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Do Consumers Want Durable Goods to Last?

The Formation of Anticipated Durability and its Role in the Purchase of Durable Goods

Introduction and context

Purchasing durable products with a high lifetime allows consumers to delay replacement, thereby reducing environmental impact through lower consumption of natural resources such as water, bauxite, and sulfides (Jetti & Dhar, 2024). Extending product lifetimes is therefore a crucial issue for sustainability (Cooper, 2005; Van Nes & Cramer, 2006). However, little attention has been devoted to the influence of durable goods' durability on purchase decisions. Cooper (2012) found that UK households expect washing machines to last only 5–7 years, while brands offering models designed for 20 years captured only a small share of the market. In the case of mobile phones, research indicates that although durability is not always the main purchasing criterion, it significantly influences consumer preferences (Wilhelm, 2012). Consumers consider a long design life to be part of the ideal phone. In fact, they prefer mobile phones lasting five years or more, even though they typically expect to use them for only three years (Wilhelm, 2012). These contrasted findings raise a central question: **do consumers genuinely want to purchase durable products, that is, products designed to last?** This question is particularly relevant in the context of strengthened European Union regulations aimed at extending product lifespans under the Circular Economy Action Plan (CEAP) (Milios, 2018, 2021). In France, for instance, two indices—the reparability index and the durability index—have recently been introduced and made mandatory for manufacturers.

Research on the impact of product durability on the purchasing decision has largely relied on rational decision-making processes like the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Bangsa & Schlegelmilch, 2020) using quantitative designs, typically assessing durability through stated preferences or a single survey item, and when information about durability is available (Jacobs & Hörisch, 2021). In many cases, durability is measured indirectly, using proxies such as quality or price to examine its impact on purchasing decisions (Cooper, 2004; Milios & Dalhammar, 2023). This approach, however, provides little insight into consumers' expected durability, its antecedents, or the stage at which anticipated durability influences their decision-making process. Qualitative approaches can therefore add value by shedding light on how perceptions of durability are formed and how, and to what extent, consumers weigh anticipated durability in their purchasing choices. To address this gap, we conducted 15 semi-structured interviews exploring consumers' perceptions of product durability. The findings enabled us to develop a conceptual model that identifies the antecedents of perceived durability, its proxy (reliability), and their relationship to purchasing behavior.

Literature review and Research questions

Product durability refers to a product's ability to maintain functionality and performance over time, encompassing physical, emotional, psychological, and strategic dimensions (Jetti & Dhar, 2024). Durability refers to the length of time a product lasts, how long it functions properly (i.e., without requiring frequent servicing), and how well it withstands adverse conditions such as weather, heavy use, or misuse (Brucks et al., 2000). Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that

the preference for product durability depends on the product category (Cox et al., 2013) but also on other factors such as experience, education, consumer sensitivity to the environment, etc.

Research on durability draws on two main fields: obsolescence (both perceived and planned) and perceptions of product lifetime. While consumers experience, fear, and criticize planned obsolescence (Cooper, 2004; Echegaray, 2016; Wieser & Tröger, 2018; Kahlin McVeigh et al., 2019), they are also vulnerable to, and in many cases become 'victims' of, perceived obsolescence. They are sensitive to the evolving aesthetics of products, base their purchasing or replacement decisions on resale value in the secondary market, or seek improved functionality offered by newer models (van den Berge & Thysen, 2020).

Perceived product lifetime can be viewed from three consumer perspectives: the 'intended lifetime,' or how long consumers plan to use a product and their willingness to do so; the 'ideal lifetime,' representing the duration they would most prefer; and the 'predicted lifetime,' reflecting realistic expectations based on past experiences and other factors (Oguchi et al., 2016). These two aspects (i.e., the product's functional durability and consumers' willingness to retain it) shape consumer attitudes and ultimately determine its actual 'in-use' lifetime.

