

Why on earth did I buy that?! A study of regretted consumption practices

Dr Thomas Roberts: t.m.roberts@surrey.ac.uk

Dr Sandy Skelton: a.c.h.skelton@eng.cam.ac.uk

Reducing demand as well as supply



- At present the majority of environmentally extended economic models that are used to identify potential pathways to meeting GHG emission reduction targets, tend to put greater emphasis on supply-side options for reducing emissions.
- However, supply side solutions take time to plan, commission and construct and there is still much uncertainty associated with critical carbon sequestration technologies.
- Consequently, the reduction in emissions necessary to achieve the ambitious target to limit global temperature increase to below 2°C cannot be achieved through supply-side solutions alone (Anderson et al., 2014).



Reducing demand

- In the UK there is a great deal of potential to reduce demand.
- The indirect GHG emissions embodied in the demand for goods and services account for approximately a third of the total GHG emissions (Barrett and Scott, 2012).
- The challenge is to find ways to achieve this without negative impacts on welfare.



Wasted consumption

- Previous research suggests that a significant amount of products purchased are wasted:
 - Quested et al., (2012): 18% of food and drink brought into UK households is wasted
 - 30% of clothes bought by UK consumers are left unworn at home (Gracey and Moon, 2012)



Regretted consumption

- Post-purchase regret presents the possibility that there are opportunities to reduce demand for goods - and therefore the embodied GHG emissions associated with this demand – at a lower welfare loss.

