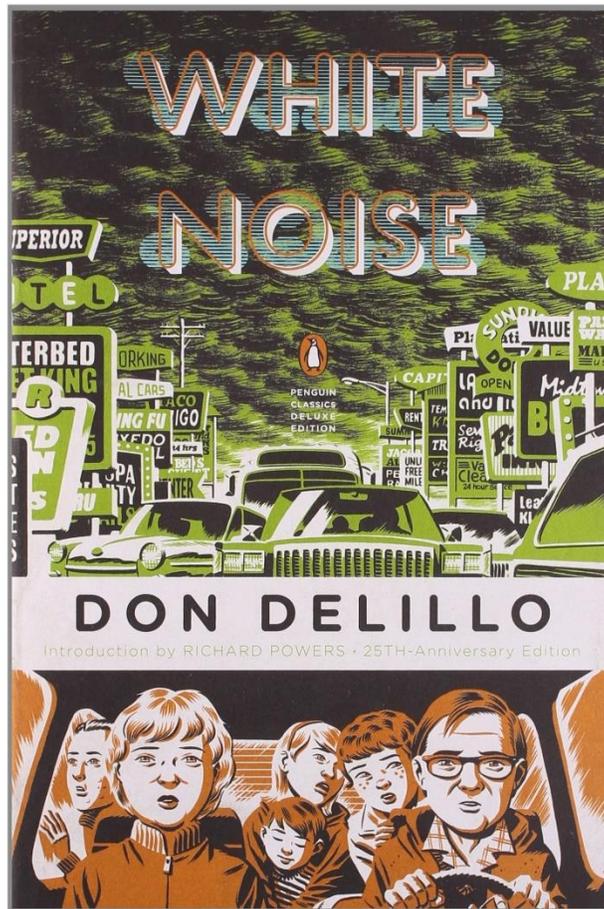


## Consumerism and Man-made Disaster in Don Delillo's *White Noise*

J. Kastrokumar and V. Gnanaprakasam

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Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/White-Noise-Don-DeLillo/dp/0143105981>

### Abstract

Don DeLillo is one of the titans of American fiction. This paper focuses on the negative effects of consumerism on people in the postmodern era in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1986). My analysis is based on postmodern theories, examining the threat of consumerism to humans. On the physical level, people living in the consumerist society cannot avoid environmental and toxic hazards. *White Noise* highlights the obsessive fear of dying, mysterious deaths of men and

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man-made environmental disaster, a very common but rarely discussed phobia. In *White Noise*, all plots tend toward death. The airborne toxicity threatening cloud of dangerous chemicals, provides a particularly frightening image of technology gone terribly, fatally awry. Jack Gladney is the narrator and principal character of *White Noise*. As the chairman of Hitler studies at the college-on-the-Hill, Jack shrouds himself in the distinguished, stately trapping of a successful academic.

**Key words:** Consumerism, Disaster, Schizophrenia, Toxicity and Technology

### Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the dangers that we fear are not as straightforward as the atomic bomb that wiped out the whole urban areas of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War II. Unexpectedly, contemporary culture faces another sort of risk, which David B. Morris in "Editorial manager's Introduction—Environment: The White Noise of Health" (1996) alludes to as "*White Noise*":

The new peril from natural corruption is greater than the atomic war. We live with its harm regularly. We can't trash a generally useful reprobate—like the bomb—to fill in as the objective for our challenge and disappointment. The adversaries are all over the place and incorporate us, particularly in our social parts as hapless, yet a long way from honest, shoppers. Condition is the unnoticed, certain *White Noise* encompasses and interpenetrates human wellbeing. (11-2)

More often, *White Noise* is a sort of clamour that is delivered by joining hints of every unique scope of frequencies together. Be that as it may, in this citation, David B. Morris characterizes *White Noise* the natural threats got from consumer culture. As per Morris, we live with these sorts of risk constantly, in the case of acknowledging it or not, and the adversaries are ourselves, the persevering consumers. Maybe, the individuals who are influenced by man-made catastrophes are not blameless casualties of unanticipated tragedies, but rather themselves instigators who must be considered in charge of their impolite activity of joining the perpetual consumerist cycle.

*White Noise*, DeLillo's 1985 novel which received the National Book Award, additionally portrays *White Noise* as the inescapable toxic environment. However, I argue that *White Noise* in this novel refers to environmental threats derived from the postmodern consumerist condition which can be characterized in two ways: firstly, describing the toxicity of the postmodern consumerist condition from which nobody can get away; and secondly referring to the logic of consumerism that penetrates all beings and all places. This kind of white noise exists everywhere and in everything, manipulating people's minds and behaviour.

