

# A Fashionable Pair of Blinders

An Illustrated Investigation  
Into the Spending Habits of  
A Conflicted Consumer



WRITTEN + ILLUSTRATED BY LAURA M. YOUNG

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Into the Spending Habits of  
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## MARCH

(EARLY MARCH)

- SCHOODACS - LRG. ICED DIRTY CHAI
- DIRECT ANGLE PRESS - PRNT HOURS \$10

3.13 • LITTLE BROTHER BURGER | 30.16

3.16 • WHALE POD SHIPPER | 21.93

- CROWLER VT | 32 -
- BEER

- CAT BATES JEWELRY | 38 -
- DONATION

3.18 • PET PROVISIONS | 50

- GIFT CARD

3.20 • MOYB | 40 -

- GIFT CARD

3.23 • BLUE LOON BAKERY | 30

- GIFT CARD

## MAY

5.1 • PET PROVISIONS | 10.98

- WELLNESS PACKAGE

- WORD SHAPE | 30 -
- BOOK FOR SAM

5.4 • AMAZON | 17.99

- PHONE SCREEN COVER

- CASPER | 58.50
- REPLACEMENT PILLOW STANDARD SIZE

## MAY, CONTINUED

5.23 • CLARKES HARDWARE | 141.78

- BENJAMIN MOORE PAINT

- BRUSHES X 2

- FOAM BRUSHES X 4

- DROP CLOTH

- PLASTIC PAINT CONTAINERS X 2

- RAZOR PAINT SCRAPER

5.24 • SOCIETY 6 | 82.48 JUNE

- FANNY PACK

- DOOR MAT

5.25 • LITTLE BRO BURGER | 26.71

5.26 • OVERTONE HAIR | 24.99

5.28 • AMAZON | 32.84

- WHITE FRAMES X 2

5.29 • SALT + SOIL | 35 -

- PRINT

## MAY, CONTINUED

6.3 • OBAMA FUND | 42.40

- DONATION

6.3 • RECLAIM THE BLOCK | 51.83

6.3 • LIFE NECESSITIES | 49 -

- SPORTS BRA

6.3 • APPLE | 2,199 -

- MAC BOOK PRO "16

- USB ADAPTOR

6.8 • POSTABLE | 4.54

- BIRTHDAY CARD FOR BREONNA TAYLOR

6.8 • APPLE | 19.99

- APPLE PENCIL NIBS

6.8 • WAYFAIR | 223 -

- BOOKSHELF FOR OFFICE

## APRIL

4.8 • SAULT NE | 23 -

- BANDANAS FOR MASKS

- 44 NORTH COFFEE | 39.50

- ESPRESSO BEANS X 2

4.14 • SAULT NE | 35 -

- IPHONE 11 CASE

4.17 • WORDSHAPE | 40

- BOOK FOR OWEN

4.20 • PACHA SOAP CO. | 43.24

- BULK BAR SOAP

- APPLE - CELL PHONE | 69.99

4.21 • L.L. BEAN | 59 -

- NEW RAIN COAT

4.22 • LUSH COSMETICS | 62.85

- FACE WASH

- BATH BOMB

- FACE LOTION

4.28 • AMAZON | 48.98

- BOOK FOR MADDY

4.29 • AVEDA | 90 -

- BATH SALTS

- HAND LOTION

- SHAMPOO

6.13 • AMAZON | 189.99 + 29.98

- DESK + LAMP

6.16 • CONTAINER STORE | 77.76

- DESK ORG. STUFF

6.14 • MAD TACO | 23.30

- 4 TACOS!

6.14 • CITY MARKET, BURLINGTON VT <sup>30.59</sup>

6.15 • EVERLANE | 25.26

- FACE MASKS

6.18 • IN CASE | 42.46

- LAPTOP CASE THAT WAS NEVER DELIVERED

6.19 • ARTICLE | 138 -

- OFFICE CHAI

6.22 • WEST ELM | 69 -

- BOOK ENDS

6.23 • SAULT NE | 29.95

- LOBSTER COASTERS

6.25 • HIDDEN GEM SALON | 56 -

- HAIR STUFF

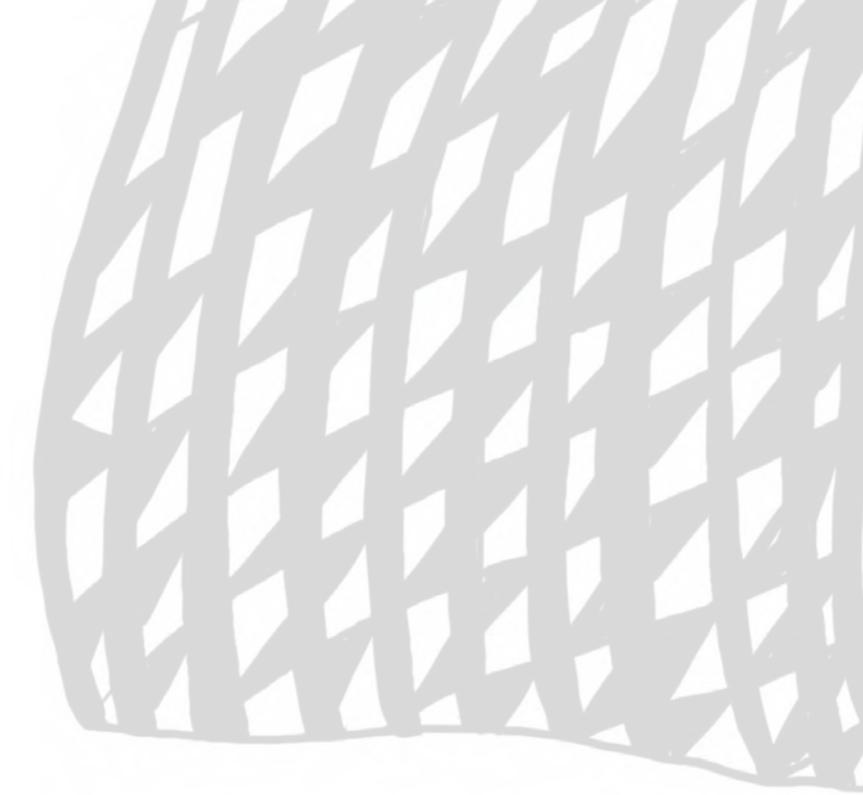
6.29 • CONCORD CO-OP | 20.36

- SUSHI

- LAMP, SANITIZER

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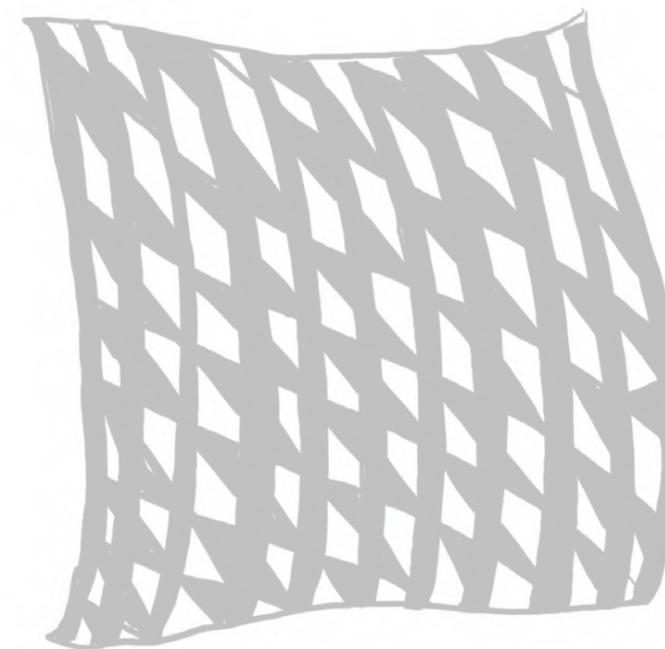
## DEDICATION



5

This thesis is dedicated to my beloved couch throw pillows. Without you, I would have no proof of being a thoughtful consumer - the kind that takes several years to select just the right accoutrements for their living room furniture.

I am reminded daily of the time and consideration I put into your selection. Your existence reassures me that I am capable of making thoughtful purchasing decisions.





### A THESIS

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Graphic Design in the Graphic Design program at Vermont College of Fine Arts, Montpelier, Vermont.

by Laura M. Young

**APPROVED BY  
MASTER'S  
EXAMINATION  
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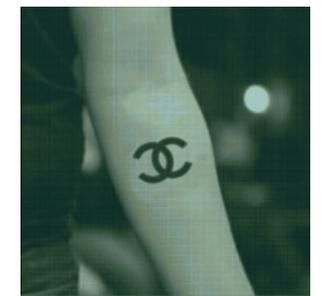
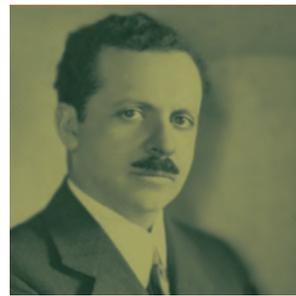
David Peacock

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Ian Lynam

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## INTRODUCTION

“Laura doesn’t need to get a new Barbie doll everytime she goes shopping, Mom.”

— My father, Luther Young, scolding my grandmother, Myrtle Young, circa. 1991.



1. Sound of Music Barbie doll.

When I was a little girl, I used to spend the weekends at my grandmother’s house. Weekends at Grandma Young’s meant a shopping trip at the mall... and the mall meant a new Barbie doll. As a middle child of four, these weekly trips provided quality one-on-one time that I longed for at that young age.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that I was obsessed with Barbie. I loved her shiny, friendly face. I loved her perfectly coiffed hair that I could run a plastic brush through, once the brush was untangled from the oppressive plastic-coated wires that held new Mattel toys in place. I loved Barbie’s tiny feet, and the uniform quality that a mass-produced line of dolls represented through interchangeable outfits and tiny high heeled shoes. Barbie’s problematic representation of the female form through impossible proportions was not yet on my radar at five. I simply loved all dolls and what they meant to me: a shopping trip with my grandmother and time away from my noisy siblings.

The trips to the Columbia Mall in Maryland were an intoxicating experience to a young consumer. The vaulted ceiling with large skylights allowed daylight to illuminate the many stores and kiosks that made up the cavernous space. The two-story, open concept building was flanked with escalators and winding staircases that brought to mind the image of Cinderella losing her glass slipper, at least to a young girl who was infatuated with Disney princesses. My favorite feature of this enchanting space was nestled near the food court: a large, old-fashioned carousel.



2. Vintage carousel.

The intricately painted wooden horses reminded me of *Mary Poppins*, and my imagination would run wild as my horse would bob up and down in a mesmerizing circle dance. Sometimes, I would choose to sit on one of the sweetheart benches with my grandmother, who would say her days of horseback riding were over. We would typically end our time at the mall with a ride on the carousel. After shopping, we would stop by McDonalds, and I would have a Cheeseburger Happy Meal and a cold Coca-Cola. Sometimes, we would have small vanilla ice cream cones before heading home.

The Barbie dolls from this time in my life were packed away long ago. I now live hundreds of miles from the Columbia Mall. I don't think I have had fast food in almost twenty years, and I no longer drink soda or enjoy the thrill of carnival rides, due to being plagued by motion sickness as an adult. However, all of these components contributed greatly to evoking the perfect weekend excursions with my grandmother, who has been gone from my life for a decade. These shopping trips have been deeply etched into my mind, providing the groundwork for the positive and emotional attachments to shopping that I often feel. It is an association that has followed me into adulthood and provides a momentary relief from some of the mundane qualities of everyday life. And yet, the sheen of those brand-new items always fades into the background of other long-forgotten "must-have" items. Inevitably, this leads me to a new tab in my internet browser window and typing in the name of whatever store I choose to virtually visit for the next, best piece to add to my ever-growing collection of consumer purchases.



3. McDonald's summer advertisement, 2017.

What we buy and where we shop are two very personal considerations in consumer spending habits. We are constantly targeted through smart and enticing marketing tactics to create a sense of ease for shopping across multiple platforms with reckless abandon. What you spend your money on can be influenced by your personality, mood, economic circumstance, or personal connection to a brand. Marketing strategists consider all of these factors when it comes to how one might interact with their wares.

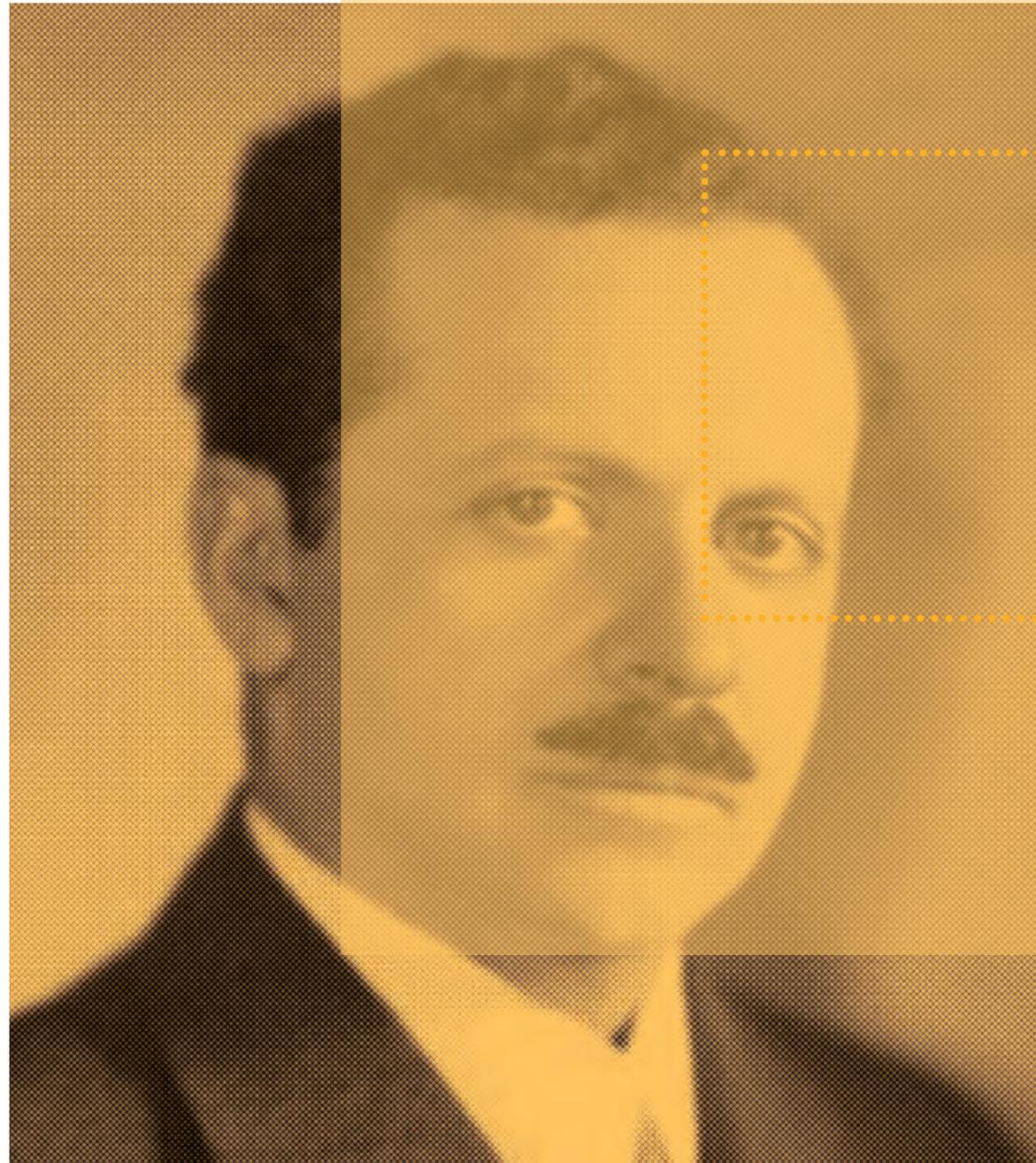
## I HAVE CHOSEN TO ANALYZE MY OWN SPENDING HABITS...

My thesis topic explores the historical evolution and development of consumer practices: how demand and desire, power and influence, and psychological factors have impacted our purchasing habits and trends. **I pose these questions:** How much control does a consumer have when it comes to the decisions they make about the objects they choose to acquire? How much do marketing tactics, societal influence, emotion, mythology, and personal history dictate the way we engage in the consumer market? I have chosen to study this topic because my consumer behavior is one that is fraught with anomalies that often leave me wondering, "why did I buy that?" In order to come to terms with the reality of my own consumption, I have analyzed my spending habits, so that I might have a better understanding of how to be a more conscientious consumer in the future.

Through personal narrative, I explore topics that will be familiar to most consumers, such as impulse-buying, product placement in media, planned obsolescence, and fast fashion. Additionally, I seek to gain some insight into how my consumption habits can affect the rest of the world, such as the production of goods through cheap labor and the questionable human rights issues that surround it. My hope is that by studying these topics, I will gain more insight into how much of my consumer behavior is affected by outside influence, to point out some of the problematic tactics that are used along the way, and to make more informed spending decisions in the future.



4. Vintage shopping spree.



# SECTION I: The History of Why We Buy

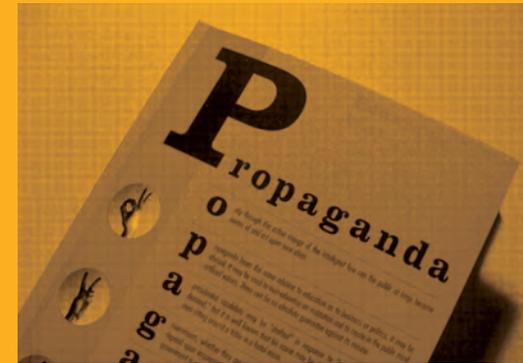
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5. Edward Bernays.

## THE ORIGINS OF PROPAGANDA

# “Advertising is a species of propaganda” – Mark Miller

“The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country.”<sup>1</sup> This is the first line of Edward Bernays’ 1928 book, *Propaganda*. Edward Bernays was the father of public relations or “new propaganda” in twentieth century advertising. He postulated that wartime propaganda techniques could be applied off the battlefield and used to manipulate the masses, otherwise known as consumers, in the moment when the United States shifted from a needs-based economy to a desire-based economy. During World War I, Bernays worked on the Committee for Public Information (CPI), which was founded by George Creel in 1917.<sup>2</sup> Creel, a former journalist and police commissioner in Colorado, petitioned a policy to President Woodrow Wilson that focused on asserting positive values and encouragement of patriotism during a time when ideas of neutrality were rampant among the general public. Bernays worked alongside Creel during the war years to “regiment the public mind every bit as much as an army regiments their bodies”<sup>3</sup> and continued to apply the methods used by the CPI in a post-war America.



6. Edward Bernays *Propaganda*, 1928.



7. George Creel (far right) and the Committee for Public Information, 1917.

Propaganda shows up in the form of posters, films, artwork, clothing, symbols, and just about anything that you can think of. It is the proliferation of ideas that embody the same fundamental concept or “having a singular impact on others.”<sup>4</sup> It is a powerful idea that can be a catalyst for power-hungry dictators, cult leaders, and even in advertising. During WWI, a branch of the CPI known as the Division for Pictorial Publicity developed such well-known print campaigns as the Uncle Sam recruitment posters, which encouraged young men to join the war effort.<sup>5</sup> Bernays identified the effectiveness of these campaigns and how propaganda had traditionally been used to sway the opinion of the masses. “The new propaganda, having regard to the constitution of society as a whole, not infrequently serves to focus and realize the desires of the masses.”<sup>6</sup>

### THE BASICS THAT ALL PROPAGANDA CAMPAIGNS PROMOTE ARE AS FOLLOWS:<sup>7</sup>

- Name calling of a certain person or group of people
- Generalities (or stereotypes) of same person or groups
- Transfer
- Testimonials
- The representation of “plain folks” in a favoring light
- Card-stacking
- Jumping on the bandwagon

1. Bernays, Edward. *Propaganda*. New York: H. Liverwright, 1928, page 3.

2. Cull, Nicolas. “Master of American Propaganda.” *PBS: American Experience*. Last modified 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y3bru7s6>.

3. Graff, Michael. “Shaping the Consumer Mind.” *Of Other: Shaping to Ourselves*. Last modified 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y64hr7ul>.

4. Stermer, Dugald. 1990. *Propaganda and Persuasion*. *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design* 7 (4).

5. Daly, Christopher. “How Woodrow Wilson’s Propaganda Machine Changed American Journalism.” *Smithsonian Magazine*. April 28, 2017. <https://tinyurl.com/yc6xyy6l>.

6. Bernays, Edward. *Propaganda*, page 24.

7. Bernays, Edward. *Propaganda*, page 24.

Some of these basic principles of propaganda have been utilized in our most fundamental systems. Within *Propaganda*, Bernays gives an example of how velvet sales were down for textile manufacturers, and this specific industry was facing economic ruin if something wasn't done. Bernays strategized that the unpopular fabric needed to eke its way into the minds of the fashion-conscious consumer to give it the same elevated status as silk. Bernays promoted the fabric through the use of influence, persuading high-powered, glamorous individuals to wear fashionable garments made with velvet. Soon, the previously-slighted fabrics were in vogue, and demand began to build among the masses in America and Paris.



8. - 11. Polo shirts with emblems. Ralph Lauren, Abercrombie & Fitch, Aeropostale, Lacoste.

When I read this account, I automatically began to compile a list of moments throughout my life where I was affected by a persuasive campaign that derived from the same methods of Bernays. One example from my past is, unfortunately, the desire to embody the image of the Abercrombie & Fitch brand. Towards the end of my high school career, I started frequenting this popular company that was known for manufacturing absurdly small clothing in a style that I will call “reserved bohemian.” This meant that you could pair a polo shirt with a peasant skirt, and it was still “on brand.” I grew up with second-hand

clothing, and I have always been sensitive about how I dress and what my outward appearance says about me. At 18, I wanted the world to know where I shopped and what that said, on some deeper level, about my status. I was proud to wear items that displayed the cute little embroidered moose on my lapel or on the bottom right-hand corner of my shirt. I didn't realize it at the time, but those brand symbols represented a form of propaganda: which brand you wear denotes your socioeconomic status and your income level. In the early 2000s, there were several of these trendy emblems that helped to organize people into different caste systems. At the top of the economic heap, you had Lacoste and Ralph Lauren (not Polo.) Towards the middle of the pile were Abercrombie & Fitch and American Eagle. Down at the bottom of this consumeristic mound were Aeropostale and other “lesser” brands. I remember my eyes flitting to those badges of economic status as I socialized in the halls between classes, subconsciously labeling and sorting people into different categories.



12. + 13. (Above) Nazi occupation and the star of David (below).

The most obvious comparison from history to my now-very-irritating high school obsession is the yellow Star of David that was forced upon the Jews by the Nazi party during World War II in Europe. Like with the small embroidered symbols of the brands represented with animals, these images of oppression acted as a signifier to Nazi soldiers of what religion you were. Though religion was not in question for the popular clothing brands, these symbols employ the same propaganda technique that the Star of David held for the Nazis. In some cases, different brands will create multiple



tiers of goods through subsets of their company, which cater to the very rich, the middle class, and lower class. The practice is known as the “democratization of goods,”<sup>8</sup> and it is a way for companies to reach more consumers by offering goods that have a price range for everyone. Automatically, this practice sorts consumers into different categories of wealth and assigns roles through clothing options. It isn't always clothing companies who employ this tactic. Often, this is a practice that is used in the automotive industry.

One example of this strategy is Hyundai and its luxury brand, Genesis. In 2008, the Hyundai Motor Group expanded into the luxury market by designing a line of cars that might appeal to younger, luxury automobile consumers. The brand, which was inspired by the BMW 5 series, would be marketed distinct from Hyundai's economy models in order to attract a more affluent demographic.<sup>9</sup> This concept of democratization has not proven to be the success story that Hyundai hoped for when they first proposed this strategy.

7. Ilyin, Natalia. 2012. *The Ethics of Persuasion*. Recorded Lecture. Vermont College of Fine Arts. <https://tinyurl.com/y5uyoa64>.

8. Currid-Hackett, Elizabeth. *The Sum of Small Things: The Theory of The Aspirational Class*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 2017.

9. Banks, Nargess. “The Story Behind Genesis, the New Global Luxury Car Brand.” *Forbes*. January 29, 2017. <https://tinyurl.com/y5axg4zr>.

10. Newcomb, Doug. “Genesis Luxury Cars Win Accolades, Offer Value — So Why are Sales so Bad?” *Autoblog*. July 31, 2018. <https://tinyurl.com/y2xq8gee>.



## HIS SUPPORTERS TOOK THIS AS A SIGN THAT FACE MASKS WERE NOT NECESSARY...

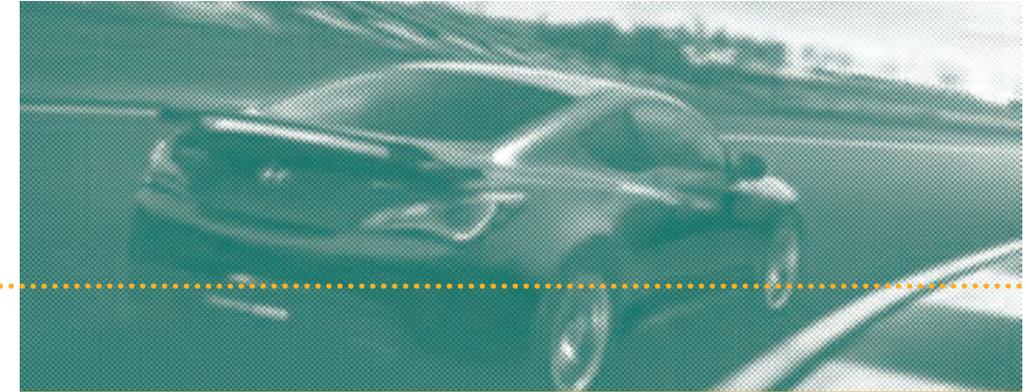
14. (Left) Editorial cartoon of Donald Trump.  
15. (Right) Hyundai Genesis.

While the luxury brand surpassed Porsche sales in 2018, Genesis is not as well-known as some of its competitors.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the company only produces three different models, which could also contribute to the low sales. While the Genesis line is still available, it is not as popular or profitable as Hyundai's economy class of cars.

According to Bernays, "society consents to have its choice narrowed to ideas and objects brought to its attention through propaganda of all kinds."<sup>11</sup> He writes that society elected the concept of having free competition, but with modes that would help to provide direction and be organized by leadership, or propaganda. Bernays strongly believed that in order to properly function as a society, such organization was necessary to achieve an "orderly life."

While there may be some fundamental merits to applying such principles to economics and the success of mankind and commerce, I have a hard time accepting an idea that is born from manipulation tactics. Propaganda exists to sway the opinions of the masses with one unified concept that has been determined by a group of people in order to achieve favorable results.

laura m. young



It is a problematic, manipulative technique that often falls into the wrong hands. However, we have seen it used in many political campaigns, as well as for commercial uses around holiday sale events. Because of the success propaganda can have on influencing the public, it is not hard to identify direct instances of manipulation in these campaigns.

One timely example (for this thesis) is the issue of wearing face masks during a global pandemic. When the current political leader of the United States, President Donald Trump, rejected the safety precautions a mask embodied by saying "I don't see it for myself,"<sup>12</sup> and made a point of not wearing one at political rallies or press conferences, many of his supporters took this as a sign that face masks were not necessary and affiliated this symbol of public health with the beliefs of the opposing political party. Trump continued to communicate his beliefs to his supporters by telling reporters that "he would not be interested in wearing a mask unless he deemed it important."<sup>13</sup> Additionally, Trump added more gasoline to the fire by ignoring the warnings of healthcare officials, which signified to his supporters that the information coming from these organizations was inflammatory or not in line with the beliefs of the Republican party.

Bernays did not respect "modern man" and, in fact, found him to be a hapless idiot who could be manipulated in order to achieve favorable economic results through persuasive advertising campaigns that relied on the group mentality and other traits that consumers exhibit when engaging with the marketplace. He felt that strong leadership and persuasive marketing tactics could help to control the masses. Bernays' practice and methodology of using interest groups to advocate for something is reflected today, through commentators on television who represent interest groups and think tanks that seem to exist to confer respectability. Though I do not agree with his philosophies, it is hard to ignore the evidence of how public relations and propaganda have been successful in confirming his theories.

11. Bernays, Edward, *Propaganda*, page 11.  
12. Rogers, Katie. "With a Face Mask Photo, Melania Trump Highlights Her Husband's Reluctance to Wear One." *The New York Times*. Last modified April 25, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y2dm3k4g>.  
13. *ibid.*  
14. McNamara, Robert. "Edward Bernays, Father of Public Relations and Propaganda." *ThoughtCo*. Last modified May 1, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/y4hqu26r>.

## PSYCHOANALYSIS + INFLUENCE: THE ENGINEERING OF CONSENT



16. 1900s cigarette advertisement.

**“Different men rule us in  
the different departments  
of our lives.”**

— *Edward Bernays, Propaganda*



17. 1900s bathing beauties lighting up.

On Easter Sunday in 1929, an eager crowd gathered on Fifth Avenue to marvel at the annual New York City Easter parade. On this particular day, spectators would witness more than the usual fashionable attractions that graced the iconic event each year. This year, one of the latest fashions to appear in the parade would not be that of an elaborate gown or a wide-brimmed hat, but beautiful female models leaving elegant trails of smoke from their slim cigarettes. The popular Sunday stroll would be interrupted by a display of modern, elegant women engaging in the act of lighting up a cigarette, to help cement the suffrage ideology that women were equal to men. The promotional stunt would come to be known as the “Torches of Freedom” and was orchestrated by Edward Bernays and Lucky Strike.

