

The Fading Glory of The Television and Telephone

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Paul Taylor, Project Director
Wendy Wang, Research Associate
Daniel Dockterman, Research Assistant

MEDIA INQUIRIES CONTACT:
Pew Research Center's
Social & Demographic Trends Project
202.419.4372
<http://pewsocialtrends.org>

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A Social & Demographic Trends Report

The Fading Glory of The Television and Telephone

By Paul Taylor and Wendy Wang

One day you're the brightest star in the galaxy. Then something new comes along—and suddenly you're a relic. It's a turn of fate that awaits sports heroes, movie stars, political leaders. And, yes, even household appliances.

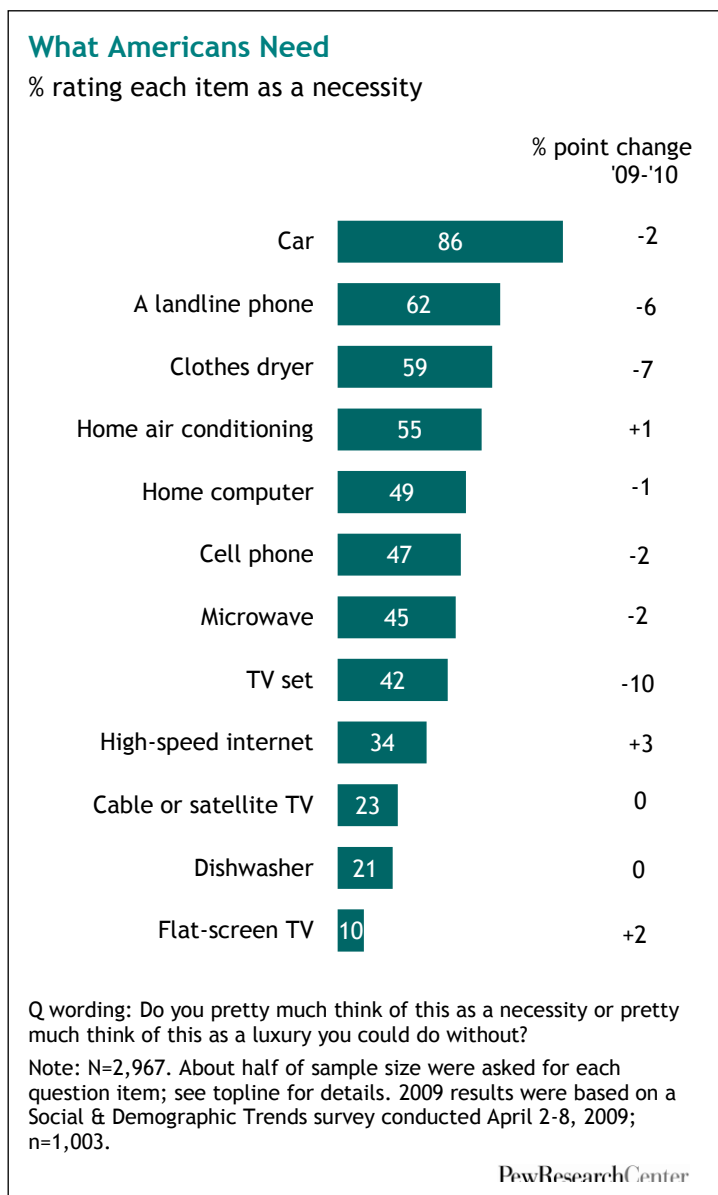
After occupying center stage in the American household for much of the 20th century, two of the grand old luminaries of consumer technology—the television set and the landline telephone—are suffering from a sharp decline in public perception that they are necessities of life.

Just 42% of Americans say they consider the television set to be a necessity, according to a new nationwide survey from the Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends project. Last year, this figure was 52%. In 2006, it was 64%.

The drop-off has been less severe for the landline telephone: Some 62% of Americans say it's a necessity of life, down from 68% last year. But there's a related trend that's more perilous for the landline: Fully 47% of the public say that its younger, smarter and more nimble cousin—the cell phone—is a necessity of life.