This paper concentrates on the impacts of consumerism on consumer health and the manners by which the customers in *White Noise* react to these new sorts of threats: the unavoidable toxicity in the postmodern consumerist society and the logic of consumerism which controls consumers. It argues that the consumer's ignorant act of turning towards consumerist ecstasy contributes to increasing environmental hazards, which in turn inevitably harm physical

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and mental health. Furthermore, this paper examines the vicious cycle of consumerism. Firstly, people are enticed into believing that the products they consume determine their identities. As a result, they perpetually buy and surround themselves with many commodities generating suffering from the toxicity of those products. They are thus inextricably enmeshed in this vicious circle.

### **Consumerism's Impact on Customer Health**

This paper looks at consumerism's effect on people's mental and physical health as depicted in *White Noise*. It characterizes the new type of postmodern threats referred to as white noise in *White Noise* in two courses: as the threats of the postmodern consumerist condition and the rationale of consumerism. The principal importance of white noise is the unavoidable toxicity that prevails in the postmodern consumerist condition. DeLillo strikingly delineates this toxicity as being found in day by day products, existing wherever inside society, pervading presence, and being unidentifiable. Thus, individuals cannot maintain a strategic distance from this sort of threat and are compelled to endure both physically and mentally.

In addition to toxicity, *White Noise* conveys an additional meaning: the logic of consumerism and its mesmerizing power. This logic of consumerism and its mesmerizing power can cause people serious mental issues, leading people towards defective perceptions, a consumerist sort of schizophrenia. Schizophrenia in the clinical sense is a crazy issue or gathering of maniacal issue set apart by seriously impeded reasoning, feelings and conduct making a patient put some distance between reality. Schizophrenia in postmodern hypothesis, in any case, is not quite the same as that in the clinical sense. The qualities of schizophrenia have been characterized by numerous postmodern faultfinders however can be sorted into two principle perspectives. Right off the bat, Jonah Peretti, by alluding to Fredric Jameson's Postmodernism, or, Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1992), declares in "Free enterprise and Schizophrenia" (1996) that schizophrenia is set apart by the powerlessness to see the correct limits between implications, or as it were, amongst connoted and signifier. For the other trademark, Mark Currie clarifies in his paper, "Culture and Schizophrenia" (1998), that as indicated by Jacques Lacan, schizophrenia is characterized as a semantic issue and is regularly observed as disunity inside the identity, where diverse perspectives can't be bound together in the pronoun "I". At the point when the connection amongst meant and signifier separates, the schizophrenic will be denied of individual character. At the end of the day, the individual personality is the impact of a specific worldly union of the past and the future with the present, one in which the procedure of meaning can happen. In any case, with the breakdown of the implying bind we can't bring together the past, present, and eventual fate of sentences in the dialect, and are in this manner, denied of a capacity to join the past, present, and fate of our own true to life encounters or clairvoyant lives. Subsequently, a schizophrenic is lessened to an ordeal of unadulterated material signifiers, a progression of unadulterated and random present minutes. Also, as far as consumerist practices, consumerism and the media mentally condition individuals into trusting that their personality isn't settled and can be changed freely by devouring the items, making them entertain themselves with the unceasing present of consumerist happiness. Consumers in the postmodern world in this manner have a disunified personality (DeLillo 96-114).

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The inability to see the boundaries between meanings, the first characteristic of schizophrenia, resembles one of Dylar's effects. Dylar, the experimental drug which is introduced to kill fear of the death, functions as a product providing only illusive promise to desperate consumers such as Babette and Jack Gladney. It should be noted that the side effect of this drug is confusing "words with the things they referred to" (Delillo 309) or the inability to see the difference between the word and its real meaning. Willie Mink, the project manager of this drug, is himself a clear example illustrating this point. He is a schizophrenic who sits in front of the TV., continually consuming products in the form of Dylar, and seeing no difference between language and reality. Mink fixes his eyes on the flickering TV. screen emitting no sound. The way Mink unknowingly acts in response to what Jack says is indicative of the way consumers blindly believe what the media tells them. When Jack says, "hail of bullets," and "fusillade," Mink acts in a manner as if he were really being shot. "He hit the floor, began crawling toward the bathroom . . . showing real terror. . . He tried to wriggle behind the bowl, both arms over his head, his legs tight together" (Delillo 311). Here, Mink believes completely in what others say, ignoring logic and his own senses. In the same way, mindless consumers believe unquestioningly in the media even more so than their own perception. In the depthless society where the real has disappeared, the media as a form of simulation is upheld as the most important perspective. The influence of the media is so powerful that people ignore their own senses, do not consider the original or the real source, and believe everything the media entrusts to them. For instance, Steffie, with this schizophrenic symptom, insists that "we have to boil our water" just because "it said on the radio" (p. 34). In fact, there is no need to boil water at all, but Steffie who likes to watch TV. and listens to the radio is convinced she should follow what the media instructs her to do. We can view these characters as schizophrenics who develop the symptoms that are announced and confirmed by the media.