In his 1956 autobiography, *Biography of an Idea*, Bernays wrote, “I found a way to help break the taboo against women smoking in public. Why not a parade of women lighting torches of freedom — smoking cigarettes?”<sup>15</sup> Bernays was hired by George W. Hill, the president of the American Tobacco company, which marketed Lucky Strike cigarettes, to “expunge the label” of seductress that was affiliated with women smokers at the time. Bernays decided what better way to ignite this image than to cast models who represented the women suffragettes who were fighting for the right to vote. The objective behind this campaign was to convince consumers that cigarettes empowered women, and the event was widely successful in boosting cigarette sales among women. Bernays played out his belief that women considered cigarettes to be “a symbol of the penis and of male sexual power... Women would smoke because it was then that they’d have their own penises.”<sup>16</sup>

## HE USED HIS KNOWLEDGE OF PROPAGANDA AND PSYCHOANALYSIS TO HIS ADVANTAGE.



18. George M. Cohan  
The Easter Parade, 1927.  
19. Lucky Strike print advertisements.  
20. *ibid.*

If this sexualized undertone seems familiar, we can attribute that to Bernays’ familial relationship to the prominent Austrian neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud. As Freud’s nephew, Bernays deeply respected his uncle’s philosophy and brought the teachings of Freud to America. He was fascinated by the idea of stimulating inner desires, which fell in line with Freud’s study of group behavior and aggression. He was also especially interested in the way psychoanalysis was used in Freud’s techniques to learn of the role of the irrationality that resides within all people, and how to manipulate it so you may control the masses. Bernays did not believe that man was capable of rational thought and for the most part, considered people to be stupid. He used his knowledge of propaganda and psychoanalysis to his advantage. As Bernays worked to develop a new field of influence that would “engineer the consent” of the modern consumer, what we know as “Public Relations” was born.

Bernays is responsible for the focus group and many of the manipulative techniques that are still used by advertising companies today. “Torches of Freedom” was an early example of what he would develop later for films and television, which we have come to know as Product Placement. He believed that the average person could be swayed by popular opinion or by the endorsement of a fashionable celebrity. “By convincing people that they want something they do not need, Bernays sought to turn citizens and neighbors into consumers who use their purchasing power to propel themselves down the road to happiness.”<sup>17</sup> Bernays is the man behind presidential pancake breakfasts; the idea that a plastic cup is more sanitary than a reusable one; soap sculpture competitions to promote hygiene for children; and the false promise that cigarettes would reduce your waistline (despite being aware of the link between cigarettes and cancer.)

15. Ewen, Stuart. “Public Relations Campaign.” *American Heritage*. May/ June, 2000. <https://tinyurl.com/yyjz8xid>.  
16. Christensen, Wendy. “Torches of Freedom: Women and Smoking Propaganda.” *The Society Pages*. February 27, 2012. <https://tinyurl.com/lo4e58j>.  
17. The Conversation. “The Manipulation of the American Mind: Edward Bernays and the Birth of Public Relations.” *The Conversation*. July 9, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/y7uyquv2>.



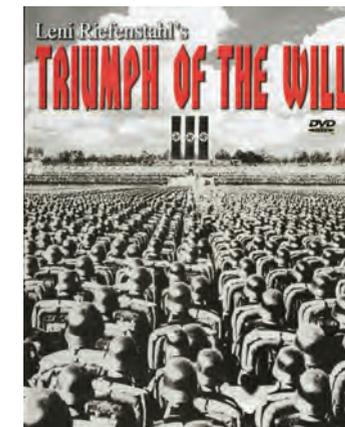
21. Filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl with Adolf Hitler.



22. Ernest Dichter (far right) leading a focus group.

In addition to his clients in the United States, Bernays attracted some rather ominous admirers overseas. “In the 1920s, Joseph Goebbels became an avid admirer of Bernays and his writings — despite the fact that Bernays was a Jew. When Goebbels became the minister of propaganda for the Third Reich, he sought to exploit Bernays’ ideas to the fullest extent possible. For example, he created a ‘Fuhrer cult’ around Adolf Hitler.”<sup>18</sup> The Fuhrer cult was the persuasive and dangerously successful propaganda campaign created to promote Hitler and the Nazi party from 1933-1945.<sup>19</sup> Its ideology was rooted in creating a single minded devotion among citizens, with the outcome of total controlling power. “Both Nazi propagandists and artists produced paintings, posters, and busts of the Fuhrer, which were then reproduced in large quantities for public venues as well as private homes.”<sup>20</sup>

One of the most powerful techniques Goebbels used to trumpet Nazi ideologies was film. The German filmmaker and documentarian Leni Riefenstahl was hired by Goebbels, and her 1935 film *Triumph des Willens* (*Triumph of Will*) showcased Adolf Hitler’s 1934 visit to Nuremberg, Germany. The film opens with sweeping shots of a city in support of the influential leader. Patriotic music accompanies Hitler’s plane as it soars over Nuremberg, obscured momentarily by billowing clouds. The city reveals churches with Nazi banners draped upon their towers, and droves of Aryan fans young and old excitedly welcoming Hitler to their city. Riefenstahl’s artistic vision for Hitler’s propaganda films is legendary. Despite the fact that she was black-listed as a Nazi Sympathizer after the war, the techniques she demonstrated in her documentaries are still used today in films and television commercials.<sup>21</sup> Her films remain a prime example of how strong visual content can be used to sway public opinion in favor of one unified opinion.



Bernays’ methods attracted the attention of another, less-admiring, subject: Supreme Justice Felix Frankfurter, who would lead the charge in alerting President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to the dangers of allowing Bernays to inhabit any leadership roles within the government. In his warning to FDR, Justice Frankfurter is recorded as stating that admen like Bernays were “professional poisoners of the public mind, exploiters of foolishness, fanaticism, and self-interest.”<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Bernays would continue to develop his methods in public relations and have a profitable career manipulating the general populace through advertising and branding.

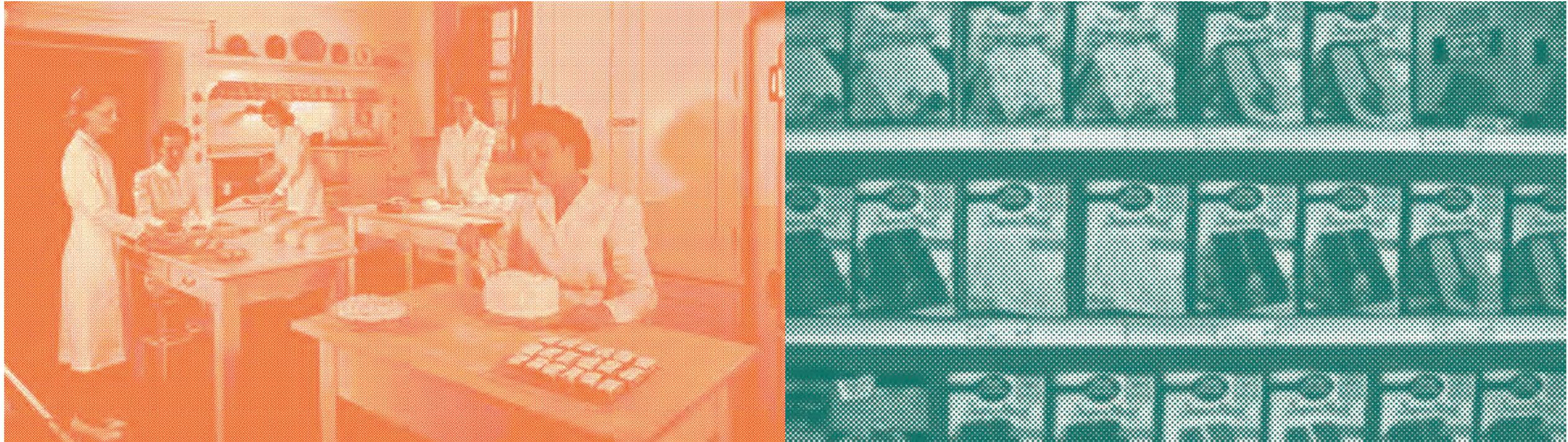
Edward Bernays was the pioneer of the notion that the consumer could be persuaded to buy just about anything, and psychoanalysis played a large role in this. His beliefs were shared by such individuals as Ernest Dichter, who was hailed as “the Sigmund Freud of the supermarket age.”<sup>23</sup> Dichter (1907-1991) was an Austro-American psychologist who would apply his knowledge to marketing and Motivational Research. One example of Dichter’s work was with General Mills and the abysmal sales around one particular product: Betty Crocker cake mix. Through the use of focus groups, Dichter was able to surmise that the American housewife felt that “the very simplicity of mixes — just add water and stir — made women feel self-indulgent for using them. There wasn’t enough work involved.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, Dichter came up with the idea to modify the recipe to include an egg in the list of ingredients, so the American homemaker could feel like she had contributed to the baking process. Thus, the “just add an egg” campaign was born. “The egg theory, with its emphasis on the homemaker’s personal investment in the cake, set the tone for much subsequent advertising and has been widely acknowledged as the insight that saved cake mixes.”<sup>25</sup>

18. *ibid.*  
19. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “Cult of the Fuhrer.” <https://tinyurl.com/yyc9fnos>. Accessed 2020.

20. *ibid.*  
21. Riding, Alan. “Leni Riefenstahl, Filmmaker and Nazi Propagandist, Dies at 101.” *The New York Times*. September 9, 2003. <https://tinyurl.com/y4rewu5w>.

22. Khol, Gary. “Tell a Lot of Truth, but Not the Whole Truth.” *Scoop Independent News*. December 2, 2016. <https://tinyurl.com/y4gy92y>.  
23. Schwarzkopf S., Gries R. 2010. Ernest Dichter, *Motivation Research and the ‘Century of the consumer’*. in: Schwarzkopf S., Gries R. (eds) Ernest Dichter and *Motivation Research*, ed. Gries R. Schwarzkopf S., 3-38. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

23. *Triumph of Will*.  
24. Betty Crocker “Just Add an Egg” campaign.



25. Betty Crocker test kitchen.

26. Betty Crocker cake mixes, present day super market.

There has been some debate as to whether or not Dichter's solution is the actual reason for the success of the product. In Laura Shapiro's, *Something From the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America*, Shapiro states that "while Dichter's work was influential, its precise role in the success of the cake mix is unclear."<sup>26</sup> Though it may not have come up in Dichter's focus group, it seems that fresh eggs might have been the reason for producing superior cakes. Previously advertised mixes that did not advise the need for the added ingredient of a fresh egg resulted in cakes that stuck to the pan, had diminished shelf life, and had a texture that was not very appealing. "Chances are," Shapiro wrote, "if adding eggs persuaded some women to overcome their aversion to cake mixes, it was at least partly because fresh eggs made for better cakes."<sup>27</sup>

Whatever the reason behind the success of Betty Crocker cake mix, in 2020 you can still purchase a box of instant brownie or cake mix that requires the baker to "just crack an egg."

The idea and practice of utilizing psychoanalysis in the realm of advertising is meant to help companies predict and interpret consumer behavior, as well as manipulate those tendencies that may be instinctual or deeply ingrained within our DNA. It may seem inflammatory or naive to suggest this, but I do not believe that it's an ethical practice for marketing companies to engage in, just for the sake of learning what kind of product to push this season. When the line between the ideology of propaganda and marketing becomes blurred, that's when you know it is time to rethink how we garner a sale, and if it was really worth it.

24. Mikkelsen, David. "Requiring an Egg Made Instant Cake Mixes Sell?" *Snopes*. January 31, 2008. <https://tinyurl.com/yx3evfwu>

25. *ibid.*

26. Shapiro, Laura. 2004. *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America*. New York, New York: Penguin Group.

27. *ibid.*

## THE ORIGINAL INFLUENCE CAMPAIGNS, HISTORICAL + PRESENT

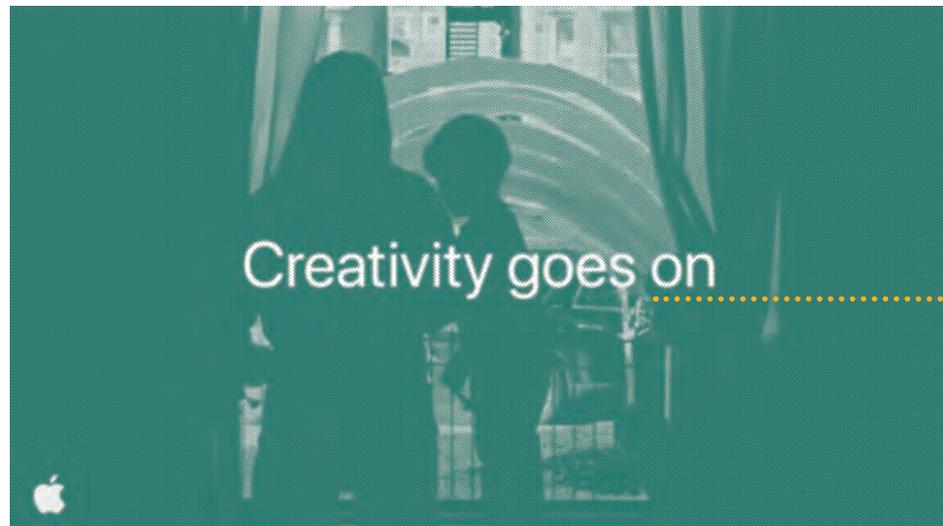


27. "I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke," print advertisement, 1971.

**“People do not buy goods and services. They buy relations, stories, and magic.”**

— *Seth Godin*

Many of the goods we purchase on a regular basis have been marketed to us in a fashion that convinces consumers that it is the absolute best product to buy. Using a persuasive marketing strategy, individuals can become life-long consumers of the same brand. We see this in the case of athletic shoes, cosmetics, soda, and a myriad of other products. Also known as “brand loyalty,” this means consumers will usually opt for the brand with which they have a personal connection. What we buy becomes a part of who we are, and the companies behind them understand this key concept. This comes down to a simple truth: humans seek to make a connection. The same sensitivity we may feel for a loved one can be nurtured by brands and developed into an advertising campaign that will boost sales.



28. "Creativity Goes On," Apple, 2020.

Recently, I found myself tearing up while watching one of Apple's latest ads, "Creativity Goes On." The advertisement, which first aired in early April 2020, shows celebrities and everyday people connecting during the global pandemic, COVID-19. We see children participating in ballet classes via video conferencing, playing chess with grandparents, and tuning in for virtual story hours. Apple's message was that creativity can transcend quarantine, and technology can help to unite us during times of great uncertainty. As I watched this short video, I thought of my family and friends who I have not visited since the pandemic began. I thought of the joy and laughter of my virtual classroom and wishing my students a tearful goodbye as I wrapped up the spring semester classes I taught at Colby-Sawyer College. There was also a small part of me that was thankful I had the necessary technology (and the tech-savvy) to efficiently conduct an online class or to have a video call with my parents. As an Apple consumer, I couldn't help but feel grateful to them for creating a product that kept me connected.

My teary reaction to Apple's marketing campaign is exactly the response their creative team wanted to elicit from consumers like me. The melodrama of my previous paragraph, which actually pens the word "grateful," is a great example of how advertising campaigns can be manipulative or prey on current events to turn a profit. As we have found, living through a global pandemic has been exceedingly alienating for many of us, relegating us to our homes for quarantine and distanced from our loved ones and routines. It almost seems predatory of Apple to design a campaign that twists the proverbial knife in our backs as we watch and identify familiar scenes of connection on-screen.

The most successful advertising campaigns are the ones that stick with us for some time and influence how we choose to spend our money. If done correctly, an ad can instantly connect with consumers who will seek out the product they viewed either in person or through media. We as humans are constantly learning and seeking connections. Advertising helps us to establish those connections that keeps us from traveling through this life alone and separate from the other humans that inhabit our planet. The following are some examples of advertising campaigns that have shaped history and woven themselves into our culture.

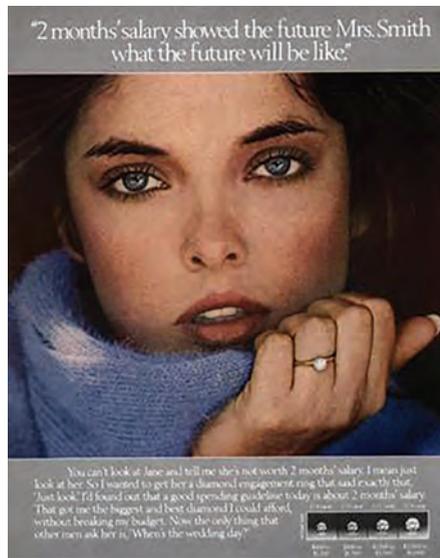
## 1948: "A DIAMOND IS FOREVER" — DE BEERS AND N.W. AYER & SON



29. "A Diamond is Forever," DeBeers, 1947.

It's hard to imagine a time when diamond rings weren't synonymous with getting engaged to be married. This consumer trend is so ingrained in our culture, that some women refuse to even consider matrimony unless their partner "puts a ring on it," to quote a popular song by Beyoncé. Since the late 1940s, this gesture has become a tradition that solidifies a young couples' commitment to one another. This tradition is one that was born from a ferociously successful marketing campaign, launched by De Beers Consolidated Mines Ltd. (De Beers) and spearheaded by the Philadelphia advertising agency, N.W. Ayer & Son.

Before the ad campaign, many couples opted to forgo the rather hefty investment of a piece of diamond jewelry. "N.W. Ayer conducted extensive surveys of consumer attitudes and found that most Americans thought diamonds were a luxury for the ultra-wealthy. Women wanted their men to spend money on 'a washing machine, or a new car, anything but an engagement ring.'"<sup>28</sup> Through sentimental advertisements and working to create an emotional response from the consumer, N.W. Ayer successfully changed the way we view this milestone event. Frances Gerety, a copywriter with N.W. Ayer who worked on the De Beers campaign team, pitched the now famous slogan, "A Diamond Is Forever." As diamond sales skyrocketed, the De Beers campaign transformed an intimate commitment to a lifetime partner into a necessary financial investment.



30. DeBeers print advertisement, 1980s.

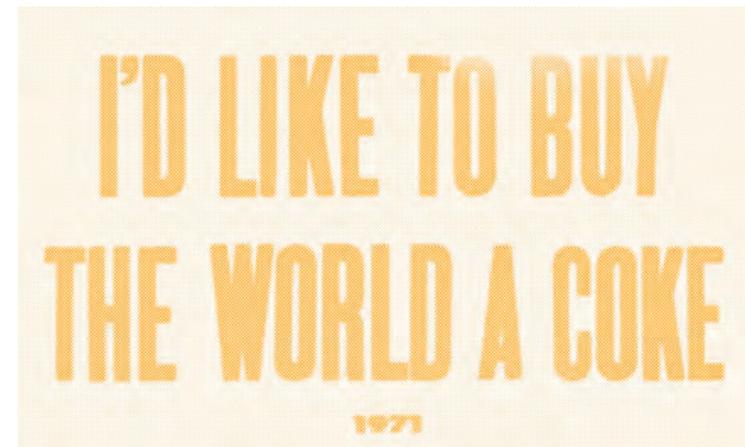
Since the inception of the De Beers campaign, a diamond engagement ring has become the symbol of love internationally. “In 1967, when the campaign began (in Japan), less than 5 percent of betrothed Japanese women had a diamond engagement ring.<sup>29</sup> By 1981, that figure had risen to 60 percent, and Japan had become the second-largest market, after the United States, for diamond engagement rings.”

I was married once, and I think back on my own engagement ring. The symbolic gesture was beautiful and the exact ring of my dreams. I remember in the time leading up to our engagement,

my partner and I discussed the ethics behind diamonds. We both felt strongly that diamonds were overrated gemstones, and we both were sickened by the exploitation of labor that surrounded their retrieval from the mines in South Africa and other parts of the world. However, at the same time, a diamond represented love and devotion. It was the adornment you were supposed to choose for your ring finger on your left hand. My relationship with my former husband was centered around status and showmanship. So, when the time came for the proposal and a gleaming platinum band with a cluster of eleven diamonds was presented to me, I instantly swooned. Gone from my mind were the thoughts of blood diamonds and mining accidents because it was *gorgeous*.

Societal influence played a role in my desire to have my own diamond engagement ring, a desire that many young people have felt since this ad campaign was launched in the late 1940s. Traditionally, young men are instructed to save two months’ salary to afford the extravagant bauble. This suggestion was also the result of an ad. “In the 1980s, the agency introduced a series of ads setting a new arbitrary but authoritative-seeming benchmark: ‘Isn’t two months’ salary a small price to pay for something that lasts forever?’”<sup>30</sup> Though two months is the recommended time frame, the average cost of an engagement ring in 2015 was \$4,000,<sup>31</sup> which takes most of us a little longer than two months to save. The gesture, which is now expected of any individual who wants to move forward with their partner, ends up being a cause for anxiety. This can sometimes thwart your timeline, due to the inability to save up for this milestone. Couples wait for the moment to share this token which represents their commitment to one another, without realizing it is also a token whose meaning has been fabricated by a marketing team in order to push a product.

## 1971: “I’D LIKE TO BUY THE WORLD A COKE” – COCA-COLA AND MCCANN ERICKSON



31. “I’d Like to Buy the World a Coke,” campaign collateral, 1971.

In 1971, Billy Backer, a creative director for McCann Erickson in New York City, was working on a new ad campaign for Coca-Cola. The story goes that Backer was traveling to London, when his plane was grounded in Ireland, due to heavy fog in London. Backer remembers that the delayed travelers were irate about the inconvenience, especially since they were forced to stay the night in accommodations that left something to be desired. However, the next day Backer walked past the airport café to see the same passengers cheerfully visiting with one another and connecting over bottles of Coca-Cola. Backer had a stroke of inspiration:

“In that moment [I] saw a bottle of Coke in a whole new light... [I] began to see a bottle of Coca-Cola as more than a drink that refreshed a hundred million people a day in almost every corner of the globe. So [I] began to see the familiar words, ‘Let’s have a Coke,’ as more than an invitation to pause for refreshment. They were actually a subtle way of saying, ‘Let’s keep each other company for a little while...’ So that was the basic idea: to see Coke not as it was originally designed to be — a liquid refresher — but as a tiny bit of commonality between all peoples, a universally liked formula that would help to keep them company for a few minutes.”<sup>32</sup>

From there, Backer and his team worked to create the perfect advertisement that could encompass the message of Coke being a universal beverage. Billy David and Roger Greenway, two members of the creative team, had already been working on melodies for an advertisement that would have been used for a Coca-Cola radio spot, but developed it more for the tune that would come to be known as “I’d Like to Buy the World a Coke.”

28. Sullivan, Courtney. “How Americans Learned to Love Diamonds.” *The New York Times*. May 3, 2013. <https://tinyurl.com/y3dxm226>

29. Friedman, Uri. “How An Ad Campaign Invented the Diamond Engagement Ring.” *The Atlantic*. February 13, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/nx3qg9z>

30. *ibid.* Sullivan, Courtney.

31. *ibid.* Friedman, Uri.

32. Coca-Cola. “I’d Like to Buy the World a Coke.” *The Coca-Cola Company*. Last Modified 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/yxll3xkf>



32. "I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke," campaign collateral, 1971.

The advertisement features a group of diverse young people from all over the world, standing on a hillside in Italy and singing the now infamous jingle. Once the completed ad aired, it was an instant success. "I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke" was released in the U.S. in July 1971 and immediately struck a responsive chord. The Coca-Cola Company and its bottlers received more than 100,000 letters about the commercial. Many listeners called radio stations begging to hear it.<sup>33</sup>

#### Some of the lyrics from the advertisement are as follows:

• "I'd like to buy the world a home/ and furnish it with love.  
 • Grow apple trees and honey bees/ and snow white turtle doves.  
 • I'd like to teach the world to sing/ in perfect harmony.  
 • I'd like to buy the world a Coke/ and keep it company."<sup>34</sup>

Coca-Cola's advertisement was created to evoke a feeling of togetherness among countries and their citizens, united by the singular concept that they all drank and loved Coca-Cola. In 1971 in the United States, times were unsettled and confusing. The country was nearing the end of the Vietnam War (1955-1975) and was desperate for peace; the Charles Manson trial was nearing a conviction; and George Harrison wrote a song about Hare Krishna ("My Sweet Lord.")<sup>35</sup> It was a time when something as simple as wanting a carbonated beverage to unite the world felt right.

In the last scene of the series finale of *Mad Men*, the main character Donald Draper (played by Jon Hamm) sits on a grassy knoll by the ocean, meditating and radiating a sense of calm. He opens his eyes, and the tune of "I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke" begins to play. A serene smile crosses his lips as the scene dissolves into a familiar hillside in Italy, speckled with young people. The fictionalized show that opened with adman Draper saving Lucky Strike concludes with Draper supposedly dreaming up the infamous Coca-Cola advertisement. The writers of the show seemingly chose this particular ad to symbolize the brilliance of Don Draper, and I think it does the job quite well.

33. *ibid.*  
 34. *ibid.*

35. Timelines of History. Timeline 1971. 2020. Available from <https://tinyurl.com/yy7u2zf7>. Accessed June, 2020.

36. Bernays, Edward, *Propaganda*, page 136.

37. Tapinfluence. "What is Influencer Marketing?" *Tapinfluence*. June 2, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/nyktnr4>

38. Hubspot, "The Ultimate List of Instagram Influencers in Every Industry," *Hubspot*. 2019 <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/instagram-influencers>

## 2000S: INFLUENCER MARKETING



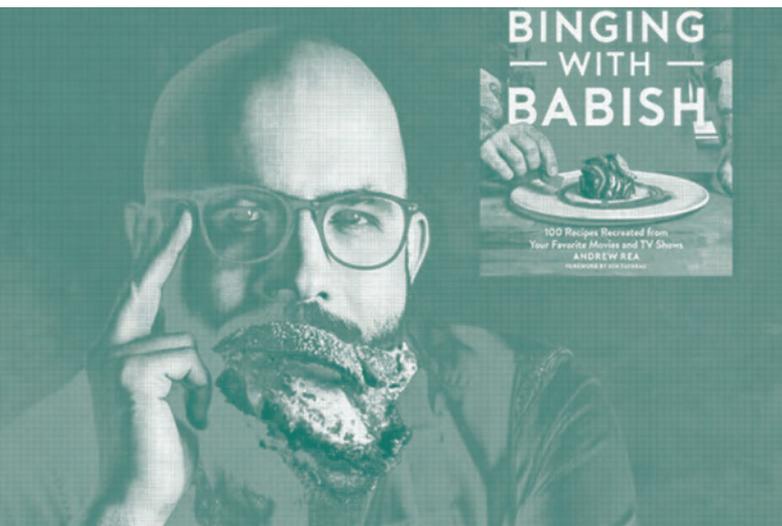
33. Instagram influencer.  
 34. Jeffree Star.

Edward Bernays believed that celebrity influence and promotion of a product were the key ingredients to ensuring its success. Bernays often turned to high-status individuals of the time to help bolster the market for a product or business. "Propaganda can play a part in pointing out what is and what is not beautiful, and business can definitely help in this way to raise the level of American culture. In this process propaganda will naturally make use of the authority of group leaders whose taste and opinion are recognized."<sup>36</sup> Throughout his eighty-year career in public relations, Bernays developed tactics that marketing firms utilize today, making him the Original Influencer (or, if you'll allow me, The OG Influencer.)

As I scan social media platforms, such as YouTube and Instagram, I wonder what

Edward Bernays would have thought of this new form of advertising that has been born from the internet age? Would he follow Jeffree Star, a popular makeup artist, whose product line of cosmetics and accessories are sold out within minutes of launch? Or would he be more interested in Andrew Rea of *Binging with Babish*, whose original take on cuisine from television and movies has us all drooling over our keyboards every week as he brings these recipes to life. I can certainly speak with confidence that Bernays would be a lifelong member and follower of Oprah's Book Club, cozying up with a mug of hot tea as he devours her latest literary recommendation.

