

Consumption Reduction: A Challenge For Behaviour Change in The Future



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Abstract

The need to shift the economies and societies onto a more sustainable path is widely acknowledged in principle, yet difficult to make substantive progress towards in practice, as the worsening of critical indicators on CO₂ emissions or rainforest destruction demonstrates. A more sustainable future depends upon many things, including getting those within wealthier economies to consume both differently and less. However, the former has proven much more palatable for companies and governments than the latter. Changes to technologies, production systems, and business models will play important roles in progressing towards sustainability but will be insufficient in the face of a population growing in size and consumption intensity. Global ecological footprint data shows that we went beyond consuming what the planet can provide without degrading environmental systems in the mid-1980s, so inevitably progress towards sustainability will partly depend on us desiring and consuming less. Consumption reduction, even if agreed upon as a societal priority, will be complicated to promote, not least because the need to consume less is unequally distributed between and within societies.

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There are many countries where environmental destruction is driven by poverty rather than wealth. Such places still require economic growth and consumption expansion to progress towards sustainability. It is within mature industrialised economies, that degrowth and some forms of consumption reduction are most necessary. Complexity is also created by the interconnections between richer and poorer economies. Ending long-haul flights for tourism might seem a simple step towards carbon reduction and sustainability. It would however risk devastating the economies of poorer tourism-dependent countries, almost inevitably heralding the liquidation of environmental resources (such as forests) that attract the tourists. Consumption reduction opportunities therefore need to be understood within a context of the overall circumstances and lifestyles within which someone's consumption takes place and the holistic consumption and production systems through which their wants and needs are met. The need to adjust or reduce consumption is also unequal across different aspects of a typical consumer lifestyle. An "every little helps" mentality has a tendency to focus pro-sustainability behaviour (PSB) campaigns on peripheral elements of consumption with a marginal impact, such as not overcharging mobile phones or avoiding single-use shopping bags or plastic straws.

The "European Environmental Impact of Products" project analysed 255 domestic product types in terms of pollution, greenhouse gas emissions and human and environmental health risks. It concluded that 70–80% of impacts relate to what we eat and drink, our homes (including their construction and maintenance and their domestic power) and our transport for work, shopping and leisure. The remaining impacts are mostly from water use, domestic equipment (including appliances, computers and home entertainment), furniture, clothing and shoes. This provides a relatively clearly defined consumption agenda that policy-makers, companies and consumers can address to seek opportunities to reduce or reconfigure consumption more sustainably. In the early decades of discussions about sustainability, the perceived primacy of the need for economic growth pushed the topic of consumption reduction to the margins. However, first, the global credit crunch of 2008 and then the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic have challenged the neo-liberal orthodoxy based on ever-expanding economic growth, consumption and globalisation. From the radical protests of the Occupy Wall Street or Extinction Rebellion movements to the less radical Slow Consumption or Voluntary Simplicity movements, alternatives to a future predicated on expanding consumption are increasingly being discussed. The COVID crisis initially impacted consumption through lockdown measures affecting whole populations and particularly affecting the travel and tourism, non-food retailing, hospitality and culture sectors. Its employment impacts then began to impact individuals' and households' consumption more selectively, with the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) forecasting that 5 million EU jobs would be lost due to the pandemic 2019–2022.

PERSPECTIVES ON CONSUMPTION

Consumption can be considered in several ways in order to understand the potential for, and implications of, its reduction:

- **Function and Utility:** We consume to satisfy our wants and needs for sustenance, clothing, shelter, healthcare, education, entertainment, communication and many other necessary or desirable things. We also seek more foundational, but taken-for-granted, forms of utility such as cleanliness, comfort and convenience. As economies develop, so consumers' discretionary spending power extends, and the mix of expenditure

between necessities and luxuries or between meeting existential needs and experiential desires, evolves. One interesting aspect of the sustainable consumption debate is the difficulty of drawing a clear boundary between essential needs and desirable wants and the tendency of the literature to simply conflate them. There is also a tendency for yesterday's "luxuries" to become tomorrow's "necessities".