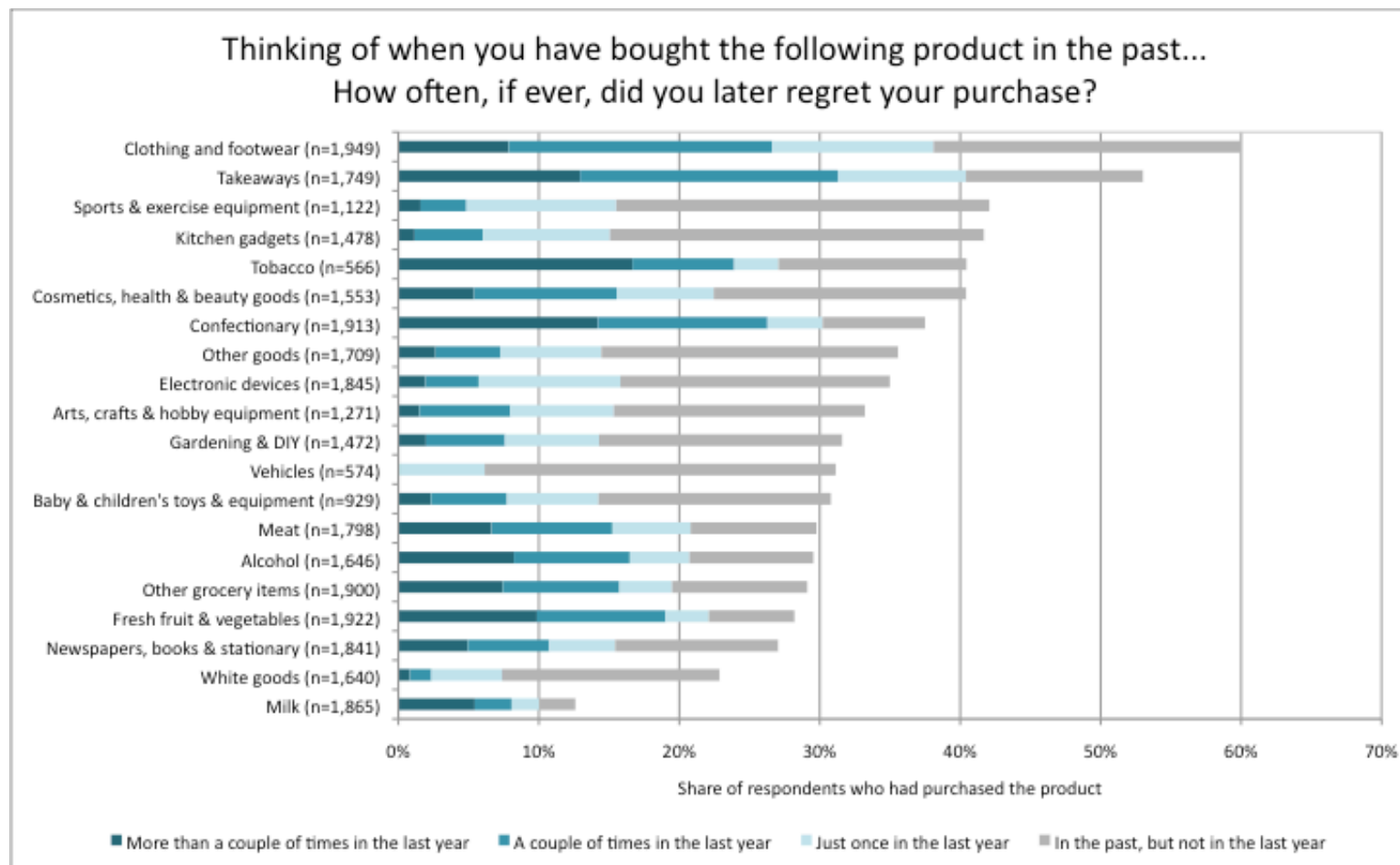


Methodology

How can we explore the extent and potential opportunities presented by regretted consumption?

- Nationally representative survey of self reported regretted consumption to explore:
 - Extent and type of regretted consumption
 - Reasons underpinning regretted consumption
 - Impact of regretted consumption
- Qualitative walking interviews with 37 participants:
 - To explore, in depth, the way in which people understand regretted consumption through a case study of domestic appliances

Survey findings



Survey findings

The tendency to regret across different consumer groups

Regret reduces with age

White-collar workers have more regrets

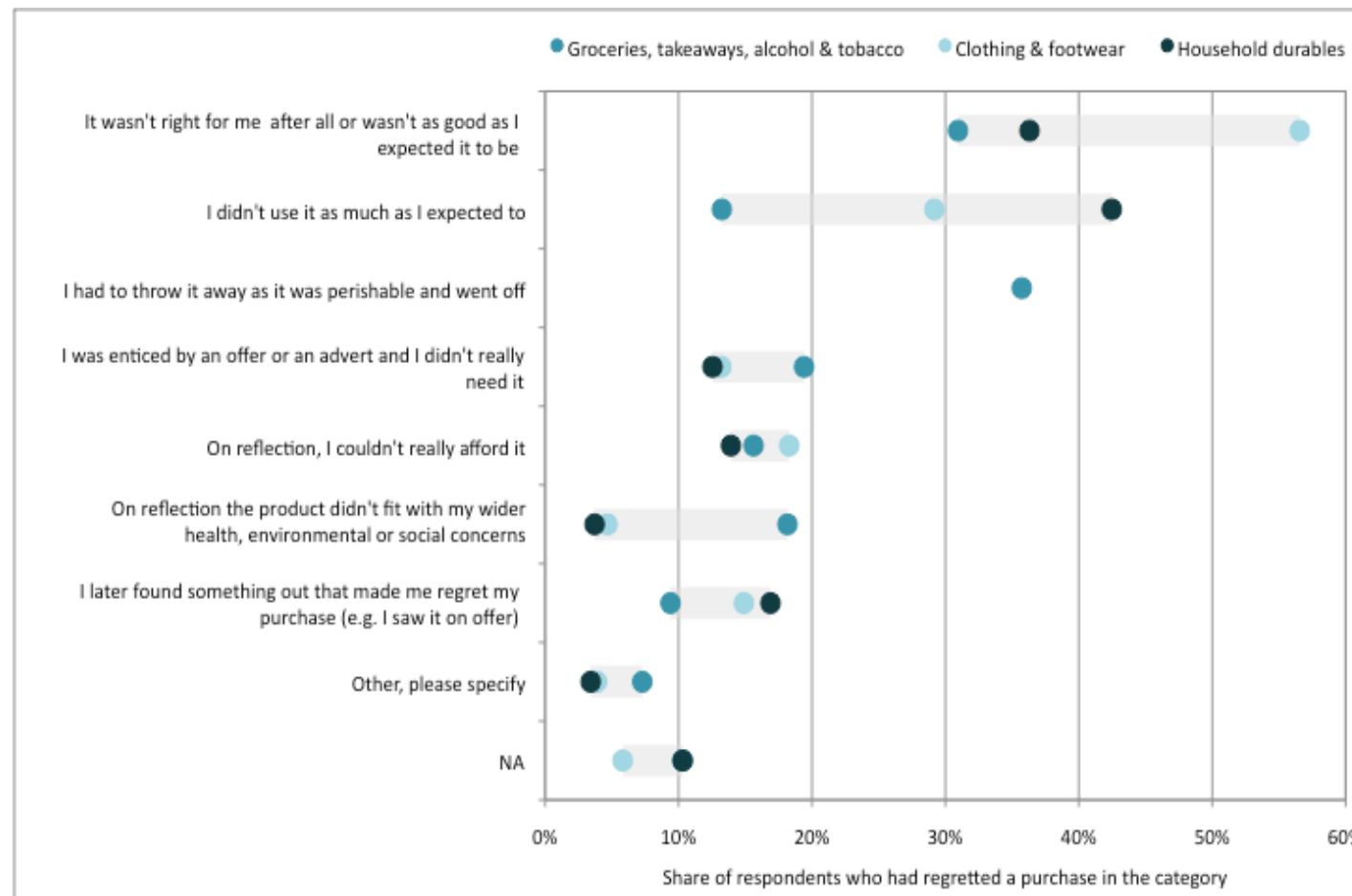
People who enjoy shopping are marginally more likely to regret purchases once controlling for differences in product type