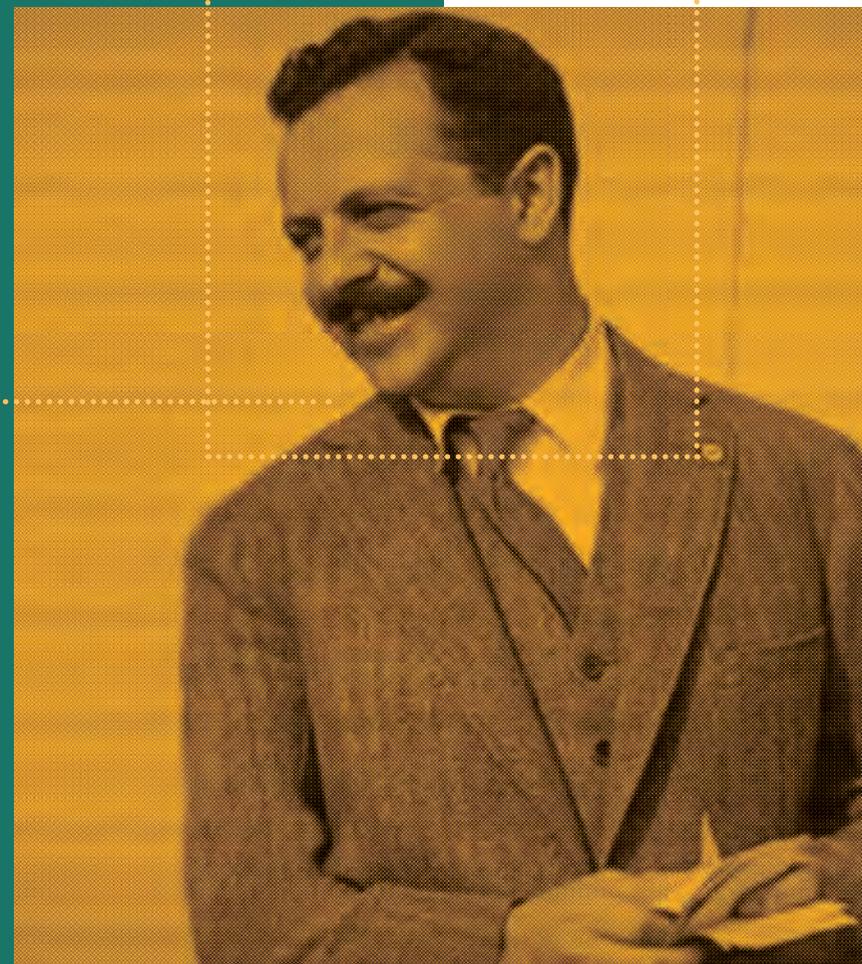
Before I go any further, I would be remiss if I did not make one very important point: in today's world, you do not have to start out as a celebrity in order to be a successful influencer. "A robust influencer marketing strategy will often include macro-influencers, "power middle" influencers, micro-influencers, brand ambassadors, brand advocates, employees, and even celebrities, as needed. True optimization means brands can understand and optimize the performance of the right group of influencers, at the right time, to meet their goals."<sup>37</sup> The use of micro-influencers, or brand ambassadors, can make products seem more attainable due to the fact that the influencer isn't a huge celebrity. You might feel a more personal connection with Janni Olsson Deler, 2019's top Lifestyle Instagram influencer (1.4 million followers), than with actress Angelina Jolie (904,000 Instagram followers.)<sup>38</sup>



Viewers create a connection with the influencer they follow, and that personal connection becomes paramount to the success of the product they might be endorsing. In a recent Jeffree Star video, the popular cosmetics influencer admitted several, very personal tragedies that their company was dealing

with, including having \$2.5 million worth of products stolen from a warehouse, as well as a 'leak' of one of their latest products to the media.<sup>39</sup> Instantly, I felt sympathy for this individual and considered buying products from Jeffree Star Cosmetics as a response. While this may speak to who I am as a consumer and what my values are when it comes to where my money goes, the fact remains that I know very little about this person. However, by Star allowing themselves to be vulnerable with their audience, it struck a chord within me that made me feel like this was a company I could trust.

I don't know anyone who reads *Consumer Reports* these days. Most of the product recommendations we receive are based on word-of-mouth from someone in our lives whose opinions we trust. Before I buy anything, I ask my friends if they know of a good brand/product within the category I am looking to purchase. Influencers want to give you the same impression as your good buddy who is only a phone call away. This can be achieved through unboxing videos or product reviews, in addition to elaborate make-up tutorials. There are several Instagram accounts I follow that are "lifestyle" personalities. They do well to humanize the content so it grabs your attention and leaves you wanting to engage in the comments section about what products were featured in their post. It becomes hard to separate your desire to consume and your desire to be a part of a community, and influencers know this. They depend on your "likes," comments, and follows. As their numbers grow, so does their appeal to larger marketing companies, who want to pay this influencer to promote their products. Yes, good old Edward, wrapped in a chenille blanket that was listed as one of Oprah's Favorite Things, would have approved of this system wholeheartedly.



35. (opposite page, top) Andrew Rea of *Binging with Babish*.  
 36. (opposite page, bottom) Oprah's Favorite Things  
 37. (above) Edward Bernays.

39. Star, Jeffree. 2019. *My Concealer Line was Stolen & Leaked (\$2.5 million of makeup hijacked)*. YouTube.



## SECTION II: Manufacturing and Desire

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38. Native toothpaste.

## TANGIBLE PRODUCTS PACKAGING + YOU



39. McDonald's 50th Anniversary wrapper design, 2013.

**“Champagne in a can,  
tuna in a bag, wine in a box.  
The egg is still the perfect  
package.”**

**— Blake Deutsch, quote from  
“Designing Brand Identity”  
by Alina Wheeler**

We live in a world where we encounter thousands of products on a regular basis. As consumers, we are constantly making decisions about how to best meet our needs. There are the usual facts to consider such as cost, nutritional value, quality of production, and intended use. Meeting these needs seem to satiate a base level of our consumption, but there are often other factors at play that help us to decide between one brand of butter over another. More often than not, those factors include packaging design.

The way a product is presented to you plays right into the satisfaction of our happy little lizard brains. If done correctly, your brain will purr with delight at the aesthetically pleasing commodity, and you will fork over the necessary funds to make it your very own. The process of developing the packaging design for a product involves many steps and collaborations with various industrial designers, packaging engineers, and manufacturers.

## A SIMPLIFIED BREAKDOWN OF THIS LARGE DESIGN PROCESS IS AS SUCH:<sup>40</sup>

- Clarify goals and positioning: target consumer, brand equity, define problem;
- Conduct audits and identify expert team: put your dream team together to make the perfect packaging for a toilet scrubber, and conduct a series of visual audits to identify what similar brands may be doing;
- Conduct research as needed: brand standards, written copy and language/tone, clarify target consumer;
- Research legal requirements: corporate standards, drug facts, warnings, claims, net weight, etc. (all that fun stuff...);
- Research functional criteria: tamper or theft resistance, usage, durability, shelf footprint;
- Determine printing specifications;
- Determine structural design: materials, proper form, design structure from scratch, or use of an existing system;
- Finalize copy and content;
- Design and prototype; and lastly,
- Evaluate the solution and manage production.

What a **sexy** process that is, folks.



40. Wheeler, Alina. 2013. *Designing Brand Identity: An Essential Guide for the Whole Branding Team*. 4th ed. Hoboken, New Jersey: Jon Wiley & Sons, INC.

41. Pollan, Michael. 2006. *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. New York, New York: Penguin Random House.



40. (opposite page) Raisin packaging concept design by Chupavi.  
41. (above) Egg carton packaging concept design by Hannah Ahn.

Through research, iteration, and focus groups, designers determine what will be the best possible package for a product, so it can stand out from the rest. It's a very scientific and long process; as such, we're not going to get into all of the particulars.

Many times, packaging design influences our grocery shopping decisions. Every packaged product you interact with in a grocery store is working to tell a story about the item. In Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, Pollan describes shopping at Whole Foods as a "literary experience." With the rise of the organic and humanely-raised food movement, it has been important to the consumer market that companies create what I will define as "a pastoral rap sheet." This contains details regarding where the item is from, how it was raised, what it ate, and if it lived a happy and moderately fulfilled life. "One of the key innovations of organic food was to allow some more information to pass along the food chain between the producer and the consumer — an implicit snatch of narrative along with the number. A certified organic label tells a little story about how a particular food was produced, giving the consumer a way to send a message back to the farmer that she values tomatoes produced without harmful pesticides or prefers to feed her children milk from cows that haven't been injected with growth hormones."<sup>41</sup> By developing this narrative around the product, the consumer can look beyond the price of the item, and connect with a brand.

For the conscientious consumer, packaging materials play a vital role in which product makes its way from the market shelf to the home pantry. By purchasing goods that are made with biodegradable materials, such as compostable paper plates, a consumer is demonstrating that they are an advocate for the environment and can show their support through the products they buy. This is known as conspicuous consumption, which can be defined as “the practice by consumers of using goods of a higher quality or in greater quantity than might be considered necessary in practical terms.”<sup>42</sup> This term was first coined in 1899 by the economist and sociologist, Thorstein Veblen, in his book *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. In her 2017 publication, *The Sum of Small Things: A Theory of the Aspirational Class*, Elizabeth Currid-Halkett applies Veblen’s theory to the twenty-first century and discusses the different ways conspicuous consumption shows up in our modern society, or new leisure class. One of these ways is to present a message of your apparent affluence or education through the products you buy. “One hundred years later, the term conspicuous consumption is still used to capture this particular type of economic and social behavior. But society and the economy have changed dramatically since Veblen’s time and new forms of consumption and behavior have emerged to reveal social position.”<sup>43</sup>



42. Fred Armisen Portlandia.

**MY MIND MIGHT COMPLETELY FORGET TO CHECK THE PRICE OF AN ITEM DUE TO THE FACT THAT I HAVE CONNECTED WITH THE PACKAGING DESIGN.**

In the case of packaging design, one can derive a narrative from the person in front of them at the grocery store checkout line with one quick scan of the items in their shopping cart. The contents alone can give us visual clues as to the preferences of the consumer, such as whether or not they prefer local, organic chicken sausage to that of Hormel sausage links. You could argue that these are tastes and preferences for certain products that are based on price, history, and economic groups, and you would be correct. However, it is also important to note that packaging still plays a role in the persuasion of the consumer. We are visual creatures, and we each connect with the tangible goods that surround us for different reasons.

As a designer, I am more drawn to colorful products that use interesting typographic systems or have a more minimal and elegant presentation. My mind might completely forget to check the price of an item due to the fact that I have connected with the packaging design.

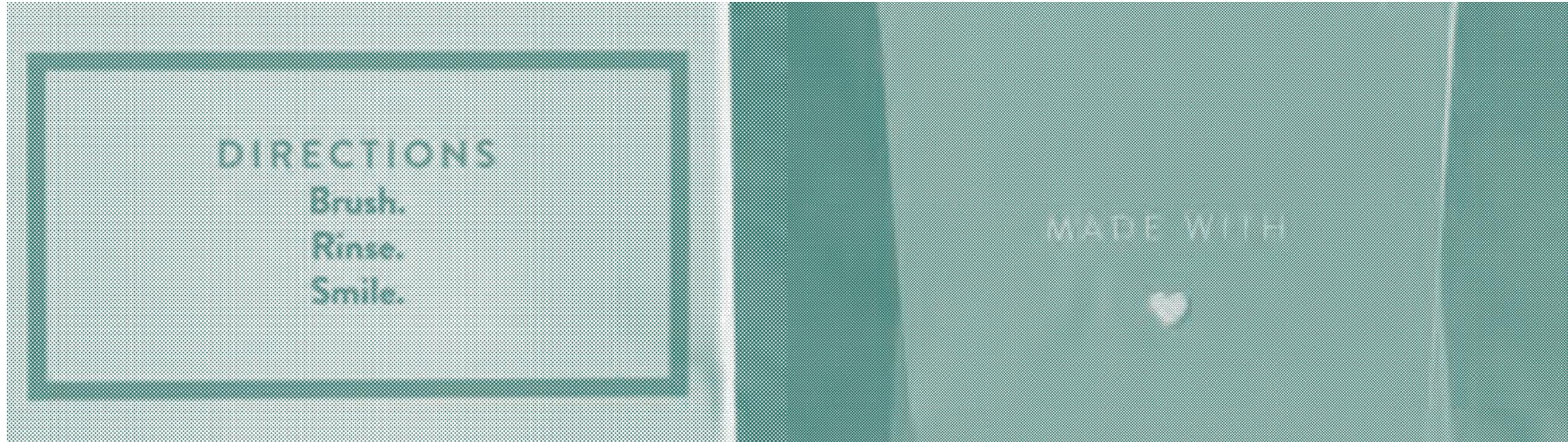


On a recent trip to Target, I found myself opting for the chain’s boutique brand, Native, when selecting a new toothpaste. I stopped using Colgate toothpaste about three months ago in favor of smaller companies that demonstrate a lower environmental impact and do not use dyes or sweeteners. My first choice had been Tom’s of Maine, but the brand’s toothpaste that I normally purchase was only available in wintergreen (which I abhor on a deeply personal level because, in my opinion, wintergreen is the gross cousin of peppermint). So, I decided to see if another brand struck my fancy. And sure enough, I stumbled upon Native. The only thing I knew about this brand was that I liked their deodorant, which advertises being aluminum- and paraben-free. I have not researched this company’s ethics, nor their environmental impact stats. I do know one thing: that was the sexiest toothpaste packaging design I had ever seen.

First, it contained my favorite color: teal. The box had lovely areas of color and typography which helped support a continuous design scheme that seemed well-considered. The typography was set in all caps but contained a variety of font weights so as to create some contrast. Then there was the tone of the copy. The designer of this product had taken great care to humanize the verbiage so it could connect with the audience (very smart.) Phrases like, “Use everyday for whiter teeth, fresher breath, a brighter smile, a better day,” and “Made with Love” (the word “love” being represented with a little white, embossed heart) added some character to the product. The toothpaste box also did well not to overload the consumer with environmental stats that might be confusing. Under several minimal icons, the brand simply stated “never tested on animals, only humans who volunteer.”

This is a perfect example of how a product can really suck you in, and ensure that a consumer will make a purchase. While shopping, I couldn’t stop running my fingers along the embossed copy and heart on the rectangular package. It seemed almost too beautiful to be a toothpaste box. I waited a whole week before opening the package, fearful that my clumsy human hands would damage this beautiful container. The boutique toothpaste also perfectly represents my conspicuous consumption. Native toothpaste retails at Target for \$9.99, which is \$5 more than a three pack of Colgate Cavity Protection. While both products serve the same function, Native does better at communicating their message which caters to what is important to me and what I look for when it comes to aesthetics.

42. Phillips, Ronnie. “Conspicuous Consumption.” *Britannica*. April 22, 2014. <https://tinyurl.com/y5rpxj5>.  
43. Currid-Halkett, Elizabeth. *The Sum of Small Things: The Theory of The Aspirational Class*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 2017.



We tend to favor brands as we discover them, passing along insights about these products to friends and family. I seek out recommendations about products, mainly because I am curious what brands people enjoy, and I sometimes become overwhelmed by all the different options in a store. When you're a graphic designer, certain aspects of packaging design can become distracting. That brand of popcorn might be the best popcorn on the market, but it can be difficult for me to look past that horrific dropshadow. While this all sounds very superficial, I would rather invest my money in a company that takes the time to put some thought into how their product has been designed. In a way, it helps to make every aspect of the consumer decision more engaging. For me, it starts with how easily I can interpret the information: is the copy legible? Are the colors vibrant? Is it authentic? Above all, is it beautiful?

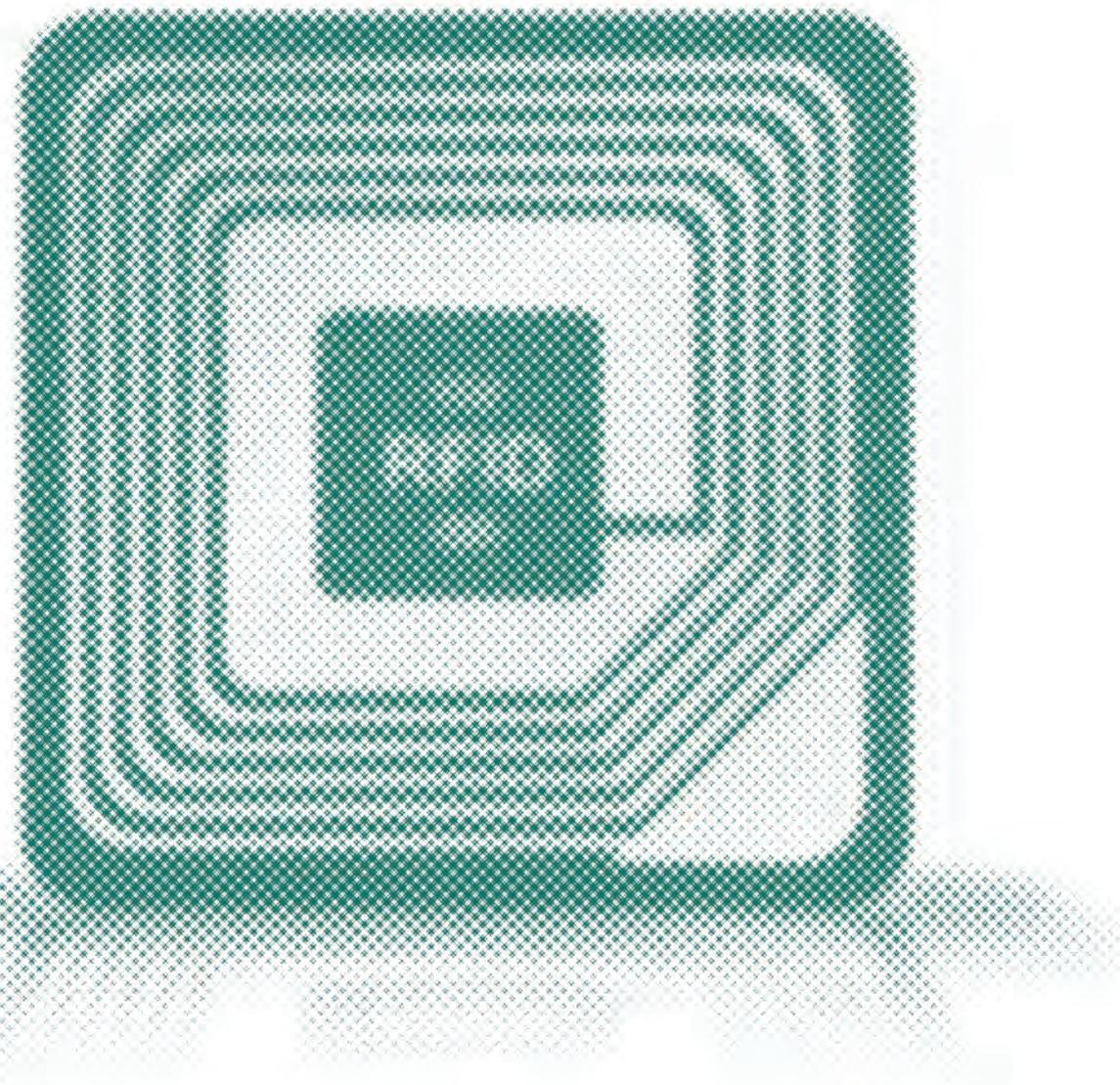
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43. Burlington Beer Company, Choir of the Dead packaging design.

## MINING FOR CONSUMER DATA

DATA MINING TECHNOLOGY:  
NOT A CUTE GHOST BUDDY, AFTER ALL



**“The package was addressed to my son — who is four years old, and does not own a Gryzll doodad. Somehow the robots looked at Diane’s computer and learned something about my child and then brought him a box of presents, so I destroyed the robot. No one is safe from these bastards.”** — *Ron Swanson, Parks and Recreation, Season 7, Episode 5* .....



45. Detail of an RFID chip.

I sometimes feel like I have a little ghost buddy living within my computer, following me around as I log some screen time. He is positioned just behind the glowing rectangle of my monitor and darts back and forth, tracking and remembering all of my online hopes and dreams, taking note of items I might be interested in purchasing, and reminding me of them later. Of course, this popular phenomenon used to track consumer behavior is far more insidious than the friendly anthropomorphized Casper-inspired phantom that I have conjured up for the purpose of this thesis. Much to my dismay, data mining is not quite as cute.

We're all familiar with retailers using data gathering software to track the habits of a consumer, and how they may use this information to better understand how to operate and market more efficiently to their customers. One strategy that retailers use in brick and mortar stores is known as RFID (Radio-frequency Identification) Tagging. This method involves "the placement of RFID tags on items that emit signals to RFID readers which are then processed by software, generating real-time results for stock taking, transactions, inventory levels, or individual customer purchase history."<sup>44</sup> RFID trackers can be found on clothing tags, hangers, garment labels, and stickers. While there are some well-intentioned merits to RFID technology that appeal to many retailers, such as keeping track of store inventory, product availability in the showroom, and anti-theft systems, RFID trackers also gather data that predicts consumer shopping behaviors within a specific store, which leads one to question the privacy and security for this technology.

### Some examples of RFID tracking on your shopping trip may include the following:

- **CONSUMER FLOW:** how a consumer navigates a particular store. RFID trackers analyze heavy traffic areas, product abandonment, and how different products relate to one another, in terms of where they are placed and if the shopper is more likely to engage with one category over another.
- **PICK-UP/ TRY-ON INFORMATION:** which items were tried on in a fitting room, and if those items were purchased or not. Retailers can use this information to remarket to the consumer later, with the hopes of clinching a future purchase.
- **POST-PURCHASE ENABLEMENT:** Let's say an RFID tracker has been activated in a pair of shoes you may have purchased by an app that the retailer has chosen to use to track consumer behavior, such as unique preferences of a customer and their purchased item. "When the shoes approach expected end-of-life, the retailer could trigger a coupon to replace that shoe with the newest iteration."<sup>45</sup> *I should note that this instance is rare, and can only happen if the clerk neglects to deactivate the tag at checkout.*

44. RIOT. "RFID Tags Explained." Riot. 2020 <https://tinyurl.com/y4eyqlxe> Accessed 2020.  
45. Wood, John, and Roller, Brad. "7 Powerful Examples of How RFID Technology Can Be Used in Retail." *Medium*. March 14, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/y2kzgs3>



46. Anthropologie store showroom.

While this information exists for companies to gain useful analytics to secure more efficient store operations and customer experience, this technology also comes with a myriad of privacy concerns. Because RFID tagging can broadcast large amounts of information about a consumer's activity and personal data, there is more of a risk of the information falling into the wrong hands. "RFID tags associated with big-ticket purchases could provide criminals with information about suitable households to target simply by scanning trash at the curb. Active RFID tags could even provide information to third parties about the contents of your home and your activities, all without your knowledge."<sup>46</sup>

My most recent encounter with data mining occurred after a frustrating online shopping experience, where I spent an irritating amount of time scouring the internet for face masks with ear loops. My goal was to get a jump on my pandemic planning for the fall semester and purchase several versions of this Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), so I could put it out of my mind. To make a long story short, I was unsuccessful in my quest, and closed my online shopping tabs in a huff, frustrated with myself and the state of the world.

The next day, I decided to see what was new in the world and casually opened a popular social media application on my cell phone. To my utter horror and amazement, I was instantly bombarded with four or five ads in a row for face masks. I am in no way, shape or form claiming innocence or surprise by this, but when I came into contact with such a blatant data mining experience, I couldn't help but be taken aback. There, right below a friend's photograph of their cat dressed as Ziggy Stardust, was an advertisement for "affordable and fashionable face masks!" The really eerie part of this whole experience was that none of the advertisements were from any of the websites that I had researched the previous evening. In that short span of time, my information was "bought and sold" to all interested parties, bidding for my face mask allowance.

A couple of paragraphs ago, I quoted from an article entitled *The Negative Impact of RFID*, written by Milton Kazmeyer:

**"Active RFID tags could even provide information to third parties about the contents of your home..."**

My experience with the ads for face masks on my social media feed is a prime example of how retailers can share customer data with third parties. "Third-party data is any information collected by an entity that does not have a direct relationship with the user the data is being collected on."<sup>47</sup> This data can be collected from any of the websites that are "aggregated together by a third-party data provider."<sup>48</sup>

**THE REALLY EERIE PART OF THIS WHOLE EXPERIENCE WAS THAT NONE OF THE ADVERTISEMENTS WERE FROM ANY OF THE WEBSITES THAT I HAD RESEARCHED THE PREVIOUS EVENING...**

While there are some ways a consumer can avoid their personal information being shared, such as opting out of surveys, avoiding data broker lists, limiting financial data sharing, and adding your name to federal registries,<sup>49</sup> there is still the looming question of whether or not your information will be sold by a website you have visited. In the case of Instagram, a security feature was added to the popular social media platform in 2019 that allows users to view any recent third-party activity and manage it.<sup>50</sup> Yes, a consumer has the ability to view this activity, but that doesn't address the issue of their information being shared with a third party in the first place.

While something as invasive as data mining and tracking of our personal information has become somewhat normal to many of us, the fact remains that our privacy is threatened and it's unsettling. We become vulnerable when we engage in certain enticing services, such as using photo printing services for the images that make up our picturesque Instagram accounts. I hate to admit it, but there have been times when I have given the retailers the satisfaction of clickbait. By selecting a banner advertisement for a company I normally shop with, I unlock a sale or promotion they might be offering. Or, by participating in Google Rewards, an incentive app made up of surveys which poll a user's experience based on location or recent purchase history, and in return gives you a small monetary amount. By engaging in this content, I might as well have waved a white flag in the air and given advertisers and third-party companies full access to my life. It's one of those gray areas of social media and digital marketing that becomes hard to avoid.

46. Kazmeyer, Milton. "The Negative Impact of RFID." *It Still Works*. Publication date unavailable. <https://tinyurl.com/y3yu7hk2>. Accessed 2020.

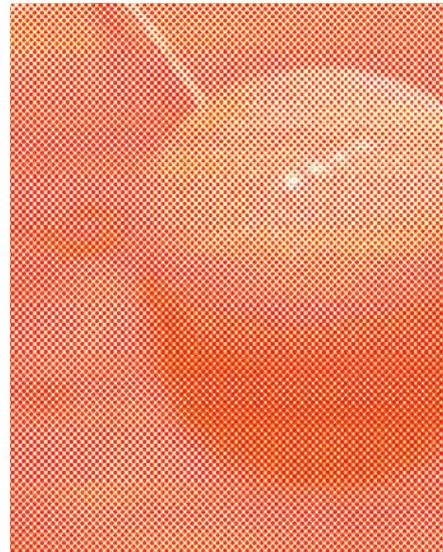
47. Shiffman, Eric. "What is Third-Party Data?" *SpotX*. March 6, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/yxplnhyp>.

48. *ibid*.

49. MacMillion, Douglas. "How to Stop Companies from Selling Your Data." *The Washington Post*. June 24, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/yxslmld7>.

50. Lee, Dami. "Instagram's Latest Security Feature Lets You Better Manage Third-Party App Permissions." *The Verge*. October 15, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/y2lteam3>.

I have heard and participated in uttering such tongue-in-cheek statements as, “Google’s always listening,” or “I better clean up my internet history,” or “THAT will come back to haunt me later.” Targeted advertising based on our viewing history is something we have come to live with in the digital age, where the sharing of consumer information has become more accessible to data analysts than ever before. Despite there being ways to alter your privacy preferences, purchase ad blocking software, and wipe your internet history periodically, it never seems like we are completely free of this phenomenon.



47. Google Home mini, smart home device.

It’s this kind of technology that makes modern consumers feel paralyzed by their own actions. We acknowledge the problem, but it can be hard to avoid being subject to its wrath or to resist something that is designed to track our every move. Sure, you do not have to engage with the online ads or surveys. You can choose not to install smart home devices in your house. You can do your best to be like the Parks and Recreation’s character, Ron Swanson, and practice his methodology by redacting your name and personal information from all public records, choosing to live a life off the grid. But Ron Swanson is a fictional character, and this is reality. Most people need a cellphone and the internet to participate in basic operations for employment or otherwise.

I recently met with a coworker who discussed how she and her husband did not have mobile smartphones. Her husband had opted to conduct this social experiment on himself a number of years ago, and she decided to join him in solidarity. Because this couple lives in a remote area, cell service or data wasn’t really an option anyway. They had done what many people often wish they could do: they removed themselves from the grip of technology that owning a smartphone can represent.

When my coworker first mentioned this, my brain instantly froze for a second. I struggled to maintain a neutral demeanor as my face can be very expressive, and essentially, this felt like an invitation for my eyebrows to jump into my hairline. While I was resistant to purchasing a smartphone for some time, I eventually broke down, and it has been glued to my side ever since. The unhealthy obsession

the device brings out in me is frustrating, but a part of me loves having a tool for accessing information at any time. I also thought more about this situation in relation to my coworker as she had young children. Didn’t you need to have a cellphone when you had kids? What did my parents do? After my initial shock wore off, I found myself pondering the concept of not having a phone, or regular access to such technology, and how liberating it could be.

**IT’S THIS KIND OF TECHNOLOGY THAT MAKES CONSUMERS FEEL PARALYZED BY THEIR OWN ACTIONS.**

I spend most of my time working on a screen. When I periodically get a break from work, I look at my phone (tiny screen.) After work, my partner and I will watch a TV episode or two while we eat dinner (more screens, but much larger.) And later on, if I don’t have any evening work to do, I will retire to my bed where I will cozy up with my iPad and my digital subscription to the New York Times crossword puzzle (medium size screen.) The amount of time I spend on a computer or digital device is astronomical, and it really makes me wish I could take a break. It also means that by spending more time online, I allow myself and my privacy to become more vulnerable to third-party data sources and all the questionable elements of that technology. However, when I actually do get some downtime from all the screens in my life, I find myself itching to check in with social media content or peruse the latest sale ads that have landed in my inbox. With my constant engagement of digital devices and the internet, it’s no wonder my actions are so easily predicted by online advertisers who are tirelessly working to learn everything about my consumer behavior.

Yet, this admission of guilt or fault on my behalf should not excuse the practices of data mining or any collection of information that tracks its users. This may be an inspiration of the innocent, since the online and physical retail stores are just businesses, trying to succeed at what they do, and this is the reality of how they operate. Call me naive, but I don’t enjoy living in a world that has me constantly questioning if the conversation I was just having an hour ago or the browsing of an item online will yield a spike of ads associated with that content. Call it crazy, but I would like to visit a store and not feel like a lab rat, where my every interaction with the products before me will be tracked and analyzed. Like a stalker, data collection of consumer behavior feels invasive, creepy, and incredibly weird. I wish we did live in a world where I could entertain the illusion of data tracking software as a friendly ghost, rather than a creeper in a trench coat, who hangs out on a street corner, just waiting to flash some sale content related to my viewing history... Because, come on, nobody needs that kind of nonsense.

