

What is the cause of the rise in consumption
and how can Designers add value to encourage
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What is the cause of the rise in consumption and how can Designers add value to encourage product attachment?

This essay will seek to determine what is the cause of the rise in over consumption in society, by looking at the origins of consumerism in the eighteenth century and how the industrial revolution influenced our attitudes towards consumption in the modern world.

I will examine the emergence of fashion and the rise in mass production to determine whether these factors are responsible for over consumption in society and the rise in capitalism. I will look at object attachment to determine the reasons why we form attachments to some of our possessions and not to others and the detachment we have from the products we buy. In our role as designers, it is important that we encourage consumers not to discard products prematurely, in this essay I hope to identify the values necessary to encourage product attachment in consumers and the opportunities we have available to us to stimulate product attachment.

The definition of Consumerism is “the buying and using of goods and services; the belief that it is good for a society or an individual person to buy and use a large quantity of goods and services.” (Oxford Learners Dictionary 2022), However, consumerism is also seen as “the preoccupation of society with the acquisition of goods” (Oxford Dictionary of English 2010). This suggests, the act of consumption is in itself quite innocuous, if it is purely to satisfy need, our possessions can be a framework to which we attach the meaning of our lives, objects becoming memories. However, Baudrillard (1996, p.205) believes that consumerism is founded on a lack of satisfaction and that the goods we consume are not merely to satisfy our needs. He argues that objects are not defined as consumed if their relationship to us is subjective. If this is the case, the object in question must be manipulated to satisfy a want rather than a conscious decision to fulfil a need and It could be assumed that consumerism is the consequence of a shift in culture.

In order to understand where the origins of consumerism are, we must look back to the industrial revolution of the eighteenth century and the rise of the middle classes as

modern capitalists. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx (2017, p57) tells us that the decline of the feudal system in the early part of the eighteenth century allowed freer movement between the layers of the social structure of Britain. For the middle classes more cash income was available to spend, standards of living increased and more was spent to signify their new status. As the market grew, the old system of production, through the guild of craftsmen, was not sufficient to keep up with consumer demand and their place was taken by Mechanical production methods. The atmosphere of ambition to rise through society demanded more capacity to fill the demand for non-essential possessions and more efficient ways of controlling the market, a society which would lead to aggressive selling and the birth of advertising. The implication here is that consumerism was a consequence of the wilful manipulation of the customer in their pursuit of higher social standing.

It would be logical to consider the possibility of other social factors as the preindustrial era was governed by tradition where individual ambition was not that common and the acquisition of goods other than for utility value was not deemed necessary. It is thought by Campbell (1994, p39.) that at this point, changes in beliefs and values become less puritanical and more romantic, so the demand for anything other than essentials was allowed to continue unfettered. This may be true as demand for goods spread to rural areas previously untouched by capitalism.

The industries that began during the industrial revolution, became even more successful in later decades, progressing towards the mass production of today. The reason for this seems to be the emergence of fashion. Changes that previously happened to garments over generations began to appear annually and influence spread throughout the whole of society. Characteristics of modern fashion, such as the rapid change in Shape, material and style appear in the mid eighteenth century with the Georgian period. "The wearing of an item of clothing is fundamentally an act of meaning that goes beyond modesty, ornamentation and protection." (Barthes, 2005, p.97). This explains the importance of clothing as a symbol of status to a middle-class society actively emulating the wealthier class. Barthes (1990, p.68) explanation of the fashion system as a code, helps our understanding of how consumers have become manipulated to by the rise of fashion.