In general, consumers expect products to last only as long as they intend to keep them, but not necessarily longer (Cooper, 2004; Cox et al., 2013; Milios & Dalhammar, 2023). Moreover, it is important to differentiate between consumers' general expectations for a product type or category and their expectations for the specific products they own (Oguchi et al., 2016). In theory, product durability can be assessed based on knowledge of component parts and their assembly. However, most consumers lack the technical expertise to evaluate durability and, as a result, they often rely on subjective sources of information, such as word of mouth, personal experience, or quality cues provided through marketing (Brucks et al., 2000).

Information about reparability can also serve as an indirect signal of product durability, an attribute often overlooked during the purchase process. Munten and Vanhamme (2023) showed that when brands communicate about reparability, consumers interpret it as a sign of durability and evaluate those brands more positively. Cooper's (2004) study of UK households showed that while half of them believed appliances lasted as long as desired, most discarded them earlier than considered reasonable; for instance, refrigerators expected to last 12 years were replaced after 11. Consumers generally have low expectations of product longevity (Cooper, 2012). For example, UK households expect washing machines to last 5–7 years, while the brand Miele markets models designed for 20 years but captures only a small market share. The literature shows that product durability is multidimensional, extending beyond functional performance to include emotional, psychological, and strategic aspects that enhance durability and consumer value. Since consumers struggle to assess durability directly, they rely on proxies such as brand, price, surface cues, or reparability. Expectations of product lifetimes are often lower than technical potential, leading to premature replacement influenced by fashion, convenience, or low awareness (Cooper, 2004). They are also ambivalent about the environmental impact, uncertain whether it is better to keep an older, less efficient product or replace it with a more eco-friendly model that still creates waste (Guillard, Le Nagard, & de Campos Ribeiro, 2023).

This exploratory research aims to understand how a product's anticipated durability is formed and taken into account in the decision to purchase a new durable product. More specifically, we

seek to identify the antecedents of the anticipated durability of a product and the subsequent impact of this attribute on purchase intention. A key question is whether a longer anticipated lifespan invariably exerts a positive effect on the intention to buy. Given that the concept of anticipated durability remains underexplored, we also seek to understand: how consumers perceive durability; whether they actually expect a certain lifespan at the time of purchase; and how their assessment and consideration of it differ across product categories. As an exploratory study, this research also seeks to identify the individual characteristics that underlie possible differences in consumer behavior.

Methodology

To answer the research questions, we conducted an exploratory qualitative study. Fifteen retrospective interviews were conducted with eight women and seven men aged between 22 and 60 (average = 38.9 years old), with educational levels ranging from high school to a doctorate (Table 1). We began by asking respondents to recall the last durable product they had replaced (e.g., cell phone, stove, vacuum cleaner), providing examples if needed. After they identified a product, we inquired why they replaced it, if they had attempted repair, and what criteria guided their new purchase. We then explored how they evaluate product durability, including pre-purchase criteria, information sources, and the role of warranties. This line of questioning was repeated for a second product. Subsequently, two projective scenarios gauged reactions to advertised product lifespans, including a dishwasher, an example that emerged from previous investigations and research (Guillard, Le Nagard & de Campos Ribeiro, 2023). Finally, we assessed personal determinants. The 30 to 45-minute interviews were recorded, transcribed, and underwent thematic analysis (Saldana, 2014). An initial analysis of the data revealed themes (such as reliability) whose characteristics were further refined through more in-depth coding of the material.

Results

Interestingly, only one respondent spontaneously mentioned product durability over time as a criterion for choosing a product. However, when asked explicitly about the importance of durability as a purchase criterion, the vast majority of respondents recognized its importance. Respondents make a distinction between ideal lifetime, intended lifetime, and expected lifetime. In general, respondents say that it is very difficult to estimate the durability of a product before purchasing it. Moreover, most of the people interviewed evaluate durability not as a criterion in itself, but in relation to the price paid.