## AN EXPLORATION INSIDE EXPIRATION: PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE OF THE GOODS WE BUY



**“Instill in the buyer,” he said,  
“the desire to own something  
a little newer, a little better,  
a little sooner than is necessary.”**

*— Brooks Stevens, 1954*

This year, I purchased a new iPhone. My “old” phone had surpassed the ominous two year mark, and it had begun to show the telltale signs of age. After three years, such signs included applications spontaneously crashing, notifications not working properly, and the biggest offender of them all: a diminished battery life. In the case of the last item, I distinctly remember leaving the house one morning to drive the twenty minutes to Warner, New Hampshire and discovering that the fully charged battery of my phone was down to 8%. While there was nothing physically wrong with the condition of my cell phone, these annoying instances of spontaneous battery drain became so frequent that I knew it was time to trade it in for a new phone.

The frustrating experience I just described is known as planned obsolescence, a tactic utilized by manufacturers who intentionally design products that will only last for a certain period of time. In some situations, like my “ancient” smartphone, a consumer has no choice but to dispose of their current device in favor of a more costly, newer, shiner version of the same product. As consumers, we come into contact with planned obsolescence on a regular basis. Some examples are printer ink cartridges, electric toothbrushes, computer software, light bulbs, and even text books.



48. Model T Ford print advertisement, 1912.

In 1908, Henry Ford released the first production of the Model T Ford.<sup>51</sup> The sturdy, affordable car had one of the longest production runs of any automobile in history, until it was ousted by the Volkswagen Beetle in 1972. Until the early 1920s, the Ford Motor Company completely saturated the automobile market with the Model T<sup>52</sup> and found themselves facing a conundrum: they made such a good product that there was no reason for people to purchase another one. In contrast, by the late 1920s, the head of General Motors Corporation, Alfred P. Sloan, decided to give consumers a choice of new colors and models every year to

entice them with more options. Sloan’s decision relied on the assumption that with more options, consumers would have the desire to upgrade their vehicle more frequently, in favor of keeping up with the latest models rather than one desirable model.

### BY 1927, FORD DISCONTINUED THE PRODUCTION OF THE MODEL T.

“The plan was provocative amidst the Great Depression, when many people struggled to afford food much less buy new cars. But soon, car owners no longer waited until their cars quit running. Thanks to GM and Sloan’s genius marketing ploy, they waited until a new model caught their eye — even if they didn’t need it.”<sup>53</sup>

Economists and large production companies recognized the strategy that Sloan’s decision represented and how it could work to control the consumer market. Soon after, the idea behind creating items with limited shelf life was born and dubbed “planned obsolescence.”



49. Philips Lamps print advertisement, 1900s.

Around the same time as the marketing competition between Ford and General Motors, another famous example of planned obsolescence was initiated by the Phoebus cartel. In 1924, a group consisting of the world’s leading lighting companies met in Geneva, Switzerland, and agreed to limit the life expectancy of incandescent light-bulbs from the anticipated 1,500 to 2,000 hours

of previous iterations to 1,000 hours.<sup>54</sup> This timed-expiration of the essential product was based solely on the fact that by limiting the life expectancy, companies could reap bigger profits. The Phoebus cartel’s rule over the lightbulb market lasted until the 1930s, but its legacy as one of the first proponents of planned obsolescence is illuminating.<sup>55</sup>

In 1932, a real-estate broker by the name of Gerald London published a paper titled, *Ending the Depression through Planned Obsolescence*, acknowledged as the first use of the term for the phenomenon we still see in practice in 2020.

### IN HIS PAPER, LONDON STATES:

“I would have the Government assign a lease of life to shoes and homes and machines, to all products of manufacture, mining and agriculture, when they are first created, and they would be sold and used within the term of their existence definitely known by the consumer. After the allotted time had expired, these things would be legally “dead” and would be controlled by the duly appointed governmental agency and destroyed if there is widespread unemployment. New products would constantly be pouring forth from the factories and marketplaces, to take the place of the obsolete, and the wheels of industry would be kept going and employment regularized and assured for the masses.”<sup>56</sup>

It would be a fair assessment to say that in some ways London got his wish. In the post-WWII era, we saw a huge boom in the manufacturing of household appliances, lawn care equipment, clothing, and footwear that met every consumer’s need or desire. And a new item was just around the corner every season.

51. History.com Editors. “Ford Motor Company Unveils the Model T.” *History*. Last updated July 28, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/gquqmjy>.

52. Buck, Stephanie. “GM Invented Planned Obsolescence During the Great Depression, and We’ve Been Buying It Ever Since.” March 3, 2017. *The Medium*. <https://tinyurl.com/yxsogt3c>.

53. *ibid.*

54. Khaleeli, Homa. “End of the Line for Stuff That’s Built to Die?” *The Guardian*. March 3, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/hnpsz9f>.

55. Krajewski, Markus. “The Great Lightbulb Conspiracy.” *IEEE*. September 24, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/y45h815t>

56. London, Bernard. 1932. *Ending the Depression Through Planned Obsolescence*. New York.

In 2020, we see many examples of planned obsolescence in the marketplace. Let's revisit some of the products listed at the onset of this section: printer ink cartridges, textbooks, and computer software.

## PRINTER INK CARTRIDGES

In the modern home office, there is one piece of equipment that might be missing from the typical desk set: an inkjet printer. In a time where digital file sharing has become more sophisticated and standardized, there is no real need to outfit your office with a printer. This is not only the case for the home office. "Printer sales for both office and home workers are falling because fewer people see a need to print. In 2005, the average office worker printed about 1,000 pages per month. Just seven years later, that number was cut nearly in half."<sup>57</sup> Due to the decline in the reliance on personal and professional printers, printer companies shifted their focus for turning a profit from the printer to the ink needed to operate the device. "The hardware is sold at or below cost. (But) Once you buy a particular brand of hardware, then you must buy the other products that work with that hardware."<sup>58</sup> In the case of an inkjet cartridge, the printer will sense when the ink is low, and signal the user it is time to replace it. For my personal HP Envy Photo Inkjet printer, which retails for \$150, a pack that includes all the necessary replaceable cartridges costs \$45.99 from Best Buy.<sup>59</sup> Though I do not print very often, I find myself needing to replace the ink cartridges quite often. And because this particular brand does not sell the ink cartridges individually, I end up shelling out nearly \$50 each time for the variety pack of ink. My frequent need to replenish the ink supply may not always be necessary. Due to the nature of planned obsolescence technology, it is uncommon to get the most bang for your buck for a product. "There are some ink cartridges with smart chips that will disable the ink cartridge when the ink-levels are low. This means that you may not get to use all of the ink that you have paid for. There may be enough ink to print, but the cartridge will not let you in an effort to maintain quality control."<sup>60</sup>



50. Inkjet printer cartridges.

## TEXTBOOKS

Throughout college, I resisted shelling out the full amount of money for any textbook on the syllabus that specified the purchase of a certain edition. I instead opted to rent the text through an online retailer, or use a copy that was on reserve in the library. Like many students, I was required to purchase at least half a dozen books for school every semester. The minute changes that are made edition-to-edition to updated textbooks becomes a form of planned obsolescence that can make the college experience a challenging, and expensive, balancing act. To make sure that authors and publishers can turn a profit on textbook sales annually, "textbooks are often reprinted with small changes, often skewing the page

numbers when compared to the previous issue. This means that students are forced to buy these new copies instead of purchasing second-hand copies."<sup>61</sup> Today, as a professor, I do my best to only assign books that will be used extensively throughout the course. As I mark the latest edition of a textbook as "required" on the syllabus, I assure myself that this book is worth the cost. However, it becomes hard not to feed into the problem of inflated book costs for students. I can understand both sides of the argument, and while I personally view books to be a necessary investment, the idea of making certain editions unusable is not very sustainable for a consumer. On the topic of textbooks and other reference guides, one cannot help but think back to the now obsolete publication of encyclopedias, which needed to be updated frequently in order to remain relevant with the times.



57. Chandler, Nathan. "Is Printing Still Relevant?" *How Stuff Works*. August 25, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/y6mkgnpX>. Accessed 2020.

58. Tyson, Jeff. "How Inkjet Printers Work." *How Stuff Works*. March 26, 2001. <https://tinyurl.com/y6r13fjl>.

59. Best Buy, "HP 64 XL High-Yield Ink Cartridge," <https://tinyurl.com/y5mononn>.

60. Andrea. "Built to Fail: 7 Examples of Planned Obsolescence." *Durability Matters*. March 7, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y4m7r4uz>.

61. *ibid.*



51. Macintosh computer software update.

## COMPUTER DEVICE SOFTWARE

One of the more obvious gripes with iPhones and planned obsolescence is the fact that there is no way to replace the battery, forcing the consumer to upgrade their phone. “Apple consumers raise their eyebrows that a replacement battery costs only \$10 less than a new phone, but it’s such pricing schemes that explain why many of us have owned three or more.”<sup>62</sup>

In 2017, a group of consumers publicly questioned Apple’s methods, and claimed that battery life of their older iPhones

was considerably reduced around the time of the launch of a newer iteration of the same device. The complaint launched an investigation into the company’s practices, and proposed a tidy settlement of \$500 million dollars, which comes out to about \$25 each to be paid to some Apple consumers.<sup>63</sup> As of April 2020, a ruling for the class-action lawsuit had yet to be carried out. However, countries such as Italy, have also accused Apple and Samsung of knowingly slowing down their products, forcing customers to upgrade,<sup>64</sup> proving that planned obsolescence is indeed a tactic that these companies are knowingly engaged in.

The simple solution would be to stop buying products that utilize planned obsolescence technology. However, when you really stop to think about it, planned obsolescence is becoming harder to avoid in the consumer landscape. On a shelf in my living room sit two dozen DVDs and Blu-Ray disks, unused and gathering dust. The once-leading technologies in home entertainment have been made nearly obsolete by the advent of streaming devices such as the Amazon FireStick or Google’s Chromecast. Sometimes my partner and I will debate watching a film from our collection. We still own a game console that can play DVDs and Blue-Ray disks. However, it becomes a headache to set up, and we ultimately opt to stream the movie through Netflix, Amazon, or another service. There have even been times when we have paid to rent a movie we own on DVD, instead of choosing to utilize the physical disk.

*Fast Fashion*, which I will discuss in more detail in a later section, has dominated the garment manufacturing industry in the twenty-first century, and is another example of how we experience planned obsolescence on a regular basis. Companies produce a high-volume of cheap goods overseas, which are then sold throughout the year to align with current fashion trends of that season. It is also worth noting that fast fashion has inflated the fashion seasons from four to 52 “micro-seasons” throughout the calendar year.<sup>65</sup>

## WHEN YOU REALLY STOP TO THINK ABOUT IT, PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE IS BECOMING HARDER TO AVOID IN THE CONSUMER LANDSCAPE.

In my opinion, planned obsolescence in fast fashion is probably one of the most insidious aspects of consumerism. Have you ever gone to a cheap clothing store at the beginning of the month, and then again at the end of the month? You will find that items that had been priced at a higher amount at the beginning of the month have now been moved to the “clearance” section of a store

and reduced to unconscionably low prices. It makes you question the value of everything. As a result, I stopped buying clothing at cost a long time ago and instead opted to wait a few weeks until the item had gone on sale.

However, supporting this popular industry should make all consumers (myself included) question the social and environmental issues associated with fast-fashion production. Because of the nature of this, and the consumers who support it, the bulk of clothing produced is now viewed as disposable. “The Council for Textile Recycling estimates that Americans throw away 70 pounds of clothes and other textiles each year.”<sup>66</sup> The obsolescence of clothing appears to be far more accelerated than for any electronic device I have owned.

It is strange to me that we still operate under a consumer model that is over a century old. It makes me question everything about the way our commerce is set up and why we go along with it. As with most methods of creating beneficial economic results from consumer spending, this is an absurdly manipulative tactic. It’s difficult to see how a consumer could break away from this model, as most of the goods around us have a shelf life that is determined by its manufacturer. I can attempt to hold onto an item for as long as possible, but in the case of technology, it is proven science that I have about two more good years left with my new cell phone before I will grudgingly purchase the latest version.

Unfortunately, this is one outcome that I don’t see expiring any time soon.

62. Buck, Stephanie. “GM Invented Planned Obsolescence During the Great Depression, and We’ve Been Buying It Ever Since.” March 3, 2017. *The Medium*. <https://tinyurl.com/yxsogt3c>.

63. Nicas, Jack. “Apple Agrees to Pay Some iPhone Owners \$25 Each.” *The New York Times*. March 2, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/sf98zb5>.

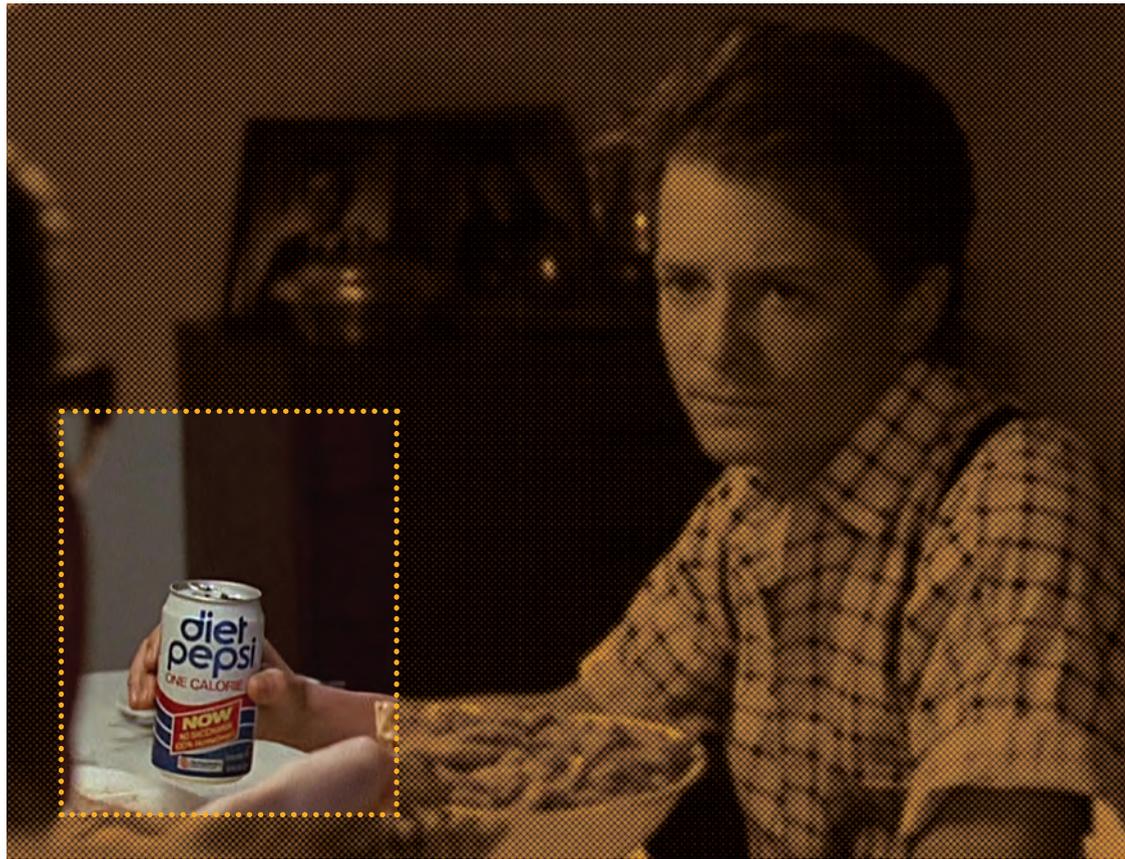
64. Gibbs, Samuel. “Apple and Samsung Fined for Deliberately Slowing Down Phones.” *The Guardian*. October 24, 2018. <https://tinyurl.com/y8pjtpo>.

65. Whitehead Lohr, Shannon. “5 Truths the Fast Fashion Industry Doesn’t Want You to Know.” *Huffington Post*. August 19, 2014. <https://tinyurl.com/y5lyym3>.

66. Bain, Marc, and Quartz. “The Neurological Pleasures of Fast Fashion.” *The Atlantic*. March 15, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/y3x7jbtb>.

## IT'S ALL PRESENT + IT'S ALL FOR SALE

### PRODUCT PLACEMENT IN MOVIES AND TELEVISION



52. Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) with a Diet Pepsi in *Back to the Future*, 1985.

**“I wanted to be wealthy so badly, I would dream about it...”**

— *kids + money, 2018*

Growing up, movies played an integral part in my life. With the exception of three local television stations, and having basic cable for a very abbreviated period of time when I was in junior high, my brother David and I relied on movies for our on-screen wonderment fix. The best movies can transport you to new worlds, and our young imaginations would absorb the shimmer and magic that Disney, the Muppets, and many other movie production companies would radiate into our living room from the warm glow of the television set. David and I were so infatuated with movies that we used to draw our own versions of the films after watching them. We would grab a ream of recycled dot matrix printer paper (it was the early nineties...) and fill it with our reimagined sketches of such films as *The Great Muppet Caper*. David was more of a cartoonist than I was, and he would personify the humorous moments in the films that he liked the most. I, on the other hand, had a morbid streak and would illustrate an embellished near-fatal accident, incurable illness, or unexplained hospital visit in my retelling of the film. It is safe to say that movies were a big part of my childhood, and their influence extended far beyond their 90-minute run time.



53. Reese's Pieces in Steven Spielberg's *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial*, 1982.

The earliest memory I have of a movie influencing my young, impressionable, consumer brain was Steven Spielberg's *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial* (1982.) I could not watch this movie without craving my own bag of Reese's Pieces candy, manufactured by Hershey's. I remember taking the small, orange bag outside and scattering the candy on the ground, just like the main character, Elliott, had done. I don't remember if I was trying to lure an extraterrestrial to my backyard, but I do remember going along and eating the candy off the ground. Apparently, I would play both parts of Elliott and E.T., and even as an adult, I still associate Reese's Pieces with *E.T.*

Though my younger self may not have been aware of it, this commonly used marketing tactic is known as "product placement." The term refers to the method of featuring a paid product in the scene of a film or on television, often in a favorable light, so consumers might derive a positive association from the film and purchase the product. Many movies and television shows exhibit multiple brands throughout their running time, which is beneficial to both the brand and the production of the film or show. Successful product placement is meant to feel organic, and usually a narrative has been built up in the mind of the viewer with the association of certain products. The example from *E.T.* discussed above is one of the most successful, most seamless vignettes of product placement in film history. Take a quick break from reading this and go contact a couple of friends or relatives. Ask them which products they remember most from *E.T.* I'll wait here until you get back...

All set? Great! I'm guessing that you had quite a few responses for Reese's Pieces. While both Coca-Cola and Hershey's were sponsors of the classic Spielberg film, most people remember the iconic yellow, orange, and brown candy that scored a 65% increase in sales after the film's debut.<sup>67</sup> The iconic scene has remained with generations of individuals over the years, and many still associate the sweet treat with the film, though this movie is nearly 40 years old.



54. Doc Brown (Christopher Lloyd) in *Back to the Future, Part 2*, 1989.

While it is still unclear if extraterrestrials exist, and we are yet to learn if they prefer Reese's Pieces to M&M's — when asked to have its candy featured in *E.T.*, the Mars company reportedly turned Spielberg and Co. down,<sup>68</sup> — we do know that corporations rely heavily on advertising their products to filmgoers and television viewers. There is ample opportunity for advertisers to reach audiences during the run time of a movie or television episode. With the advent of streaming content has come an absence of commercials. Streaming services, like Hulu, offer a premium streaming package that

offers commercial-free content. Netflix has removed the ad model that would interrupt your viewing experience back in the days of cable television. It seems that most advertisements you see on streaming services, like HBO, Showtime, or Amazon, are for original content that is offered on that platform. Due to the increase in streaming content viewership, there appears to be more of a push for product placement in films and television content.

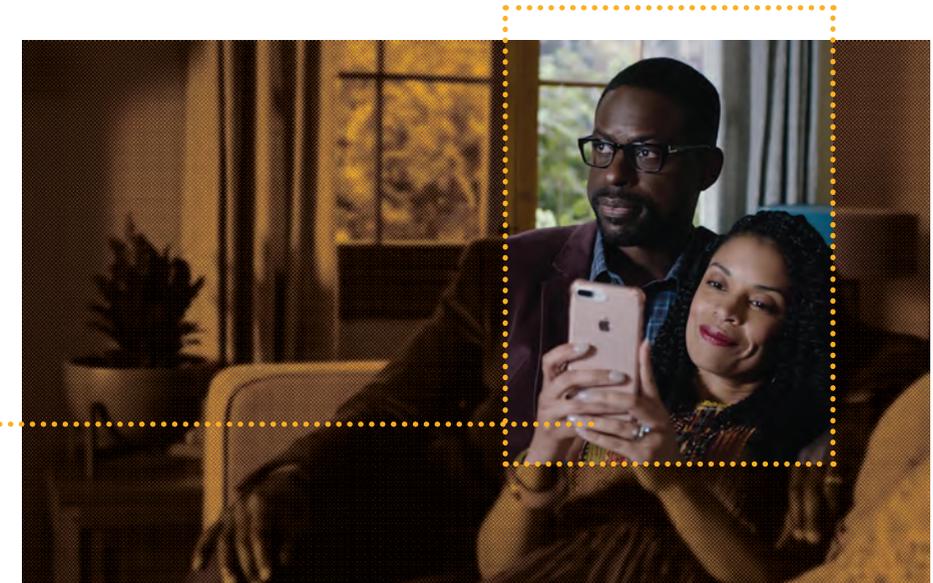
The methodology and practice of product placement in films brings into question the feelings of a director or screenwriter. Does their artistic vision become compromised by the blatant representation of Pepsi or Nike in their film, or do they view this minor inconvenience as simply a workaround that will help secure the exposure and financial success of their film? When considering this debate, we can cite two case studies that discuss these scenarios.

When David Lynch was questioned by a reporter in 2007 on his opinion of product placement in television and film, the prolific independent filmmaker and creator of the television series *Twin Peaks* was quoted as saying, “Bullshit. That’s how I feel. (It’s) total,  *fucking*  bullshit.”<sup>69</sup> Due to the avant-garde nature of Lynch’s films, and perhaps a personal objection to the method, product placement is absent from Lynch’s onscreen portfolio. “To date there is no example of Lynch accepting funds for placing brands in his films. As an artist whose work is not mainstream or known for breaking records in the box office, Lynch has found other ways to fund his productions.”<sup>70</sup> While David Lynch is not opposed to making commercials, he strongly views his films and television series as art, and that each frame should be free of corporate distractions.



**A not-so-interesting side note:** While shopping at Whole Foods recently, I stumbled upon a display case that featured David Lynch Allegro Coffee. Come to find out, Lynch has a number of coffee varieties produced by the brand Allegro and many of the proceeds from this product go to support the David Lynch Foundation, which promotes the practice of Transcendental Meditation as a coping tool for trauma victims. Despite the good intentions behind this product, it was a bit jarring to see Lynch’s face on a bag of coffee.

Conversely, we can review the monstrously successful and popular film franchise, *Back to the Future*. Scattered throughout the fictional town of Hill Valley in Robert Zemeckis’ epic trilogy are story lines for iconic brands developed right alongside the actors. As with the attention to detail demonstrated in *E.T.*, many of the brands have been worked into the narrative of the film. Some of the many participating brands are: Pepsi, Pizza Hut, Western Union, Mattel, Calvin Klein, and Nike. When questioned about product placement in the films, Zemeckis and screenplay writer, Bob Gale, discussed how “Universal Studios had recently created a product placement department that would contract with different advertisers to put an item in the film.”<sup>71</sup> This process involved the advertiser paying a fee to the studio, which can sometimes be out of the control of the creative director of the film. After the *Back to the Future* experience, Bob Gale was quoted as saying, “The lesson I learned on this and the subsequent sequels is I never do product placement, ever, anymore... It’s like you’ve got another creative person.”<sup>72</sup> Though Zemeckis made a conscious effort to make the paid products appear to fit with the story by using vintage logos that would have fit the time period of 1955, he seems to be in agreement with Gale: “You have another producer.”<sup>73</sup>



55. NBC’s *This Is Us*.

I have grudgingly watched all four seasons of the hit series, *This is Us*, since it first aired on NBC in 2016. Despite my disdain for the show, I have never missed an episode because it’s my guilty pleasure show that I love to hate. For 45 minutes every Wednesday night I sit and yell at the screen or engage in a rapid series of disapproving text message exchanges with my friends, as we watch it in our separate domiciles united in our rage by what Randall did this week or what Kevin did that week. Between my fiery, judgmental texting, I often find my mind wandering and bouncing back and forth between all the brand new, strategically placed Apple products that riddle an episode each week. While writing this, I stumbled upon a website that tracks product placement in movies and television. According to [productplacementblog.com](http://productplacementblog.com), there have been twenty-four instances of Apple products on the series since its inception.<sup>74</sup> However, this figure seems low. In the seventy-two episodes that have aired to date, it seems as if I have seen hundreds of Apple products placed neatly all over the set, inviting audiences to bask in the affluence of the Pearsons while they ramp up another cacophony of drama. Each character seems to be outfitted with the latest MacBook, Apple Watch, iPad, or iPhone, and they appear so often that the products might distract some viewers from what’s happening on screen. This example of product placement is not nearly as subtle, nor does it weave as seamlessly into the narrative as *E.T.* and even *Back to the Future*. However, it can still be just as effective in its long-term impacts on a consumer.

67. Conradt, Stacy. “The Stories Behind 10 Famous Product Placements.” *The Week*. December 11, 2012. <https://tinyurl.com/y6cof8sj>.

68. Snopes Staff. “Did M&Ms Turn Down ‘E.T.’?” *Snopes*. July 24, 2001. <https://tinyurl.com/yxt86cur>.

69. Mason, Aiden. “That Time David Lynch Gave His Opinion on Product Placement.” *TV Over Mind*. 2017. <https://tinyurl.com/yyt9zz5x>.

70. Smith, Greg. “Product Placement in David Lynch Productions.” *Hollywood Branded*. September 24, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/y53o8vmj>.

71. Futurepedia. “The Back to the Future Wiki. Product Placement.” *Fandom: Filming*. Publication date unavailable. <https://tinyurl.com/yvjmt6pa>.

72. *ibid.*

73. *ibid.*

74. Product Placement Blog. “This Is Us” Last modified 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y4op4gpe>. Accessed 2020.



56. + 57. Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) *Sex and the City*.

In the case of HBO's *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), the main character Carrie Bradshaw historically left viewers questioning the character's income-to-shopping habits ratio. Regular viewers received a weekly dose of high-end, luxury stylings from their beloved heroine. Ms. Bradshaw and friends influenced an entire generation of women to believe that their lifestyle was the epitome of achieving success and being desirable in modern society. My generation was late to the party when it came to *Sex and the City's* viewership, as many of us had parents who wouldn't allow us to

watch such a show with the word "sex" in the title until we were in our late teens. However, once we were given the green light to tune in, we were still at that ripe, impressionable age and were susceptible to the marketing ploys that surrounded the popular HBO series. At school, I was suddenly seeing fewer Hello Kitty backpacks and more Coach bags. Cheap costume jewelry from Claire's was being replaced with tennis bracelets from Tiffany's and now adorned the limbs of my developing classmates. Lacoste, Gucci, and other major brands also started popping up, along with the advent of that horribly idiotic popped collar trend. If you had money, you could be like Carrie, Miranda, Charlotte, or Samantha.

One high school acquaintance of mine had a rather pricey addiction to designer handbags and anything made by Chanel. I remember visiting her our freshman year of college and being blown away by the extravagant items that filled her dimly-lit dormitory closet. My good friend and roommate of our mutual friend, Sarah, confided in me that the bags were either purchased with a credit card or by her father. I was amazed by this. At the time, I felt bad asking my dad for money for food, so I couldn't imagine asking him to shell out funds for a Birkin bag.

As I think back on some of the television shows that were popular during that time, such as *The O.C.* (2003-07), *Gilmore Girls* (2000-07), and *One Tree Hill* (2003-2012), I notice a common trend. Many of these shows exhibited some form of wealth fetishism that subconsciously influenced the desires of young consumers. Whether it was through technology, clothing, shoes, or cars, there was ample opportunity for product placement within this medium. We often see a connection



58. *kids + money*, Lauren Greenfield, 2018.

between young teens and status: throughout adolescence, fitting in becomes a matter of survival and can quickly become an expensive obsession. In Lauren Greenfield's 2008 documentary, *kids + money*, we get a first-hand look at how money affects the development of tweens and teens growing up in Los Angeles. Greenfield revisits this same theme in her 2018 documentary *Generation Wealth*. "It's not about the rich," Greenfield said in an interview with NPR. "...it's really about our aspiration to wealth, and our needing to show it off whether we have it or not."<sup>75</sup> Because we are bombarded by products so regularly through film and other media, we find ourselves striving to replicate this kind of affluence in our everyday lives, whatever the cost. When we are constantly absorbing visual mediums, such as television, we tend to create emotional connections with the people onscreen, whether we are aware of it or not. Going back to *Sex and the City* for a moment, fans of the show would go as far as to say whether or not they were a "Samantha" or a "Miranda" when conversing with other fans of the show.

Even as an adult, when I tune in to watch shows like, *Big Little Lies*, *Modern Family*, *Parenthood*, or *This is Us*, I find myself looking at my own clothing, tech devices, and furnishings with slight disdain. All of my clothes seem frumpy in comparison, and none of my decor is quite as elegant or curated as the staging of these L.A.-based homes. This causes me to question the sleekness of my own New England dwelling. These shows are designed to sell literally everything that is present in a scene, and it is often successful in eroding a viewer's resolve over an extended period of time.

59. Josh Baskin (Tom Hanks) with his unlimited supply of Pepsi in *BIG*, 1988.60. Cosmo Kramer with Post breakfast cereal in *Seinfeld*, 1998.