Even more worrisome for both 20th-century household fixtures are the oh-so-very-21st-century attitudes of today's young adults. Fewer than half (46%) of 18- to 29-year-old survey respondents consider the landline phone a necessity of life. Fewer than three-in-ten (29%) say the same about the television set.

The Pew Research telephone survey (landline as well as cell phone) was conducted among a nationally representative sample of 2,967 adults from May 11 through May 31, 2010. Using a list of a dozen different items



(see chart) designed to make everyday life more productive, convenient, comfortable or entertaining, it asked respondents whether they consider each item a “necessity” or a “luxury.”

As past Pew Research reports on this topic have shown,¹ the public’s collective judgments have waxed and waned in recent times with the changing state of the economy. From 1996 through 2006—a period of economic expansion and heavy consumer spending—a rising share of Americans saw more items on the list as necessities rather than luxuries. Since 2006—as the housing bubble burst, the economy sank into a deep recession and consumer spending throttled down—the trend has moved the opposite way. A rising share now sees more everyday items as luxuries than necessities.

It’s Not Just the Economy

But the economy isn’t the only factor driving these numbers. For several items on the list—the television set and the landline phone are prime examples—innovations in technology also seem to be playing a role.

Indeed, the dichotomy posed by the question “luxury or necessity” may itself be something of a relic. For some items, a more appropriate question in 2010 may be whether consumers consider these venerable appliances to be “necessary” or “superfluous.”

In the case of the landline phone, a rising thumbs-down verdict comes not just from the survey but also from the marketplace. According to a Pew Research Center analysis of government data, just 74% of U.S. households now have a landline phone.² This is down from a peak of 97% in 2001.³

About the Survey

Results for this survey are based on telephone interviews conducted with a nationally representative sample of 2,967 people ages 18 and older living in the continental United States. A combination of landline and cellular random digit dial (RDD) samples was used to represent all adults in the continental United States who have access to either a landline or cellular telephone. A total of 1,893 interviews were completed with respondents contacted by landline telephone and 1,074 with those contacted on their cell phone. The data are weighted to produce a final sample that is representative of the general population of adults in the continental United States.

- Interviews conducted May 11-31, 2010
- 2,967 interviews
- Questions on luxury and necessity were asked of split halves of the sample, n=1,484 for Form 1 and n=1,483 for Form 2.
- Margin of sampling error is plus or minus 2.2 percentage points for results based on the total sample at the 95% confidence level. For questions on luxury and necessity, margin of error is ± 3.0 percentage points for Form 1 and ± 3.1 percentage points for Form 2.

Survey interviews were conducted under the direction of Princeton Survey Research Associates International. Interviews were conducted in English or Spanish.

¹ See Pew Social & Demographic Trends, “Luxury or Necessity? The Public Makes a U-Turn,” April 23, 2009

(<http://pewsocialtrends.org/pubs/733/luxury-necessity-recession-era-reevaluations>), and “Luxury or Necessity? Things We Can’t Live Without: The List Has Grown in the Past Decade,” Dec. 14, 2006 (<http://pewsocialtrends.org/pubs/323/luxury-or-necessity>).

² See Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and Pew Internet & American Life Project, “Assessing the Cell Phone Challenge,” May 20, 2010 (<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1601/assessing-cell-phone-challenge-in-public-opinion-surveys>), and Stephen J. Blumberg, and Julian V. Luke, “Wireless substitution: Early release of estimates from the National Health Interview Survey, July-December 2009,” National Center for Health Statistics, May 2010 (<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhis/earlyrelease/wireless201005.htm>).