With respect to the second normal for schizophrenia, consumerism causes a disunified identity. At the end of the day, it denies individuals of a genuine individual character. The media conditions individuals so firmly that their personality moves toward becoming reliant on the picture of the products they purchase. In this way, Jack needs to shop keeping in mind the end goal to fill himself with alluring pictures. As Jack states:

I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I forgotten existed. . . Our images appeared on mirrored columns, in glassware and chrome, on TV. monitors in security rooms. (p. 84)

Jack feels that he himself has no genuine personality and that he should buy products for the pictures he needs to wear to discover his identity. In *White Noise*, the best approach to pick up character in the postmodern consumerist society is to purchase and show products as one's very own portrayal picture. Nigel Watson states in "Postmodernism and Lifestyles" in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* (2005) that:

People actively wish to join in and actively desire the opportunities for self-expression and display which are provided by the choices of the pink shopping malls. . . . We like to

identify with the style that best represents the way that we wish to be seen. (p. 37)

This description matches that of Jack Gladney, the father of the Gladney children and a university professor, who attempts to boost his confidence and create his authority by consuming products and altering his appearance. Jack admits, "I am the false character that follows the name around" (p. 17).

### **Self-Hallucination as a Way Out**

In spite of the fact that the general population in *White Noise*, or if nothing else Jack Gladney, appears to understand that they are encompassed by the inevitable passing brought upon them by the products they purchase, causing enduring both physically and rationally, they attempt to overlook this reality and swing to the illusive solace that consumerism gives.

The characters in the novel additionally swing to consumerism as a system for sidestepping their threat of death and ecological dangers. Consumerism produces numerous products offering illusive guarantee of solace and an answer for death issues to the frantic consumers caught in the harmful and consumerist condition. Purchasers trust that consumer products can help them in their miserable circumstance. The medication Dylar is an unmistakable case of this point. Dylar represents the ultimate form of consumer product as it is believed to eliminate the fear of death itself. Although it proves ineffective with Babette, Jack wants to take this drug to get rid of his fear and anxiety. Dylar is similar to any other consumer product in the way that it makes illusive promise to fulfil consumers' needs and relieve them from mental and physical health problems. Although the promise is illusive and impossible, desperate people are willing to take it as a last refuge they can cling to in the postmodern world where threats are ubiquitous. In the same way, Jack believes that if he thinks Dylar will help him, it will help him no matter how strong or weak Dylar is. Jack tells Denise, his daughter, that "the power of suggestion could be more important than side effects" (p. 251). Although Denise thinks this noise stupid, Jack says, "I am eager to be humored, to be fooled. . . This is what happens . . . to desperate people" (p. 251). This communication indicates that the people are so hopeless that they are eager to be fooled. They are ready to believe anything and indulge themselves in consumerist ecstasy.

Apart from Dylar, tabloids are another type of product that offers illusive guarantee in the deadly society. The sensationalist newspapers contain stories that claim to soothe consumers of their physical and mental enduring. As Jack considers, "The newspaper future, with its system of a confident wind to prophetically calamitous occasions, was maybe not all that exceptionally remote from our own prompt encounter. . . Out of some persistent sense of large-scale ruin, we kept creating hope" (p. 146-47). Here Tabloids capacity, as a method for turning appalling occasions into pleasurable ones and help ease individuals' uneasiness in the nearness of casualty and vulnerability. Stories in tabloids, for example, star chatter furthermore, the articles examining marvel medications to cure toxicity related maladies, can occupy individuals from their hopelessness. In one newspaper, it is expressed that "mouse cries have been estimated at forty thousand cycles for each second. Another comparable story depicts wonder drugs that are

delivered in the weightless environment of space and can cure anxiety, corpulence, and state of mind swings. In spite of the fact that this sort of story makes a fairly false and illusive expectation that individuals can cure themselves when they confront unavoidable harmful threats, it does effectively offer the expectation that postmodern individuals are frantically hunting down.

