Plastic: a passengerial marketplace icon

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ABSTRACT
We provide a critical reading of plastic in consumer culture highlighting its furtive omnipresence and supporting role in enabling the consumption of countless products, services, and brands, including many previously identified marketplace icons. We introduce the term “passengerial icon” to explore how the iconicity of plastic is often characterised by its unobtrusive and inconspicuous presence in consumers’ lives. Like a passenger, plastic most typically accompanies consumers on various experiential journeys rather than drives them. Drawing upon Leder’s concept of dys-appearance, we discuss the “absent presence” of passengerial icons as they tend to fade from consumers’ awareness, remaining present but unseen and unthought about until something about them appears to dysfunction. We discuss the dysfunctional appearance of plastic as catalysed most dramatically by environmental and health consequences. Though plastic’s dys-appearance affects society broadly, it is often hermeneutically and fetishistically handled by individuals through precautionary consumption adjustments rather than collective political action.

Introduction
Plastic is everywhere. If the measure of marketplace iconicity is widespread usage, historical significance, creative adaptation, and divisiveness in consumer culture (Gopaldas 2016), one could arguably say few artefacts are more worthy of the term than plastic. Plastic has infiltrated all conceivable aspects of the material world from the realm of functionalistic necessity to spaces for hedonic pursuits and self-expression. Plastic is featured to varying degrees within the production, distribution, and general composition of multiple products previously identified within Consumption, Markets, & Culture’s Marketplace Icons series, such as the vinyl record (Bartmanski and Woodward 2018), the mobile phone (Reyes 2016), the electric guitar (Ostberg and Hartmann 2015), sneakers (Denny 2021), shapewear (Zanette and Scaraboto 2019), lipstick (Gurrieri and Drenten 2021), and, most recently, the facemask (Silchenko and Visconti 2021). Even marketplace icons that are more experiential than material such as beauty salons (Ourahmoune and Jurdi 2021), rock festivals (Chaney 2020), theme parks (Brown 2018), Christmas markets (Broeckerhoff and Galalae 2020) or shopping malls (Warnaby and Medway 2018) invariably include plastic somewhere or somehow in their service provision. Moreover, music (Denegri-Knott 2015) and video (Kerrigan 2018), while ostensibly dematerialised (Magaudda 2011) through the rise of digital streaming, take place within complex sociotechnical systems reliant on plastic including devices for recording, storing, and reproducing media, fibre-optic internet connections, Wi-Fi routers, coated cables, headphones, and so on.
Plastic is so widely used, integrated, and naturalised within our everyday lives that this era of Earth history has been called the Plasticene, having commenced with the post-WWII expansion of cheap consumer plastics and noted stratigraphically by our massive discarding of plastic waste that will be observable in the fossil record (Haram et al. 2020).

Despite plastic’s overwhelming presence in consumption, it is rarely at the foreground of consumer experience. Susan Freinkel, author of *Plastic: A Toxic Love Story*, aptly identifies plastic as “a huge, and yet strangely invisible, part of modern life” (2011, 3). Plastic, as something found in countless material objects and services, is often experienced as just a necessary ingredient or component in the things that people buy and do, rather than consciously thought about or discussed. While exceptions, of course, do exist (for example, plastic fulfills an overtly celebrated and spoken about role in the modernist furniture of Verner Panton and in Patagonia’s recycled nylon parkas), most consumer interactions with plastic are rarely elevated to the level of “discursive consciousness” which Giddens (1986, 374) defines as, “What actors are able to say, or to give verbal expression to” or an “awareness which has a discursive form”. Hawkins (2021, 408) describes the non-discursive material presence of plastic as “the skin of commerce”, which she qualifies as “a pervasive or mundane material, part of the taken for granted world of markets” (see also Hawkins 2018). Though she deploys the term “mundane”, Hawkins (2009a, 194) argues that this should not be read to signal the trivial or apolitical nature of plastic whose “material realities of its environmental impacts are aggressively displaced or foregrounded in the interests of making or destroying markets”. Plastic, though often used in a supporting role to make, package, deliver, or experience a product or service, is qualified through a range of diverse politico-ideological and cultural practices and associations that ensure its ubiquity, indispensability and, ultimately, iconicity within markets.