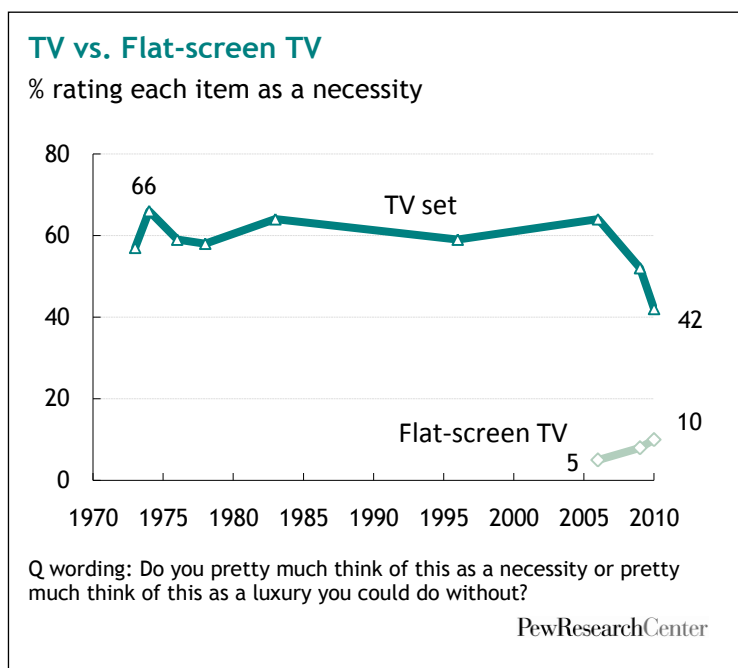
³ Blumberg et al, 2007, Chapter 3 in *Advances in Telephone Survey Methodology*, edited by James M. Lepkowski, et al, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

During this same time period, use of cell phones has skyrocketed. Fully 82% of adults now use cell phones, up from 53% in 2000.⁴ There are now more cell phones in the U.S. than landline phones. And—as if to add insult to injury—today’s young adults are spending less time talking on their cell phones and more time texting.⁵

Our Schizophrenic Relationship with the Television Set

The television set presents a more confusing picture. Even as fewer Americans say they consider the TV set to be a necessity of life, more Americans than ever are stocking up on them. In 2009, the average American home had more television sets than people—2.86, according to a Nielsen report.⁶ In 2000, this figure was 2.43; in 1990, it was 2.0; and in 1975, it was 1.57.

Why the disconnect between attitudes and behaviors? It’s hard to know for sure. But it may be that, unlike the landline phone, the TV set hasn’t had to deal with competition from a newfangled gadget that can fully replace all of its functions.



Yes, it’s true that in the digital era, consumers know they can watch a lot of television programming on their computers or smart phones—and this knowledge is no doubt one of the reasons fewer people now say they think of a TV set as a necessity. But if a person wants real-time access to the wide spectrum of entertainment, sports and news programming available on television, there’s still nothing (at least not yet) that can compete with the television set itself.

There’s yet another twist to the TV story. It comes from one of the hottest new starlets of consumer technology—the flat-screen television. According to the latest Pew Research survey, 10% of the public now says that a flat-screen television is a necessity of life, up from 5% who felt that way in 2006. And according to industry reports, American consumers have bought more than 100 million flat-screen television sets since 2005.

So to summarize: Most Americans say they no longer view the TV set as a necessity. But they keep buying more and more of them, especially the ones with the big, sleek screens and crystal-clear pictures. Got that?

⁴ See Pew Internet & American Life, “Mobile Access 2010”, July 7, 2010 (http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2010/PIP_Mobile_Access_2010.pdf) and Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, biennial media consumption survey 2008 topline (<http://people-press.org/reports/questionnaires/444.pdf>)

⁵ See Ian Shapira, “Texting generation doesn’t share boomers’ taste for talk,” *The Washington Post*, Aug. 8, 2010.

⁶ See Nielsen wire, “More than Half the Homes in U.S. Have Three or More TVs,” July 20, 2009.

Appliances and Age

Judgments about whether household appliances are necessities or luxuries vary with the age of the respondent.

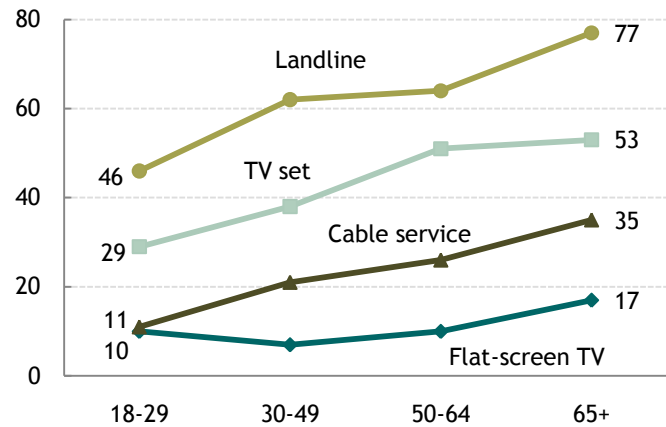
However, depending on the appliance, these age patterns sometimes run in opposite directions. A brief rundown.

