Ethics Final Project

Topic: Planned Obsolescence

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Overview:

In today's society, people have become accustomed to a fairly short lifecycle because not only do technological devices stop working after a certain time, but they are also considered obsolete when a better version is produced. In many cases, companies purposely implement various strategies designed to get a customer to buy another very similar product by making the older one useless, undesirable, or non-functional within a set period of time. According to the article, "Designed to Break: Planned Obsolescence as Corporate Environmental Crime", planned obsolescence is the practice of deliberately designing products to limit their life span to encourage replacement (Bisschop et al., 2022). There are five main ways in which a company can achieve planned obsolescence: contrived durability, systemic obsolescence, perceived obsolescence, programmed obsolescence, and prevention of repair. The general idea behind planned obsolescence is to encourage sales of new products and upgrades. The most immediate consequence of constantly replacing products that either work perfectly but have gone out of style, or which have broken before they should, is an increase in electronic waste. The build-up of this waste damages the environment which, in turn, contributes to climate change. We can fight planned obsolescence and make the technology greener at three different levels: the government, manufacturer, and individual.

Ethical concerns:

Planned obsolescence is unethical as it is costly for both consumers and the planet. Companies design and manufacture their products so that it only lasts a certain period of time that the consumers have to buy a new product. As companies constantly manufacture new products with new resources, they use energy that impacts the environment. Electronics are especially more concerning to the environment. According to the electronic-waste-focused WEEE Forum, it estimated around 62.8 million U.S. tons of electronics would be thrown away in 2021. Recycling this e-waste is costly and the process is polluting. For the parts that are not

recyclable, e-waste is sent to landfills that eventually leach into water supplies. Continued practice of planned obsolescence will lead to more serious environmental issues.

Possible Solutions:

In 2017, the "Resolution on a longer lifetime for products: benefits for consumers and companies." was passed by the European parliament. The goal of this act was to incentivize companies financially to make products that are more durable and easily repairable rather than replaceable. The resolution also permits users to repair their devices with a provider other than the manufacturer. This will prevent manufacturers from overpricing their repair service to the point where it is more logical for the user to just buy a new device. The term "right-to-repair" has been used by legislatures when passing laws to refer to allowing users to repair their own goods with a particular emphasis on electronic devices. Just last year the New York State Senate passed a right-to-repair legislation, and Federally there was an Executive order for the Federal Trade Commission to force manufacturers to allow customers to repair their goods. These are a few examples of the growing effort governments have placed on reducing companies' use of planned obsolescence and allowing consumers to repair their devices.

There are also several companies that have either reduced planned obsolescence and/or its effect on the environment. One way to reduce planned obsolescence is to make products modular. A modular product has parts that can be easily removed and replaced when individual parts are broken or become outdated. A Dutch company called Fairphone released a smartphone in 2017 which used a modular design which allowed for the ability to be repaired but upgraded over time. For example, this design would potentially allow a user to buy an upgrade for the camera on a phone and install it rather than buy a whole new phone just for its upgraded camera. So even if a part of a product becomes "obsolete", it does not necessitate that the user buy an entirely new device. This concept should be a familiar one to anyone who has built a computer and individually selected the part they wanted to use as part of the construction. A way to reduce the environmental impact of planned obsolescence would be to provide people with opportunity and incentive to properly dispose of their devices. A

company called Outerwall has developed the EcoATM, which is a receptacle for smart devices. The EcoATM determines the value of the phone and then gives the user a cash voucher for recycling it. This is a solid system because there is incentive for consumers to then go and properly dispose of their phone. A final example of companies actively trying to reduce the environmental effect of planned obsolescence is through the use of a Circular business model. The overall goal is to reduce both new resource extraction when making a product and waste disposing of a product. One important aspect of a Circular economy is resource recovery. Resource recovery is the process of using pieces of recycled materials in the manufacturing of new products to lessen both the amount of waste and the amount of new materials which will need to be collected for further manufacturing. Companies like IKEA and Target have already made efforts to adopt a circular business model and plan to become fully Circular in the coming years.

Individuals can reduce the waste caused by planned obsolescence by participating in the programs mentioned above and by supporting products and companies with environmentally conscious business practices. There are also practices that users can adopt to reduce the need for buying the same product over and over. Some examples of these practices include: buying either high quality or reusable/durable products (quality does not always mean expensive), care for the products you buy, repair or upgrade parts rather than replace, pass on products you no longer need to someone who can use it, and of course recycle! Consumers who take these measures will be less impacted by companies who adopt planned obsolescence which could also incentivise companies to make repairable, longer lasting products.

So as detailed above, the possible solutions to the issue of planned obsolescence can be enacted at three levels: government, manufacturer, individual. The clear and obvious solution is for companies to make products that are actually designed to function for as long as they possibly can rather than implementing planned obsolescence. However, there is little motivation for companies to do this because it can and will affect their profit margins. Legislatures and businesses have already begun taking action to counteract planned obsolescence. The ethical concerns are both about the impact on the consumer and the longer lasting impact on the environment. The use of planned obsolescence leads to unnecessary over production of products so businesses can maximize profits. When manufacturers produce products with planned obsolescence in mind the

overall quality of the product is reduced and the waste caused by the discarding of replaceable products is difficult to properly dispose of and is a growing environmental concern.

References:

Bisschop, L., Hendlin, Y. & Jaspers, J. Designed to Break: Planned Obsolescence as Corporate Environmental Crime. *Crime Law Soc Change* 78, 271–293 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-022-10023-4