Recent work in the *CMC Marketplace Icons* series has highlighted the importance of “contextual icons” whereby artefacts achieve iconicity by virtue of their situated importance and synecdochical ability to represent a historical moment, such as personal protective equipment during the COVID-19 pandemic (Silchenko and Visconti 2021). In our contribution to the Marketplace Icons series, we expand and extend the conversation to consider how associative and oftentimes surreptitious routes facilitate the path to iconicity. Here, we introduce the notion of “passengerial icons” to denote the role that essential and ubiquitous yet simultaneously inconspicuous objects, materials, or technologies, such as plastic, occupy in consumption, markets, and society. Our use of the word passengerial here is not intended to signal passivity because, as we shall discuss, plastic actively impacts life and the environment beyond its role in the marketplace. Rather, we represent plastic as a “passenger” that *accompanies* various products, services, and brands on their journeys to the marketplace and the experiential adventures that consumers have with them, without ever (or, at least, hardly ever) being a conspicuous *driver* of either. Using the passenger metaphor, we discuss how plastic, as a closely integrated part of the marketplace, participates in its wider phenomenological structure rather than singularly characterises it for consumers.

In the sections that follow, we first explain how our discursive consciousness of plastic’s material presence has historically been subordinate to what plastic represents and makes possible ideologically. Here, we examine how the initial synthesis of plastic during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was largely inseparable from the wider ideological draw of capitalist work ethic, the exceptionalism of “rational man”, and his triumph over nature. Second, we discuss how plastic came to lose much of its techno-utopian lustre from the mid-twentieth century onwards, standing instead for consumerist promiscuity and encountered mostly in its supporting, yet strangely invisible, role in the expansion of ephemeral comforts. To explore these developments, we draw on Leder’s (1990) concepts of “disappearance” (27), meaning something that might be physically present but is not particularly apparent to us, and “dys-appearance” (84), meaning something that becomes apparent to us only in times of dysfunction. While most contemporary marketplace encounters with plastic typically “elude articulation” (Leder 1990, 55) for consumers, they are violently called to consciousness through material consequences such as pollution and toxicity. These consequences, we argue, are all too often disavowed at an individual level to restore the shroud of habitual unawareness that
characterises many of consumers’ encounters with plastic in their everyday lives. We argue that the individual propensity to push plastic to the background of one’s consciousness does not just perpetuate plastic’s passengerial status in consumer culture but exacerbates its potential to cause problems for society more broadly. We close out with our theoretical contributions to the Marketplace Icons series.

“Wonder-stuff”

Descending from the Greek πλαστικός (plastikos), meaning “something capable of being molded or shaped”, the term plastic has come to denote a category of materials that are malleable during manufacture or use and offer an expansive array of applications and consumption opportunities (Meikle 1997, 4). What the materials actually “are” and how they “work”, however, is largely a mystery to most consumers. Roland Barthes famously expressed his mystification at a public demonstration in the 1950s when witnessing an injection moulder transform its mysterious inputs into plastic curios:

> Despite having names of Greek shepherds (Polystyrene, Polyvinyl, Polyethylene), plastic, the products of which have just been gathered in an exhibition, is in essence the stuff of alchemy. At the entrance to the stand, the public waits in a long queue in order to witness the accomplishment of the magical operation par excellence: the transmutation of matter… At one end, raw, telluric matter, at the other, the finished, human object; and between these two extremes, nothing; nothing but a transit, hardly watched over by an attendant in a cloth cap, half-god, half-robot. (Barthes [1957] 1973, 104)

Though the above account helps us to situate plastic within the modernist and mechanistic realm of man-making-use-of-machine, naturally derived plastics were finding their way to the marketplace long before Barthes took a trip to an exhibition. Ancient Egyptians used natural resins to lacquer their sarcophagi (Bijker 1987), Mesoamericans fashioned rubber balls, bands, and figurines from the latex naturally found in some trees (Tarkanian and Hosler 2011), and medieval Europeans used the translucent keratin from animal horns as window panels for lanterns, i.e. “lanthorns” (MacGregor 1991). It was not until the mid- to late nineteenth century that the development and marketisation of semi-synthetic plastic ensured plastic’s role in commerce took on a modernist and mechanistic character.

Victorian scientists and industrialists recognised that the increasing mass production of consumer goods and wares for art and science necessitated the unsustainable extraction of natural plastic from finite resources. Their concerns about an impending resource crisis were reflected in a discussion about the need for new materials by the chairman of the Royal Society of Arts in 1865, “We were exhausting the supplies of India rubber and gutta percha, the demand for which was unlimited, but the supply not so” (as quoted in Gloag 1943, 462). In response, several semi-synthetic plastics based on celluloid were cultivated to make small personal objects including combs, buttons for clothing, chessmen, collars, and cuffs that would have otherwise been manufactured from ivory, bone, horn, tortoiseshell, mother-of-pearl, or other expensive finite materials. By the end of the century, semi-synthetics were also providing film for photography and the fledgling art of motion pictures, marking a proto-period for the Plasticene. Ironically, as commentators can appreciate today, the Victorians’ rush to synthesise plastics was justified as a move towards protecting the natural environment. “As petroleum came to the relief of the whale,” a brochure from the Celluloid Manufacturing Company in 1878 proclaimed, so too “has celluloid given the elephant, the tortoise, and the coral insect a respite in their native haunts; and it will no longer be necessary to ransack the earth in pursuit of substances which are constantly growing scarcer” (as quoted in Meikle 1997, 12; Freinkel 2011, 17).