Ideal lifetime	*I hope it will last me as long as possible (...)* *When you buy an oven, you want it to last a lifetime*," *(I9)* *"I hope it will last me as long as possible. Ideally, 10 years, yeah, but I think realistically it will be more like 5 years, but at least 5." (I9).*

Intended lifetime	"*No, because a phone isn't durable. I mean, you can't say, 'I'm going to keep this for 10 years.' [...] You're not going to keep a $1,000 phone much longer than a $150 phone anyway [...] Technology is evolving," (I7)* *"I thought to myself, it (*a smartphone*) will work well for as long as I use it, and then I'll change it if necessary, rather than: I'll keep it for a long time." (I12).*
Expected lifetime	"*I'd like that, but I don't know how long it will last.* "*Well, (computers) last 5 or 6 years, I don't have a choice, longer would be better, but with computers, after 5 years, I'm under no illusions," (I12)* "*It's hard to take these criteria into account because, for example, with washing machines, it's true that we buy one every 7 or 8 years or more. It's difficult to estimate" (I10).* *"At the time of purchase, the price will also determine the lifespan I expect," (I12)* "*Then you see, there's also an element of chance, because you never know if it's going to break down for X or Y reason*," (I5)

For household appliances, the intended use period can be very long, whereas for products such as smartphones, it is much shorter, because of the pace of innovation in the product category. Respondents also emphasize the unpredictable nature of the breakdown. It seems that estimating durability is more a matter of hope than expectations

Criteria used to assess durability

Brand reputation	"*Yeah, it's a bit silly, but by trusting the brand?*" (I15) *"We chose a brand name. [...] so that it would last over time," (I1).* "*Even if the brand is Samsung, they're not necessarily known for their ovens" (I11)* "*Sometimes there are good brands now that aren't that durable, and things that seem cheaper but ultimately last longer," (I13).*
Price	*"There can be very expensive items that have the same durability as a mid-range product in terms of price."* (*I10*)
Product appearance	"*First of all, if it's a plastic product, the quality of the plastic, the thickness of the plastic, the texture. The design, too, it shows that a little more thought has gone into the product. (I14)*

	”I mainly look at the seams, zippers, all that stuff. If it looks good, if it looks solid," (I4).
Experience of others with the brand	”*For example, Moulinex—I know my mother has had them since I was little and they're still working." (I14)*. “*I saw that it's a product that came out a long time ago, two years ago, and that it's very popular. (I11).*
Repairability	*” A huge criterion for durability is being able to replace parts," (I9)*
Existence of a warranty	*“No, I never take warranties [...] for me, it's a scam,”* (I8) ”*I was told that they deliberately offer a warranty until they know it's going to work, and once the warranty expires, there's a good chance that the product will start to... go haywire.*" *(I5)*

The most commonly used indicator for assessing durability seems to be brand reputation for a specific product category. However, this indicator does not seem to be absolute. Past experience with the product category, or observing the experience of friends and family, is often decisive in forming expectations and choosing the brand or model. Online reviews are also decisive, even if they are often collected just after purchase or when the product is first used, so respondents find it necessary to look at the history of comments. Some consumers also look at repairability.

Faced with the difficulty of assessing durability, some consumers prefer to go to a store to see the materials used or the design, which they use as a sign of solidity and, by extension, durability. The product’s price, especially its position in the price range, is a point of reference, even if, again, consumers emphasize that this factor is far from foolproof.

The length of the manufacturer's warranty can make a difference, all other things being equal. However, paid warranty extensions generate a significant mistrust. Consequently, the warranty period is interpreted as the maximum lifespan of the product, not the minimum lifespan

Individual variables

Income	*“I can't afford to spend that much money all at once,*” *“We don't ask ourselves these questions as much because we told ourselves that we don't really have a choice, we can't spend $200 on a suitcase that is much more eco-friendly,” (I15)* "*My husband told me we're not rich enough to buy* ****” (I8)

Ability to repair	*"I realized that I could buy a repair kit for €80 and fix my machine instead of buying a new one. (I10)* *"I look at how easy it is to take apart, whether you can change the parts easily." (I4)* *"My stepfather is very handy, so he repairs everything, so I might go see him to see if he can fix it." (I12)* "*I'm all for repairing whatever you want. But if it means driving an hour to get it done. Well, in Paris it's easy, but in Brittany, for example, good luck finding a repairer who's willing to do it" I14*

There are significant differences between consumers, particularly in terms of income. While those with less money tend to favor cheaper products, the opposite holds when durable goods are considered an investment. If income is high enough, ecological criteria begin to come into play, whereas for less affluent consumers, they are completely absent. Some consumers, while recognizing the value of investing in a long-term product, cannot really afford it and will therefore agree to buy low-end products that they anticipate will have a short lifespan. Another important difference among the consumers interviewed is whether they have access to repair services, because of either personal skills, a network, or geographical reasons. For those who do not have access to repair services,"native" durability is therefore more important. Contrary to expectations, environmental awareness appears to play no role in the way consumers weigh expected durability in their purchasing decisions.

