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Consumer Society as Polluted Society: The Sociology of Waste and Planned Obsolescence

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Abstract: The contemporary consumer society represents a fundamentally unsustainable relationship with material goods, one in which the logic of endless accumulation and disposal has become institutionalized as normal. This paper examines the interconnected phenomena of planned obsolescence and waste generation as defining characteristics of modern consumer capitalism, utilizing sociological frameworks to demonstrate that pollution. Drawing on critical theories from Vance Packard to Jean Baudrillard and situating analysis within environmental sociology, this examination reveals how consumer culture manufactures both desire and waste as mechanisms for perpetuating capital accumulation. Understanding consumer society as a polluted society requires moving beyond individual behavioural explanations to interrogate the structural imperatives of capitalism that mandate overproduction, planned product failure and the externalization of environmental costs onto marginalized communities and the Global South.

Keywords: Consumer Society, Waste Studies, Planned Obsolescence, Externalities.

INTRODUCTION

The question of why contemporary societies generate unprecedented quantities of waste cannot be adequately answered through the lens of personal consumption choices or individual carelessness. Rather, the massive accumulation of discarded goods, electronic wastes, and overflowing landfills in urban peripheries represent the logical outcomes of an economic system fundamentally premised on the accelerated turnover of commodities (Gaidajis *et al.*, 2010; Rainnie *et al.*, 2015). The transformation of consumer culture from a marginal phenomenon to society's organizing principle occurred within the past century, reshaping not only how humans relate to material objects but fundamentally reordering production systems, environmental relationships and social hierarchies. This transformation was neither accidental nor inevitable. Sociological analysis reveals that waste and planned obsolescence function as deliberate strategies within a broader system designed to sustain capitalist accumulation through perpetual consumption (Neil, 2009). Where pre-industrial societies oriented themselves toward durability, repair and the long-term relationship between users and objects, contemporary consumer capitalism has inverted this logic entirely. Objects are now consciously designed to fail, to become unfashionable, to require replacement not because they cease to function, but because capital requires the continuous circulation of commodities. Thus, this paper examines the interconnected phenomena of planned obsolescence and waste generation as defining characteristics of modern consumer capitalism, utilizing sociological frameworks to demonstrate that pollution.

The challenge for sociology lies in articulating how this system produces pollution at scale while appearing to serve individual desires and consumer choice. Understanding consumer society as inherently polluted society requires tracing the connections between structural economic imperatives, technologies of desire manufacture, products deliberately designed for obsolescence and the disproportionate concentration of waste in spaces inhabited by the most vulnerable populations. This is not primarily a story of human nature or consumer excess, but rather a story of how capitalism has restructured social life around the imperative of continuous, accelerating consumption.

Veblen's conspicuous consumption and the origins of wasteful display

The sociological analysis of consumer waste originates not with contemporary scholars but with Thorstein Veblen's late nineteenth-century examination of the leisure class. Writing in 1899, Veblen distinguished between consumption oriented toward genuine utility and consumption oriented toward social status signalling (Trigg, 2001). The wealthy deliberately engaged in "conspicuous consumption" as a mechanism for establishing and maintaining social hierarchies. Veblen's insight was that consumption practices operate simultaneously as economic behaviour and as a system of communication, conveying messages about the consumer's place within social hierarchies. Critically, Veblen identified the wastefulness inherent in this status-seeking consumption (Sergey, 2012). The conspicuous consumer is not merely purchasing goods; they are purchasing the visibility of their wealth, which necessarily requires ostentatious display and deliberate

excess. This recognition provides an early theoretical foundation for understanding how contemporary consumer capitalism has systematized and universalized what was once the peculiar behaviour of a leisure class (Turnbull, 2015).

What Veblen observed in the habits of the nouveau riche in the Gilded Age has become generalized across society. The practice of purchasing more expensive goods, discarding still-functional items to acquire fashionable replacements and engaging in consumption as a primary form of status attainment have become normalized expectations regardless of actual income. The emulation dynamic that Veblen identified now operates on a mass scale, with advertising and media systematically cultivating aspirational consumption across the entire population.