Practically speaking, the semi-synthetic plastics of the Victorian era had limited usage in commercial mass production due to their flammability, degradation, and sometimes brittle structures (Bijker 1987; Hammer, Kraak, and Parsons 2012). It was not until 1907, when the chemist, Leo Baekeland – “the father of modern plastics” (Davis 1939, 15) – applied to patent Bakelite, the first truly
synthetic polymer, that plastic began to achieve primacy in production. Although Baekeland had been searching for a synthetic substitute for shellac, a natural electrical insulator, he recognised the extended uses of his creation and wrote in his diary on July 11, 1907: “Unless I am very much mistaken, this invention will prove important in the future” (Baekeland 1907, 96). Bakelite soon played a crucial role in enabling the mass marketisation of a myriad of soon to become commonplace items in a rapidly electrifying consumer culture including telephone handsets, clocks, radios, sockets for light bulbs, engine parts for cars, and nonelectrical automotive components like gearshift knobs, steering wheels, and instrument panels. Bakelite, because of its progressive high-tech associations, also made its way into the manufacture of status-signalling possessions for the wealthy like bracelets, necklaces, cigarette holders, and jewellery boxes. Cartier even introduced a luxury Bakelite watch in the 1920s (Stancliffe 1990).

In 1923, as part of a promotional campaign for Bakelite, a writer named John K. Mumford was commissioned to write The Story of Bakelite. Published in 1924, the book made use of grandiose prose and a quasi-scriptural style to bombastically situate Bakelite in the context of rational man’s utopic mastery over nature, drawing reference to the “waste heaps” of sediment or long dead materials that, through hard-work, patience, and dedication, could be mined and manipulated for the formulation of new substances (Mumford 1924, 20). From the spoils of primordial death and destruction, Mumford argues, the assiduous and industrious “Chemist” had laboured to extract ever-versatile substances that would enrich rational man’s place in the world. Mumford (1924) draws reference to “the priceless deposits which Nature had placed in her vaults against the ‘rainy day’ which was surely coming to man” (11-12) and describes Bakelite as “a wonder-stuff, the elements of which were prepared in the morning of the world, then laid away till civilization wanted it badly enough to hunt out its parts” (7).

In many ways, we can consider Mumford’s (1924) techno-utopian love letter to Bakelite (and the plastic age it heralded in) a reflection of a secularised vision of the Protestant work ethic that underpinned industrial capitalism at that time. Throughout his book, Mumford proselytises the “work” that led to the development of synthetic plastic, conceptualising the chemistry behind Bakelite as an iconic and life-altering turning point in humankind’s enlightenment. It was through such market-making eulogies of Mumford and his contemporaries that the materiality and functionality of plastic was made secondary to its symbolism. In the first few decades of the twentieth century, synthetic plastic was rarely “seen” in isolation but instead as part of, and attendant to, the wider fantasy support structures of capitalist ideology such as rationalism, technocracy, and the entrepreneurial spirit. Plastic, a “wonder-stuff”, was often made to appear as a passenger of those fantastical drivers which interpellated the subjects of capitalism to ride unhesitatingly with them into a more civilised and productive future. In deconstructing the writings of Mumford and others from that period, Jeffrey Meikle (1997, 243) explains, “By suggesting that organic wastes from the bowels of the earth could be transformed into wondrous shapes and colors, chemical utopians encouraged ignorance and fostered a feeling that some things are best left unrevealed”.