I find myself searching online for the dresses or accessories a character sported in an episode. There are websites that inform a viewer of what items were worn by their favorite characters, and where to buy the exact item or something similar to the one on-screen. One of my favorite shows to gain inspiration for future purchases is the Netflix reboot of *Queer Eye*. (2018- present) I find myself browsing West Elm's website as Bobby Berk reveals an elegantly outfitted bar cart or a queen-sized bed with perfectly plumped throw pillows and knit blankets. When I first started watching the show, they featured a Samsung refrigerator that sported a screen on the right-hand panel, which allowed you to preview the contents of your fridge without opening it. At first, the design seemed like an inane concept to me. Now, after having binge watched all five seasons, I find myself coming around to the desirability of this fab new concept and viewing my perfectly adequate refrigerator as clunky and boring, sans screensaver.

Product placement in movies and television shows is not a new concept. It is one that has been around since the dawn of television. In essence, since people discovered this new way to showcase products, they have used it to their advantage. Cars, cigarettes, liquor brands, make-up – it's all present, and it's all for sale. Edward Bernays was fascinated by the practice of stimulating the inner desires of the population, and "he orchestrated a world where we have to buy certain things in order to be a certain kind of person."<sup>76</sup> We can thank Bernays for the consumer model we currently have, which has dictated mass-consumer persuasion tactics including product placement and celebrity influence to market products.

Though *Sex and the City* has been off the air since 2004, I wonder how many young women and men still aspire to the status and stylings of Carrie and Big? Am I the only one who has made it my life's mission to track down Jessica Day's (Zoey Deschanel's character on *New Girl*) chicken iPhone case? (No, for real. I need that!) Can we really shirk off this form of capitalism so easily? Can we really claim that this is a fair advertising tactic, and the consumer has control over the situation?

75. McEvers, Kelly. "Don't Be Fooled: 'Generation Wealth' Is More About Wanting Than Having." *NPR*. May 10, 2017. <https://tinyurl.com/y3dtq3u8>.

76. Martell, Katie. "Marketing Was Never Supposed to Be This Way." *Katie Martell*. <https://tinyurl.com/yytgxfu> Accessed 2020.

## MASKED CONSUMPTION WHEN DISASTER MEETS COMMODIFICATION



61. Mailbox with free masks in Bar Harbor, Maine in July 2020. It was empty.

**“I recommend people  
do what they want.”**

— *Donald Trump, the 45th President of the United States, when asked if citizens attending his June, 2020 rally in Tulsa, OK should wear a mask to prevent the potential spread of COVID-19 in a crowd.*

## HERE'S A SHORT RANT ABOUT FACE MASKS.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 first gripped the United States in early March 2020, there has been ample opportunity for companies to profit from the virus. Sure, the stay-at-home mandate paralyzed the nation and sent our economy into a tailspin, causing an economic downturn that has not been seen since the Great Depression. It's only natural that companies are doing what they need to in order to survive this time of uncertainty, and in some cases, to profit by what is known as "disaster capitalism." Disaster Capitalism can be defined as "free-market 'solutions' to crises that exploit and exacerbate existing inequalities."<sup>77</sup> We often see these solutions present themselves during times of war, natural disasters, and economic crises. In the case of COVID-19, the Trump administration has done its best to publicly contradict information about preventing the virus from organizations like the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and other leading health officials. One tactic the Trump team utilized was publishing a list of comments made by Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), in the early days of the virus that have been taken out of context and meant to undercut the professional opinions of such health organizations as the NIAID.<sup>78</sup> Due to the ineptitude of the current administration in a time of crisis, many businesses have developed free-market solutions that are rarely in the best interest of the general public. This can be attributed to the development of a vaccine and face masks. In America, due to the lack of response by our government in the early days of the virus, the latter were scarce or inefficient for many healthcare workers and citizens. Businesses began developing their own solutions. It wasn't long before we began seeing luxury brands, such as Gucci and Absolut Vodka jumping on the bandwagon by producing high-end face masks, hand sanitizer, and "cleaning gels."<sup>79</sup>

In the early days of COVID-19, I began seeing an uptick in face mask production among artists and entrepreneurs, who were putting their skills to work in order to outfit citizens with necessary Personal Protective Equipment (or PPE). Most of the masks, and a large portion of the proceeds, were part of a laudable effort to outfit first responders and other essential healthcare workers, who were running out of equipment as the virus ravaged our nation. It made me proud to support these smaller businesses, and their efforts to keep healthcare workers safe. I felt good knowing my money was going towards something useful.



62. Billie Eilish wearing a Gucci face mask, April 2020.

Fast forward to June, several months into the pandemic. As stay-at-home orders began to expire on a state level, face masks became a required accessory if you ventured out into the world that is still without a cure for COVID-19. In the beginning, many of us were only wearing face masks for short periods of time, like when we would go to the grocery store or another essential business. However, many in the US workforce had to return to their offices and, in some cases, were required to wear a mask for the duration of the business day. After spending some time with this new accessory, you start to formulate what ergonomics work best for your here-to-stay face mask.

For me, the tie-back system is annoying and time-consuming. Half the time, my choice to venture out can be determined by the amount of energy I'm willing to expend on securing a face mask. I was concerned at the onset of the virus about engaging in outdoor activities without a mask, so I opted to wear my mask when walking. In the remote area where I live, this proved to be overkill, and I abandoned my sweaty, hot mask after a couple of sweltering walks around our local lake.

There's another consideration beyond the aesthetics of the face mask; how many of these masks are actually CDC-approved? Due to the lack of government regulations during a time when disaster capitalism can thrive, the market is saturated with inept facial coverings that will not prevent exposure to the virus. Additionally, due to retailers' ability to engage in price gouging of products in high demand, we become a society left vulnerable to a capitalist model that profits during the pandemic. The "new normal" means face masks are now an essential item to wear every day. Washable face masks are available from most clothing retailers, Etsy shops, and beyond. Pretty much any online store now has a tab or banner advertisement promoting their masks.

77. Solis, Marie. "Coronavirus is the Perfect Disaster for 'Disaster Capitalism.'" *Vice*. March 13, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/wc2m2g8>.

78. Haberman, Maggie. "Trump Aides Undercut Fauci as He Speaks Up on Virus." *The New York Times*. July 12, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/12/us/politics/fauci-trump-coronavirus.html>.

79. Lord, Richard. "Does Billie Eilish's Gucci Face Mask Even Help Prevent Coronavirus – and How About Luxury Masks from Louis Vuitton, Fendi, and More?" *Style*. April 4, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y6m8gp5u>.

80. Newcomb, Alyssa. "Meet the 'Trikini,' a Bikini with a Matching Face Mask." *NBCDFW*. May 22, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/yxvootr9>.



63. Homemade masks became a lifesaver in the early days of COVID-19.

Like with regular clothes shopping, you can select from a wide variety of masks, and unlike the early days of mask consumption, you can choose mass-produced, cheap versions. During the summer months, you can even find a mask that will match your two-piece bikini, making the whole ensemble a “trikini.”<sup>80</sup>

When I first came across some mass-produced face masks, something about the concept changed my relationship with this essential commodity. How I would like to remember the history of the face mask is dependent on a community’s effort to protect our healthcare employees and loved

ones who were most at risk. Everywhere I looked, I found stories of people sharing patterns, offering to sew masks for anyone who needed one, and helpful articles about alternative ways to make a mask from items around the house. (I, for one, was greatly appreciative of a good friend who sent along a DIY instructional article on how to make a non-sew face mask from a bandana and rubberbands.) In a way, the community aspect around this newly required item made things a little less scary and even easier to manage. We were united in our need to protect ourselves and the members of our community as we navigated this new virus-stricken world.

When I stop and look at these mass-produced face masks, it seems the sense of community and unity that grew from our desperate need to protect each other has been cheapened. As an introverted consumer, I am aware of how easy it is to buy these masks in bulk, and have it be just as mundane an experience as if I was buying lightbulbs off the internet. The artists and entrepreneurs I bought my masks from at the onset of the pandemic are still selling masks, but not at the same rapid pace. Some are charging \$30 a mask, and there is now no mention of the proceeds benefiting any cause.

While I prefer to support a small business, I feel the familiar tug at my consumer brain raising well-versed questions about the items I am scanning on my online shopping trip:

- **How much is it?**
- **How quickly can I get it?**
- **Is it eligible for free shipping?**

I will always prefer to sport a reusable cloth face mask to a paper one. My role during the pandemic will not be to accrue this type of waste, adding to the already staggering amount of trash that plagues our shores and roadways. I have several tie-back masks and a few ear loop ones as well. I have been instructed by my place of employment— which has announced resuming operations of an in-person classroom experience — to stock up for our fall semester. I find myself desperately searching for masks that will work for me. A mask I can wear for hours on end. A mask I can wear while speaking at length.

I am fearful. Like many others, I am scared of this virus that holds us tight in its paralyzing uncertainty. I am not used to living in fear like this. It becomes harder, not easier as one would expect, as restrictions are lifted and businesses start resuming regular operations, such as indoor seating in restaurants and going to the movies. I am resistant to returning to the classroom, especially with the rise of cases in certain parts of the country. I often find myself looking at my face mask and thinking, “this can’t be enough.” And in reality, it isn’t.

Where disaster capitalism is able to flourish, the fate of citizens and their health is not always in the best interest of many companies or our lawmakers. There are some educational guidelines about how to select the right face mask, but the market is also fully saturated with many styles that might not be as effective and are possibly dangerous to a consumers’ health. As with any product, consumers are left to do their own research and decide which face mask will keep them safe. And, in the case of a commodity that has entered the market virtually overnight and is mandatory in most establishments, there are no regulations to make sure we are buying a product that will protect us. “We’re seeing in real time that we are so much more interconnected to one another than our quite brutal economic system would have us believe.”<sup>81</sup>

81. Solis, Marie. “Coronavirus is the Perfect Disaster for ‘Disaster Capitalism.’” *Vice*. March 13, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/wc2m2g8>.

## MANUFACTURING + DESIRE

### THE EMOTIONAL ROLLER COASTER OF IMPULSE SHOPPING



64. Shopping spree at Target.

**“We don’t go to Target to get what we need. We go to Target to find what we want.”**

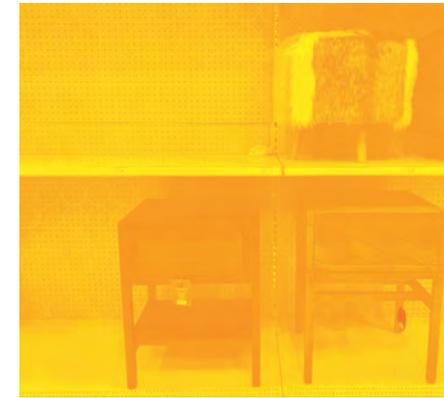
— *@TargetMadeMeDoIt*

It starts out with a well-intentioned list. You thoughtfully craft a sensible synopsis of what you need from an establishment before you leave the house. If you have a list, you will stick to it, or at least that’s what you have promised yourself. If you have a list, you can do no wrong.

The sliding glass doors part with a quiet “whoosh” as you enter the sacred space: Target. The first decision you must make upon entering the store is paramount to the success of this thrifty shopping trip: shopping cart or basket? You opt for the former, select a large red cart with sufficient wheel rotation, and press on. You make it about 10 feet before you are confronted with the strategically placed discount area, filled with enticing, inexpensive items. You have entered the decompression zone, an area of a store that is designed to draw you in, whether through beautifully designed displays or “a large bin of merchandise that’s been deeply discounted.”<sup>82</sup> Your grip tightens around your well-constructed list, and you redirect your line of sight to the middle of the store, ignoring the \$5 plastic desk organizer units. You don’t have a desk to place them on, anyway. According to Paco Underhill’s *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping*, more than 60 percent of what we buy wasn’t on our list.<sup>83</sup>

As you shop for the necessary items on your list, your attention flits to accent items that could really “dress up your home this season.” You grab two or three new hand towels for the bathroom and place them in your cart. You continue to meander through the store, traveling off course several times, in order to examine the latest homewares from Joanna Gaines and other interior designers. After at least an hour, your cart is overflowing with items that caught your eye as you shopped. The necessary items you were searching for are hunkered at the bottom of your cart, judging you through the sheer fabric of a patterned scarf you found in the accessories aisle. Once you arrive at the check-out lane, you realize you have acquired too many goods to use the self-check-out kiosk and now must interact with another human being. As an introvert, this is your punishment for allowing yourself to give in to your impulsive spending frenzy.

I have bonded with countless friends over the act of overindulging at Target. This demonstration of reckless consumerism has served as a way for us to laugh at our own foibles and connect over how we couldn’t resist the latest item by Nate Birkus or Threshold, brands that are a byproduct of Target’s vertical integration marketing strategy.<sup>84</sup> Our excess becomes excusable, because we know others who have been guilty of impulse buying in the affordable, yet trendy setting. As I write this, I start to unpack how odd all of this sounds: bonding over the inability to spend our money responsibly at a big box store. It has become so entrenched in our lives, that I have even sent text messages to one nearby friend saying, “Yo, I’m at Target. Where you at?”



While Target seems to be the frontrunner of my culturally-acceptable impulse buying, it is not the only store in which I find myself mindlessly pulling items from shelves. I am also aware that there is a certain timeline to my impulse shopping:

- I enter the store with good intentions and a plan (aka: a list.)
- I tend to walk around for a while, eyeing things that I want, but do not pick up.
- I get anxious when I think about spending money on anything beyond what I need to buy, and I do my best not to deviate from my list.
- (This is usually when things start to go awry) I have selected all the items that were on my list, and I start to think about how it’s been a while since I bought something new for myself.
- I walk back through the store and begin to examine the items I liked from my previous pass through the store. I may pick up one or two. NOTE: I also tend to put things back on shelves, feeling a stab of anxiety when I realize I have too many items in my cart.
- After much soul-searching and many trips through the same sections of the store, I ultimately break down and grab a few items I want.
- I bargain with myself. I tell myself that I need to relax, and that purchasing something new is fine. I work hard and deserve to buy something every once in a while that isn’t need-based.
- I get to my car and feel a wave of guilt wash over me. That is, until I go to the next store on my list for the day...
- Repeat the above steps.

82. Underhill, Paco. 2009. *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.

83. *ibid.*

84. Amadeo, Kimberly, and Barnier, Brian. 2020. “Vertical Integration: Pros, Cons, and Examples.” *The Balance*. Last modified May 28, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/yy7zsum6>.





Because of the senses that are activated during an in-store shopping experience, I am more likely to walk out with unplanned purchases, just as Gruen intended. When I am in a store, the true, vibrant hues cry out to me from shelves, and I am never left wondering if they will match the product that was displayed on my computer monitor. I can aimlessly wander through the beautifully designed corridors and run my fingers along a set of sheets to decide for myself if the thread count seems adequate. I am surrounded by smells, sounds, and visuals that are absent from the online shopping landscape. In many ways, this more physical way of shopping is what has assisted me in making more informed decisions about whether or not an item will be useful or worth keeping. When I shop online, I never quite know what to expect. My hesitation is greater, which might contribute to why there are fewer unplanned purchases and I am able to stay on task, removed from the heavily-curated environment of a shopping mall or store.

Gruen recognized that time a shopper spends in a retail environment is a fragile concept, one that requires skill on the part of every employee involved. A consumer's positive or negative memory of a store is almost always associated with the time they spent in the store: how long a customer service executive made them wait; how long they were in line; how disorganized the store was, which resulted in the consumer spending more time hunting down a certain item. When orchestrated correctly, a store can achieve this delicate balance, and both the customer and retailer will benefit. One example of utilizing a store's floor plan efficiently, so a customer may have a positive shopping experience, is the checkout line at stores like Old Navy and T.J.Maxx.

From the minute you enter the line, you are surrounded by goods that are for sale. The items tend to be cheap in price, and also tend to be small. Makeup, perfumes, hair accessories, and candles surround a consumer up until the minute they are invited by a cashier to approach the check-out counter. This method of distraction on the part of the retailer can have great success in appeasing a customer while they wait, as well as ensuring that the customer will exit the store with their original purchase, and then some.



### “I FEEL LIKE I JUST WALKED IN A CIRCLE...”

The Gruen Effect reveals a consumer's retail experience can be engineered through store aesthetics. One of the most successful examples of Victor Gruen's store psychology model is the Swedish giant, IKEA. Utilizing lighting, signage, and a sophisticated one-way directional flow of foot traffic, IKEA has mastered Gruen's "story layout" that influences consumer behavior, and encourages them to deviate from their shopping list. "(On average) customers only visit about a third of a retailer's floor plan, and IKEA's layout forces customers to cover more ground."<sup>94</sup> IKEA's one-way floor plan is designed so that consumers feel a sense of urgency about missing out on an item, an urgency that makes them more likely to pick up an item they didn't plan for. In addition to aesthetics, IKEA uses Beacon Technology to track the flow of their customers by using sensors that operate on Bluetooth. This system provides data on which areas shoppers are more likely to visit, in order to effectively strategize how to layout future store displays.

91. *ibid.*  
 92. Trufelman, Avery. 2015. *The Gruen Effect*. 99% Invisible.  
 93. Underhill, Paco. *Why We Buy*, page 168.  
 94. Waters, Carlos. 2018. *How IKEA Gets You to Impulsively Buy More*, ed. Tony Castle. Vol. Video. YouTube: Vox.

95. ———. "How IKEA Mastered the Gruen Effect." *Vox*. October 17, 2018. <https://tinyurl.com/yrtxjz>.  
 96. Underhill, Paco. *Why We Buy*, page 168.

68. (opposite page) Southdale Center, 1956.  
 69. (above) IKEA store map.



Using technology similar to RFID tagging, the Beacon sensors tap into the IKEA Family mobile application that shoppers may use to access deals and promotions while shopping at IKEA. The sensors pick up on your movement as you shop, and send you deals that are relevant to whatever area of the store you are currently in.

One of the most successful aspects of the IKEA retail model is its floor plan. During the initial planning process, stores work with architects and retail analysts to formulate which layout will work best for the store, and what will make the most sense for their consumer market. Different layouts include a Grid Layout, Freeform, and Racetrack designs. “IKEA uses a fixed path through a maze of product displays, and that can extend the distance traveled in the store.”<sup>70</sup> Using a heat map, data analysts learn that a fixed path layout almost always ensures that consumers will travel the same path when shopping at IKEA, and that the one-way system contributes greatly to

the success of their buyers engaging with all the content in the store. As a result, we learn that when a shopper is herded through the entirety of a store using smart design solutions such as these, there is a greater chance of them deviating from their shopping list and making unplanned purchases.

Discovery is one important aspect of a retail store. “(Stores) should seduce shoppers through the aisles with suggestions and hints of what’s to come. The aroma of warm bread can be enough to lead supermarket shoppers to the bakery aisle...”<sup>71</sup> Even the most hardened consumers cannot resist well-designed displays and floor plans that are perfectly engineered with the possibility that you, the consumer, could duplicate this very look in your own home. I have the most trouble in showroom stores like West Elm or IKEA. The design of the showroom allows the consumer to fantasize about the potential ownership of these goods and how you might set them up at home. For non-creatives and creative folks alike,



showrooms offer a valuable strategy for ensuring the product makes its way out the door and onto the ledger as another successful sale. As a visual shopper, my brain runs rampant with home design possibilities as my eyes take in the beautifully curated scenes. It’s all I can do to remind myself that purchasing more than two items in a store like West Elm would seriously cut into my budget for the month...

It’s easy for me to joke about impulse buying and write a fairly humorous account of how I have no self-control in a store like Target. However, for some people, retailers have made it impossible to say no to their smart visual merchandising experience. For those who cannot demonstrate self-control, impulse spending is a very real issue that can lead to reckless credit card debt. Financial ruin aside, many hoarders are impulse shoppers and cannot say no to even the most trivial of items. These items end up in collections that can become towering heaps of excess within their own homes, creating the possibility of a crushing demise should one plastic Mickey Mouse toy shift in the delicate balance that keeps everything from crashing down.

Before I set out for a shopping trip, I always write a list. I tell myself the list will keep me on track. I check my bank account and my calendar to make sure I have enough funds to pay my upcoming bills. My financial situation is no mystery to me, and I will not spend money I don’t have. I have already participated in that form of consumerism, and I am still digging my way out of it. Despite their annoying chirpings from my inbox, I subscribe to email notifications from stores I frequent. This way, I do not miss out on any deals that can make me feel like I’ve saved money. I find ways to curb my impulse buying, but ultimately I still find myself leaving a store with one or two unplanned items. I am only human, and as long as I forgo spending money on a full-sized, gold-plated statue of Dolly Parton, I think I’m doing okay. Although, that does sound pretty awesome.

70. (top) IKEA projected store wayfinding system.  
71. IKEA dining room table set-up in showroom.  
72. (opposite) West Elm showroom.

# WHERE I AM RIGHT NOW: ■ ■

A Breakdown of My Socioeconomic Existence

## WHERE DO YOU LIVE?

North Sutton, New Hampshire. For anyone not from here, this translates to central New Hampshire. It is 30 minutes from Vermont and about two hours from Boston. I did not grow up here, but I have lived in New Hampshire off and on for nearly ten years for reasons unknown to me. The part of New Hampshire that I inhabit is made up of mostly old, rich, retired white people who are unfriendly. There are a few people my age around here, but I don't have many friends who live locally.

## WHERE DO YOU WORK? WHAT DO YOU DO?

Up until recently, I worked as an adjunct professor of graphic design at two different colleges. I have been teaching for two years, and I made the decision to become a full time adjunct last August. This was not an easy decision to make. I worked hard as a graphic designer, but I didn't feel fulfilled in any of the jobs I held as a designer. Be that as it may, I was also concerned about voluntarily placing myself in the "precarious laborer" bracket by transitioning to teaching "full time." Since 2016, I have been obsessed with creating stability and job security for myself. I didn't want to rely on anyone again, like when I had been married. I wanted to have full control over my finances and my future.

*"I'm not ready to put my dressy Doc Martens away."*

As a faculty member, I must navigate what it means to work somewhere that has a summer break. I got an idea of what it meant to be part of the "precarious labor" workforce in January, when the colleges were closed for a month. I am feeling the strain now more than ever, due to the pandemic. In the past, I haven't had trouble finding work. However, this time is very different. Luckily, I received a stipend to redesign a course over the summer that I am teaching in fall 2020. However, I have joined much of the workforce of the United States in filing for unemployment, and that feels very odd.

## WHERE DOES YOUR MONEY GO?

Many items I buy are very frivolous, I admit. I spend a ridiculous amount of money on bath bombs, face wash, and other various beauty products. I have also developed a minor addiction to purchasing coffee mugs. We never entertain, so these mugs mostly serve as impulse buys that make me feel better at the time of purchase.

I have stopped buying clothes as often as I used to. I went through a brief phase where I had to buy more professional clothing. Since I had worked for design firms and newspapers for four years, I essentially lived in leggings and loose sweaters. Once I started teaching, I needed to step up my closet a bit. This mostly had to do with the fact that I don't look that much older than my students. Now, I own an assortment of very adult blazers.

My professional attire can be described as “Annie Hall goes to a Bad Religion concert.” I’m not ready to put my “dressy” Doc Martens away, so I’m fine with this assessment.

My bills are small. I am lucky to live with someone who doesn’t charge me rent. I did pay him rent for the first year, but we agreed I could pay for other things and it would come out to about the same amount. I try to keep my monthly expenses low, mainly because my checking account very rarely has more than \$600 in it and even that is probably a gross overestimate. My car payment is less than \$200, which has kept me from trading it in for a new one, though I know that time is coming... Despite having few bills, I still obsess over having enough money in my account to pay them.

I do my best to shop local. I try to put my money back into our local economy or into businesses I care about. Most of my “local” shopping goes to businesses in Maine. Being that I am originally from there, I have a strong connection to many of the Main Street businesses that are trying to beat out their online competition. A few of my friends own shops, and I purchase from them when I can.

My parents raised us to take care of our community when we could and donate to causes we care about. My father very much bestowed the idea on us kids that no matter how bad we may have it, someone else has it worse, and every little bit counts. Because of this, I try to donate annually to different organizations I care about. It’s not much. It’s not even worth claiming on my taxes, but it’s something. I don’t know if this falls into some “upper class do-gooder” mentality, but I enjoy giving back when I can.

## WHERE IS YOUR PLACE, ECONOMICALLY?

I grew up in a middle class family in a nice part of Downeast Maine. My parents were from good families who were also middle class. Everyone dating back to my grandparents attended college or graduate school. My parents always made sure I knew the importance of an education, and what I did professionally was worth something to this world. I have been working in some capacity since I was 15. I have had a bank account since I was 11. I was taught to save, live within my means, and contribute to society.

I tell you all of this to give you an understanding of my background. Though I grew up with certain opportunities, I make considerably less than my parents did when they were my age. My values are that of someone who grew up with more than I currently have. After my separation, I had to live off credit cards for over a year. It ate me up inside. I knew how wrong it was, and how much credit card interest accumulates, but I had no choice. I remember distinctly a phone conversation with my student loan company during this time. I had been granted economic forgiveness and was told I didn’t have to pay on my loan. This registered in my brain as problematic. I had grown up listening to my father lay out all the economic catastrophes that could befall anyone who defaults on a loan. Though I had been given a pass, I opted to pay on my loan until I went to graduate school.

I didn't grow up in a bubble. My parents were always very transparent about the fact that my siblings and I had opportunities that might not be awarded to others. From a young age, my mother worked with inner city kids and underprivileged individuals in Baltimore, where I was born and lived for nine years. When we moved to Maine, my parents were open to my younger brother and I having play dates with children who grew up in mobile homes, and they did not discriminate against those who were not in our economic bracket. My family wasn't rich by any means, let me make that clear. We had our hardships, true, but I also never had to share a room with a sibling unless I wanted to, and the hand-me-downs I received from my siblings became play clothes, not essential to keeping me clothed.

My current economic status confuses me. Though I make an adjunct's salary, I still feel as though I have all the opportunities I grew up with in a different economic bracket. What is it about growing up in one class that defines your future? How does the mentality of growing up in one economic group solidify your future?

Every day I question where I fall on an economic scale. Am I a poor white woman who grew up with money but has yet to figure out how to make a living wage as an adult? Can I even use the moniker of poor when I have a family who would help me if need be? If you grow up with money, does this mean you will always have more opportunities, and why? What if I can't give my children the same opportunities I had? What will that mean for them?

My economic status is in "free fall." Like many people, I am still figuring my life out. However, it is painfully obvious to me that I am not just some other person on unemployment at the moment. I almost didn't file because I had savings. On one hand, I feel guilty about having to file when I have savings. On another, I feel shameful because I had to. I feel like I have achieved a new low in my lifetime, even though I know I am making a bigger deal out of this than it actually is. To my knowledge, I am one of two people in my immediate family who has ever filed for unemployment. When I bring up the topic to my mother, she changes the subject quickly. She has no practical advice on how to navigate the Unemployment Portal or words of encouragement that this situation is just temporary. It's as if it's not happening to one of her precious offspring who she so enjoys bragging about to anyone who will listen. I know that there is nothing wrong with claiming benefits that my taxes go to every year, but part of me feels shameful. Another part of me is confused. Can I still buy useless crap from the internet while receiving benefits? Should I feel bad about buying pricey oat milk?

What do I do with this unemployment money?

# PRECARIOUS LABORER:

Unemployment Claims in a Time of a Global Pandemic

*“You would think those three jobs would sustain me, financially. You would be wrong.”*

## PART 1

It’s my last day as an adjunct professor until the fall, and the checks will stop coming next week. The time has come to file for unemployment in New Hampshire. I have battled with myself for the better part of a month about this decision. If I’m being honest, I’m still arguing with myself. Filing for unemployment makes me feel defeated, like I have failed. That’s crazy, of course. No one could have predicted that we’d be in a global pandemic that would leave many in the United States unemployed. However, during this time of uncertainty, filing for unemployment leaves me feeling disheartened about my role in this world as a member of the “precarious labor” force.

I open the NH Unemployment website to discover that it is a poorly designed digital interface. Nothing is intuitive. I spend half an hour trying to figure out how to respond to a pending message that requires more information. But, I never figured this out. I just gave up. I am exasperated and on the verge of chucking my laptop across the living room. This process is impossible, I think. How am I so stupid that I can’t figure this out? People with far less education have figured out how to work this, abuse it, even. Am I really so inept that I can’t figure out how to get an unemployment claim approved?

I have no one I can call to help me with this process. My friend Sarah, who lives in Maine and is also receiving unemployment, has no advice for me via text. Each state has different requirements, so her experience filing a claim will be very different from my own. I could call my older brother, Zak, but the conversation would most likely revert into a retelling of his experience with a system that has poor accessibility. As Zak is dyslexic, he struggled greatly with filing his first claim through the Baltimore system. My go-to source for any “adulting” of this nature is my father. However, neither of my parents have ever filed for unemployment. This fact sends another wave of shame over me as I click on the same three buttons, hoping that maybe the result will be a different outcome from the last half-dozen times I’ve tried. My frustration is mounting. I am so close to giving up, but I try to determine if I can survive on the meager graduate PLUS loan I took out for my thesis semester. This is not something I had intended to use those funds for, but anything is better than this primitive form of government technology.

Eventually, the claim is successfully processed. Three days later, money shows up in my checking account. I breathe a sigh of relief.