The code begins with the physical garment, fabric sewn together into a form dictated by designers and manufacturers, once the garment is given a description its significance then becomes about rhetoric, it becomes a symbol, a fashion item. If an article becomes a symbol, it is less about the original object and more about its fashion value. The fashion system is made up of three elements, the object, the support, and the variant. These can be described in the following terms, the object is the base garment, the support is a significant detail on the garment, such as a collar or pocket for example, and the variant is the description of the particulars of the support that makes the garment fashion. The garment on its own has no meaning other than its original function of protection but once given the support, the garment has now been given the signification of fashion. The original garment cannot be changed without it becoming something new, the variation may be small, but the garment still becomes a different one from its predecessor. Barthes theory highlights the fact that very little changes in the production of garments from one year to the next, but society still feels the necessity to follow the trend. This is how the new industrialists were allowed to take control of the fashion market by sustaining society's needs to signify their status, as Woodward (2018, p.4) says, "consumption that occurs in a context of mass-produced goods is a process that involves encountering and interacting with goods that we did not make but that capitalist structures of production and advertising produce and attempt to impart meanings onto them." In this way, Society is pre-conditioned to consume more than their basic needs, fuelled by the arrival of the fashion industry.

In spite of technological and intellectual advances, Industry today still operates on the same structure it did during the industrial revolution, manufacture is still based on mass production and cheapness. In some places there still exists an underclass of workers subjected to low pay and unhealthy working conditions and despite the fact that we have a better understanding of the natural world we still damage our environment.

The ongoing problem with overconsumption is exacerbated by rampant capitalism, their focus is on our want of possessions and their ability to influence our decision to discard products rather than keep them. Perfectly functioning items are discarded before they have outlived their usefulness, companies preferring to encourage a throw away culture as products in recent years are made with a built-in obsolescence. This is

designed to give the consumer little choice but to replace it with a newer model. Our perception of the lifespan of a product is conditioned by the concept of fast replacement in society, we are lured into unconscious decisions about the longevity of our purchase as we are unaware of the manipulation of our mindset by the manufacturing industry, never learning that all your desires and wants will not be satisfied through an endless replacement process.

Away from the persuasive powers of advertising, another factor which may influence excessive consumption is the way we act socially. In an age of social media, we are under pressure to stay up to date and feel threatened with the spectre of becoming irrelevant. In a similar way to the middle classes of the eighteenth century, as a society we measure our success in relation to the success of peer groups. Consumerism persuades us that materialistic behaviour will somehow connect us to an idealistic image of society which would not necessarily be of our choosing under normal circumstances, they promise an image of ourselves that improves as we update, but that promise of fulfilment never comes. In order to understand why and how we are so easily persuaded to join a cycle of replacement; we need to look at why we place less and less value on the products we buy and why we are inclined to keep some objects but readily dispose of others.

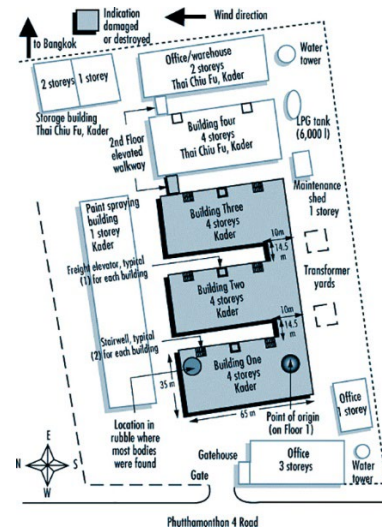
One reason is that we are becoming increasingly detached from the goods we buy. The way in which we shop is changing, with the explosion in the purchase of online goods we are ever more distanced from the physical engagement when choosing a product, we are unaware of its materiality or feeling of empathy we may have with it. Perhaps our decisions to discard our possessions more easily are created by the detachment from the products, its only purpose is one as a signifier of our social status and virtually lacking in any personal worth. We know little of the process of mass-produced goods, the material that it is constructed from, or the human cost involved in the mining, construction, or manufacture of our purchase, therefore, the estrangement of the consumer from these is evermore widening.

Geographically the world of Capitalism is expanding across the globe in an effort to keep up with today's rapid increase in consumerism. This is not a modern world phenomenon. Marx (2017, p.54) describes how in the eighteenth century "the need of a

constantly expanding market for its products chase the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere “He goes on to say it has “drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. All old established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed.” (2017, p.54). This is to say that manufacturing has become detached from us not only through location but through the destruction of traditional workshops.