Spurred on by the alignment of the science of synthetics with capitalist techno-utopianism, the 1920s and 1930s saw multiple plastics marketed to consumer culture, including the modern form of polyvinyl chloride (PVC), nylon, cellophane, polyethylene, and polystyrene. Like Bakelite, these plastics remained eclipsed by what they represented: a desirable – and mouldable – future. Nylon’s popular application to hosiery meant that it was celebrated for its democratisation, and rationalisation, of female fashion and femininity (Zanette and Scaraboto 2019). Nylon stockings, as one commentator puts it, “homogenized the look of all women’s legs as if gender itself were a uniform”, turning them into new “erotic weapons” (Hume 2019, 413–414). Cellophane, while finding practical usage in the packaging of consumer goods, was comparably invoked to connote malleability of modern glamour and the liberalising sexuality of an increasingly consumer-led model of capitalist ideology (Brown 2008). In the final act of a Broadway show staged within the musical film, Dancing Lady (1933), six elderly ladies in conservative dark clothing are portrayed entering a space-age beauty salon and emerge rejuvenated as much younger, glittering, and sexualised women wearing
crisp, clear and uniform cellophane dresses. Such images situated plastic within the matrices of desire, liberalism, and futurity. By the mid 1930s, Mumford’s (1924) bombastic gospel to synthetic plastic had become firmly naturalised. Fortune magazine (1936, 69) declared that, “The synthetic plastic … is a glamorous substance and a tribute to the powers of man. In the light of it the layman has been taught to believe that an age of plastics is at hand”.

By the advent of World War II however, the rationing of natural resources and the material need for economy at home and on the battlefield prompted pragmatic, less ideologically loaded relationships with plastic. Between 1939 and 1945, the mass production of plastic increased rapidly in the US and UK (Meikle 1997; Mossman 1997). In the next section, we discuss how its increasing pervasiveness meant plastic came to be seen less as “wonder-stuff” and more as taken-for-granted ordinary stuff, marking a substantial change to its passengerial role in the marketplace.

“Throwaway Living”

In the post-war decades, plastic rapidly moved from applications within durable goods and electrics – such as cars, jewellery, and stereos – into cheaper and more ephemeral conveniences such as toys, textiles, cosmetics, household furnishings and a whole host of single-use consumables including carrier bags, bin liners, bottles, cutlery, drinking straws, food containers, cigarette filters, disposable safety razors, coffee cup lids, dental floss, pens, diapers, bibs, and condoms. “The future of plastics is in the trash can”, the editor of Modern Packaging magazine, Lloyd Stouffer, proclaimed at an industry conference in the mid-1950s (Stouffer 1963, 1). Stouffer advocated for packaging producers “to stop thinking about ‘reuse’ packages and concentrate on single use” and, “The happy day has arrived when nobody any longer considers the plastics package too good to throw away” (1).

In the post-war consumer culture, plastic’s synonymity with throwaway lifestyles radically altered how marketplace constructs such as utility, (im)permanence, consumption, and refuse became thought and spoken about (Meikle 1997). While thrift and asceticism had dominated the collective consciousness of the Great Depression and the two World Wars, in 1955, LIFE magazine published a short feature on the conveniences of “throwaway living” in the post-war US. The feature included an image of a family gleefully tossing various single-use plastic wares into the air accompanied by a write-up that celebrated the disposability of goods. Like the US, the post-war UK fetishised throwaway living with speculative write-ups in British newspapers – such as Alice Hope’s Home Column – reporting on a hastening future where, “Meals will be pre-cooked and frozen and packed ready to eat” and, “There will be no washing-up. All food will be on disposable plates and dishes that can be used and thrown away” (Daily Telegraph, July 23, 1957). In the parlance of the Cold War, the luxury of being able to throw things away represented the consumerist liberties of Western capitalism in stark contrast to the repressive apparatuses of Eastern bloc state communism.

Plastic was now made to appear to the social subjects of capitalism as a benign passenger riding alongside them on new consumption journeys that social drivers including globalisation, the rise of suburbia, the popularity of fast food, the expansion of large supermarkets, and self-service merchandising steered. Plastic, in this sense, did not single-handedly usher in a culture of throwaway living but was bound up in an expanding assemblage of market-capitalist accountrements. Increasing plastic wastage was, to adapt a metaphor from Žižek’s (2008, 95) reading of writer G.K. Chesterton, equivalent to a “dead body … [hidden in] a field of dead bodies”; the horrors of plastic were hidden in plain sight amongst an increasingly horrifying system.

Contemporaneously, Barthes ([1957] 1973, 106) recognised that plastic, by the time of his interest in the substance, had fallen from its twilight as a wondrous material and was sinking to the realm of the ordinary and the mundane: “Plastic has climbed down; it is a household material. It is the first magical substance which consents to be prosaic”. By the 1960s, the increasing mundanity of plastic was intersecting with its increasing unknowability to secure its silent spread into ubiquity. In Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash, historian Susan Strasser (1999, 267) situates this intersection
within consumers’ improving quality of life under capitalism whereby it became more acceptable for consumers to buy things rather than make them and to throw things away rather than attempt to mend them: “Nobody made plastic at home, hardly anybody understood how it was made, and it usually could not be repaired”.