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## FAST FASHION: HOW MANY CLOTHING SEASONS DO WE NEED? A PERSONAL NARRATIVE ABOUT A PUBLIC PROBLEM



**“Know your factories.  
Know your costs.  
Always ask why.”**  
— *Everlane*

My brain is almost always consumed by clothing. It’s a quiet obsession that exists just below my collar and is always present, calculating what my exterior says to the world. I should note that I don’t really care about the latest fashion trends or trying to keep up with them. My obsession has more to do with creating an unexpected visual narrative through my clothing.



When I first started teaching, I spent a lot of time trying to decide what my outer facade would say about me to my students. I thought back on my former art teachers: many of the women wore breezy, brightly colored drapings with big, chunky jewelry. The men wore moth-eaten sweaters that were splattered with dried paint and sported ill-fitting corduroy pants. I related to neither aesthetic. Additionally, I was confronted with the issue of being one of the youngest members of the faculty at both colleges, and I felt the need to distinguish myself from the co-eds.

I do not possess the breezy, artsy-fartsy aesthetic, nor do I really care for the preppy collegiate thing that seems to manifest in academia. When deciding how to dress, I broke my style down to some very basic facts about myself:

**I wear a lot of black.**

**I like boots.**

**I feel most comfortable with androgynous attire.**

**I'm not afraid to dress in a more unconventional style.**

This last fact sounds derivative of some adolescent fan girl, but historically, I have been most comfortable with my style when I was trying to piss someone off. Though I wasn't a very rebellious teenager, I found myself gravitating towards a more punk rock aesthetic that inspired creativity through ripped tights and homemade t-shirts with painted slogans that resonated with me. I didn't give a shit about the mainstream fashion my peers were sporting. I wanted my clothes to serve as an expression, not a uniform. Back then, I felt the most confident when I dressed in unconventional clothing. I guess this is still the case.

The new aesthetic I adopted as a teacher required me to purchase quite a few items of clothing to round out my closet. As many teachers know, a shopping spree for clothing is often a luxury.

I found myself making regular trips to Old Navy in order to represent the style I wanted, and not break the bank. I grabbed inexpensive blazers and t-shirts off the rack, filling my shopping cart with items cheaply crafted in sweatshops located in Malaysia, China, and Bangladesh.

The companies that rely on the cheap, fast production in these countries make it possible for a consumer like me to fulfill my latest fashion desires. It is something I think about on a regular basis. During the school year, I stand before a classroom made up of the next generation of graphic designers. I encourage them to design for good causes and to make a positive impact on the world through their work. I communicate the importance of creating a sustainable practice, all while I am clothed in products that were manufactured for less than the cost of the Sharpie Fine Point pen that I hold in my hand. It is a paradox that leaves me feeling paralyzed by my consumer habits. And yet, I continue to find myself frequenting such stores as Old Navy, Target, and other fast fashion establishments on my days off.

Out of all my consumer habits, I am most voracious when it comes to the purchase of clothing. Because of this insatiable need, many of the items I buy are considered unsustainable. This becomes a problem of feeding into the cycle of fast fashion, which can be defined as "an approach to the design, creation, and marketing of clothing fashions that emphasizes making fashion trends quickly and cheaply available to consumers."<sup>97</sup> The solution is to simply buy less and wear the same pieces until they have worn out and need to be replaced. However, this is a concept that only a handful of consumers seem to live by. Wearing trendy new threads seems to be a mentality that begins when we are in adolescence: an insane, hectic time in our lives where acceptance through our outward garb can be paramount. We learn early on that in order to fit in with our peers, we must keep up with trending fashions.

97. Merriam-Webster. "Fast Fashion." Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Last modified 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/yuh7okd> Accessed 2020.

98. Thomas, Dina. 2019. *Fashionopolis: The Price of Fashion and the Future of Clothes*. New York: Penguin Random House.



74. H&amp;M storefront.

However, this concept of fast fashion, and the innumerable seasons that come along with it, seems to be a relatively new phenomenon. Gone are the days of inheriting a pair of Levi Strauss jeans.<sup>98</sup>

In a previous section, I discussed the neurological response a consumer's brain issues when they are shopping. Fast fashion perfectly feeds this neurological process. First, the clothing is incredibly cheap, which makes it easy to buy. Second, new deliveries to stores are frequent, which means

customers always have something new to look at and desire.<sup>99</sup>

The combination of scoring a great bargain and finding the perfect pair of shoes is almost addictive. Many of us are familiar with the ramifications of buying cheap products, as well as the inconvenience of their shoddy craftsmanship, but we have become hopelessly addicted to the process of scoring the best possible deal. Clothes are an essential part of the economy and easily the second largest consumer service, behind food.<sup>100</sup>

Finding your perfect clothing style is one aspect of being a consumer that I struggle with. I desire something new to replace something that doesn't reflect my style anymore. Clothing is telling of our personalities and a great way to express yourself. However, most of us undergo some kind of fashion personality change on a regular basis. I find myself becoming bored with my wardrobe quite often, and I feel the need to acquire new items to express myself. I enjoy those items for a time, but they always lose their glimmer after a few wash cycles.

Simply put, clothing today is not designed to last. As with computer software or a mobile device, the production of fast-fashion clothing is another example of planned obsolescence, and how companies control the consumer market by creating goods that will not last beyond a certain period of time. This is especially true of inexpensive clothing that is produced by companies like Zara, Forever 21, or H&M, to name a few.<sup>101</sup>

These threads are cheaply made from synthetic materials and are sold at low cost to keep a consumer coming back. Should that cute crop top you purchased for Friday night's party fall apart after one wash, you will most likely shrug and remember the low cost of the item. It's not

### THE COMBINATION OF SCORING A GREAT BARGAIN AND FINDING THE PERFECT PAIR OF SHOES IS ALMOST ADDICTIVE.

worth fighting over because most of these items are literal garbage. Fast fashion retailers are highly profitable because they provide the masses with trendy clothing that will not last more than one season. And speaking of seasons,

good luck keeping up with them. There are at least 52 "micro-seasons" throughout a calendar year that have been designed by retailers to keep shoppers coming back for more.<sup>102</sup> Because of the frequent turnover of trendy fashions in stores, consumers have the joy of always feeling like the looks they just purchased will be out of date by the time they have a chance to wear it more than once (this brings to mind the old saying about a new car being worthless the minute it is driven off the lot, which loses 15-20% of its value within its first year.<sup>103</sup>) Fast fashion is a radical method of retailing that has broken away from seasonal selling and puts out new inventory constantly throughout the year.<sup>104</sup>

The PR departments for clothing companies like Zara and Everlane would have you believe that they are making great strides to improve their "sustainability efforts." In a press release issued by Zara in 2019, the company pledged to only use "organic, sustainable, or recycled" cotton, linen and polyester by 2025.<sup>105</sup> Everlane is famous for touting a message of transparency when it comes to their production, which includes a list of the factories they employ posted on their website.<sup>106</sup> However, this is where Everlane falls short in its campaign. The company does not provide the names of any of the factories that produce their goods, alongside press photos of smiling employees and well-lit, exotic factories. Instead, each factory has been given a generalized name, associated with the goods that are produced at this location. For example: The Flats Factory, The Slingback Factory, and The Leather Bag Factory. When pressed by journalists about this rather opaque facade from a company that bases its campaigns on transparency, a PR representative simply stated that it had to do with protecting trade secrets.<sup>107</sup>

99. Bain, Marc, and Quartz. "The Neurological Pleasures of Fast Fashion." *The Atlantic*. March 15, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/y3x7jbtb>.

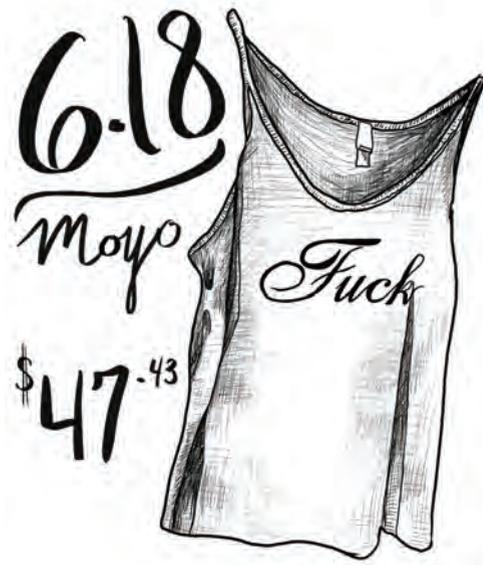
100. Cline, Elizabeth. *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion*. New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2013.

101. Zarroli, Jim. "In Trendy World of Fast Fashion, Styles Aren't Made to Last." *NPR*. March 11, 2013. <https://tinyurl.com/y5hm2w8q>.

102. *ibid.*

103. Cars Direct. "Why Does a New Car Lose Value After It's Driven Off the Lot?" March 11, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y3panmhc>. Accessed 2020.

104. Cline, Elizabeth. *Overdressed*, page 96.



This omission of information makes it rather hard to judge whether or not Everlane's commitment to their workers and sustainable message go beyond their marketing department.

As of 2019, Zara was the largest fast fashion retailer in the world, producing around 450 million garments a year and releasing approximately 500 new designs a week, or about 20,000 different styles a year.<sup>108</sup> With these numbers

in hand, one has to question the environmental impact the fashion industry is having on our planet. The current carbon footprint of the fashion industry is over eight percent of total global greenhouse gas emissions, larger than all international travel.<sup>109</sup> These statistics make me question the sincerity of the promise of sustainability from any fast fashion business.



75. Store displays at Old Navy.

76. Landfill made up almost entirely of cheap clothing.

There are loads of other reasons not to support retailers who fall into the fast fashion category. Much of the clothing contains hazardous chemicals, such as lead, pesticides, insecticides, formaldehyde, and flame retardants. Prolonged exposure to these chemicals can lead to a higher risk of heart attacks, high blood pressure, and strokes. Many of these companies also engage in the use of child labor.<sup>110</sup> Due to the fact that these companies primarily manufacture overseas, labor laws are not as stringent as they are in the United States. Large corporations can skirt these laws by exploiting laborers in unsightly working conditions for meager wages.

### CHEAP LABOR + CHEAP GOODS = A GLOBAL ISSUE.

I am a conscious consumer: I understand where my clothing comes from, and I continue to patronize companies that produce cheap goods at an affordable cost. It is not something I am proud of, and I find myself growing more irritated with this fashion industry that causes harm to the environment and its inhabitants. All for the sake of affording that perfect clothing style?

This is where the consuming populace pulls on a fashionable pair of blinders, striding through their fast fashion retailer of choice, while selecting armfuls of cheaply made garments. The problem is draped on racks and displayed throughout our country, to be snatched up and worn by eager, thrifty individuals with ease. Because so many of us engage in this transaction, does that make the human rights violations, cheap production costs, and lax labor laws easier for us to digest?

I find myself wandering over to oldnavy.gap.com again and scrolling through the endless pages of cheaply-made garments. I wonder what will be available in the fall – my favorite retail season. The familiar pang of guilt radiates through my index finger as I click “Add to Cart,” and I put it out of my mind for another day.

105. Kozlowski, Anika. “Fast Fashion’s “Sustainability” Endeavors Need to Be About More than Fabrics, Recycling.” *The Fashion Law*. August 14, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/y213spzf>.  
 106. Everlane. “Factories.” <https://www.everlane.com/factories> Accessed 2020.  
 107. The Fashion Law. “Radical Transparency? H&M and ZARA Might Actually Be More Transparent than Everlane.” *The Fashion Law*. October 27, 2016. <https://tinyurl.com/y3bgh3o6>.

108. Kozlowski, Anika. “Fast Fashion’s “Sustainability” Endeavors Need to Be About More than Fabrics, Recycling.” *The Fashion Law*. August 14, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/y213spzf>.  
 109. *ibid.*  
 110. Whitehead Loehr, Shannon. “5 Truths the Fast Fashion Industry Doesn’t Want You to Know.” *Huffington Post*. August 19, 2014. <https://tinyurl.com/y5lyyrm3>.

## SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED IKEA + THE CHEAP FURNITURE PHENOMENON

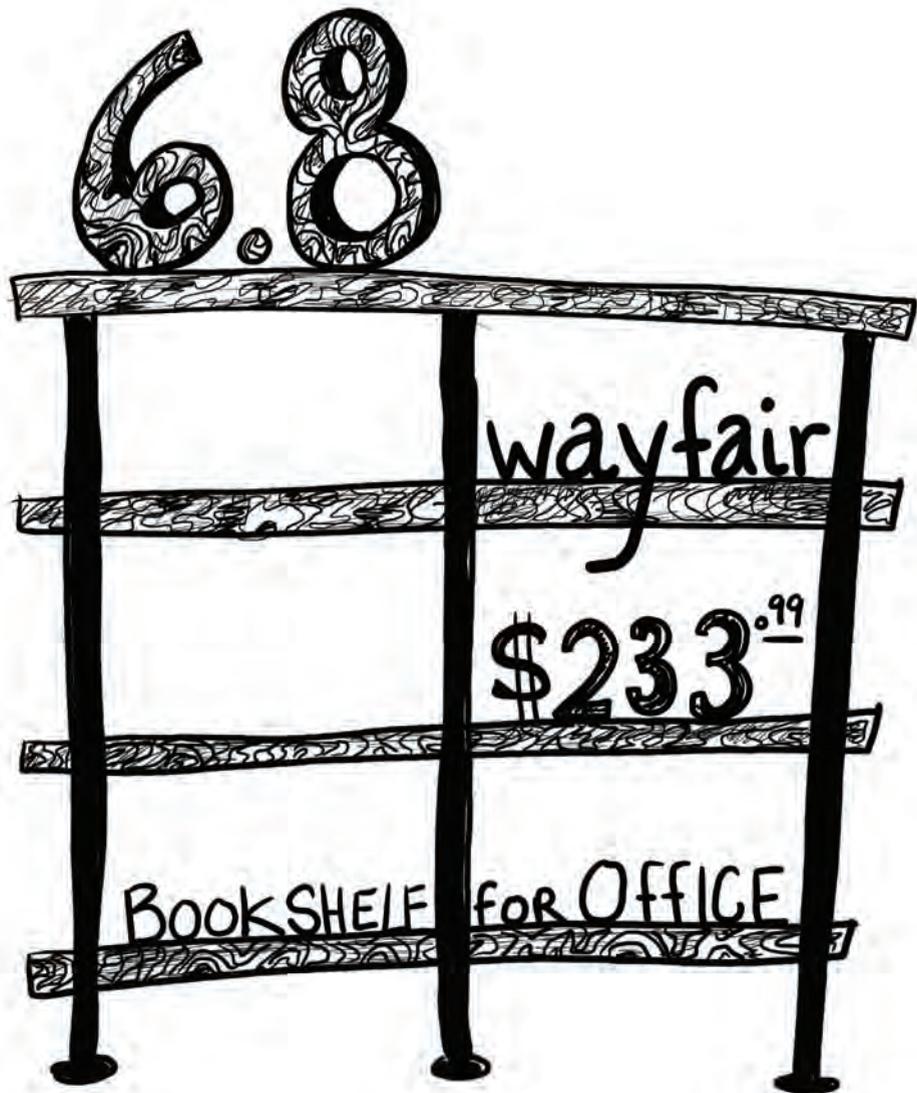


**“Humanity is acquiring all the right technology for all the wrong reasons.”**

— *R. Buckminster Fuller*

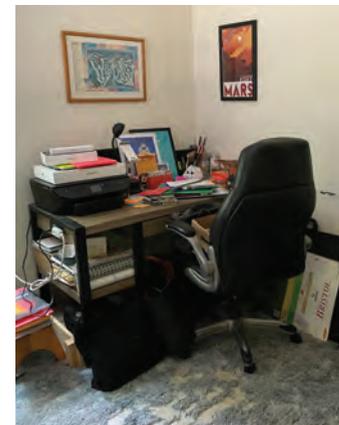
The first time I ever set foot in an IKEA store, I had an anxiety attack. I’m not quite sure what prompted such a dramatic response, but it’s an event in my life that has always made me question whether or not to shop with this retailer. I distinctly remember entering through the automatic doors in Portland, Oregon and how my entire body began to tense up. The feeling did not dissipate as we navigated through the elaborately decorated showroom, another aspect of the IKEA shopping experience I had not anticipated. It was making my anxiety mount as I inched deeper into the belly of the Swedish retail giant. I clutched my small golf pencil and rectangular checklist of items in my sweaty hands and was paralyzed with fear. There were just too many choices. I didn’t know how to respond. I had come without a plan, and I knew then and there that had definitely been a mistake. My partner at the time kept asking me about certain items: would I prefer these wooden dining chairs to metal ones? Should we consider buying a yard of fabric to drape over the second-hand couch? What about glassware? My mind was blank. I had no way of answering these questions of which I would normally have a thousand opinions. My throat closed up, due to the crushing grip of anxiety on my windpipe, and clenched ever tighter as the shopping trip continued.

Thankfully, this experience was the only time I ever had an anxiety attack at an IKEA store. I credit some of this anxiety as being situational, rather than just a reaction to the store’s one-way layout or enticingly displayed furnishings. However, it was a notable experience, given the fact that the purchase of goods from companies like IKEA churn up much anxiety in me in the present day.



I recently set aside some time to reorganize my workspace in the home office I share with my partner. My corner of the office has always been disastrously messy: a literal drop zone for teaching paperwork, projects to grade, hordes of art supplies, important financial documents, and an unyielding list of other crap not worth mentioning. Trying to locate anything in the massive pile of unorderly chaos could take anywhere from five to thirty minutes. Something needed to be done.

Over the course of a month, I spent a good chunk of time planning how to best convert my office space into a functional design of which I could be proud. I tirelessly trolled the online furniture stores I often frequent for the best deal on a bookshelf that could house most of my disorganized wares. My first stop was Wayfair, a site that contains thousands of economically priced items from which to choose.



I found a bookshelf I liked, but it was out of stock. I perused the other options but was not satisfied with the items I dredged up from their online catalog. I decided to move on. Next, I made my way to Overstock, a website I have never personally bought anything from but have heard nothing but good things about from friends. I was met with the same feeling of indecision at Overstock as I felt at Wayfair, and I could not decide upon a shelf that suited the aesthetic I wanted to achieve. I found myself sorting through at least four or five more online furniture retail sites, until I eventually went back to Wayfair and magically found a shelf that would suit my needs just fine. I use the term “magically” loosely, as I have a feeling I was exhausted by all the options and wanted to check this item off my list of remodeling tasks.

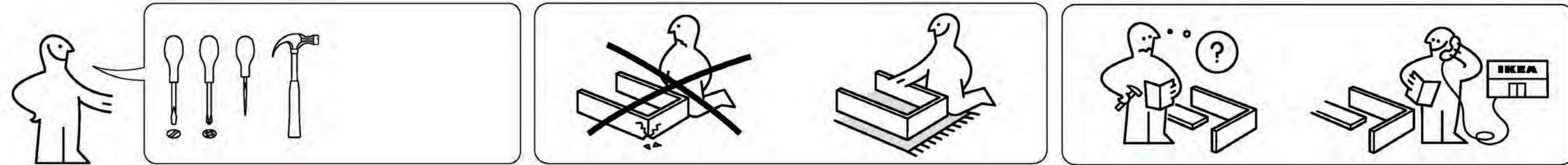


As I careened from website to website in my quest for the perfect bookshelf, I began to realize that all the choices were blending together. Many of the items were cheaply manufactured from materials like MDF (medium-density fiberboard) and all seemed to maintain the same mundane qualities that so much of prefabricated furniture offers to consumers. Since the 1980s, companies have been outsourcing the production and manufacturing of furniture to countries like China, in favor of cheaper labor costs and more lenient production regulations. By 2004, as much as 54% of our furniture was made overseas,<sup>111</sup> which caused many factories in the United States to close as they were unable to keep up with the competition.



77. The evolution of my home office redesign.

Like with fast fashion, it is hard to avoid buying furniture that is manufactured and sold at a lower cost. I have shopped in the past at antique or thrift stores when I have needed a piece of furniture for my home. However, in recent years, I have found that my taste in furniture is not represented among the offerings of local thrift shops or Goodwill. I would spend months checking back with these local haunts, hoping that perfect piece would appear. In terms of antiques, there are few instances in my life when my taste in furniture and my budget have ever aligned. I want things in my home to look a certain way, and I have reached a certain point in my life where I'm sick of living with furniture that I don't want. Because my tastes tend to be more modern, and my budget is usually pretty slim, I am often relegated to the prefabricated offerings of IKEA, Wayfair, or Target. Rarely, I treat myself by shopping at West Elm and Article. While they boast a more eco-friendly production of goods that are made with higher quality materials, the cost can be prohibitive.



78. Illustrated directions from IKEA Målm Dresser instruction manual.

I used to joke with my friends that one day our kids would look back at old photos of our first apartments and point out how we all owned the same furniture. I can still remember the prefab, furniture items that everyone seemed to have in their homes: a tall black, particle board bookshelf from Wal-Mart; an uncomfortable futon from Target whose metal rod you could always feel in either the middle of your back or thighs; and several pine Windsor chairs with loose chair legs on at least one of them. Back then, we were all broke, so paying for prefabricated, cheap furniture was overlooked. As we got older, furniture tastes improved, but the quality of the products was still just as cheap as the ones we owned in those first apartments.

Beyond its revolutionary, sleek modern furniture design that is affordable to the masses, IKEA was a huge proponent of flat-pack furniture in the 1950s.<sup>112</sup> Flat-pack furniture refers to items that are not assembled, but instead broken down and sold as kits that a consumer can assemble at home. This design made it easier for consumers to transport the furniture from the store, with the added bonus of avoiding expensive furniture delivery costs for such a transaction.

Though the creation of prefabricated furniture is a manufacturing process that involves machines and assembly lines, rather than efforts of skilled tradesmen and tradeswomen, the connection established between a consumer and the dresser they must assemble evokes some of the same craftsman qualities of furniture production. Some tests have shown that the actual act of assembling a piece of furniture can generate a much more favorable perception of that object than one that was purchased in a completed form.<sup>113</sup> Like with the Betty Crocker cake mixes of the 1950s, some consumers feel a sense of accomplishment when they are involved in the production process.

IKEA is often associated with hard-to-interpret assembly instructions for their furniture, as well as the demise of many a romantic relationship in the stressful time it takes to construct said furniture. Having assembled quite a few pieces of prefabricated furniture in my time, I would say that IKEA is not alone in this. All prefabricated furniture is a nightmare to put together. The headache of having to interpret the mass of small, plastic or metal fasteners and bolts, and where they go in relation to the sideboard that caught your eye at Target, can be more than even the most skilled of furniture assemblers can take. The hieroglyphics printed in the manual that pass for “instructions” aren’t much help either. And heaven help you if there’s a screw missing... Can I honestly say that I agree with the statement that “assembling a piece of prefabricated furniture generates a more favorable perception of that object?” No. I do not agree with the affinity a person might experience as they turn an Allen wrench into the head of a machine-stamped screw, while grinding it into a piece of MDF. This does not fill me with the notion of “a job well done.”

In my recent office remodel, the bookshelf I purchased came with a set of directions that forgot to note the important orientation and order of the wrought iron supports that made up the bookshelf’s frame. My partner and I were halfway through the assembly, when we realized we needed to swap one of the supports for the other. Two of the frame pieces possessed holes that would hold a crossed tie-rod to act as a stabilizer for the whole shelf. We stopped and deconstructed our hard work to correct our error. After that, we were well-versed in how this bookshelf should go together.

111. Holm Johnson, Sarah, and Steve Rivo. 2019. *Broken*. Television Series. United States: Netflix.112. Jansson-Boyd, Catherine. “How IKEA’s Shop Layout Influences What You Buy.” *BBC*. January 31, 2018. <https://tinyurl.com/yx8o6xwa>.113. *ibid.*



In present day furniture consumption, there doesn't seem to be a middle ground between prefabricated items and finely crafted artisan furniture, the latter being completely unaffordable for most households. If you're like me and you don't love antiques, you end up at IKEA or on Wayfair, searching for items that meet your tastes and your budget. Handmade furniture is art, and I have learned to admire it from a distance.

Though I continue to buy it, I am always wary of prefabricated furniture. It is cheap, and it breaks easily. You can never be sure if this mass-produced item will have holes that line up correctly or the whole thing won't collapse into itself if you look

at it funny. A piece of prefabricated furniture is not an heirloom, nor does it hold any value or appreciate with time. It acts to provide convenience for you as you go about your day. But what happens when prefabricated furniture of this kind occupies every home in the U.S.? Do these items become the relics of the twenty-first century, to one day crowd antique stores for future broke college kids or young couples to decorate their homes? This is almost surely not the case, as much of this mass-produced "fast-furniture" is not built to last. You'll notice that the "fine veneer" (or vinyl laminate) begins to fade or become unglued within the first year or two of purchase. The joints begin to loosen, and you have no way of fixing them, as you threw out the specialized apparatus that secured the foreign bolts along with the directions. Your piece of furniture will barely survive the moves you will most likely make in your life. With every trip on a U-Haul, it will become a little more battered. The lifespan of your newly acquired IKEA dresser is a truncated one, a choice that is very much intentional on the part of the manufacturer. Like many of the goods we surround ourselves with, prefabricated furniture has become another example of the familiar theme of planned obsolescence.

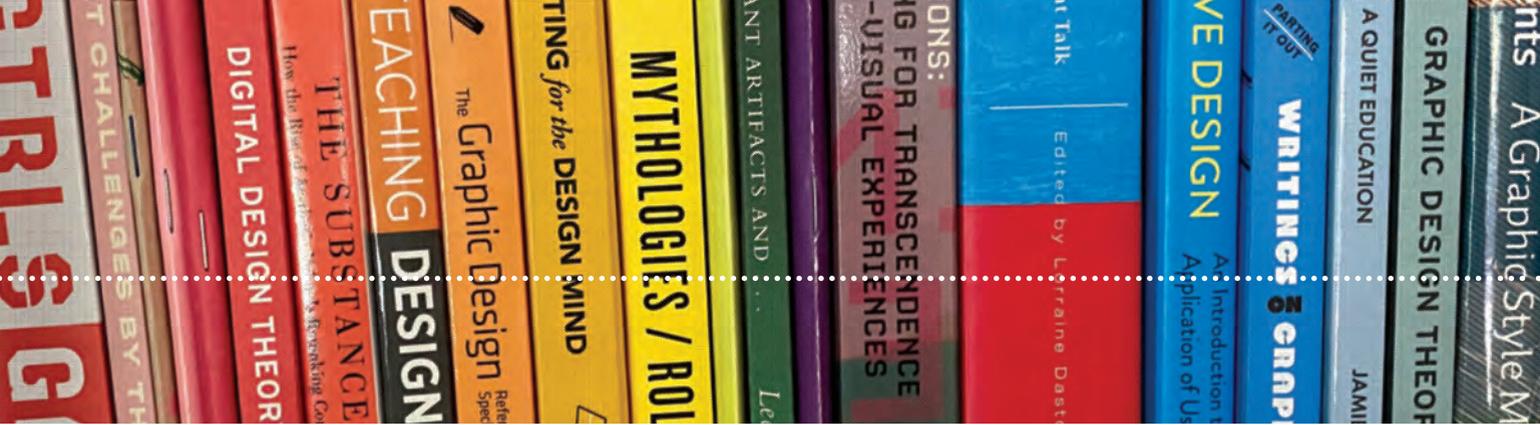
You may have heard your grandfather or your shop teacher (*do they still offer shop class?*) bemoan, "Nothing is made to last anymore." They're not entirely wrong. Well-made furniture is not as widely produced because most of the population can't or won't pay for it. And why would they, when they can just walk into IKEA or Wal-Mart and find a bookshelf that suits their immediate needs? Furniture is an investment. It requires care and maintenance, and it might cost you more money to transport later down the road. Plus, if you invest in that Shaker dining room set, you will most likely have to keep it around for some time, even if your tastes change.



**BUT WHAT HAPPENS WHEN PREFABRICATED FURNITURE OF THIS KIND OCCUPIES EVERY HOME IN THE U.S.?**

79. Vintage IKEA catalog, 1968.

When it comes to prefabricated furniture, style is not the only consideration that should influence a consumer's decision to bring an item into their home. Many of the products that fill IKEA and other cheap furniture retailers are made from materials that will not only break down quickly, but can be unsafe or even deadly. In the United States, organizations such as the Consumer Product Safety Commission (USCPSC, or CPSC) do well to try and protect consumers from dangerous products by issuing recalls when necessary. In one of the most famous and tragic cases of shoddy production, the IKEA Malmö dresser contributed to the deaths of three children between 2016-17, due to furniture tip-overs.<sup>114</sup> "As of 2020, the deaths of 10 children have been linked to IKEA dressers."<sup>115</sup> Tip-overs occur when a filled drawer is open and the dresser cannot sustain the weight, falling over and crushing any subjects in front of it. Many of these dressers are made from cheaper materials so they are not designed to counterbalance weight that is applied. In the Netflix documentary series *Broken*, families who have lost infants and young children to tip-overs are shown lobbying for more stringent standards of furniture manufacturing so this tragedy does not continue. IKEA's initial response to the claims was to provide a wall anchor kit with every dresser that is sold, should the customer request one. If installed properly, a wall anchor kit may work and can be instrumental in addressing the tip-over furniture concern.



However, according to a 2018 *Consumer Reports* article, “only about one quarter of Americans are anchoring any furniture.”<sup>116</sup> This comes out to about 27% of the consumer market, leaving 73% reporting they’ve never anchored a piece of furniture in their home. Early product manuals accompanying the Malmö dresser as far back as 2002 indicate that IKEA has known about the tip-over issue for quite some time. Within the manual, the company has no reservations about shirking this safety concern and making it the buyer’s responsibility to make the item safe in their home. In the safety section of a 2009 manual for the Malmö dresser, it states “**Serious or fatal crushing injuries can occur from tipping furniture. To help prevent tip-over: ALWAYS secure this furniture to the wall using tip-over restraints.**”<sup>117</sup> At the time, the wall anchor solution was not readily available or promoted to the IKEA customer.

