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Planned Obsolescence in Consumer Products*Tisha Taksali*

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Abstract

Planned obsolescence describes the practice of intentionally designing products to break quickly or become obsolete (unusable). Many debates have occurred in past decades whether this process is ethical or not.

This paper will explain why the practice is widespread among various industries and why it is still relevant in the market after massive consumer awareness, and it will also examine if consumers can track down these patterns of obsolescence. Furthermore, it will assess how obsolescence impacts the environment.

Objectives

This Research paper will help users understand the ongoing practice of Intentional Obsolescence and its effects on their buying behavior. Study what impacts it has on the environment and the planet. It will also find out whether the users are already aware of this practice through personal interviews. Detailed study on Apple product users and their awareness of this practice.

Research Methodology

By reading numerous research papers by Taiwo K. Aladeojebi, Sofia Margarita, and many more we had substantial information and knowledge about the topic but wanted to find out whether people around us knew what this practice is and how it is impacting their lives.

So, we decided to move ahead by conducting interviews with iPhone users and a few general consumers around us and out whether they are facing any related problem in their device, and

if they know what planned obsolescence is and how it is impacting them.

By conducting these interviews, we came around a bunch of people, so we categorized them into three groups and then analyzed them. After looking into each group's needs, wants, pain points, and behaviors we have drawn some conclusions and came up with the findings of our Research.

Introduction

Planned obsolescence or built-in- obsolescence is a policy of intentionally designing a product with a limited useful life, so it becomes obsolete or no longer functional after a certain period. The primary objective of this approach is to incentivize consumers to invest in newer products at an accelerated pace, consequently bolstering sales. Products are intentionally designed to have a limited lifespan, or by fostering a perception of obsolescence, wherein consumers feel compelled to upgrade due to perceived inadequacies in their current products. Although consumers could perceive planned obsolescence as a profit-maximizing tactic employed by producers, marketing expert Phillip Kotler stated that “it is a result of competitive and technological forces in a free market.”

Some examples of Planned Obsolescence are:-

- Apple does this by making its product obsolete in old devices.
- Textbook publications do this by adding new modules with minor changes in their textbook.

Planned obsolescence serves as a boon to manufacturers and the economy, ensuring consistent and potentially growing sales by stimulating consumption. Simultaneously, society reaps rewards from ongoing investments in research and development. Nonetheless, the downsides are glaring: vast amounts of waste accumulate, and resources are excessively depleted, leading to environmental repercussions. Furthermore, this perpetuates a cycle of consumer discontent and stress, driven by the relentless pursuit of owning the latest models.

How it all started?

In Geneva, Switzerland 1924 there was a meeting of top executives of the world's leading light bulb companies they formed what became known as the Phoebus Cartel. They agreed to

collaborate in assisting each other by managing the global supply of light bulbs.

Due to massive technological advancements light bulbs were lasting for approx. 2,500 hours. Light bulbs were lasting too long which declined their sales so all the members of the cartel agreed to reduce the life span of light bulbs.

Following the establishment of the Cartel, the lifespan of light bulbs gradually diminished, with the average duration plummeting to 1205 hours by 1934. As intended, this decline coincided with a 25% surge in sales.

While the Cartel disbanded in the 1930s, its strategies endured, shaping contemporary business practices. Today, many businesses purposefully reduce the lifespan of their products—a strategy known as Planned Obsolescence.

How do Companies do it?

Planned Obsolescence occurs when a company deliberately manufactures a device to deteriorate before reaching its expected lifespan. This often involves using inferior materials, like a weaker filament or fragile glass screen, to limit the durability of the product, such as a smartphone.

Conversely, there's the more abstract concept of perceived obsolescence. Consider the latest phone launch or the current fashion trend. These exemplify instances of perceived obsolescence. When companies introduce new product lines, their older offerings quickly lose appeal or seem outdated. To ensure continued consumer purchases, corporations consistently promote their latest releases, creating the impression that last year's gadget is now antiquated.

With vehicles, technology, and fashion in particular, this kind of perceived obsolescence is common since these consumer products have become status symbols.

Planned Obsolescence and Apple

Apple's products stand out as some of the most notorious examples of planned obsolescence. Allegations of this practice have been directed at the company for numerous years, drawing significant scrutiny from both the media and consumers alike.