Television: Whether the item in question is the basic television set, the flat-screen television, or cable and satellite television service, the pattern is the same: The older the respondent, the more likely the person is to say these things are necessities of life.

Home computer; high-speed internet; cell phone: Here, the age patterns run the opposite way. In all three cases, the younger the respondent, the more likely the person is to see these items as necessities. In the case of home computers, however, the age gap has narrowed significantly in the past four years.

For Some Items, Dependence Increases with Age ...

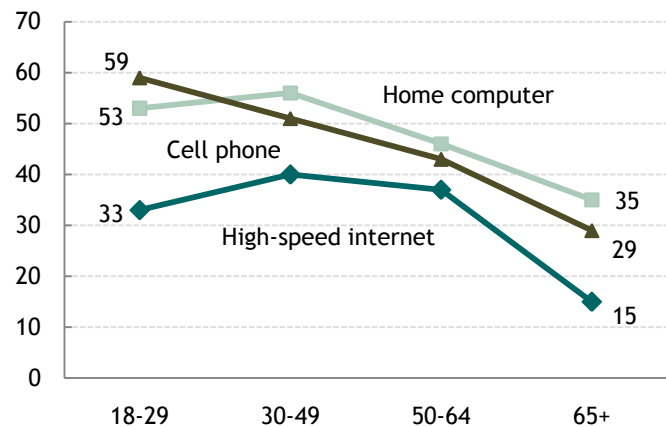
% rating each item as a necessity



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For Others, Dependence Decreases with Age ...

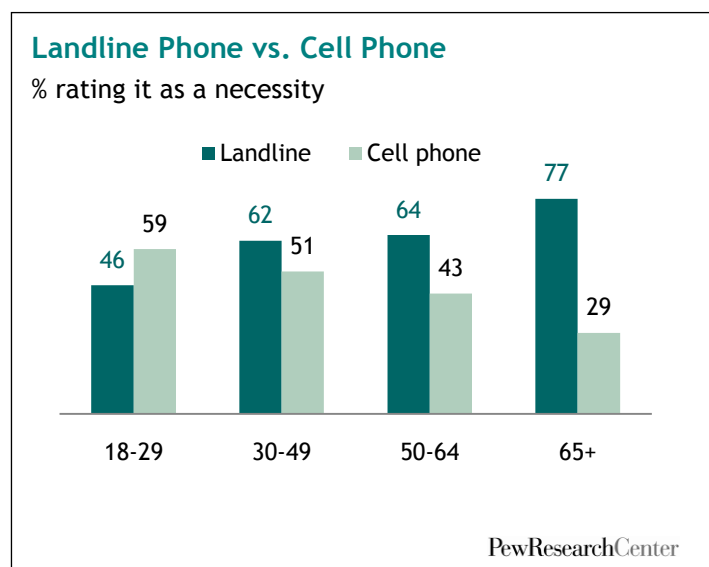
% rating each item as a necessity



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Head to Head: cell phone versus landline

phone: As the accompanying chart illustrates, the “balance of necessity” between cell phones and landline phones shifts with the age of the respondent. Among 18- to 29-year-olds, more respondents consider a cell phone a necessity than a landline phone. For those in middle age, more consider a landline phone to be a necessity. And for those ages 65 and over, those who say the landline is a necessity outnumber those who say the same about a cell phone by a ratio of more than two-to-one.



Out With the Old, In With the New

As old necessities fade, new necessities rise. A 2008 report by the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project found that 45% of internet users said it would be “very hard” to give up the internet, compared with 29% in 2000. Similarly, 51% of cell owners said it would be “very hard” to give up that phone, an increase from 43% who said that in 2006.⁷

Adoption rates reflect these changing attitudes. Some 79% of adults now use the internet, up from 46% in the spring of 2000. Similarly, 82% of adults now use cell phones, up from 53% in 2000.