Men are significantly more likely to regret purchases once controlling for differences in regret by product type

The effect of cost-consciousness on regret is marginal and the sign of the relationship depends on the model chosen

Survey findings

Reported reasons for regret



Questions raised by the survey

- Previous research into self-report surveys suggests that respondents may well have underreported their levels of regret.
- Nevertheless, the results suggest that there is a degree of self-assessed over-consumption that, if reduced, could help to reduce pressures on the environment.
- They also call into question the assumption, common across many economic models, that the current level of demand is necessarily desirable.



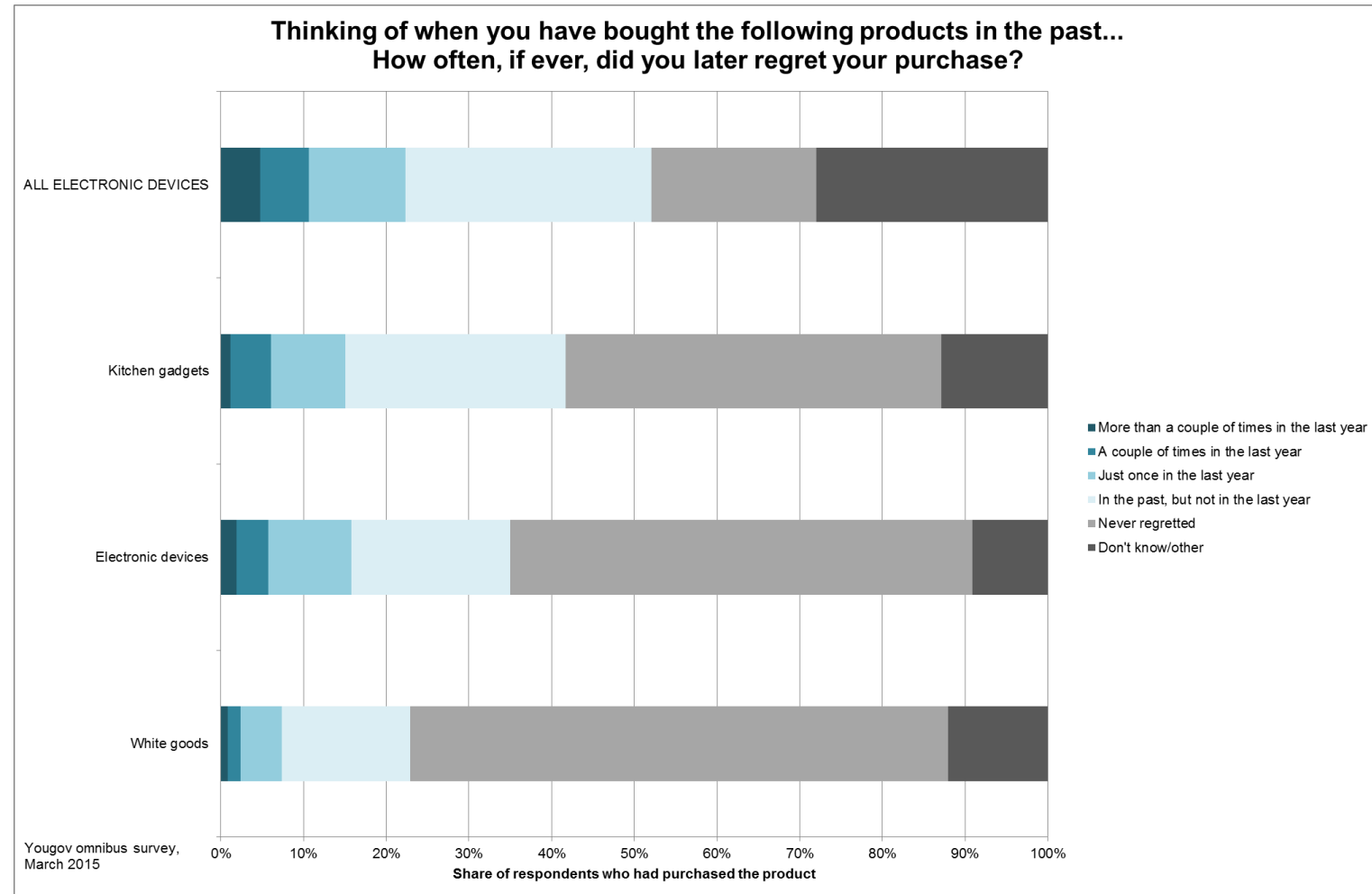
Findings from the qualitative walking interviews