- They push software updates as soon as new products launch in the market to decrease

the performance of older products.

- Apple phone charger cables have gained ill fame for their fragility, often necessitating more frequent replacements compared to cables from other brands.
- In the past, there have been indications suggesting that Apple intentionally shortened product replacement cycles.

Harvard University professor Sendhil Mullainathan also noticed in 2014 that searches for "iPhone slow" spike in the days after a new phone launches.

However, Apple has officially denied that it uses planned obsolescence.

Although Apple is well-known for its planned obsolescence policy, there isn't concrete evidence to support this claim, despite the previously reported facts.

The Problem of Electronic Waste

The most immediate consequence of constantly replacing products that have gone out of style, or which have broken before they should, is an increase in electronic waste. Annually, millions of tons of electronic waste, are generated each year. In the European Union alone, around 2.5 billion tons of e-waste is produced each year. These discarded electronics harbor hazardous chemical substances and materials, posing significant threats to both human health and the environment. Compounds like lead, cadmium, and chemicals such as phthalates DEHP and DBP are often present in high concentrations.

Components that defy recycling, often find their way to countries lacking stringent regulations on waste management, including many nations in Africa. Here, the waste is frequently processed by unprotected children, who handle the gadgets bare-handed to extract valuable materials like aluminum and copper. This processing often involves burning and releasing toxic dust and fumes.

Looking ahead, this rampant disposal of electronics represents a colossal waste of resources. Many of the materials within these devices, such as neodymium, indium, and cobalt, are inherently scarce. While they are abundant in products like magnets and batteries, they are difficult to come by in nature.

If practices like planned obsolescence persist unchecked, and no measures are taken to address

them, we are on course to encounter severe material shortages. Concurrently, we risk inflicting irreversible harm on vast swathes of our planet.

Primary Research

This study investigated planned obsolescence among iPhone users, with a focus on understanding what the views of the users on planned obsolescence are and their awareness of the same. Also, why do users stick with or switch from iPhones to Android devices? Through 40 interviews conducted via phone and in-person which specifically includes 10-15 telephonic interviews and 25-30 one-on-one interviews, three main types of iPhone users emerged.

Firstly, there are the Environmental Advocates, who switch to Android due to concerns about electronic waste generated by frequent iPhone upgrades. They prioritize eco-friendly choices and opt for Android devices perceived to have longer lifespans.

Secondly, we have the Status Seekers who view iPhones as symbols of prestige and wealth. Despite potential drawbacks like planned obsolescence, they remain loyal to the brand due to its association with social status and exclusivity.

Lastly, some users Value the familiarity and functionality of the iPhone interface. While acknowledging similar features in Android devices, they stay with iPhones due to their comfort with the iOS ecosystem. However, they expressed willingness to switch if Android offered comparable features.

These findings emphasize the diverse motivations behind iPhone usage and responses to planned obsolescence. They underscore the need for further research on consumer behavior and attitudes towards sustainable technology consumption, as understanding these dynamics can inform strategies for promoting environmentally friendly practices in the smartphone industry.

Research Findings

We had some questions at the beginning of the research discussed each one by one and try finding out whether we found the answers or not.

1. Are the users aware of the practice of Planned Obsolescence?

As expected, many users aren't aware of this practice and seemed to hear it for the very first time but upon explaining they expressed that they do notice it in their lives. Some people had a little bit of idea about it and some knew the exact concept and had already taken action against

it.

2. The extent to which the Companies use planned obsolescence in the present time according to users.

Many responses favored that every company has now been indulged in this practice and you can't escape it by leaving the use of one product. In the race for profits, the quality has been compromised and that is not a good sign.

3. Are iPhone users aware of this practice and do they notice it in their devices?

Similarly, many users here also aren't aware but most of them do notice the diminishing quality and standards in their devices over the years and aren't happy about it. Some on the other hand say that they will change their devices after 2-3 years, so it didn't matter.

4. Will they still purchase the products if they become aware of companies doing this?

In this question the respondents were divided into equal halves and outright rejected the use of any product that is intentionally doing it, but the other half says that they don't have any choice and can't do anything except accept their fate.

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