The Internet & American Life Project’s surveys also show that a growing number of activities associated with older technologies have now migrated to newer gadgets. For example, it finds that 52% of all Americans now watch video online, ranging from short amateur clips to television programming to movies.⁸ Also, as of early 2008, 31% of Americans were listening to radio programming on their computers and other non-radio devices. And in this recent spring, some 14% of cell phone owners said they had watched videos (including TV programming) on their phones.⁹

Back to the Economy

As a June 2010 Pew Research Center report and other recent surveys of consumer behavior have shown, the deep recession that began in December 2007 has led to a new frugality in Americans’ spending and saving habits.¹⁰

⁷ See Pew Internet & American Life Project, “Mobile Access to Data and Information,” March 2008 (<http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2008/Mobile-Access-to-Data-and-Information.aspx?r=>).

⁸ See Pew Internet & American Life Project, “The State of Online Video,” June 3, 2010 (<http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/State-of-Online-Video.aspx>).

⁹ These numbers are calculated based on various Pew Internet & American Life Project surveys.

¹⁰ See Pew Social & Demographic Trends, “How the Great Recession Has Changed Life in America,” June 30, 2010 (<http://pewsocialtrends.org/pubs/759/how-the-great-recession-has-changed-life-in-america>).

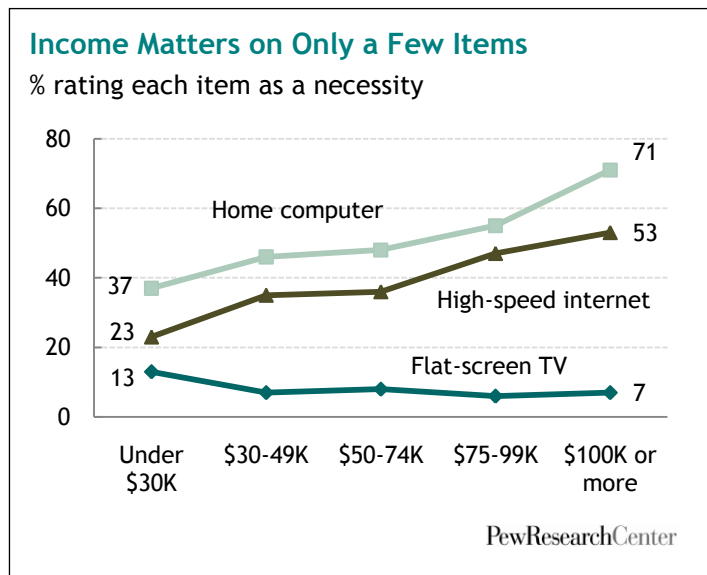
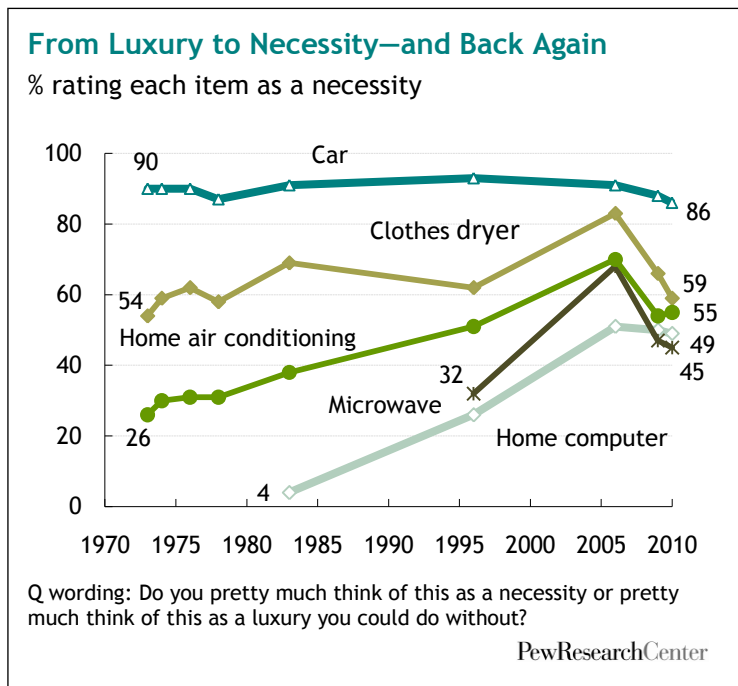
It also appears to have scrambled Americans' judgments about whether many everyday appliances are necessities or luxuries.