The hard truth that was seldom reflected upon during the development of the Plasticene was that “throwing away” is a misnomer. There is no “away” per se. Plastic objects tend to persist long after their original usage. Unless the plastic object can be reused or recycled somehow, then it is likely destined for the rubbish dump where it will remain for good; or our habitats where it will stick around as litter; or an incinerator where it will subsequently move into the atmosphere as gaseous pollutants. For example, the ubiquitous plastic carrier bag does not just help consumers to carry their groceries from the supermarket, its own “stubborn materiality” carries on after it fulfills its purpose (Hawkins 2009b, 43). The carrying on of plastic allows us to think of it as an inconspicuous passenger we encounter on our consumption journeys that then continues its own voyage long after we have alighted, largely unnoticed by the world around it, until it becomes menacing. To help lay down the theoretical foundations for this, we now turn to the concept of “dys-appearance”.

**The Dys-appearance of plastic**

For a material such as plastic to achieve passengerial iconicity, it tends not to be at the foreground of consumers’ experiences, rather it is seamlessly interwoven in the sociotechnical assemblages that support and underpin those experiences. Meikle (1997, xiii) clarifies that, “It is hard to do justice to plastic because it serves so many functions, assumes so many guises, satisfies so many desires, and so quickly recedes into relative invisibility as long as it does its job well”. In these regards, plastic is susceptible to disappearance and dys-appearance. Philosopher Drew Leder originally advanced these concepts to explore how people usually do not think about the functioning of their bodies when they are healthy but become acutely aware of them when struck with illness or facing situations wherein their bodies become the focus of negative attention. Leder (1990, 3) identifies the body as typically experienced by an absence from consciousness due to its “intrinsic tendencies towards self-concealment”. The self-concealment of the body – i.e. its disappearance – enables us to direct our conscious attention elsewhere when going about our lives or, as Leder suggests, much of the body is “simply put out of play so as not to interfere with the primary locus of engagement” (26). To disappear, for Leder, implies to “not-appear” (27).

Like the experience of our bodies when healthy, our phenomenological experience of plastic, when it works well in our consumption, is characterised by disappearance whereby it is “usually marginal to consciousness” (Leder 1990, 53). Like how we do not think explicitly about the blood coursing through our fingers when playing a piano or our arms or legs when engaging in sport, we do not really think specifically about plastic when throwing a frisbee to a friend, gripping a videogame controller mid-battle, putting a Blu-ray disc in a media player, opening a bag of potato chips, or eating salad from a take-out clamshell. It is only when some disruption comes to our attention that our habitual unawareness is shaken, our embodied experiences are interrupted, and the body appears (as a ‘dys’function of sorts).

“In contrast to the ‘disappearances’ that characterize ordinary functioning”, Leder (1990, 84) refers to this interruption as, “the principle of dys-appearance. That is, the body appears as thematic focus, but precisely as in a dys state – dys is from the Greek prefix signifying ‘bad’ […]”). Like how the body is thrown into focus for a pianist when her ability to play is disturbed by sudden cramping in her hand, or a football player’s concentration on a game is broken by an acute chest pain, there are certain catalysts that make plastic the focus of negative attention for consumers. A compatible way of understanding this is what Žižek calls a parallax shift of our perspective whereby something appears in a dys state only when viewed from a particular perspective: “the very thing which, viewed from a proper distance, looks like the supreme Good changes into repulsive Evil the moment we come too near it” (Žižek 2006, 187).
An important parallax shift for plastic is when we encounter it as pollution: “matter out of place” (Douglas [1966] 1994, 36). Part of our everyday perception of reality is the plastic that we throw out in our garbage conveniently disappears from our world. However, it only disappears in an illusionary sense; plastic goes on travelling through the environment long after we have completed our own journeys with it. Of all the plastics ever made to date, approximately 60% are estimated to have been discarded in landfills or dumped throughout the natural environment (Geyer, Jambeck, and Law 2017). Estimates indicate that there will be more plastic than fish (by weight) in the oceans by the year 2050 (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2016). That hard truth is rarely thought about until we are confronted with television footage of the “Great Pacific Garbage Patch”, a giant blotch of plastic waste floating in the North Pacific Ocean, or the photojournalist Justin Hofman’s image, “Sewage Surfer”, which captures a seahorse grasping a plastic cotton bud with its tail in the wild. Such images are enough to undo plastic’s ability to avoid our discursive consciousness, forcing us to confront its dys-appearance. Garbage is, what Leder (1990, 73) might consider to be, a “concretization of the unpleasant, the aversive” by which it “establishes its peculiar hold upon our attention”. The attention-grabbing nature of garbage is so acute that activists have used it to force a parallax shift in perspective for others. For example, Greenpeace made plastic dys-appear to British policymakers by dumping over 600 kilograms of plastic waste outside of Downing Street, an approximate measure of how much plastic waste the UK exports to other countries every half a minute (McDonagh 2021). Such attempts to stage plastic’s dys-appearance, Hawkins (2009b, 47) suggest, “expose its material afterlife” and “reveal ‘disposability’ as a myth”.

