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How can we as designers counter consumer waste?

Why do we want new things and why are we attached to certain objects?

materialism vs Object attachment.

Is ownership of an object self- representation or symbolic value only?

Is materialism a bad thing?

Is consumerism a natural culture or is it a result of Capitalism?

Definitions

Consumerism – The buying of goods and services; in the belief that it is good for a society or an individual person to buy and use a large quantity of goods and services.

Preoccupation of society with the acquisition of goods.

Materialism- A prevailing pattern of desire for mere sensory enjoyments, possessions, or physical comfort, at the expense of higher moral or spiritual value.

Attachment – The act of joining one thing to another.

A feeling of love for someone or something.

French origin – atachier, fasten or fix.

(Why do we buy things to discard them)

Baudrillard's definition of consumerism is that consumption is founded on a lack, that the goods we buy are not merely for our needs but for our need of satisfaction. He argues that objects are not defined as consumed if their relationship to us is non arbitrary, such as furniture, houses for example and have no implication beyond their relationship to us.

Consumption is based on the manipulation of the object itself; it must become a concept external to its relationship with us. (I think)

It is human nature to compare ourselves to those around us, as a community we measure our success in relation to the perceived affluence of our peers. The feeling of not having is a prerequisite to consumptive behaviour.

We buy goods as a signifier of status. As Barthes states "The wearing of an item of clothing is fundamentally an act of signification and a social act. Clothing is the object of codification." we are influenced by what are considered to be socially acceptable patterns of behaviour. Although we may not be aware of them, cultural values and customs influence our understanding of what is normal, what we do and think we should do until they become the standard.

Our perception of normality conditions us to the concept of a fast replacement society. We make unconscious decisions on the lifespan of products, a fridge for example has longevity whereas a mobile phone does not. (Is this Haskins?) While companies encourage a throw-away society we are unaware of the manipulation of our mindset.

The way we interact socially influences our behaviour, living in an age of social media, we are under pressure to keep up, living with the threat of becoming irrelevant. Social media shows us an improbable form of reality, the illusion of an unrealistically happy and successful society. We are urged into materialistic behaviour in order to connect to someone else whether it would ordinarily be our choice in our bid for acceptance. A person with little sense of their own identity will be inclined to buy more expensive material goods as a signifier of their status.

Culture is fluid and develops over time through social interaction and the way we interpret our environment is subject to change. In this way the object we possess as meaningful one day can become irrelevant the next. The emotional association with the object is lost and it becomes meaningless as a result.

Products that don't grow with us get outgrown, companies promise us an image of ourselves, one that improves with every update, never fulfilling our imagined potential.

We are often making purchases without the engagement of seeing or touching the physical object, buying products we have no connection to. The object will be lacking in significance to the buyer except to fill a cultural obligation. And therefore, a virtually worthless product.

Our problem with over consumption is exacerbated by rampant Capitalism, focusing on our emotion of wanting and not keeping. Perfectly useful products are discarded before their time, large companies preferring to encourage a throw away culture, products being made with a built-in obsolescence.

(Why do we keep some things and not others – object attachment)

Responsible consumption is not necessarily bad. Our possessions can be an anchor to our reality, Separation from our possessions can change the meaning of their lives, a person's memories can be objects acquired over a long period of time.

“they provide a framework on which we layer meaningful associations over time” (Chapman J.p.21)

Consumption can be a way of curating the stories of our lives or others, the value of which can only be decided by the individual. A valued possession can be of very little monetary and utility value but are kept for meaningful associations connecting to time, place or person, the meaning being the connection between subject and object.

In our lives we encounter both negative and positive experiences, for our own psychological wellbeing, we return to a base level of happiness. The effects fade with time and we return to our baseline. We reflect less on positive events, so they do not become as deeply imbedded

as negative. The euphoria experienced is, therefore, short lived, requiring a new positivity boost (such as new purchase?) As a connection to places and experiences an object may also be discarded in order to sever a connection from a negative experience.

Ideas about ourselves are sometimes represented in an object, it could be that it reminds you of a previous version of yourself that you wish to remain in the present.

The relationships between the materials and meaning of objects depends largely on the context of its cultural environment. The sense of material intelligence is a matter of nurture over nature. As an example, a child that has played with wooden and hand-made toys will have developed a different set of material values than one born into an era of mass-produced toys.

Intrinsic value is often assigned to objects we invest time and money into. We are more inclined to keep an object we have maintained or repaired; the owner is bestowed with the feeling that they are somehow involved with its creation.

Likewise consumers place a much higher value on products they have created or fixed, the more a person puts into the construction the more they value it. The process makes them feel competent through the demonstration of skill and feel less inclined to replace it.

(the Ikea effect)

Adversely the failure of construction or maintenance can be a source of shame and leads to the disposal of the item.

A handmade gift is valued more as they have the experience of the effort and time the gifter has invested.

TBC: Traditional methods of repair (Transformation as opposed to repair)

Darning/patching/sashiko

Icelandic bowl repair/ Japanese Kintsugi

Attachment security

Object attachment- The experience a person has when they feel an emotional attachment to an inanimate object and a sense of loss when they part with it.

Our essence lives on in what we made/owned.

Materialism peaks in the teenage years when self esteem is lowest. This is reduced when feedback is given that boosts self-worth.

Possessions reflect who they want to be. The sharing of gifts between friends achieves a sense of identity independent of their parents.

In adults the home is an extension of the physical body and reflection of who they are.

How they see objects as an extension of themselves depends on how much confidence they have in themselves. Reflecting on our things restores ego. A midlife crisis is connected with buying high status products.

Older adults do not just form bonds with their belongings but for brands from their youth, the idea that things were better in the past.

Attachment grows deeper with time, like a history of their life. They can provide a sense of continuity as they are seen by family members left behind as containing the essence of that person.

TBC- Prehistoric artefacts

(How can designers make a difference)

According to Papanek, design “should be a tool for positive social and environmental change”. (in Chapman p.3) There is a need for a more ethical response to social and environmental issues. We need to move away from the notion that success is measured in economic gain and move further towards creative fulfilment.

We are fuelled by a misguided assumption that people want an easier life more than a more fulfilling life. As Chapman says, they do not shy away from the inconvenience of cooking, pets, and travel for example as they have more meaning and value with regards to self-fulfilment.

Many people no longer have the skills to repair or maintain but taking care of things is a natural state of mind. This option has already been removed by the manufacturing as the machine process renders the interior of the product inaccessible. Products assembled by hand are more accessible to the owner. By placing a higher importance on accessibility, the consumer is able to prolong the lifespan of the product and feel more of a sense of connection.

As a designer it is important for our products not to fail, not just for environmental issues but to enhance the value of your products and your reputation as a business.

Overproduction removes the sense of an object as something precious and irreplaceable, it is vital to reduce consumption and add personal value to our products.

The world of commerce is slowly eroding the idea of multicultural design and the way we define our world. Companies are not driven by a desire to embrace diverse cultures, defined by diversity of experience, they are focused on the capitalization of what are deemed to be emerging markets. Mass production has seen a shift away from locally made goods to a typical Anglo-European model at the expense of other cultures.

From a design point of view, we need to re-set the market to encompass an extensive view of the cultural market as opposed to market led mediocrity and disconnect.

The idea that wastefulness is prevalent across the world is false...

TBC: Material matters

Supply chain disconnect/Collateral – McLearn

Better choices

Form following evolution

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