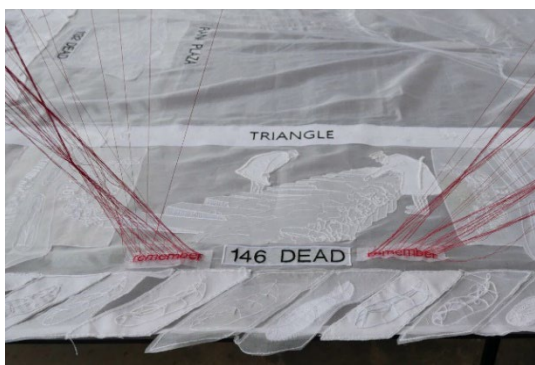
The process of estrangement does not stop at the destruction of the old industry, the worker who was once a tradesman held in high esteem, is subjugated into paid labourer, selling themselves in order to survive, becoming “a commodity like every other article of commerce.” (Marx, 1970, p.59) The disconnect continues in the manufacture process itself, the more objects he produces the less he is connected to them. As a human being in the natural world, the product of his labour would determine his place as part of the human race and his connection to his fellow beings. In this disconnect, he is unable to affirm himself in his labours and becomes discontented and is denied any personal development. Not only is the object he has produced alien to him, but it is also the property of somebody else. The owner too is in a state of alienation from the worker and his environment, unaware of the human cost their product has attached to it.

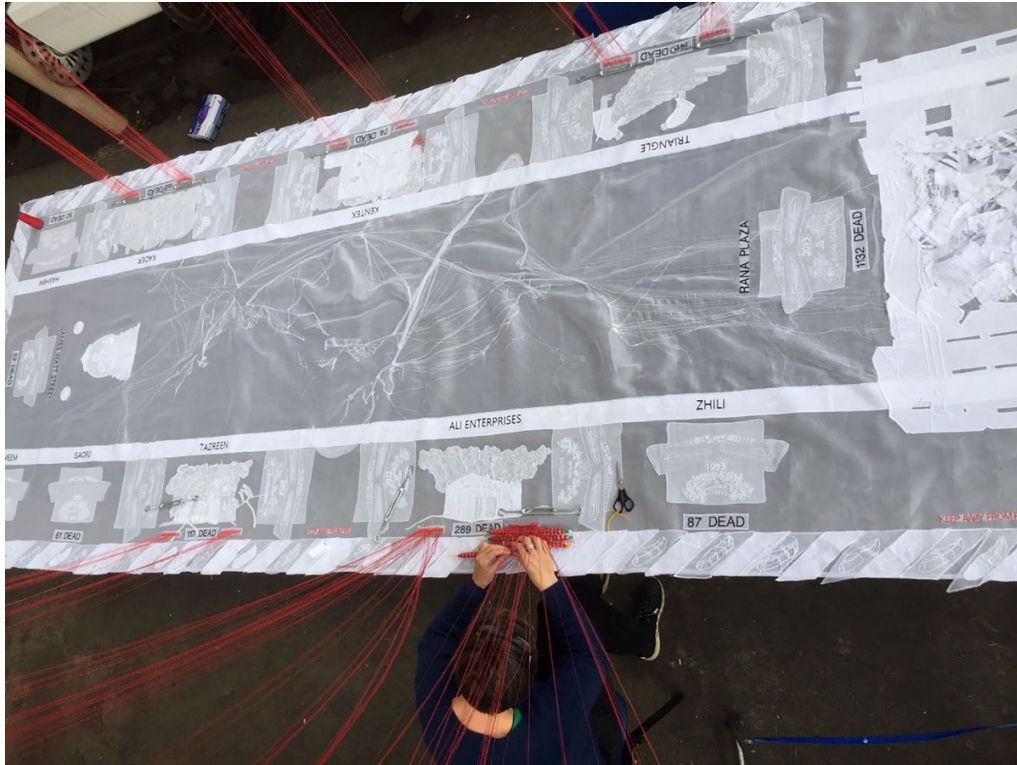
Despite the fact that the modern consumer may have good intentions to buy ethically produced goods, they may not be aware of the conditions under which the product is manufactured. Brigid McLeer is a British artist interested in the process of memorialisation through art installation. She uses her art to raise difficult questions on the treatment of workers in the manufacturing industry. Her aim is to draw attention to negligence in the workplace and highlighting that it has become a repeated pattern around the globe. Her latest piece, *Collateral*, is based on a previous work *N Scale* exhibited in Dublin in 2015, remembering the death of 188 workers in a factory fire in Thailand on the 10th May 1993 owned by the toy manufacturer Kader industries. The artwork representing the plan of the building.