Baudrillard and the colonization of desire through sign value

While Veblen analyzed consumption primarily as status signalling, mid-twentieth century theorists like Jean Baudrillard examined how capitalism transforms the very meaning of commodities themselves. Baudrillard's critical contribution lay in his analysis of how commodities function not as use values (objects satisfying material needs) but as sign values (Williams and Allinson, 2015). In the contemporary consumer society analyzed by Baudrillard, the relationship between consumer and commodity has been fundamentally inverted. The consumer no longer purchases a car for transportation, clothing for protection from weather, or a home for shelter. Instead, these objects are consumed primarily for their ability to communicate identity, status and belonging to others. The material substance of the commodity becomes almost irrelevant; what matters is the sign it carries, the image it projects, the identity it makes available to the consumer.

Baudrillard argues that this transformation of commodities into signs creates a perpetual demand for replacement and newness. Since what is being consumed is meaning, not matter, no amount of consumption ever satisfies. A car purchased for the status it signals will inevitably require replacement as newer, more prestigious models emerge. A garment purchased for the fashion it communicates becomes obsolete not because it deteriorates but because the sign it carries becomes outdated. This theoretical framework explains a critical paradox of consumer society: the more people consume, the less satisfied they become. Unlike consumption oriented toward material needs, consumption of sign value is by definition endless. The symbolic associations of commodities are infinitely malleable, created and destroyed through advertising, media representation and the constant cycling of trends. Consumer capitalism thus has a built-in mechanism for expanding demand without limit: the endless production and destruction of meaning.

Guy Debord's society of the spectacle and the mediation of desire

Guy Debord's analysis of what he termed "The Society of the Spectacle" extended Baudrillard's insights by examining how capitalism had colonized not merely commodity consumption but the totality of social representation and desire production. In Debord's formulation, the spectacle is not merely advertising or entertainment; it is the complete replacement of lived reality with mediated representations designed to maintain capitalist social relations (Debord, 1994). Debord's analysis illuminates how the contemporary consumer derives their understanding of what they need, what is beautiful, what constitutes success and what makes life worth living entirely through representations manufactured by capital: advertising, cinema, fashion magazines, television programming and contemporary equivalents in digital media. The spectacle colonizes desire itself. What appears to be the consumer's autonomous choice is revealed as the consumer's participation in scripts written by corporations and marketed through ubiquitous media representations.

This analysis connects directly to the problem of waste. The spectacle necessarily produces endless cycles of desire and disillusionment. Media representations circulate images of commodities as bearers of happiness, fulfilment and authentic identity. Consumers acquire these goods, only to discover that material possession of the commodity does not deliver the promised psychological or existential satisfaction depicted in its advertising. This gap between the promise and the reality creates a structural demand for new commodities, new identities, new purchases. Moreover, Debord's analysis demonstrates how the spectacle systematically directs consumption toward newer, more expensive and more status-laden products. The spectacle renders older goods "uncool," unfashionable or outdated through the constant circulation of images of newer versions. This represents a profound inversion: the older goods have not deteriorated in function, but they have been devalued through representation. The consumer is compelled to discard them not because they are broken but because the spectacle has stripped them of social meaning.

The emergence of planned obsolescence as manufacturing strategy

While the sociologists discussed above provided conceptual frameworks for understanding consumption, the first analyst to systematically document and critique the deliberate design of products for failure was Vance Packard. In his 1960 work *The Waste Makers*, Packard provided detailed evidence that the rapid turnover of goods was not an accidental consequence of consumer choice but rather a deliberate corporate strategy (Packard, 1960.). Packard traced planned obsolescence to the American automobile industry in the 1920s. By the 1920s, the automobile market had reached saturation. In a saturated market, the only way to maintain and increase sales was to convince car owners to replace their

automobiles not because they were broken but because they were outdated. Sloan introduced the concept of "dynamic obsolescence," which involved designing new model year vehicles with cosmetic changes sufficiently pronounced that previous models would appear old-fashioned by comparison.

This strategy proved extraordinarily successful. Rather than designing cars to be maximally durable (which would reduce repeat purchases), manufacturers began designing cars to create the impression of obsolescence. Cars remained mechanically sound but appeared unfashionable, leading consumers to replace them. This principle, originating in the automobile industry, subsequently spread throughout the consumer economy. Packard documented how manufacturers applied similar strategies across appliances, clothing, furniture and various consumer goods, deliberately designing products with limited durability while simultaneously using advertising and styling changes to convince consumers that older goods were outdated. Packard's analysis revealed that planned obsolescence operated through multiple mechanisms.