- The walking interviews focused on understanding the dynamics of energy intensive domestic practices. This included understanding the way the participants utilised devices.
- The participants were asked a number of questions about each device in their home, including whether they regretted purchasing it.
- However, when directly asked if they regretted purchasing a specific item very few people said yes.



Regretted purchase of electronic devices

The initial analysis of the qualitative data supported findings of the survey, that regretted purchases of electronic devices was relatively low.



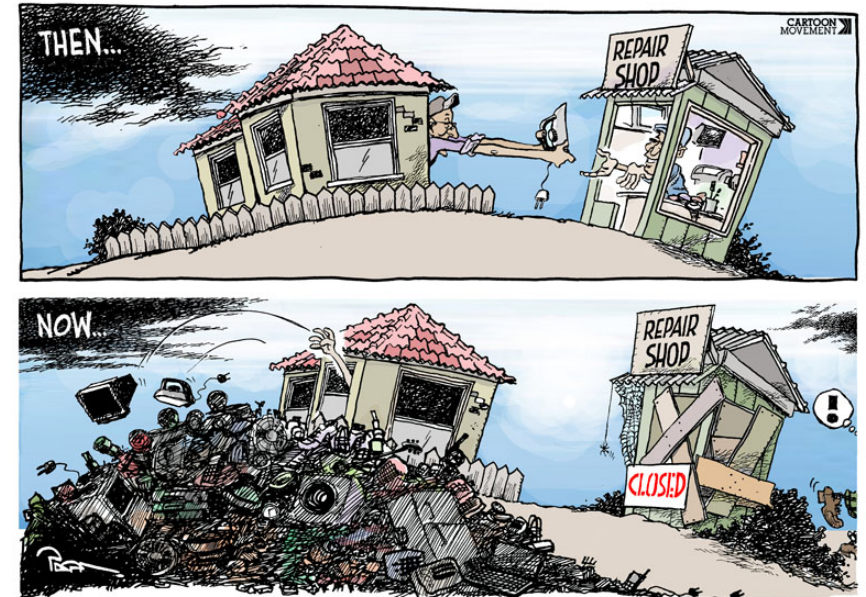
Regret is a complex emotion

- Further analysis showed that the respondents indirectly expressed a great deal of regret about electronic devices they had purchased.
- However, it wasn't the product itself they regretted, but that they had felt they 'HAD' to buy it.
- This 'pressure' to make unwanted purchases came from two sources:
 - Disappointment that a previous appliance had prematurely broken
 - Pressure from society to own a particular device or type of device



Broken devices in a throw away society

- A number of participants expressed regret that they had had to replace 'essential' items such as washing machines, fridges and boilers much sooner than they anticipated. Many also noted that previous versions had lasted much longer.
- There was a general agreement that contemporary products were not designed to last.
- Furthermore, many participants perceived that it is very difficult to fix contemporary products and normally cheaper to buy new ones.



‘Essential’ for modern life?



- Participants also noted that they often felt under a range of societal pressure to purchase new items.
 - In particular the digital switch over had forced many people to buy new TVs or set top boxes. While they didn't necessarily regret the purchases themselves they felt that they shouldn't have had to buy them in the first place.
 - Others had felt pressure from family, friends, neighbours and colleagues to buy up-to-date electronic gadgets to perform functions which they had previously survived without (communicating via social media was a popular example).
- Here regret manifested itself through the pressure to purchase rather than the items acquired.

Conclusions

- This research has highlighted that a significant proportion of consumption is regretted. Furthermore, it is important to recognise that participants in both the survey and the interviews probably underreported their regretted consumption.
- Consequently, there is clearly scope to explore this area as a possible target for reducing 'demand' with minimal loss of welfare.
- However, regretted consumption is complicated and can be expressed in a variety of ways.
- Consequently, if we are to make the most of this potential opportunity to reduce demand, it is necessary to utilise a range of methodological tools to improve our understanding of the complex dynamics of regretted consumption.