NScale (Belfast 2015)

The installation, *Collateral*, was based at Queen St. Mill in Burnley, Lancashire, a fitting location as it reflects the role of Lancashire in the cotton industry during the industrial revolution. The composition was inspired by a lace panel in the neighbouring Gawthorpe Hall, commemorating the battle of Britain. Struck by the delicacy of the work in contrast to the violent images of burning buildings, she was moved to replace the ruined buildings on the battle of Britain sampler with the ruins of factories such as Ran plaza, Bangladesh, which collapsed due to an unsafe building in 2013, killing 1,134 workers and leaving 2,500 with life changing injuries. The factory produced clothing for retailers including Benetton, Mango, Matalan, and Primark. The Panel has a wheatsheaf design around the border the shape of which reminded McLeer of images of the bodies laid out in front of the factory wrapped in cloth. A team of locally based volunteer embroiderers were invited to contribute, each being offered one to stitch.





Collateral (Burnley 2021)

The aim of the work is to display a scenario in which to reflect on responsibility and the degree of separation we have from the consequences of mass production of the products we buy. The personalisation of her design removes the anonymity of the workers and makes it impossible to separate the human element from it, and the individual time and care given by the volunteers shows the commitment of the living to the victims. The elements in the work “come together to “re-member” the disconnections and wilful negligence by which such horrific devaluing of life comes to underpin the clothing we buy and wear and to remember those who are ignored and forgotten in consumer capitalism’s rapacious, ongoing race to the bottom.” (McLeer B. 2021)

McLeer’s work helps us to see past capitalist’s deliberate strategy of neglect, it is convenient for them that we forget the avoidable tragedies of the past so that they may continue to mass produce regardless of the human cost. In buying their products they make us unknowingly complicit in their actions. The positioning of the installation in the mill is poignant as it reflects the role of Lancashire in the cotton industry and reminds us

that lives were lost here too. If we fully realise the human and material cost of the things we buy, we may understand the true value of the object and foster a stronger bond between ourselves and the product.

There are many other reasons why people keep some things and discard others. According to Chapman “they design things simply as a wire frame architecture on which we may drape layers of meaningful association over time.” (2021 p.21) We therefore need to investigate how we form the relationship between object and owner.

Despite the manipulation of advertising in the world of mass production, it is still possible for the consumer to bestow meaning on an object through their own knowledge and experiences. A valued possession can be of very little monetary value or even utility value but are kept because of meaningful associations connecting to time, place, or person. The meaning in this case is the connection between subject and object.

We are told by Chapman (2021 p.21) that, in our lives we encounter both negative and positive experiences, for our own psychological wellbeing we return to a base level of happiness. We reflect less on positive events, so they do not become as deeply embedded as negative. The euphoria experience is short lived, therefore, we require a new positive boost, such as a new purchase for example, easily obtained in the new consumer era. If the connection between the object and places or experiences is negative, the object may be discarded to sever the connection from the difficult experience.

objects can become a projection of ourselves, it becomes a reminder of who we were that you wish to retain in the present and attachment grows deeper with time, like a history of our life. They can provide a sense of continuity as they are seen by family members left behind as containing the essence of that person, sometimes taking the characteristics of an heirloom.