Planned obsolescence in contemporary consumer markets

The strategies documented by Packard have intensified and proliferated. Contemporary examples demonstrate that planned obsolescence has become a standard operating principle rather than an exceptional practice (Echegaray, 2014). The mobile industry exemplifies this pattern with ruthless clarity. Major manufacturers release new phone models annually, with each iteration featuring only incremental technological improvements. Yet these incremental changes are marketed with intense promotional campaigns suggesting that older models are significantly inferior, obsolete and incapable of meeting contemporary needs. Moreover, manufacturers have adopted software-based methods of rendering older phones functionally obsolete. Operating system updates are deliberately designed to be resource-intensive, slowing down older phone models to the point of becoming unusable. Batteries are designed with finite lifespans and often rendered irreplaceable without manufacturer assistance, making repair economically unfeasible for consumers. Parts required for repair are deliberately made unavailable, making maintenance of older devices impossible.

The fast fashion industry represents another paradigmatic case of industrialized planned obsolescence. Major fashion retailers introduce new collections constantly rendering previous purchases obsolete not through deterioration but through the circulation of new images and marketing messages that communicate previous styles as uncool or outdated. The industry explicitly designs garments with poor construction quality, using cheap materials and shoddy seams, ensuring they deteriorate quickly. The combination of deliberately low durability and relentless marketing of new styles creates a situation in which

consumers feel compelled to continuously discard clothing that remains largely wearable. What distinguishes contemporary planned obsolescence from Packard's era is its systematization and integration into product design from inception. Products are now routinely designed explicitly for a predetermined lifespan, with engineers tasked not with maximizing durability but with determining the optimal point at which the product should fail.

The psychological infrastructure: Advertising and the manufacture of discontent

The economic success of planned obsolescence depends on more than mere product design; it requires the continuous manufacture of consumer discontent. Packard documented how advertising systematically cultivated anxiety, shame and the sense that one's current possessions were inadequate. Contemporary advertising has only intensified these mechanisms. Advertising functions to create the psychological conditions necessary for the acceptance of planned obsolescence. Marketing campaigns do not merely provide information about product features; they engage in the systematic cultivation of desire, the creation of associations between products and identity and the establishment of what are essentially false needs. Individuals are made to feel that they are inadequate, unfashionable, unsuccessful or unhappy due to their current possessions and that the solution lies in acquiring new commodities.

This process is particularly effective because it operates at an unconscious or semi-conscious level. The cumulative exposure to thousands of advertising images daily shapes what individuals perceive as normal, desirable, and necessary without requiring explicit argumentation. Advertising does not typically tell consumers they should discard their old phones; rather, it circulates images of beautiful people using new phones, establishing associations between the new products and attractiveness, success and social belonging. The consumer arrives at the conclusion that they should replace their device not through external coercion but through what appears to be their autonomous recognition of their own inadequacy.

The scale of waste production

Municipal solid waste (MSW) generation has escalated dramatically in recent decades, reflecting the expansion of consumer capitalism. By 2012, global MSW reached an estimated 1.9-2.1 billion tonnes annually, with projections indicating steady growth driven by urbanization and consumption patterns. OECD countries alone produced around 530 kg per capita in 2012, significantly higher than the global average, underscoring disparities between affluent consumer societies and developing regions. The U.S. remained the largest generator, producing 192 million tonnes by 2000, up from 131 million tonnes in 1980 (D-Waste, 2013). Electronic waste (e-waste) similarly exploded, from 33.8 million metric tons worldwide in 2010 to 41.8 million metric tonnes in 2014 (Baldé *et al.*, 2015). These figures

reveal waste not as individual failing but systemic output of planned obsolescence and consumerism. Plastics production, reaching 322 million tonnes globally by 2015 (an 8.6% CAGR since 1950), exemplifies material throughput fuelling waste. This scale demands structural critique over behavioural fixes, as consumer capitalism inherently mandates accelerated disposal.

These statistics are difficult to comprehend in their enormity. They represent not marginal waste generated by a minority but rather the quantitative outcome of how production and consumption are systematically organized. The waste is not incidental to consumer capitalism; it is fundamental to its operation. In a system in which products are deliberately designed to fail and be replaced, in which advertising systematically devalues existing goods in favour of newer consumption, in which sign value rather than use value governs purchasing decisions, waste at scale is inevitable.