Stating that consumers should practice discretion is a dangerous conversation that seems to dominate the world of commerce and the production of hazardous goods. While the CPSC website does well to keep up to date with the most recent product recalls, such as dressers that are prone to tip-overs,<sup>118</sup> we’re assuming that a consumer will have the foresight or capabilities to access this information before the time of purchase. I can honestly say I’ve never checked the CPSC’s registry of unsafe products before purchasing a piece of furniture. I know for a fact that my own cheaply constructed dresser cannot bear any weight applied to the top two open drawers and is a product that could readily cause a tip-over death.

The CPSC is restricted when it comes to reporting information about an industry’s lack of safety provisions. The Consumer Product Safety Act reveals that the CPSC is prohibited by law to inform the public of a dangerous product without first allowing the company to weigh in.<sup>119</sup> This is known as the Voluntary Standard. In the case of IKEA’s Malmö dresser, IKEA chose to first repair rather than recall the product that was responsible for infant deaths. This is where that handy wall anchor kit first appears. However, after another tip-over death occurred in 2016, IKEA agreed to a full recall of the Malmö dressers. The company reported 29 million Malmö dressers had been sold in the United States, and issued a statement, offering to buy back the hazardous product from consumers. As of July 2020, 17.3 million dressers have been recalled.<sup>120</sup>

While a recall exists to inform consumers of any company’s reported unsafe products, it can only be effective if it is widely publicized. Despite CPSC and IKEAs efforts to get the word out about the recall, millions of purchasers are still yet to return the Malmö dresser. A recall is not a perfect system, and it should not be the solution for retroactively repairing the damage that has been done. It’s like excusing an individual for shooting someone in the face and then blaming the victim for not realizing the shooter was standing in front of them with a loaded gun.

As I write this, I am sitting in my newly decorated office space. My computer is resting upon a simple desk I purchased from Amazon for less than \$200. I was absolutely shocked to find that it was actually made out of bonafide wood! What does that tell you about my consumer mentality? My bookshelf sits at my right, with neatly arranged items that used to be scattered in disarray. My design books are sorted by color and resting upon MDF shelves with a veneer that mimics the age and character of barnwood. It is not anchored to the wall. The only item in this space that might appreciate with time (other than my awesome library) is the wooden chair from Article that I carefully selected. I did not want a traditional, rolling desk chair. They’re ugly and cumbersome. On Article’s website, some witty marketing personnel wrote this about office chairs:

**“I don’t know who decided that office chairs have to be ugly. Just because they need to offer posture support and a get-down-to-business attitude doesn’t mean they need to look like they belong in an evil genius’ lair. No offense to evil geniuses.”**

I was blown away when I read this. I had always thought that an office chair needed to have four wheels, a lumbar support adjuster, and a confusing apparatus for adjusting the height of the chair (a system I have never been able to master.) For this new office space, I wasn’t about to dominate the aesthetic I had worked so hard to cultivate with a Hermann-Miller knock off or a brightly colored balance ball. No sir. For this space, it had to be simple, and it had to be beautiful. The total cost of the chair, bookshelf, and new desk all came out to be under \$600. I look at this number and think, “Wow, girl. That’s a hell of a deal you got. Good job!” But another part of me looks at this number and realizes that it’s far too low. A good writing desk that has similar proportions and materials made by a local craftsman would cost you \$3,000.<sup>121</sup> While this price would cover labor, materials, transportation, and craftsmanship that might prevent any injury to those who inhabit my home, it makes this item prohibitive for me and other people like me who are not in a position to spend this kind of money on a simple wooden writing desk with one drawer. While I would always prefer to support a local craftsman over a mass-produced item, the reality of this scenario is not feasible. I will simply have to make do with the truth that in order to fulfill this basic consumer need, I might have to shelve my concerns.

114. Holm Johnson, Sarah, and Steve Rivo. 2019. *Broken*. Television Series. United States: Netflix.

115. Cain, Aine. “3 Years After IKEA Recalled 17.3 Million Dressers, A Lawyer Who Represented The Parents of Victims Say More Toddlers Will Lose Their Lives to Furniture Tip-Overs.” *Business Insider*. July 22, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y4x4ucvv>.

116. Rabkin Peachman, Rachel. “Furniture Anchors Not an Easy Fix, as Child Tip-over Deaths Persist.” *Consumer Reports*. November 5, 2018. <https://tinyurl.com/y36tdzbx>.

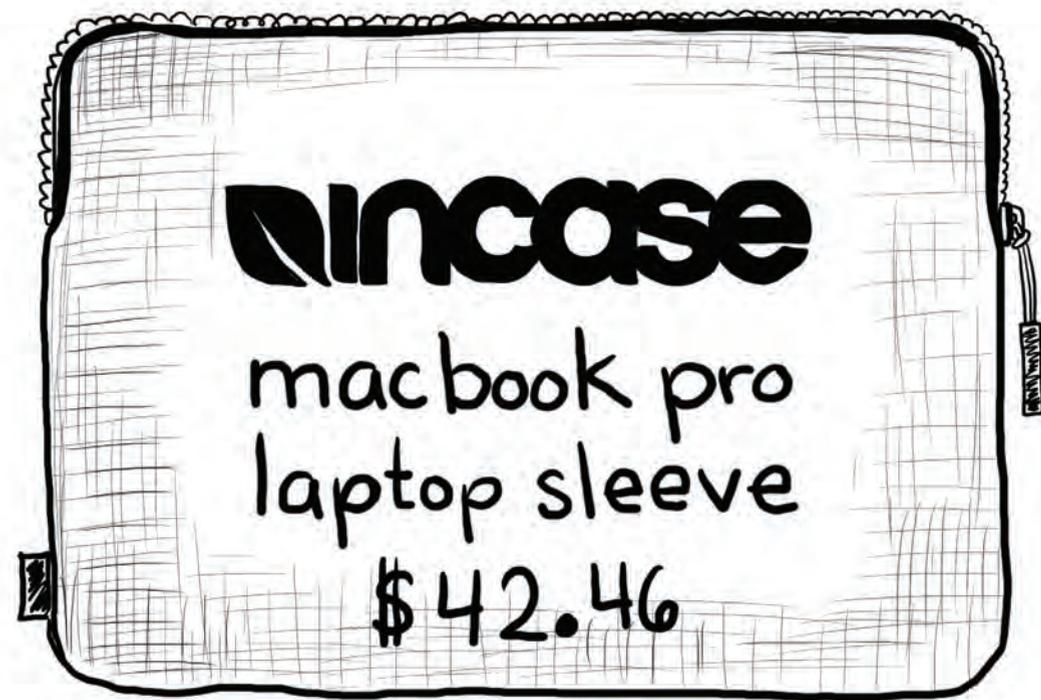
117. IKEA. 2009. Malmö 4-drawer chest Assembly Manual. IKEA of Sweden.

118. United States Consumer Product Safety Commission. “Recall list.” CPSC. Last modified 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/kc9mva7>.

119. ———. 2001. Consumer Product Safety Act. *CPSC*, Public Law 92-573; 86 Stat. 1207, Section 6.

120. Cain, Aine. “3 Years After IKEA Recalled 17.3 Million Dressers...”  
121. Pompanoosuc Mills. “Arlington Table Desk.” Last modified 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y5wfpccs>.

## FULFILLMENT SERVICES: ONLINE SHOPPING



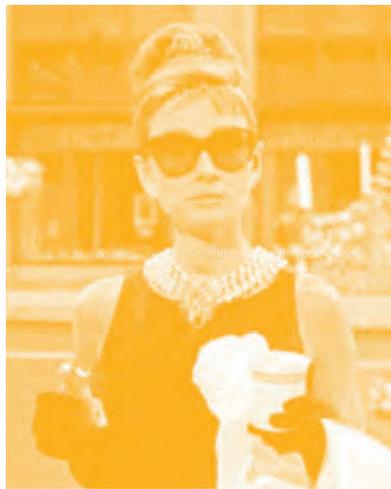
\* Case could not be delivered to my address. I eventually cancelled the order. Incase has crappy customer service...

**“My favorite emails are the ones that tell me my order has shipped.”**

— *Author Unknown*

There's nothing more liberating than the reckless abandon one can feel when online shopping. The internet is the wild west of our time, and the rules of civilization seem more like guidelines to a consumer than actual laws. With a simple graze of an electronic keystroke, you may enter into the rich cavern of Louis Vuitton, Dolce and Gabbana, or Chanel, stores where you would normally need an appointment to be granted an entrance. On a lazy Sunday morning, while sipping your \$3.50 latté from Dunkin' Donuts, you can marvel at this season's take on the modern garden party aesthetic from retailers such as CB2 and Design Within Reach. As you peruse the fine furnishings, you can dream of the day you escape your third floor apartment that only offers an outside space behind a communal dumpster.

Online shopping of the twenty-first century has transformed the modern consumer into Holly Golightly, standing on the other side of a plate glass window at Tiffany's, drooling over unattainable diamonds while favoring a bear claw pastry and black coffee. However, in this scenario, the double-paned glass is the welcoming glow of our computers, encouraging us to dream big as we mindlessly scroll for hours through the endless lists of bright, shining goods. Because of the effortless access the internet provides a consumer to these exceptional trinkets, we can dream bigger than ever before. In 2018, an estimated 1.8 billion people worldwide purchased goods online. In the same year, global e-retail sales amounted to \$2.8 trillion.<sup>122</sup> Even if you have no intention of purchasing an item, 63% of the "shopping process" begins online, and not in a brick-and-mortar store.<sup>123</sup> This consumer behavior tactic is known as the "pre-shop," in which a customer can take their time to learn more about certain merchandise in the comfort of their own home, or from their mobile device. Paco Underhill describes the pre-shop method as "the retail equivalent of a blind date. Nothing heavy goes on here, just a lot



80. Holly Golightly, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, 1961.

of flirting and data gathering."<sup>124</sup> Being that we are so wired in to the electronic devices that surround us at all times, online shopping can also become an act of killing time or fulfilling antisocial tendencies, an act that will replace having to engage with anyone while we scroll through merchandise with our thumbs between subway stops.

Purchasing items such as \$5,000 cocktail carts or a set of four \$90 agate coasters has nothing to do with the rush consumers seek when they troll the internet for goods, for one simple reason: the invention of the online shopping cart and an act of reckless abandon that comes with it.

The virtual shopping cart allows a consumer to set aside an item for later while they continue shopping. Most of us are familiar with this format, and most of us have been guilty at one time or another of deviating from a website without completing a purchase. This passive act is known to online retailers and marketing strategists as "shopping cart abandonment," and it is the plague of their online existence.

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Nothing heavy goes on here, just a lot

## JUST A FRIENDLY REMINDER THAT YOU STILL HAVE A FEW THINGS IN YOUR SHOPPING BAG

(Great choices, by the way.)

SEE WHAT'S IN THERE



IN YOUR BAG:  
Flannel Trapeze  
Shirt in  
Overcast Plaid

81. Madewell direct response marketing email.

A constant cause for implementing consumer outreach tactics, shopping cart abandonment signals to a retailer that a consumer was interested in a product but for some reason changed their mind. The primary reason for most shopping cart abandonment comes down to shipping costs, though expired discount codes, shipping time, and payment issues are also factored into this form of consumer behavior. Analytics reveal that on average 63% of customers will walk away from near-complete purchases due to the amount it costs for a product to be delivered to their doorstep.<sup>125</sup> Retailers will then follow up with cart abandonment offenders to try and secure a sale. In the case of Target, you might receive multiple emails over the course of a few days to remind you of some items you might have "left behind." As with many spam emails, the verbiage is paramount to encouraging a customer to return to the site to acquire their items. After returning to their site, you will find your items sitting pretty in the ghost cart you abandoned, even if you haven't created an account with that particular retailer. Familiar tones will suggest a personal connection between you and the automated response that sits in your inbox, as if your purchase means so much to them. After all, your business means the world to them. Companies personally tailor an email blast that will include information about your selected items, including average customer ratings, highlighting one product from your cart, and sometimes providing a discount code to clinch the deal.<sup>126</sup>

My shopping cart abandonment statistics would terrify any marketer. When I log any amount of screentime on my laptop, you will find at least three or four open tabs of online retailers I frequent. Upon further investigation of these tabs, you would discover shopping carts containing one or two items per site.

122. Mohsin, Maryam. "10 Online Shopping Statistics You Need to Know in 2020." *Oberlo*. March 23, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/ydckka4h>.

123. *ibid.*

124. Underhill, Paco. *Why We Buy*, page 236.

125. Mohsin, Maryam.  
126. Pienaar, Adii. "Creative Abandoned Cart Recover Email Strategies Your Competitors Aren't Using." *Big Commerce*. Website Updated 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y5ga25km>.

# A BANDON

laura m. young



And more often than not, I have no intention of buying anything from these websites. I'm the type of online shopper who keeps large businesses up at night. As I take an eternity to commit to the purchase of an item, I will typically only pull the trigger if there is some kind of sale involved. Sometimes, if my abandoned shopping cart has been sitting dormant for too long, a nice little 30% off coupon will float my way from the perspiring retailer.

Though I might feel like I am sticking it to the man, businesses rely on how often I frequent their websites, even if I've abandoned a hundred shopping carts. This act of saving an item for later gives them valuable data on my taste preferences, which they may use to target my interests for potential future purchases. Roughly 45% of shoppers are more likely to shop at a store that offers personalized recommendations.<sup>127</sup> This can be achieved by using a data gathering technique known as Market Basket Analysis, in which retailers learn about their consumers spending habits by highlighting purchasing patterns, and they will base suggestions for other similar products off those items.<sup>128</sup>

One of the most ominous email subject lines I have encountered came from Wayfair, trumpeting a cheery, "We noticed you noticing us!" This statement was about as unwelcoming to me as Ted Bundy asking me to help him load something into his car. However, this is the price you pay for online shopping: data mining, targeted advertising, and chirpy spam emails.

I can remember the early days of online shopping and how unreliable it was. I recently dredged up a memory of purchasing a colorful floor lamp from Bed Bath and Beyond in 2005 meant to outfit my dorm room that fall. This was one of the first items I had ever purchased online, and I was excited. As I patiently waited for my lamp to arrive, I dreamed about how cool it would look in my dorm room, and how it would be a glowing reminder of my independence.



The weeks went by with no sign of the lamp's arrival. I can't quite remember, but I'm almost positive this was before the days of regular tracking methods for purchases. Finally, after some prolonged period of time, I decided to reach out to Bed, Bath and Beyond. I vaguely remember having a conversation with an unhelpful customer service rep, but in the end, the lamp never arrived, and I was never reimbursed for my money. My 33 year-old self is appalled and embarrassed by this story. This savvy online shopper, who can now hunt down the best deal depending on the season or day of the week, can't even imagine not getting reimbursed for a lost item.

In my experience, Amazon was a turning point for online shopping. By the 2010s, the promise of two-day delivery with no shipping fees became the norm and other online retailers struggled to compete. Online shoppers have become accustomed to the precedent that Amazon set for the online marketplace. As a result, I would balk at the idea of paying for shipping and do my best to avoid it. This was my mentality up until very recently. However, over the past few months, I have tried harder to support more local and independent retailers who would otherwise pay for shipping costs out of pocket. One thing to keep in mind is just because a large company like Amazon can offer this perk doesn't mean it's wrong that a smaller company has to ask its customers to pay for shipping.

While writing this section, I have purchased the following items online: a new laptop computer, Apple Pencil replacement nibs, and a bookshelf. While these were all sensible purchases and not a \$700 pair of Louboutin heels, this does not account for the amount of time that I have spent flitting between websites adding items to shopping carts that I will choose to abandon and never think about again. Setting aside the very real possibility of a full-blown shopping addiction, this deviation from staying on task and accessing the spoils of the online marketplace is exactly what intrigues me about it: the ability to "window shop" from the comfort of your personal computer. Location, status, or overzealous and disarming chit chat from eager sales associates are all ruled out when you venture onto an online shopping trip. Plus, you don't have to put on pants if you don't want to, which is always a major perk in my book.

# YOUR SHOPPING CART

127. Ecommerce News. "Why Data Mining is the Future of Online Retailing." *Payment Solution Pros*. Last modified 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y2m7how8>.

128. Albion Research Ltd. "Data Mining: Market Basket Analysis." *Albion Research Ltd*. Last modified 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y3uv4fr>.



# SECTION IV: Consumption + Inequality

Minimalism, Hoarding, + Everything In Between ..... **134**  
 Assumptions + Consumption ..... **144**

82. Jackie Segal from Lauren Greenfield's documentary, *The Queen of Versailles*.

## MINIMALISM, HOARDING + EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN

### APPLE VS. HOARDERS – SOCIAL INEQUALITY THROUGH DESIRE



“How long before we  
are convinced that hands,  
arms, legs, and appendages  
are just bothersome?”

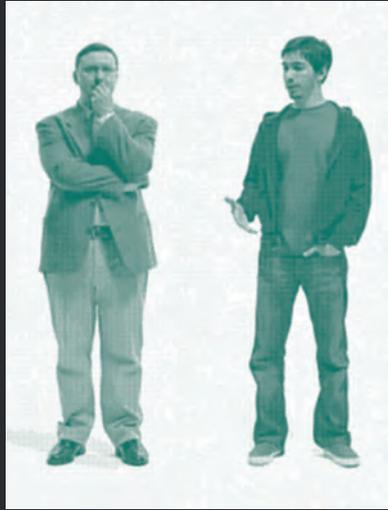
— *Ian Svenonious*

“All Power to the Pack Rats!”

OVER THE COURSE OF THE PAST YEAR, I HAVE  
PURCHASED FOUR NEW APPLE PRODUCTS.  
THEY ARE AS FOLLOWS:

- iPad Pro (11")
- Apple Pencil, second generation
- iPhone 11
- MacBook Pro (16")

All items on this list were purchased in order to replace earlier iterations of these devices. In the case of the first two items, I owned their former versions for less than a year. I hated the first generation of the Apple Pencil, and my younger brother was willing to buy my “old” iPad from me so he could practice digital illustration. It all worked out well. Items three and four were purchased to replace the much older Apple products I owned, and I was happy to do so. Now, I sit surrounded by a sleek collection of expensive electronics that all match, tastefully finished in the same Apple-patented Space Gray patina.



The first computer I ever used was a Macintosh. I grew up playing around on my father's Macintosh 128K, which was produced in 1984. As a toddler, I pounded on the keys with no inkling as to what a computer was or how prevalent a role it would play in my life someday. Computers always confused me, and I didn't really spend much time using them until I had to take a computer literacy course in elementary school. In this course, I learned how to type and navigate basic computer functions and that was about it. I learned all of this on a Macintosh computer.

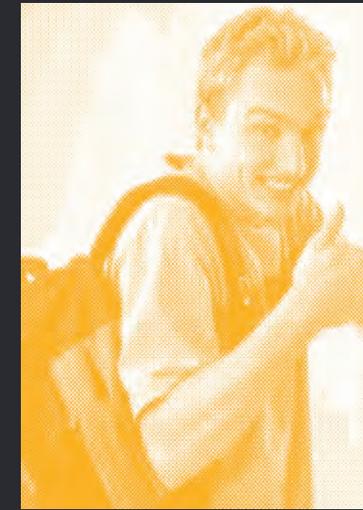
From that point on, my consumer behavior around technology was dictated by my preference for Macintosh (Apple) products. This kind

of favoritism happened organically, as I was more comfortable with Apple products. I have never owned an Android phone. I never used an MP3 player that I couldn't sync with iTunes, and with the exception of one crummy Dell (PC) laptop in college, I have always clacked away on a MacBook Pro. I never really felt any strong animosity or prejudice towards PC products. I just didn't have any experience with them, and I wasn't interested in purchasing them for my own electronic usage.

### YOU ARE PROBABLY FAMILIAR WITH THIS ICONIC PHRASE:

#### "I'M A MAC... AND I'M A PC."

In 2006, Apple debuted its *Get A Mac* campaign,<sup>129</sup> in which both computing universes were brought to life by actors whose character development would help represent the rival tech groups. The campaign was created by Apple's longtime ad agency partners at TBWA and remains one of the most popular and recognizable ad storylines of the twenty-first century. In the fiscal year of the campaign's debut, Apple saw a 39% increase in sales.<sup>130</sup> Mac, played by Justin Long (*Waiting*), is meant to represent the youthfulness of Apple with his cool, laid-back attitude, hoodie sweatshirt, and jeans. Mac could also be interpreted as representing the future of technology and the demographic of the labor force that tech companies would seek out over the next fourteen years. For PC, we have a more strait-laced John Hodgeman (*The Daily Show*), whose less-youthful demeanor and attire reminds one



of a middle manager employed by some unhip industry, like insurance or accounting. Both personalities play off one another to develop a banter that works to help "bolster the Mac's image among consumers and businesses and legitimized its competition with the PC..."<sup>131</sup>

This marketing campaign did something for Apple that is really notable. It convinced us that Macs were youthful and desirable, and that PC's were old and clunky. However, one could argue that an earlier PC marketing campaign was equally as successful as Apple's when it came to targeting a younger demographic. In the early 2000s, Dell launched its *Dude, You're Getting a Dell* campaign, created by DDB of Chicago.<sup>132</sup>

The ad starred Steven, a surfer/ burnout kid whose catchphrase became one of the most recognizable slogans in the history of advertising in the twenty-first century. While Mac marketed more towards the affluent twenty-somethings of 2006, Dell cornered the market for highschool age students, who were likely to be first-time computer buyers as they ventured off to college. "(When the campaign was launched,) an incredible 78 percent of American teens had computers and Internet access in their homes. Because many of these computers were purchased by parents, Dell's campaign had to simultaneously target teens and parents. Steven, played by actor Benjamin Curtis, who was 21 in 2001, was himself a representative of the lucrative young-adult demographic. In the *Dude, You're Getting a Dell* television commercials, Steven spoke most directly to parents who were purchasing computers for their high-school and college-age kids." As a result, by 2003, Dell's annual revenue increased from \$31.2 billion in 2001 (pre-"Dude" campaign) to \$50 billion.<sup>133</sup> While this campaign was successful for a time, Dell eventually decided to move on from Stoner Steve and slowly phased him out in favor of fictional interns in its ads.<sup>134</sup>

Unlike the "Dell Dude" approach, the Apple campaign was more about creating a lifestyle through the tech products you own, rather than a one-time purchase. The *Get a Mac* campaign was the beginning of Steve Job's vision for cultivating a narrative about the Apple consumer. One could also argue that, with the help of Apple, electronics take on a life of their own and tell a story about the person

83. *Get a Mac* campaign with Justin Long and John Hodgeman.

84. *Dude You're Getting a Dell* spokesman, Steve.

129. Dormehl, Luke. "Today in Apple History: Apple's 'Get a Mac' Campaign Comes to an End." *Cult of Mac*. May 21, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y5bcg817>.

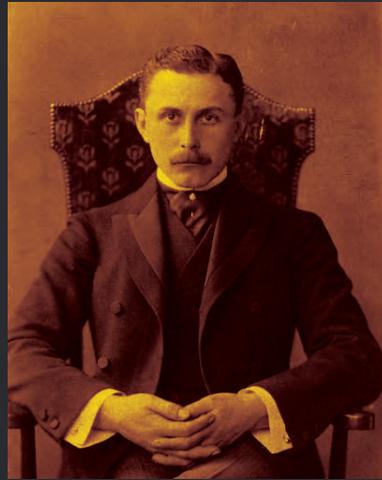
130. Rhoads, Kelton. 2007. "Get-A-Mac Campaign Analysis." *Working Psychology*. <https://tinyurl.com/39f89s>.

131. Snyder Bulik, Beth. "Yes, They Do Like Them Apples (Macs, that is)." *AdAge*. July 31, 2006. <https://tinyurl.com/ywqtaxe>.

132. Rossen, Jake. "The Highs and Lows of the Dell Dude." *Mental Floss*. October 6, 2017. <https://tinyurl.com/y2gx572g>.

133. Marketing Campaign Case Studies. "Dude, You're Getting a Dell Campaign." *Marketing Campaign Case Studies*. July 2, 2008. <https://tinyurl.com/y2pxxba>.

134. *ibid.*



who owns them. In doing so, Apple has packaged and marketed products geared towards the trend setters, the youthful, and most importantly, the minimalists.

Let's go back to my personal mission to ensure that Apple meets its sales quota for this fiscal year. Ahh, the unboxing of a new Apple product. Is there anything greater in the whole wide world than the experience of unwrapping your much anticipated new Apple device? The box is like no other box you've ever seen. The matte finish is soft and displays a photo of the product inside. When you remove the lid, every step of how you will interact with your new device has been

considered. There is no need for yanking, pulling, or even scissors. You simply have to gently pull on a delicate piece of plastic and white sliver of cardboard to release the device and its accessories from their enclosures. The tactile experience is like an act of meditation, one that leaves you calm despite your excitement to begin using your new electronic device. And then of course, the product itself is a breathtaking work of minimal elegance.

Ornamentation by today's standards is considered clutter. In Adolf Loos' 1913 essay "Ornament & Crime," he discusses how a minimalist design approach is the more desirable aesthetic. In his essay, Loos reasons that ornamentation is distracting, expensive, and represents a world that is no longer relevant. I don't know if Steve Jobs ever read "Ornament & Crime," but if he did, this particular excerpt might have stood out to him when considering the direction of his design philosophy. "Lack of ornament is a sign of spiritual strength. Modern man uses the ornaments of earlier and foreign cultures as he thinks fit. He concentrates his own powers of invention on other things."<sup>135</sup> In his essay, Loos encourages society to shirk off the velvet capes of the past, and focus on translating work through subtle designs that inspire, but not dominate, individual and collective creativity. We can clearly note from Apple's design history when ornamentation was cast aside in favor of a more minimalistic approach that Loos would have delighted in. If alive today, I bet Loos would be an avid Apple fan. In 1998, Apple released the iMac G3 desktop computer.<sup>136</sup> This was the first computer line released under Steve Jobs since his return to Apple, and it is literally a bright spot in Apple's neutral history. Apple fans now had several brightly colored desktops to

85. Adolf Loos.  
86. Steve Jobs.



choose from, such as Strawberry, Blueberry, and my personal favorite, Tangerine. The vibrant design of the G3 can be credited to Sir Jonathan "Jony" Ive.<sup>137</sup> The dazzlingly different personal computer line was the object of much fascination for my generation. My twelve year-old self was instantly infatuated with the colorful computer line, and I dreamed of owning one. **Side note: Around this time, I included the iMac G3 computer in a collage I made for a friend's birthday. It was so cool.**

With the exception of the iMac G3, most of the Apple product design legacy has featured a sleek, minimalist design that sadly does not offer many bright colors. There have been few

instances of colorful electronics in Apple's history, including the iPhone 5C, the iPod Nano and Shuffle, the Apple Watch, and the iPhone 11. The 16" MacBook Pro that this thesis has been composed on is quite different from many of its aforementioned predecessors. The design is compact, sleek, and other than the mirrored logo on its front, contains zero ornamentation. The lack of ornamentation is one that makes Apple products so desirable to its fans. It attracts a range of consumers who desire a minimal design scheme in their electronics, and they will continue to purchase their products to represent their dedication to the Apple philosophy. As Ian Svenonius wrote in his essay, "All Power to the Pack Rats!": "The Apple proposition is a sixties futurist-Zen minimalist throwback, lifted from Scandinavian designers like Panton and Saarinen, whose Nordic functionalism was influenced by modernist movements like De Stijl and the Bauhaus."<sup>138</sup>

It would be impossible to discuss Apple without mentioning the exorbitant cost of their products. Apple electronics are notoriously expensive, which can make their products unattainable to lower income groups. While Apple does offer discounts to students and educational institutions, the shocking price tag is inhibiting to many consumers who will seek out cheaper PC products. The minimalist design that Apple has touted over the years has now been copied by many of their competitors, but featured at a lower cost. Electronic designers have recognized Apple's success and have worked to uphold the same minimal design scheme, with the hope that their products will also appeal to tech consumers.

135. Loos, Adolf, and Adolf Opel. 1964. *Ornament and Crime* from Essay in Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture. Cambridge, MA.  
136. Grabham, Dan. "20 Years of the iMac: Looking Back at Apple's Legendary iMac G3". *Pocket-lint*. August, 2018. <https://tinyurl.com/y7zdossd>.  
137. *ibid.*  
138. Svenonius, Ivan. 2015. *All Power to the Pack Rats*.  
139. *ibid.*



It would not be far off to suggest that minimal designs in technology, architecture, clothing, and automobiles present the facade of affluence about the consumer who possesses these products. For example, a home outfitted with a mid-century modern design aesthetic might provoke this assumption in those who visit it, as opposed to one that is cluttered and disorderly with no clear design aesthetic to note. The perceptions about one's economic class that we can gather from one's aesthetic choices becomes problematic in a world that values minimalism and sees it as the desired aesthetic.

"The Apple ideology is sleek and clean," wrote Svenonius. "It proposes a futuristic lifestyle

without attachments or clutter, where mankind is free to chase down every desire, creative and otherwise, free of the 'fuzz' of possessions."<sup>139</sup> On the opposite end of this design aesthetic spectrum, we have *Hoarders*. The hit 2009 reality show featured on cable network A&E depicts individuals who have allowed their possessions to destroy their lives. On screen, the home of a hoarder is usually depicted as filthy and vermin-infested, possessing towering boxes filled with items resulting from impulse shopping sprees. Many of the owners of these homes, or hoarders, appear to be of a lower socioeconomic class, which sets a dangerous precedent of prejudice against lower-wage earners. Many are elderly, and many suffer from undiagnosed emotional disorders or mental trauma, which indicate even more problematic and troubling representations of this population. *Hoarders* seems to want us to believe that only poor, crazy people would allow their homes to be filled to the brim with useless detritus. Their solution is to hire an organization consultant to come in and force the individual to deal with the spoils of their excessive spending, or "the hoard."