Retention of objects is generally beneficial in moderation, however there is a fine line between healthy attachment and hoarding. Shopping is widely accepted as a leisure activity in modern culture, in some cases once the initial thrill of purchase is over, they cannot part with the product. This is unusual behaviour as it does not display the accepted theory of short-lived euphoria. Harold (2009, p.51) says this obsession in part

can be explained in not only the memory the object may hold but also the promise of a better future, for example clothes that don't fit now may do in the future. The potential capacity for future usefulness, Like the object's role in memory, is to show us an idealised vision of ourselves. In some cases, they see the object as a way to form a connection with the wider world, as what they possess may be useful or interesting to someone else. One of the consequences of overwhelming capitalism. It that it has become difficult to judge what is enough and be aware if our own level of consumption is acceptable when too many things are easily available to us. Awareness is the best step towards understanding our perception of the consumer society and the ways connections between objects and meanings are forged.

Woodward (2018, p.11) tells us "There is a distinction, between objects having meaning and being a meaningful object, the term meaningful suggests that object has personal and cultural meanings which people are aware and able to articulate." Sometimes, however, this is not always accurate as objects have a material value that because of its nature can only be sensed and not easily be articulated as we engage with them through the senses. Things we cannot experience when detached from the object at point of sale. Some objects are only realised as meaningful through everyday routine practices, we become aware of their meaningfulness when reflected upon during unusual activities such as reorganisation of a room, for example.

When people become attached to a product, they are more willing to spend time and money on repair to prolong the life, the memories, their social identity, and attachment is often stronger 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 themselves, 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. Adversely the failure of construction or maintenance can be a source of shame and leads to the disposal of the item.

In order to reach an understanding about why the consumer builds a relationship with the goods they buy, and what influences their decision to keep or discard them, it is

helpful to define the values placed on their purchases. Mugge (2021, p.66) lists five values, those being as follows, functional, in its physical performance, emotional, in that it stimulates feelings, epistemic, whereby the product arouses curiosity, social, in allowing association with a group, and conditional, where personal circumstances influence decisions. The product at purchase usually offers functional value and possibly emotional value if it is a gift perhaps, on the other hand a new product may have improved performance as a functional value and epistemic value if it has new features. Some products encourage the idea of brand as a tribe, fulfilling the social value as it persuades the consumer, they are part of a wider society. It may be said that values are not static, for example a products functional value can change due to wear and tear and emotional value will also be eroded by the damage to its appearance. It is, therefore, common for the owner to write off an older product as they perceive they have had their worth from the goods. The conditional value may change due to circumstances such as changes in the home or family life whereby the product is deemed to have outlived its usefulness.

In studying the historical factors which have resulted in a culture of overproduction and over consumption, we as designers have a greater understanding of how fashion and mass production have influenced our culture. If a designer is committed to their role in industry, it is important that they strive to create value in a product that promotes a sustainable relationship between the product and the consumer, as a commitment to the reduction of discarded products and the overconsumption of mass-produced goods.

According to Papanek, design “should be a tool for positive social and environmental change”. (quoted in Chapman, 2021, 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. Heskett (2017 p.186) also believes that good design has become secondary to profitability, although I am not sure this is entirely the case, we can both agree that profit must be a consideration in the viability of any business. It should also be noted that overproduction removes the sense of an object as something precious and irreplaceable, so it is vital to reduce consumption by adding personal value to our products, using the information we

have linking object attachment and detachment with the rate of product retention. With this in mind we can see ways to improve product retention.

Mass production has seen a shift away from locally made goods to a typical Anglo-European model at the expense of other cultures. The rapid expansion of Capitalism across the globe 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, instead they view them as emerging markets to be exploited for capital gain. The determination to forcibly fit generic design systems shows that capitalist attitudes have changed little since the observations of Marx (2017, p.31) in the communist manifesto International design has evolved into a bland uniform structure isolated from local culture and natural materials adopting little of the characteristic styles of the region. "a tide of sameness is spreading from sea to sea" (Braungart M. McDonough W. 2008, p.119) From a design point of view, we need to re-set the industry to encompass an extensive view of the cultural market as opposed to capitalist led mediocrity and disconnect. By respecting different cultures, we gain access to a diverse selection of materials and creative expression, and our designs and product would be richer for it. As Brungart and McDonough (2008, p.120) state that it is not the fittest that survives but the most fitting. A positive response to diversity through design and creative production methods, may bring the additional benefit of the product being used for differing purposes and different individuals. The method of mass production could still be maintained with a few adaptations to the local trades, materials, and tastes, the possible compromise we need between profitability and creativity.