The accompanying chart shows the trend over time in "necessity" ratings for five familiar consumer items: the car, the clothes dryer, the microwave, home air conditioning and the home computer. Each has a somewhat different trajectory, some of which is attributable to when the technology came on the market and achieved widespread popularity.

But one pattern is consistent across all five items: Their necessity rating was at (or very near) its peak four years ago, and has since declined—in most cases, sharply. This suggests that the psyche of the American consumer is in a much different place now than it had been in the heady days before the recession.

Appliances and Income

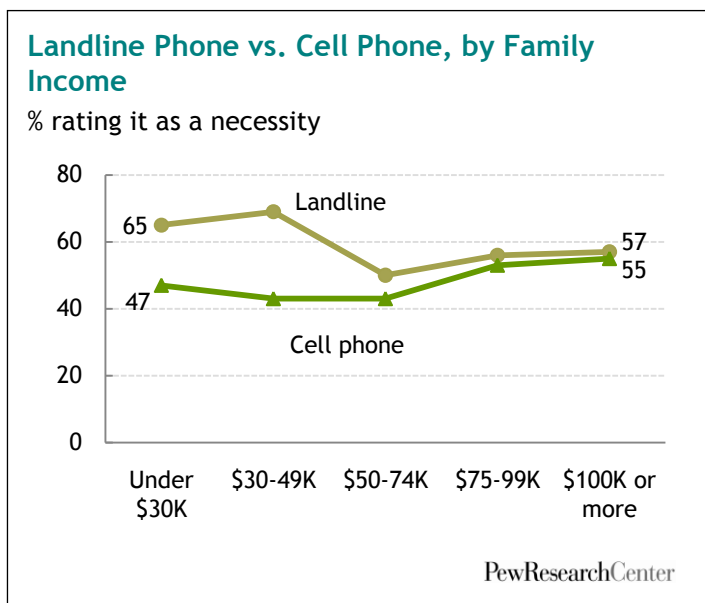
For most of the dozen items on the questionnaire, judgments about luxury or necessity vary only slightly by the income of the respondent. However, there are a few exceptions. People with higher incomes are more likely than those with lower incomes to rate a home computer and high-speed internet as a necessity. The pattern for flat-screen television runs the other way; people with incomes below \$30,000 are more likely than others to say this item is a necessity. Meantime, when it comes to telephones, people in lower income brackets are more inclined to say a landline is a necessity than say the same about a cell phone. This gap disappears among those in higher income brackets.



Other Explanations?

Might there be other explanations for changing perceptions about luxury and necessity? Consider, for example, the sharp drop since 2006 (from 83% then to 59% now) in the share of Americans who rate the clothes dryer as a necessity of life. Could it be that an environmentally conscious public has decided it makes sense to save energy by drying clothes in the sun?

Maybe. But before we declare a trend, we'd need to see a revival in the sales of clothespins. Like the television set and landline phone, they, too, once had the run of the American household. Funny, but you don't hear much about them anymore.



Acknowledgements

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PEW SOCIAL & DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS
MAY 2010 ECONOMIC SURVEY
FINAL TOPLINE FOR SELECTED QUESTIONS
MAY 11-MAY 31, 2010
TOTAL N=2,967

NOTE: ALL NUMBERS ARE PERCENTAGES. THE PERCENTAGES GREATER THAN ZERO BUT LESS THAN 0.5 % ARE REPLACED BY AN ASTERISK (*). COLUMNS/ROWS MAY NOT TOTAL 100% DUE TO ROUNDING. UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED, ALL TRENDS REFERENCE SURVEYS FROM SOCIAL & DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS AND THE PEW RESEARCH CENTER FOR THE PEOPLE & THE PRESS.

Q10 I'm going to read you a list of things. For each one, please tell me whether you pretty much think of it as a necessity or pretty much think of it as a luxury you could do without. First, **[INSERT ITEM; RANDOMIZE; OBSERVE FORM SPLITS]**

READ IF NECESSARY: Do you think of this as a necessity or think of this as a luxury you could do without?