The chemistry of consumption: Pollution from production and processing

The waste visible in landfills and floating in oceans represents only the final stage of a production process thoroughly saturated with pollution. The manufacturing of consumer goods generates massive quantities of air and water pollution. The textile industry, for example, relies on 3,500 different chemicals in production, of which 10 percent are recognized as hazardous to human health and 5 percent as hazardous to the environment. Textile dyeing and finishing accounts for 36 percent of the industry's pollution impacts. The production process for synthetic textiles depends on fossil fuel extraction and energy-intensive manufacturing. Fibre production has the largest impact on freshwater withdrawal due to cotton cultivation and contributes significantly to ecosystem degradation. Dyeing and finishing processes release highly toxic compounds into waterways. In Bangladesh, India, and Vietnam, rivers have been rendered permanently discoloured and toxic from textile production, threatening both aquatic ecosystems and the drinking water supplies of rural populations (Tulchinsky and Varavikova. 2014).

Electronic waste processing, whether in formal or informal settings, releases toxic compounds including lead, cadmium and other heavy metals. In developing countries where much e-waste is processed outside of regulated facilities, workers dismantle devices using crude methods, directly handling toxic materials without protective equipment, leading to severe health consequences and environmental contamination (Annamalai, 2015). The globalized nature of contemporary consumer goods production means that the pollution generated in manufacturing is concentrated in the regions where labour costs are lowest and environmental regulations are weakest or poorly enforced. The populations that directly experience the health effects of manufacturing pollution are typically

those who benefit least from the consumption of the goods produced.

The disproportionate location of waste in marginalized spaces

Understanding consumer society as polluted society requires examining not merely the total quantity of waste produced but its spatial distribution. Waste does not distribute evenly; rather, it concentrates in spaces inhabited by those with the least political power and economic resources (Gidwani, 2015). Landfills, incinerators and hazardous waste processing facilities are systematically located in or adjacent to low-income communities and communities of colour. This pattern is not accidental but reflects the rational economic logic of waste facility siting. Land in affluent neighborhoods commands high prices and meets fierce community opposition to noxious facilities. Land in impoverished neighbourhoods is cheaper and community opposition is easier to overcome due to political marginalization, lack of resources for legal contestation and sometimes direct political corruption.

The result is that residents of marginalized communities face disproportionate exposure to pollution from waste facilities, manufacturing facilities producing consumer goods and the toxic compounds released in waste processing. Low-income communities and communities of colour experience higher rates of respiratory disease, neurological damage, reproductive health impacts, and cancer compared to affluent communities. This spatial concentration of pollution represents an unequal ecological burden. Communities that derive minimal benefit from the consumption whose waste is dumped in their neighbourhoods bear the maximum health and environmental costs. Meanwhile, affluent communities that consume at the highest rates remain physically separated from the waste and pollution their consumption generates.

Thus, addressing consumer society as polluted society requires not merely changing individual behaviours but rather transforming the economic imperatives that mandate overproduction and planned obsolescence. This demands questioning the assumption that continuous economic growth is desirable, challenging the equation of consumption with happiness and self-realization and supporting structural changes toward circular economy models, product durability, reparability and extended producer responsibility.

CONCLUSION

This analysis has traced connections among several key phenomena: the theoretical frameworks that explain how desire itself becomes colonized by capital; the deliberate design of products for failure as a strategy for maintaining capital accumulation (planned obsolescence); the massive quantitative scale of waste generated through these systems; the concentration of pollution in manufacturing processes; and the spatial distribution of waste such that affluent populations enjoy

consumption while distant, marginalized populations bear the environmental and health costs. Understanding these connections reveals that pollution and waste are not incidental to consumer capitalism or accidental byproducts that could be eliminated through better management. Rather, they are integral to how the system functions. A capitalist system oriented toward maximum profit accumulation requires ever-increasing consumption. Planned obsolescence ensures that products are replaced not when they cease functioning but when they lose social meaning. Advertising systematically manufactures dissatisfaction with existing goods. And environmental costs are externalized onto populations without power to resist. Consumer society is inherently polluted society, not because pollution could be eliminated through green technology or individual awareness but because the system's fundamental logic mandates the transformation of material resources into commodities for rapid turnover and disposal. The waste overflowing landfills, contaminating waterways, filling oceans with plastic and poisoning the air and water of marginalized communities worldwide represents not a failure of the system but its successful operation. Rather than asking how consumers can be better educated about recycling or how corporations can marginally improve the environmental footprint of products, sociology must ask whether the system of production organized entirely around unlimited consumption and the maximization of commodity turnover can coexist with ecological sustainability and social justice. The evidence suggests it cannot.

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