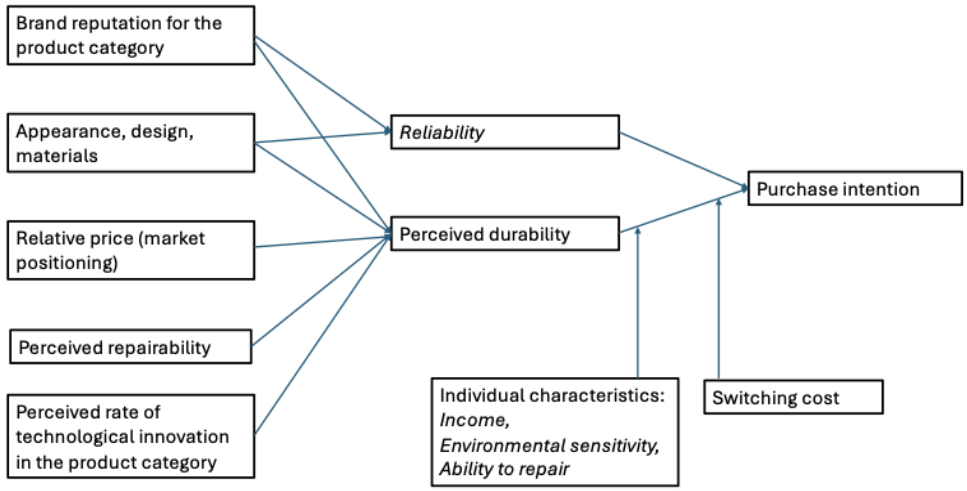
Finally, we note a difficulty in projecting oneself into the very long term and therefore in valuing very long-term durability, as proposed in a projective scenario for a dishwasher with a 20-year warranty. This may be due to a lack of confidence in the company's longevity. *"And in 20 years, will the company that gave you the warranty still be around?" (I13),* on anticipated changes in living conditions: "*We don't know, we don't know if we'll still be around in 20 years*, or on technological developments*: "Given how technology is evolving, 20 years isn't interesting, it's maybe too long. In 20 years, dishwashers will be completely outdated," (I13).*

Discussion

The results confirm findings from the literature, such as the distinction between expected, ideal, and intended durability, and the difficulty consumers face in assessing durability before purchase. They tend to rely on brand reputation, especially if they do not have enough information about other attributes (Park & Chang, 2022), the product's physical appearance, and its perceived reparability. However, new insights not previously discussed in the literature emerged. First, there is confusion or assimilation between durability and reliability, i.e., the product's ability to perform its function continuously, even over a short period, with high expectations in this regard. Second, consumer discourse revealed significant disparities between product categories: household appliances, where the expected rate of innovation is low, and replacement costs are high, versus more technological products such as smartphones, where the expected and desired lifespan is short. Regarding individual variables that may explain differences in how durability is considered in purchasing decisions, income logically seems to

play a role, as does the actual ability to repair, while environmental awareness appears to have only a weak effect, and mainly among wealthier consumers. Finally, there seems to be a non-linear effect of expected durability, with very long lifespans perceived as less attractive, in line with previous research (Jacobs & Hörisch, 2021). This is in line with the CFC future consequences model (Arnocky & al., 2014). The results also confirm that the environment is not a decisive factor in most consumers' purchasing decisions. In fact, this criterion often increases the price of equipment. Furthermore, it is a difficult criterion to assess, which implies a lack of consumer trust. Our data shows that consumers have relatively little trust in brands. In summary, the results enable us to propose a conceptual model for quantitative testing (Fig. 1).