Another parallax shift for plastic is when we experience it as toxic. In the case of being suspected of toxicity, plastic ceases to appear as an inert passenger and becomes explicitly recognised as an active and present threat albeit profoundly inapprehensible to the consumer. On these occasions, the plastic that so often silently accompanies us on our consumption journeys appears to us as “something uncanny and alien” (Leder 1990, 54). This kind of dys-appearance has occurred various times over the history of synthetic plastic. In 1973, for example, vinyl chloride monomer from which various PVC products are made became suspected of carcinogenicity when a rare cancer of the liver was found amongst industrial workers exposed to the substance (Westermann 2013). When the news of occupational cancer in the vinyl industry broke, the safety of plastic was thrust into the public’s attention. In the US (Meikle 1997) and in West Germany (Westermann 2013), the dys-appearance of plastic in the 1970s galvanised rousing anti-PVC debates amongst citizen initiatives, environmental activists, trade unions, and consumer health groups. In more recent years, attention has been turned to the adverse health impacts of consumer plastics as they break down into micro or nano particles in the environment and enter the global food chain. Concerns are also attached to the long-term “reproductive toxicity” of phthalates that leach from plastic into our bodies and impact our ability to reproduce (Davis 2015, 236).

Though pollution and toxicity are important catalysts for collective concern amongst consumers, the “problematic presencing” (Leder 1990, 70) of plastic does not always spur collective action. The dread with which consumers experience shocking scenes of waste on their TVs or circulating narratives of harmful chemical cocktails leaching into their food has, crucially, the potential for provoking politically transformative solidarity. But collectivised resistance against plastic, a consumption material so ubiquitous that it would have the momentum to alter or upend the existing consumer-capitalist hegemony, has yet to occur. “This fissure in capitalism never fully emerges,” Smith and Brisman (2021, 291) point out, as consumers are often placated by the introduction of “platitudinal low-level regulation of peripheral harms”, such as nominal levies on plastic carrier bags, restrictions on applications of PVC, the option to purchase glass rather than polyethylene terephthalate (PET) bottles, and the phasing out of plastic microbeads in cosmetic products. Next, we theorise why plastic’s dys-appearance is often faced by consumers in personal, idiosyncratic ways that sweep problems out of sight, but seldom challenge those problems’ structural causes.
Disavowing plastic’s Dys-appearance

Leder (1990, 84) suggests that when something dys-appears, we experience it as “that which ‘stands in the way’, an obstinate force interfering with our projects”. The dys-appearance of an object can distract us from the personal or social activities which we are intimately invested in, and impel “hermeneutic and pragmatic” (86) efforts to try and restore the object’s disappearance so that it can return to being present but unthought about. Importantly, restoring the disappearance of plastic when its problems appear is, for many consumers, based on self-preoccupation and hermeneutic biases rather than a collectivised and radical engagement with the wider social and economic system. Dys-appearance provokes individualist self-reflection and isolation within our personal subjective worlds, what Leder calls “spatiotemporal constriction” (75).

In their constricted state, individuals are more likely to engage in “precautionary consumption” (MacKendrick 2010) than mobilise themselves politically against manufacturers, retailers, and the broader market system. For example, an individual consumer may offset the trauma of witnessing a seabird entangled in a plastic six-pack ring by cutting her own plastic rings before disposal next time she enjoys a beer. She may also insulate herself from the horrors of seeing plastic debris in local waterways by doing little more than dutifully recycling her personal waste, sorting bottles, meat trays, etc. into the appropriate bins. Other precautionary consumption measures might include investing in reusable carrier bags and moving purchased groceries from the plastic containers they are sold in over to glass or ceramic storage vessels at home (Pathak and Nichter 2019). Even the once quite vocal anti-PVC movement tends to channel its substantial health risk concerns to our life-sphere, even when they are not (Smith and Brisman 2021).