In contrast to employing cultural influences it should still be possible for a designer to create a product resilient to the ever-changing fashion trends, to produce a style that will be timeless, and classical It is recognised that symmetry and simplicity of form are most effective design elements and the use of materials that gracefully age such as wood or leather which will not decrease the aesthetic value through scratches and signs of handling and therefore delay the discarding of the product.

One factor in the discarding of goods that is overlooked or wilfully ignored is the capacity to upgrade an existing product to extend the lifespan of the item. If designers were to develop a system of modular patterns that could be interchangeable it may be

possible to facilitate changes to existing models. A strategy such as this would also support Epistemic and social values by increasing interest and keeping up with social groups, perhaps by making a product that can be shared with other members of a group or society. The associations of which will grow over time and the connection to the product will become stronger and on a larger scale. There may initially be potential problem of reduced sales, but If a product performs well, a strong customer relationship can increase brand loyalty. These adjustments to design could result in a stronger emotional attachment especially those that require personal involvement.

Before the industrial revolution, hand made goods had a unique quality and were personalised to fit the individuals' requirements. With this in mind, one idea towards stimulating an emotional bond through products, is Involving customers in the design of their purchase. They will express their own identity and see themselves as co-designers. Mugge (2005, p.43) states that Preliminary ideas on personalisation include Products left with elements unfinished at the point of purchase, to stimulate the consumer taking on the role of designer. The control of what the products appearance is, will be their own interpretation. "If the product is a symbol of the owner's skills, talents or efforts, he or she experiences pride in the product because it expresses a valued part of the self." (2005, p.44) in this way the product becomes unique, and the owner has more empathy with it.

Mugge, schoormans and schifferstein (2009, p.467) performed a study to evaluate the emotional bond between consumer and purchase. Focussing on the integration of the customer in the design process as a way to foster emotional bonding. Their findings found that the more effort involved in the creative process the greater the value of self-expression and the increase in emotional bonding.

There are many ways to apply personalisation to a product, an example of which is Adidas who offer a customisation service to the public on a range of trainers. The customers are able to choose the shape of the shoe, the colour of the shoe and add text. In this way the consumer has become part of the design process, the product then becomes more personal as it is a better fit to their circumstances and a way of taking ownership by distinguishing it from the rest. The activity adds value to their goods as the time and the effort shows personal accomplishment because they created it themselves.

The main outcome may just be that it's fun to do but the act in itself evokes a positive response which adds meaning to the object in the form of emotional value, hopefully adding to the lifespan of the object. Although bonds are formed through products such as those which require self-assembly, from Ikea, for example. They require only physical effort, lack a more personal touch and may not form as greater bond between object and consumer. The designer would be responsible for making the personalisation a positive experience, creating a toolkit simple enough for the public to use. The personalisation should not diminish the quality of the base product so that people are able to handle the consequences and the designer need not be responsible for customer error in the personalisation process

As designers we are constantly reminded of the need for sustainability and the dangers manufacturing pose to the environment. In seeking to understand the attitude of consumers towards their possessions and their precondition to overconsume, it provides the designer with a toolbox with which they can add value to manufactured goods in an effort to prolong their lifespan. Designers are only a small part of the manufacturing process and I have concluded that the manufacturing industry as a whole still operates on almost the same structure it did back in the industrial revolution, therefore the whole of the system requires modernisation on a big scale. In adding value to products through features such as personalisation, good aesthetic value and a system of modular integration, designers may encourage product attachment and find the way to help combat over consumption.

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