Figure 1 – Conceptual Model



Implications and Conclusions

These results have theoretical, managerial, and societal implications. On a theoretical level, they enable us to propose a comprehensive conceptual model of the antecedents and consequences of anticipated durability, as well as moderating variables. The natural extension of this exploratory research is therefore a quantitative test of the model. From a managerial perspective, they suggest ways manufacturers can better promote the durability and reliability of their products, and encourage reflection on the potentially negative effects of the pace of new product launches. Finally, from a societal perspective, our results demonstrate the usefulness of measures such as the durability index, while highlighting areas for improvement in the information provided, such as taking into account reparability and failure frequency.

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Appendices

Table 1. List of Interviews

	Gender	**Age**	**Education Level**	**Profession**	**Place of residence**
I1	Female	51	2-year post-secondary degree	Executive – Executive Assistant	Vauréal
I2	Female	29	Master	Computer Engineer	Cergy
I3	Male	50	1st year of a Master's Degree	IT Project Manager	Clermont sur Oise
I4	Male	22	Master	API Manager Apprentice	Amiens
I5	Male	31	Master	Academic and Research Coordinator at a Business School	Paris suburbs
I6	Female	55	Doctorate	Research Valorization and Funding	Paris suburbs
I7	Male	54	Master	**Engineer**	Paris suburbs
I8	Female	57	High School Diploma	Administrative Manager	Paris
I9	Female	25	Master	Actively seeking employment	Paris
I10	Female	37	3-year post-secondary degree	Program Coordinator	Paris suburbs

I11	Male	36	Master	Engineer	Nantes
I12	Male	24	Master	Freelance Audiovisual Producer	Paris
I13	Female	60	Master	Bank Executive	Marseille
I14	Female	27	Master	Marketing Project Manager	Saint-Malo
I15	Female	26	High School Diploma	Sales Assistant	Paris

Appendix 2. Interview guide

Interview Guide

Introduction:
Research project on the purchase of durable goods, meaning home equipment (small or large appliances), electronic products, or mobility goods.
For research purposes only.
There are no right or wrong answers, no judgment.

Think about your most recent purchase of a product (new or second-hand) from one of the following categories: digital/electronic product, large appliance, or mobility product (electric bike or electric scooter).

Which product category are you thinking of? When did this purchase take place?

1. When making this purchase decision, what criteria did you take into account?
2. Did you consider the durability of this product when making this decision?

In this study, we define durability as the length of time the product can be used.

3. For this purchase, was it an important criterion compared to the others?

4. More generally, for which products do you believe durability is an important criterion to consider?

o For example: … dishwasher/freezer? suitcase/bag? smartphone/headphones/computer? electric bike or scooter?

- (Choose two examples from the list above and answer the following questions)

5. How do you assess the durability of a [XXX] at the time of purchase?
6. Does the length of the warranty offered play a role?
7. Does the availability of customer service with repair options play a role in this assessment?

8. Projective Questions:

- A start-up has designed a dishwasher with a 20-year guarantee. Who do you think is the target market for this product? Can you describe these people (profile, character traits, do you see people in your circle who would be interested? Describe them)?
  - https://www.everever.eu/ (Real company, dishwasher model: Albert)
- A company offers rigid, carry-on-sized suitcases for 15 euros, but the seller explains to me that for this price, they are designed for about ten trips. Would you be ready to buy it?

Now, a few questions about you. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your agreement with the following statements:

- I am willing to sacrifice my immediate happiness or well-being to achieve future goals.
- I think it is generally not necessary to make sacrifices in the present because I can deal with future consequences later.
- I like taking risks by buying products I don't know, just to vary my purchases.
- I get tired of buying the same products, even if they are good.
- In general, I believe I am good at mR15ging my money.
- In general, I hesitate to spend money, even on essentials.
- I systematically choose products that have the least impact on the environment.
- I try not to buy products from companies that do not respect the environment.

Demographics:

- Age
- Gender
- Profession
- Level of education
- Place of residence