These kinds of symbolic interventions based on limited personal action enable individual consumers to return plastic to the background of their own private consciousness insofar as they simply limit their culpability in plastic becoming dysfunctional. In a gesture of fetishistic disavowal, guilt and responsibility are personalised and fetishised by consumers allowing them to disavow – or somehow forget – the wider systemic problems that are to blame for the dys-appearance of plastic (Žižek 2008). The focus is on absolving oneself of plastic’s dysfunctions instead of challenging plastic generally, because to do the latter would necessitate a much more radical and revolutionary engagement with market capitalism. By relying on their common sense, which is largely informed by (and limited to) their ordinary life-worlds, consumers fetishise ordinary day-to-day actions and treat them with symbolic significance that mask the fuller extent of a growing catastrophe. Spurred on by the enthusiastic vortices of clicktivism such as likes and shares on social media, consumers are validated with total assurance that their interventions are meaningful and that they are making a difference, even when they are not (Smith and Brisman 2021).

The personalised and fetishised approaches that people try to face down the dys-appearance of plastic are willed by a “telic demand for interpretation and repair” (Leder 1990, 81). Telic demand refers to an “inward focus” directed at personally ridding ourselves of trauma rather than understanding and challenging the external causes of the trauma. Doing so allows consumers to once again “unsee” plastic, restoring its disappearance within their own life-worlds and disavowing the need to contend with plastic in a larger societal sense (see also Carrington, Zwick, and Neville 2016). “In experiential terms”, Leder (1990, 88) suggests, the individual is aware of the dys-appearing object “as separate from and opposed to the ‘I’”. Importantly here, the “I” is specified as the unit for intervention and not the “we”. By disavowing the need for collective action, consumers perpetuate the passengerial status of plastic, relegating it to a background issue that can somehow be tackled by personal intervention. “Any radical social change”, Žižek (2008, 372) warns, “must therefore be anti-fetishistic in its approach”. To move past our hermeneutic biases and truly contend with systemic issues, he advises “We should really ‘grow up’ and learn to cut this ultimate umbilical cord to our life-sphere” (445).
Passengerial iconicity: a new tool in the marketplace icons series

Previously, Gopaldas (2016, 264) outlined how marketplace icon status is bestowed on “brands, products, or services” that are associated with a complexity of cultural meanings, can attract polarising attention, are mentioned in diverse media, and are creatively adapted to multiple spheres of social life. Although plastic fulfils these criteria in its own right, it must also be recognised that plastic achieves a large part of its iconicity by proxy; by its silent integration to and association with many other culturally salient and transcendental marketplace icons. Wherever and however consumers encounter a marketplace icon these days, whether talking on a smartphone (Reyes 2016), playing a beat on a synthesiser (Lanier and Rader 2020), strutting in high heels (Parmennier 2016), or watching a movie (Kerrigan 2018), plastic is often there with them making their experience possible through its own Lederian self-concealment. Unlike other marketplace icons such as whiskey with its libidinous symbolism of “rugged individualism” (Holt 2018, 78), champagne with its designation as “the quintessential device and symbol for celebration” (Rokka 2017, 275), or lipstick as “a key signifier of femininity” (Gurrieri and Drenten 2021, 226), plastic is one of the rare concoctions of human ingenuity that has primacy in contemporary consumer culture because of, rather than in spite of, a lack of visibility, stable meaning, or enduring panache.

The first duty of plastic in today’s marketplace is its “absent presence” (Leder 1990, 13): to be functionally present but to stay in the background; to accompany us unobtrusively and inconspicuously on our consumption journeys but almost never as the driver, usually just as a passenger. In these regards, plastic is vaguely similar to denim which Miller (2015, 298) introduces as a marketplace icon based on an “ordinariness and ubiquity” that allows it to function “below the surface of significance”. However, there is a subtle difference between Miller’s nondescript – or what he refers to as post-semiotic – marketplace icons and the passengerial variety we identify with plastic. While post-semiotic icons like a pair of denim blue jeans are mundane and need not carry any meaning for consumers beyond their comfortable ordinariness, they nevertheless remain an object of what Leder (1990, 84) would call “direct and focal thematization” – a product that consumers do choose to wear and experience in and of itself. An ordinary pair of jeans, while unexceptional, is nevertheless chosen when seeking informality or comfort in casual settings. In contrast, a passengerial icon such as plastic is rarely thematised in any consumer choice-making or experiential behaviours, rather it is most often non-discursively brought along for the ride as part and parcel of consuming other more focal products’ content or packaging. Beyond absent presence, the second duty of plastic is its versatility. Part of plastic’s iconicity is derived, in some respects, similarly to sneakers which Denny (2021, 464) suggests have become ubiquitous because they can be used or appropriated by diverse individuals or groups that “exhibit a wide variety of behaviors and attitudes that problematize, ritualize, and instrumentalize” their consumption. Plastic, although materially malleable, is functionally and socially malleable also allowing it to be integrated seamlessly and versatilely into multiple consumption opportunities.