In the 2012 documentary, *The Queen of Versailles*, by filmmaker and photographer, Lauren Greenfield, we get to see how the other half lives. When the film opens, billionaire couple David and Jackie Segal are in the midst of building their 90,000-square-foot dream home in Orlando, Florida, which they affectionately refer to as Versailles. The finished home will possess a bowling alley, 10 kitchens, and a health spa. The couple's source of wealth comes from David Segal's success as the founder of the timeshare company, Westgate Resorts. The documentary follows the couple's journey as Segal's company is battered by the 2008 housing crisis, which forces the company to lay off



thousands of employees while facing economic ruin.<sup>140</sup> Throughout the documentary, we get to see how excess is represented by the billionaire class. While Ms. Segal is shown on camera working at a donation center she has opened in the area to help lower income groups, we also get an inside look at her warehouse, where she has stored items to outfit their new home. The storeroom is vast and full of many expensive items, including a collection of Faberge eggs. We also have the pleasure of coming along on Ms. Segal's holiday shopping trip to Walmart. Flanked by three members of the Segal's domestic staff, all of whom have shopping carts, she pulls items from shelves in rapid succession, filling at least six shopping carts to the brim with presents for her children. When

we return to the Segals' home, despite finding a garage full of unused children's bicycles, Segal purchased a bicycle for each of her children on this recent shopping trip, to add to the collection. What follows is a dismal look at Christmas morning. The children are inundated with hundreds of presents, all of which they open with no reaction, at a pace that is reminiscent of an assembly-line worker.

The message that *Hoarders* and *The Queen of Versailles* seem to send is that excess is never good, but it is viewed less disparagingly if you are wealthy. The interesting thing about the Segal family is, when they began to fall subject to economic ruin and lay off several housekeepers, we see their elaborate home fill up with detritus worthy of a *Hoarders* episode. Dirty paper plates, towers of clothing and toys, and an ample supply of dog feces start to litter the previously pristine mansion. Both the show and the documentary are good examples of how our perception of someone can be dictated by their possessions. Though Jackie and David Segal may not be considered hoarders, their level of excessive spending is one I find just as hard to digest as the mass of items pulled out of a double-wide trailer on *Hoarders*.

It is arguable we should practice this same caution of perception when it comes to the minimal facade of Apple products and the association we make with their customers. From personal experience, I did not part with my last MacBook Pro until it was nearly six years old, and I could afford the cost of a new one. Despite my preference for Mac products, I by no means fall into the category of an affluent Apple consumer.

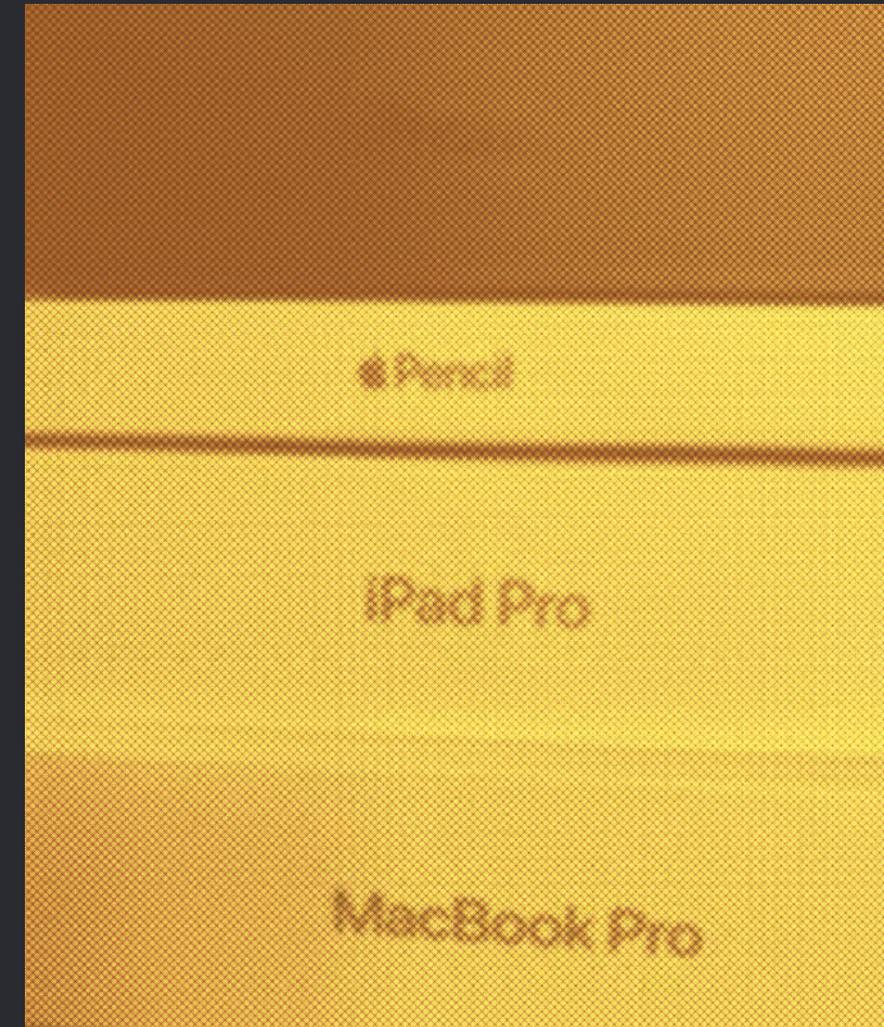
<sup>87</sup>. Jackie and David Segal of *The Queen of Versailles*.  
<sup>88</sup>. David Woods from *Hoarders*.

140. Nocera, Joe. "House of Cards." *The New York Times*. June 21, 2012. <https://tinyurl.com/y6oz8vur>.

At the onset of this chapter, I listed off all my Apple products like it was nothing, but each one of those purchases took months of saving and planning before I took the plunge to complete the online purchase. When I began teaching college students, I would feel a sting of embarrassment every time I had to haul out my 'ancient' Mac, acutely aware that most of my students had brand new laptops that didn't sound like a Buick going through a garbage disposal when they tried to run Adobe Premiere. I worried that my students would think less of me, because I could not afford the same laptops they had or the fashionable wireless headphones that also seem to be a status symbol. Why any of this should matter to me is a mystery. However, it would enter my mind as I lectured in front of the students, surrounded by gleaming Apple electronics from all corners of the classroom.

It is indeed a dangerous precedent to associate minimalism with wealth, and ornamentation or excess with poverty. As a species, we tend to note the materials that belong to others and make assumptions or judgment calls about their expected income bracket. It is still very interesting to me that we have reached the point in our consumer evolution that opulence and ornamentation is seen as tacky or lower class. However, there are plenty of examples of traditional minimalists who have chosen to live a life that does not include the flouting of monetary gain. What we can learn from these individuals is that our possessions do not represent who we are spiritually or emotionally.

As consumers, we need to stop judging one another's value from the items we choose to spend money on. These items in no way shape or form speak of the individuals who own them, and should not solidify their place in the world.



## ASSUMPTIONS + CONSUMPTION

### CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION + THE MYTHOLOGIES THAT SURROUND OUR IMPRESSIONS OF OTHERS



89. Vintage Prada print advertisement.

**“All sighted human beings use visual signs to communicate.”**

— *Steven Skaggs,*  
*Visual Design Semiotic Primer*

The idyllic narrative we derive from consumer behavior in the twenty-first century is the desire to be seen at a high status within society through the goods we purchase. The standards we have constructed for our society have been transcribed into a tome of mythology, passed down from one generation to the next, through advertising and commercialism. These messages advise the next group of consumers to assess the value of character and status from the objects and drappings we present to the world. We can identify these myths and their influences in clothing, household products, luxury handbags, and many other items that we interact with on a daily basis. We use impressions of an outward influence to assess presidents and their wives. Jackie Kennedy and Michelle Obama both represented very different models of what a First Lady should wear when representing the country, and what the price tag of an outfit worn boarding Air-Force One can say about the individual to the public. At the grocery store, we take into account what the purchase of a more expensive brand of almond milk might say about us versus its cheaper, off-brand counterpart.

For the average consumer, it's this mythology that has written the cannon, dictating what brands we need to support in order to be viewed as successful by our society. Like with Greek or Norse mythology, we peons bow down to the godlike figures who inspire us (brands and labels) and ask to be worthy of their influence. We craft elaborate narratives about celebrities we've never met, who wear show-stopping outfits we could never afford, on red carpets our discounted shoes will never travel. We pretend all of these outward influences matter or somehow determine our worth, and we continue to pen the mythology that brands say something about who we are as people. Miuccia Prada, the heir to her family's luxury line, once said this about luxury products; "I think it's horrible, this judgement based on money. It's all an illusion that you look better because you have a symbol of luxury. Really, it doesn't bring you anything. It's so banal."<sup>141</sup>

In Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, the French essayist, theorist, and semiotician discussed how the operations of mass culture are analogous to mythology.<sup>142</sup> Barthes discusses post-WWII consumerism, and the rise of the hyper-commodification of goods in France through the theory of semiotics. Stated in the most basic of terms, semiotics is the study of signs and symbols, and how we represent and interpret them. Barthes used the theory of semiotics to discuss how we interpret such commodities as margarine, children's toys, automobile design, food advertising, and presidential campaign photography. "(Mythology) is a part both of semiology inasmuch as it is a formal science, and of ideology inasmuch as it is an historical science: it studies ideas-in-form."<sup>143</sup>

Barthes based his research of mythology and semiotics on the didactic theory developed by Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist and semiotician (1857-1913),<sup>144</sup> which takes two different approaches to how to perceive language through the concept of a sign and a signifier. Barthes applied Saussure's concept to a more visual platform in order to discuss the semiotics of consumer products and how we interpret them.

Working from Barthes' theory of mythology through semiotics, we can see a clear example of how brand recognition can contribute to this narrative. Since its founding in 1859, Louis Vuitton remains one of the most desirable and successful luxury brands of all time. Its logo, which consists of the founder's initials interlocked in a simple typographic design, has become as recognizable to the world as McDonald's Golden Arches.

When the luggage company first opened its doors in the mid-nineteenth century in a suburb of Paris, Louis Vuitton's clientele consisted of kings and queens, as well as high-society patrons. The unique and desirable design of the Louis Vuitton steamer trunk made it de rigueur for many social elites on long voyages. While the luxury item began as an efficient and integral part of the upscale traveler's journey, the trunks are no longer loaded on ocean liners, but instead displayed as works of art in the homes of those fortunate enough to own one of these relics of luxury fashion history.

Thanks to the marketing prowess of such fashion groups as LVMH (Louis Vuitton and Moët-Hennessy, founded in 1986,) the popularity of Louis Vuitton has spread to a global market. Today, Japanese patrons buy half of all luxury goods worldwide and of that number, 40% of all Japanese consumers own a Vuitton product.<sup>145</sup> The iconic luxury brand is viewed as highly desirable in the Japanese market. Though Japan considers itself to be a classless society, "by wearing and carrying luxury goods covered with logos, the Japanese are able to identify themselves in socioeconomic terms as well as conform to social mores. It's as if they are branding themselves."<sup>146</sup>

This theory of branding oneself through material goods in order to appear of a certain social class is known as conspicuous consumption. In the time of Veblen, the mark of the leisure class could be seen in how one took their tea (milk first, then tea), how one crossed their silverware, and what music one discussed in public conversation. These traits would signify your status in society and ultimately if you were "well-bred" or not. In the time of aristocracy, plebeians could look up to their royal dignitaries for an example of high society and wealth. In the present day, we instead turn our attention to celebrities and luxury fashion icons for a source of inspiration and wealth fetishism. From these influences, we as consumers may model our homes and attire off of their influence and present ourselves to the world as if we are of the same socioeconomic status.

Our psychological association with wealth fetishism and brands can be directly linked to semiotics. When we see an individual with a Louis Vuitton handbag, we immediately develop a narrative about that person, forming theories based on the mythology that is affiliated with that particular brand. This is why the counterfeit market has been able to thrive. The manufacturers recognize the desire a consumer has to possess the look of a certain brand, so one may feel elevated.

141. Thomas, Dana. 2007. *Deluxe: How Luxury Lost Its Luster*. New York, NY: Penguin Books. Page 48.

142. Anderson, Sam. "How Roland Barthes Gave Us the TV Recap." *The New York Times*. May 12, 2012. <https://tinyurl.com/y22rfnsf>

143. Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. New York: *The Noonday Press*. 1991. Page 111.

144. Dunigan, Brian. "Ferdinand de Saussure: Swiss Linguist." *Britannica*. Last modified 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y3ejsgyv>.

145. Thomas, Dana. *Deluxe*, page 74.

146. *ibid.*

147. *ibid.*



90. Roland Barthes.

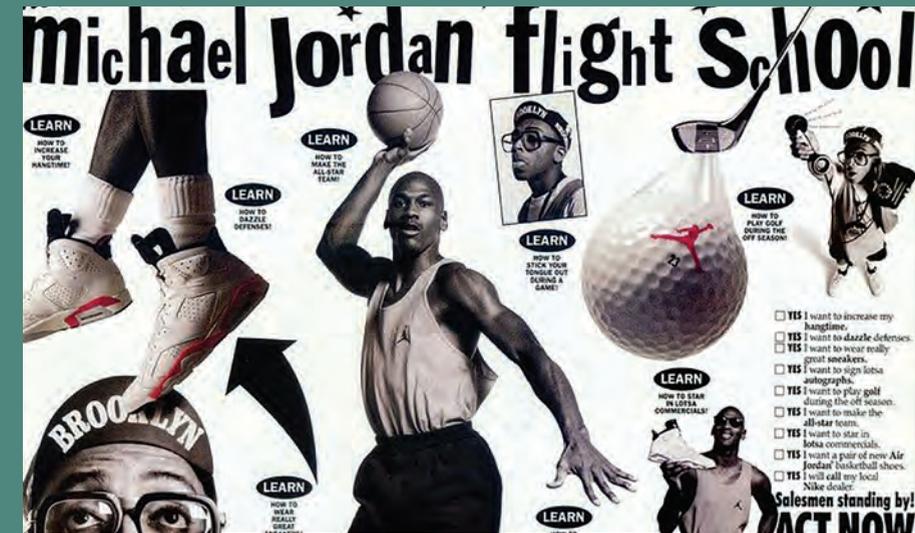


91. Ferdinand de Saussure.

The contradiction between personal indulgence and conspicuous consumption is the crux of the luxury business today: the convergence of its history with its current reality.<sup>147</sup>

Many of us are unable to afford the luxury goods made by such fashion legends as Louis Vuitton. While writing this section, it occurred to me that I've never seen a Louis Vuitton purse in person. Though I have lived a life devoid of this particular luxury, I am well aware of the signifier that a piece of Vuitton luggage represents, and what it says about its owner. In the words of Grace Adler from *Will and Grace*, "I can't afford Louis Vuitton, and her dog poops in it!"

The value we ascribe to consumer goods, such as luxury brands, becomes a dangerous obsession. While we can make jokes about dogs defecating in \$3,000 dog carriers,<sup>148</sup> the truth is conspicuous consumption and mythologies associated with these luxury brands can lead to prejudice, alienation, and even death. In the 1990s, the highly desirable sports shoes known as Air Jordans, which were endorsed by basketball legend Michael Jordan, inspired a rash of muggings and teen-related homicides. The trendy shoes that retailed for \$115.50 in 1990 were popularized not only by sports legends, but by rappers and celebrities alike, and helped launch the new trend known as "sneaker culture." As of 2015, an estimated 1,200 people die each year over sneaker-related incidents.<sup>149</sup> In 2009, the Nike-Kanye West collaboration sneaker Nike Air-Yeezy became immensely popular upon its release. Like with the Air Jordan, the shoes fell into the category of luxury sneakers, and retailed for \$225. In December 2013, a 20-year-old was shot to death outside the barbershop where he worked during the sale of a pair of Air Yeezys that went sour.<sup>150</sup>



92. Air Jordans advertisement, featuring Spike Lee and Michael Jordan.

My own conspicuous consumption is one that weighs heavily on my mind as I continue to become more aware of the mythology I have worked hard to portray. Though I may not own any designer handbags, and I will probably never own a luxury car, I have been known to exude the illusion that I am more affluent than my bank account suggests. Though I possess many nice things, they are displayed in a home I do not own. My salary affords me the ability to fulfill very basic needs, and I have no business shopping at such establishments as Whole Foods. I have the privilege of obtaining an advanced degree — another sign of my conspicuous consumption. However, all of these truths are disguised behind a thinly veiled shroud that could disintegrate at any moment. My elevated status is a facade.

I work hard to live my life free of judgment, but when it comes to signs and symbols, this becomes impossible to maintain. Should I encounter a person who is wearing a high-end brand, or drives an expensive car, I immediately begin to formulate an idea that they are of a high socioeconomic status. Yet, if I see someone wearing a brand from Wal-Mart or eating food from a fast-food establishment, my mind can be just as quick to create a negative narrative about the individual who could be a total stranger to me. These assumptions around our consumption are propagated and encouraged by society. We are told we should desire luxury brands, no matter the cost. We have evolved over time to consider a person's exterior when evaluating their worth or merit, and it is difficult to change the mythology that has become so ingrained in our consumer behavior.

148. Vuitton, Louis. "Dog Carrier 40, Product Number M42024." <https://tinyurl.com/yxfoclw8> Accessed 2020.

149. Mason II, Byron. "Seeking Responsibility in the Deaths Over Designer Sneakers." *The Prindle Press*. November 28, 2017. <https://tinyurl.com/y5ztemny>.

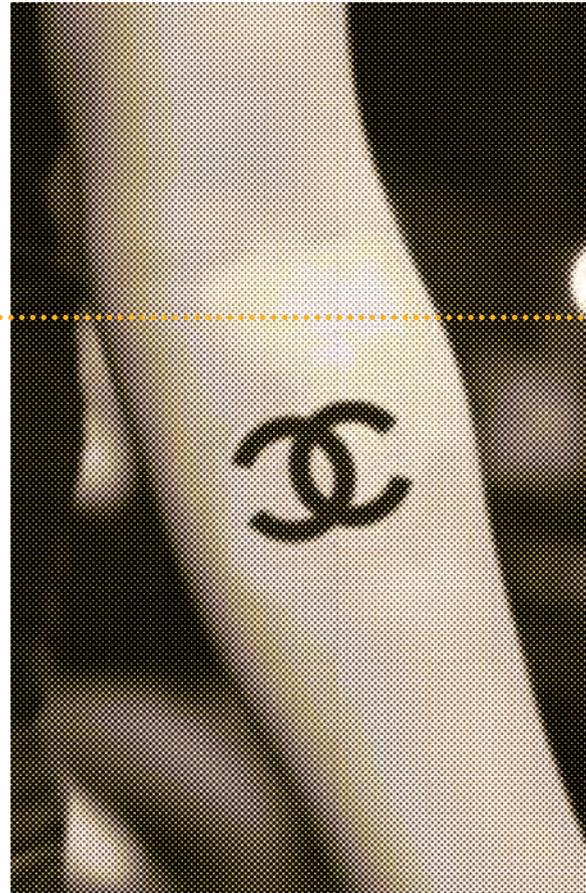
150. *ibid.*

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## CONCLUSION

“If you **don’t** like it,  
you don’t have to  
**buy into it.**”

— *Stella McCartney*



94. Chanel temporary tattoo.

**As an adult, I no longer explore the toy aisle, searching for that perfect Barbie doll to take home with me. Instead, my eyes scan rows of home decor items, and my fingers knowingly recognize the ideal thread count as they trace expertly folded bedsheets. The skeptical consumer in me now sees through the magic of a shopping mall or department store. What was once an enchanting experience is now a cluttered, clunky one. Overpriced apparel and kiosks selling cheaply-made products rule the market now. These caverns that hold thousands of goods also inspire anxiety in my introverted self, and I tend to avoid them altogether. However, the thrill of finding the perfect item on the shopping trips that I once took with my grandmother all those years ago still remains. The fact is this: I buy because it makes me feel good.**

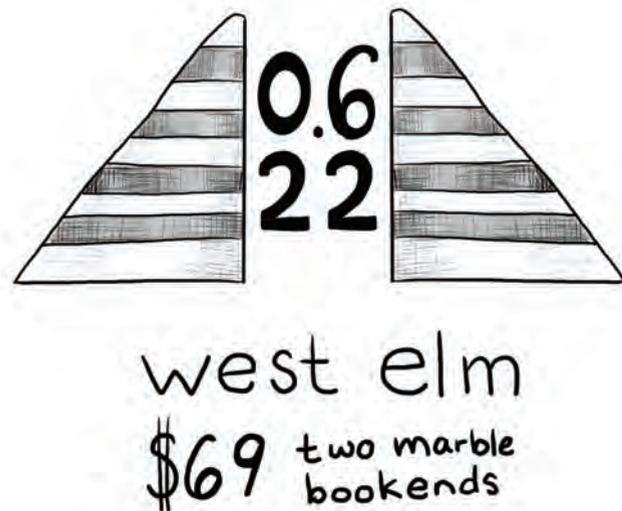
This truth is hard for me to admit. I wish I could say that I could ignore the sale emails that clutter my inbox around a holiday weekend, or that I possess the willpower to unsubscribe from these emails. The bold, callus truth is that my consumer behavior is driven by something inside me that I lean into far too often: desire. The desire to acquire something new outweighs my ability to save and plan for the future; the desire to present myself to the world as successful influences the wares I possess; and the desire to fill something inside of me that is empty longs to know that the goods I have surrounded myself will provide some security and comfort.

It can be hard to navigate the turbulent waters of consumerism and to separate it from our desire to fulfill the need for acceptance in society. From a young age, we learn that fitting in depends on how we present ourselves to the world — what you wear and how you look seems like everything when you are a teenager. However, this instinctual concept is not only seen in adolescence, but in our workplace, how we select a spouse or mate, and oftentimes how we determine one’s status. For many people, what you own can become who you are. It can be equally as hard to take control of your consumer behavior when we have been subjected to a constant barrage of ads since before we were old enough to spell the word “advertisement.”

The consumer has a responsibility to be discerning of how they shop, and be educated about the companies which produce the goods they purchase. However, the companies should have an equal responsibility in changing how they market to consumers so there is more of an equal playing field. For too long, companies have enjoyed an inordinate amount of control, but they still rely on “we the consumers” to keep their businesses afloat. This control allows businesses to consistently dodge unsafe labor charges, or EPA violations, all in the pursuit of “fulfilling our needs.” By not being upfront about their production process, consumers may not be aware that the awesome “BOGO” deal they just scored was made available to them thanks to the backbreaking labor of an employee who earns less than \$100 a month. Because we are constantly targeted through smart and enticing marketing tactics, it is easy for large corporations or marketing agencies to have the upper hand. It becomes hard to resist spending when these clever tactics are designed to penetrate every aspect of your life, to gain knowledge of what products are influenced by your personality, mood, economic circumstance, or a personal connection to a brand. To me, this is (in a word) creepy. And I hate to sound like a petulant child, but also a little unfair.

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CONCLUSION



As a consumer who wants to develop more ethical spending practices, I am torn. After a lifetime of searching for the best deals, it is hard for me to break out of my normal mode of buying more for less. I struggle to play out the reality of affording an item that was produced sustainably and with fair labor. While it kills me to think that almost everything in my home was manufactured overseas in less-than-ideal working conditions, I continue to allow my desire to get the best of me. I soothe my worry and consumer guilt by telling myself that I also support local businesses, and by doing so, I am helping to stimulate the local economy. Though I am aware of what is involved in the goods that are manufactured for a lower cost, my need to keep shopping dominates my guilt.

Despite my shortcomings, I have learned to acknowledge where I need to make room in my life for change, so I may become a more conscientious consumer. I have become more discerning of the way advertising affects me, and I have learned to look past the immediacy of desire, and really focus on whether or not I have room in my life for another product that will haunt me from its cheaply-constructed exterior. The way to solve problems in your life doesn't have to be through consumption. If you don't like it, don't buy into it.

153

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Owen.

VCFA family.

Blood-related family.

Dads wearing editor hats.

Dads wearing father hats.

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Patient students.

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## COLOPHON

This thesis is set in Latiene Pro and Tablet Gothic. Latiene Pro was first realized by type designer, Mark Jarma in the mid-1980s, and was first launched in 2004. It is a popular font among packaging designers.

Tablet Gothic was designed by Veronika Burian and José Scaglione. It was first released in 2012, and is intended to be used as a titling font.

All original photographic content was taken by the author with an iPhone 11 and Nikon z6, 24 –70mm.

All commercial imagery is cited accordingly.

Content edited by Sarah Flynn.  
Copy edited by Luther O. Young.

o CASPER | 58.50  
- REPLACEMENT PILLOW  
STANDARD SIZE

5.5 o FOREST BOUND | 20-  
- MASKS X2

5.11 o AMAZON | 61.59  
- BOOKS X3

5.8 o CSC | 50-  
- DONATION

5.12 o CHEWY | 34-  
- DOG BOWL  
- URINE CLEANER

5.12 o VISION WORKS | 426-  
- CONTACTS + EXAM

5.18 o BLUE LOGN BAKERY | 28.35  
- BAGELS X6 - GRAPEFRUIT  
- Scone JUCIE X2  
- CROISSANT

5.19 o SCHOOBACS COFFEE | 39-  
- MERCH: TEESHIRT  
- COFFEE MUG  
- TRAVEL MUG

5.21 o BARE NECESSITIES | 64.98  
- BATHING SUIT

o MOYO BOUTIQUE | 16.90  
- SCHITT'S CREEK BAG

o TARGET | 104-  
- OUT DOOR RUG + LIGHTS

o WEST ELM | 58.40  
- OUTDOOR PILLOWS

- APPLE PENCIL NIBS

6.8 o WAYFAIR | 223-  
- BOOKSHELF FOR OFFICE

6.10 o NYT SUBSCRIPTION | 4.00

6.11 o VIMEO | 3.00

- kids 7.13 o OLD NAVY | 121.85  
- WORK-OUT CLOTHES

o CLARKE'S HARDWARE | 16.98  
- JUTE TWINE

7.14 o VANS | 65-  
- SK8 HIGH TOPS

7.15 o AMAZON | 71.89  
- BOOKS

o LUSH | 73.85  
- FACE WASH + LOTION  
- BODY SPRAY

7.20 o AMAZON | 52.95  
- K-TAPE  
- FRAME 16" X 20"  
- "DESIGN OF DISSENT" BOOK

o ACT BLUE: JOHN LEWIS  
BRIDGE PROJECT | 25-

7.22 o OLD NAVY | 135.01  
- IMPULSIVE SHOPPING SPREE

7.23 o OVER SEASONED AMY | 29-  
- "SMASH THE GARLIC..." TANK

7.23 o LUSH | 30.54  
- FACE MASK (+1 FRESH  
FACE MASK) FREE!

7.24 o SURRY GEN. STORE | 29.53  
- SQUIRREL COLLAR FOR  
BIRD FEEDER

7.27 o ACADIA TRADING POST | 58-  
- TEE FOR RYAN  
- SWEATSHIRT FOR ME

o PET PROVISIONS | 95-

- PET TOYS + TREATS

o MOYO BOUTIQUE | 118.23  
- SHOPPING SPREE...

6.25 | HIDDEN GEM SALON | 56-  
- HAIR STUFF

6.29 | CONCORD CO-OP | 20.36  
- SUSHI  
- HAND SANITIZER

6.29 o AIR PLANT DESIGN CENTER | 39.95  
- 3 GLASS ORBS w/ PLANTS

6.30 o PERGAMO PAPER GOODS | 37.50  
- 3 MAGNETS  
- 1 ORNAMENT

## AUGUST

8.03 o LITHEMAN'S  
LIMITED | 15.60  
- BEERS X2

8.04 o L.L. BEAN | 29.46  
- INSULATED  
COOLER BAG

8.10 o RIVER ROOST BREWERY | 21.60  
- BEER

o BELLETETES HARDWARE | 46-  
- PAINT + SAND PAPER

8.11 o BODUM | 36.99  
- FRENCH PRESS

8.13 o WAYFAIR | 121.99  
- RUG FOR OFFICE

8.14 o AMAZON | 70-  
- BOOKS

8.17 o USPS | 23.30  
- STAMPS!

8.20 o NOWHERE  
BOOKSHOP | 34-

- JENNY LAWSON'S  
NEW BOOK  
(PRE-ORDER)

## JULY

7.1 o 44 NORTH COFFEE | 33.75

o 1 lb. ESPRESSO

o 1 TOTE BAG

o REI | 194.38

- TENT - DOG  
- HIKING PACK HARNESS

7.2 o CHEWY | 16.95

- WEST PAW FRISBEE

o DECKERS | 115.00

- HOKA RUNNING SHOES

7.3 o VENMO | 55-

- PHOTOGRAPH BY CLEMMIE

7.6 o THREADLESS | 44-

- USA CONGDON MASKS X3

7.8 o TASHEKA | 50-

- ZINES!!

7.9 o NATIVE UNION | 72-

- MACBOOK PRO CASE

o HIDDEN GEM SALON | 224.20

- HAIRCUT + PARTIAL FOIL

7.13 o EASTERN MTN SPORTS | 30-

- 2 TEE SHIRTS