		<u>Necessity</u>	<u>Luxury</u>	(VOL.)
ASK FORM 1: [n=1,484]				
a. A car ¹¹				
May 2010		86	14	*
April 2009		88	12	*
Oct 2006		91	8	1
July 1996	<i>Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard</i>	93	7	*
Dec 1983	<i>Roper</i>	91	9	0
Dec 1978	<i>Roper</i>	87	12	1
Dec 1976	<i>Roper</i>	90	10	1
Dec 1974	<i>Roper</i>	90	9	1
Dec 1973	<i>Roper</i>	90	9	1
b. Air conditioning for your home				
May 2010		55	44	1
April 2009		54	45	1
Oct 2006		70	29	1
July 1996	<i>Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard</i> ¹²	51	49	*
Dec 1983	<i>Roper</i>	38	61	1
Dec 1978	<i>Roper</i>	31	69	1
Dec 1976	<i>Roper</i>	31	68	1
Dec 1974	<i>Roper</i>	30	69	1
Dec 1973	<i>Roper</i>	26	72	2

¹¹ For the Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard and Roper surveys, the item was listed as "an automobile."

¹² For the Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard and Roper surveys, the item was listed as "air conditioners for your home."

Q10 CONTINUED...		<u>Necessity</u>	<u>Luxury</u>	(VOL.)
c.	A dishwasher			
	May 2010	21	78	1
	April 2009	21	78	1
	Oct 2006	35	63	2
	July 1996 <i>Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard</i>	13	86	0
	Dec 1983 <i>Roper</i>	19	80	1
	Dec 1978 <i>Roper</i>	12	87	1
	Dec 1976 <i>Roper</i>	15	83	1
	Dec 1974 <i>Roper</i>	13	85	2
	Dec 1973 <i>Roper</i>	10	89	1
d.	A computer for home use			
	May 2010	49	50	1
	April 2009	50	50	1
	Oct 2006	51	47	2
	July 1996 <i>Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard</i>	26	74	*
	Dec 1983 <i>Roper</i>	4	94	2
e.	A flat-screen or high-definition TV ¹³			
	May 2010	10	90	*
	April 2009	8	91	1
	Oct 2006	5	93	2
f.	A microwave			
	May 2010	45	55	*
	April 2009	47	53	*
	Oct 2006	68	31	1
	July 1996 <i>Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard</i>	32	68	0

¹³ In October 2006, the item was worded "a flat-screen, plasma or high-definition TV."

Q10 CONTINUED...		<u>Necessity</u>	<u>Luxury</u>	(VOL.)
ASK FORM 2: [n=1,483]				
g.	A TV set			
	May 2010	42	57	1
	April 2009	52	47	1
	Oct 2006	64	35	1
	July 1996 <i>Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard</i>	59	41	0
	Dec 1983 <i>Roper</i>	64	36	0
	Dec 1978 <i>Roper</i>	58	41	1
	Dec 1976 <i>Roper</i>	59	40	1
	Dec 1974 <i>Roper</i>	66	33	1
	Dec 1973 <i>Roper</i>	57	42	1
h.	A clothes dryer			
	May 2010	59	40	1
	April 2009	66	33	1
	Oct 2006	83	16	1
	July 1996 <i>Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard</i>	62	38	0
	Dec 1983 <i>Roper</i>	69	31	1
	Dec 1978 <i>Roper</i>	58	42	1
	Dec 1976 <i>Roper</i>	62	37	1
	Dec 1974 <i>Roper</i>	59	39	2
	Dec 1973 <i>Roper</i>	54	44	2
i.	Cable or satellite television service			
	May 2010	23	76	1
	April 2009	23	75	1
	Oct 2006	33	66	1
	July 1996 <i>Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard</i> ¹⁴	17	83	0
j.	A cell phone			
	May 2010	47	52	1
	April 2009	49	50	1
	Oct 2006	49	49	2
k.	High-speed internet access			
	May 2010	34	64	2
	April 2009	31	67	2
	Oct 2006	29	67	4
l.	A landline or regular home phone			
	May 2010	62	37	1
	April 2009	68	31	1

¹⁴ The item for Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard was worded "basic cable television."