Individuals not only consume such products as Dylar and the tabloids but also resort to the idea that wealth and commodities can prevent them from facing environmental hazards. Jack, for example, tries to convince himself that the disaster will not happen to the upper middle class, the privileged class with the power to buy and thus to take refuge in consumerist ecstasy. Jack considers on natural and man-made disasters:

These things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas.

Society is set up in such a way that it's the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters. People in low-lying areas get the floods, people in shanties get the hurricanes and tornadoes. (p. 114)

Jack trusts that, as a college professor, his social and financial status can protect him from a wide range of disasters. He lets himself know: "I'm the head of a department. I don't see myself escaping an airborne toxic event" (p. 117). His presumption is that on the off chance that he has a solid house in a good location and the energy to purchase products, he won't be influenced by ecological perils. Moreover, it is fascinating to take note of that consumerism twists the ideas of death, life, and existence. In a general public moderately free from consumerism, for example, Tibet, the best approach to react to death is not quite the same as that in the consumerist society. Tibetans see death as a natural phenomenon that one cannot avoid; thus, they accept death for what it is.

In the consumerist society people reject death and try to run away from it by turning to consumer products. People cannot easily accept death because death in this kind of society is unnatural. As Jack states, "There's something artificial about my death. It's shallow, unfulfilling. I don't belong to the earth or sky" (p. 283). Jack's death is artificial because he has been exposed to human-made toxic substances. In addition, death in this kind of society is fearful because it is inevitably premature. To show individuals can bite the dust any moment on account of the toxic environments. This reality reflects the fact that death in the consumerist society is not characteristic however happens to buyers through their own demonstration of determined purchasing. Moreover, consumerism misshapes the consumers' thoughts of presence. In Tibet, individuals discover that they can discover genuine bliss by relinquishing everything. Interestingly, in America, individuals are mentally conditioned into trusting that their presence and joy rely upon consumer products. Therefore, they surmise that they can sidestep passing by purchasing merchandise. It ought to likewise be noted that directly after the lethal occasion at the school and one caused by a break of a Nyodene D tank, the Gladneys quickly go shopping. The juxtaposition of these death scenes and the general store scene infers that in the wake of being debilitated by death occurrences, Jack's family tries to grab after the feeling of satisfaction,

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security, and recharging through consumerism. Jack's reflection on his consumerist consumption further elaborates this point:

It seemed to me that Babette and I, in the mass and variety of our purchases, in the sheer plentitude those crowded bags suggested, the weight and size and number, the familiar package designs and vivid lettering, the giant sizes, the family bargain packs with Day-Glo sale stickers, in the sense of replenishment we felt, the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls—it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, expect less, who plan their lives around lonely walks in the evening. (p. 20)

As a matter of fact, Jack and his family have never determined any feeling that all is well with the world or prosperity from utilization. It can be translated that those "who require less, expect less, who design their lives around forlorn strolls at night" (p. 20) are probably going to have a superior shot of straightforward happiness. At any rate, they are not one or the other presented to unsafe threats that originate from consumer products nor lost in what is mixed up as consumerist happiness.

The novel ends with a depiction of postmodern consumers. They delight in the consumer world since consumerism itself and different items it gives give them expectation and importance in spite of the fact that they are illusive and discharge. Tabloids and holographic scanners are both the results of consumerism, offering illusive trusts in customers that everything is fine. The scanners are portrayed as a spiritualist element that individuals can continuously rely upon. For desperate customers assaulted by toxic threats, tabloids give the domain of superstition and different sorts of diversions for example, stars' stories and false advertisements of stunning drugs that can cure a wide range of diseases caused by consumerism. Regardless of how serious the confusion and the panic are, consumers attempt to seek for comfort in consumerism.

## Conclusions

In *White Noise*, Don DeLillo presents a vivid picture of the post-modern toxic world that provides people with no real certainty, but rather a fear of death and fatal diseases. It is a world where people's minds and behaviours are manipulated by the logic of consumerism. Consumerism gives consumer products that can mortally debilitate individuals' lives from one perspective, furthermore, offer the illusive guarantee of getting away from that fatal threat or death fear through the demonstration of expending products, for example, Dylar and tabloids on the other. Nonetheless, overlooking the way that consumerism is the genuine reason for the deadly threats and swinging to it as a means of looking for comfort is not a wise choice. Albeit some contend that nobody can get away from the toxicity postmodern consumerist condition, we can at any rate change our method for life, neither encircle ourselves with the threat in the form of consumer products nor supporting the consumerist circle. Through these practices we may have a glimpse of some solution for this depressing society. Each individual act can contribute to either more severe environmental hazards, or the restoration of the environment.

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