It is through the above two duties – its absent presence and versatility – that we can arrive at a definition of a passengerial marketplace icon: an artefact that, while marketable and complexly meaningful in its own right, is characterised by its furtive omnipresence in consumer culture and its supporting, rather than driving, role in the consumption of diverse and more conspicuous marketplace icons and their consequences for various actants. The stipulation of “consequences” in our definition is important. Passengerial marketplace icons, while discreet within the consumption experiences they support and accompany, can have material consequences beyond their intended journeys – such as plastic’s impact on wildlife, oceans, and population health. Silchenko and Visconti (2021) in their contribution to the Marketplace Icons series lament that previous contributions mostly focused on presenting how singular and unconnected artefacts have become iconic, to the detriment of considering the implications of iconicity within, or for, the market more broadly. Conceptualising plastic as a passengerial marketplace icon, we hope, helps to redress that omission.
Passengerial marketplace icons have the potential to cast a long shadow in society, remaining curiously hidden from individual consumers’ discursive consciousness until they cause trouble. Davis (2015, 234) has called that legacy one of *slow violence*, “where violence is displaced and extended over time”. To contextualise the slow violence of passengerial marketplace icons, let us turn to the dys-appearing role of plastic at music festivals. Chaney (2020) discusses the rock festival as an iconic marketplace site for personal expression and hypercommunal experiences of emotion, but such functions are only made materially possible by the absent presence of plastic in its various forms (e.g. polyethylene terephthalate bottles and food trays, polypropylene cups and straws, glitter, nylon tents and umbrellas, polyester band t-shirts and fold-up chairs, PVC rain boots, and so on). Although largely hidden within the overall gestalt of the festival’s living atmosphere, plastic inevitably dys-appears as the grotesque amount of garbage left behind when the festival ends. Remnants of plastic waste left over from the iconic Woodstock rock festival in 1969 can still be found on the site today, providing a small indication of the hidden and lasting consequences of festivals’ passengerial attachments (Gray 2019).

The concept of passengerial marketplace icon allows us to confront the agency of certain objects to travel through the environment and become “contested matter” (Hawkins 2009b, 43), long after we have disembarked with them on our journeys. Plastic is not alone in its passengerial iconicity. Nuclear energy, for instance, inconspicuously powers and underpins all manner of marketplaces, workplaces, and consumption spaces within our electrified consumer cultures. Like plastic, nuclear energy was once considered a *wonder-stuff* during the “Atomic Age” but has stepped down to a level of furtiveness. Today, though many of us often do not “see” or even talk about nuclear energy in our day to day lives, it accompanies us on our experiential journeys with manifold marketplace icons that directly or indirectly require electricity. The iconicity of nuclear energy derives from its absent presence and versatility, only dys-appearing to us when it “manifests as a problematic or disharmonious thing” (Leder 1990, 70) such as contaminants entering the environment, radiation poisoning, and catastrophes like Chernobyl and Fukushima Daiichi. Theorising the dys-appearance and slow violence of passengerial icons within consumer culture opens a potentially promising pathway for critical marketing studies and consumer research.

**Conclusion**

Exploring the iconicity of plastic has allowed us to consider the importance of absent presence and versatility in facilitating and achieving furtive omnipresence in consumer culture. Our contribution to the *CMC Marketplace Icons* series more broadly has been in highlighting the functioning of passengerial marketplace icons in the substantiation and propagation of production, markets, and consumption. The individual consumer’s focus has, for much of consumer culture’s history, been trained on pilot objects: the status-signally luxury good, the refreshing mouthful of soda, or the new flashy gadget, and not on their equally iconic but furtive passengers such as plastic. Passengerial icons hitch a ride on the charismatic products and services they help bring to market and remain largely unnoticed by consumers until they inevitably claim our thematic focus through unintended dysfunctions.

Much like Leder (1990) sees the invisibility of our bodies (“the absent body”) as a necessary, everyday condition of human lived experience, the inconspicuousness of passengerial icons is an important condition for enabling consumer culture to continue unperturbed. For consumer culture to function responsibly and sustainably however, market actors need to force awareness of the slow violence of its iconic passengers *before* they dys-appear and require action.

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