- **Economic:** Private consumption represents a substantial portion of an economy –55% of 2017 Eurozone GDP according to the European Central Bank's 2018 "Economic Bulletin (Issue 5)" – but such data does not capture all consumption. We may consume in ways leaving no economic footprint because they involve products (like food, clothes or flowers) we produce ourselves, are swapped or lent, that the planet provides without charge (such as foraged food, breathable air or a beautiful view), or involve goods and services (like childcare) provided by family and friends for love rather than money. Within the formal economy, pricing is one way to influence and reduce consumption. Indeed, economists could argue that there is no inherent behavioural challenge in the pursuit of sustainability. Adjusting prices to reflect the full socio-environmental costs of all we purchase would, theoretically, transform economies and societies into sustainable ones at a stroke. It remains theoretical because it depends upon those "full" costs being calculable, known and agreed, and on consumers, investors, companies and governments accepting they should be met. Previous responses to proposals to introduce "carbon taxes" to reduce fossil fuel consumption and CO2 emissions illustrate how challenging this would be to achieve in practice.

- **Symbolism:** Sociologically, consumption plays an important role in signalling our status, identity, worldview and values to others and can become a focus for our individual ambitions and the pursuit of meaning. One challenge for consumption reduction is that it is easier to signal through the presence of something than through its absence. Consumption also reinforces social bonds through the sharing of meals or the giving and receiving of gifts. The commercialisation, and cross-border expansion, of cultural events including Christmas, Diwali, Valentine's Day, Easter or Chinese New Year has also stimulated new forms and levels of symbolically-loaded consumption along with a "market resistance" backlash against it.

- **Physical:** Discussions about the consumption predominantly frame it as a socio-economic phenomenon. The sustainability movement has focussed attention instead on consumption's physical implications through the extraction and transformation of resources (particularly energy) and the generation of pollution and waste. Ocean microplastics, rising atmospheric CO2 levels and rainforest clearances are all aspects of the physical costs of our consumption and production. The physical impact of a given unit of consumption can vary significantly if production methods shift. Electricity from fossil fuels has a different level and mix of impacts to energy from hydro-electric or nuclear sources, although each has its environmental burdens. A physical view of consumption has led to new concepts such as "household metabolism" to depict the efficiency and various consequences of the physical flow of resources through our homes. Consumption reduction can involve reducing the amount of utility accessed (e.g. buying and consuming less of something), decreased economic activity attributed to a given consumption behaviour (e.g. starting to grow your own food) and/or a reduction in the energy or physical resources required to deliver particular consumer benefits (e.g. buying a second-hand rather than new product). Reducing the environmental impact of consumption may partly be assisted by the "decoupling" of the economic value of consumption from its environmental costs. This is something that has long been observable when prices change. A "buy-one-get-one-free" offer effectively doubles the environmental cost of a given product, and for food, it also increases the risks of over-consumption and waste. Conversely, an environmental tax increasing a product's price reduces the physical

impact of a given expenditure. Improving the resource efficiency of production and consumption systems, design changes that remove impactful ingredients or promote recycling and repair, and improving product longevity or consumption based on sharing and access to durable goods rather than individual ownership are all methods by which such decoupling can occur. The relationship between the economic and physical aspects of consumption is complex, and negative outcomes can arise from apparently beneficial reductions in consumption. If consumers are persuaded to demand less of a given damaging product, then (a) the price should fall, potentially re-stoking demand and resulting in a higher level of physical impact for the same economic value and (b) to make a profit from a lower price and a higher production volume, producers are likely to cut costs in ways that may worsen social and environmental quality. Similarly, the “rebound effect” considers what happens to the money that consumers may save by engaging in cost-positive consumption reduction behaviours such as energy saving. Investing money saved in a discounted long-haul flight, or donating it to an environmental charity, will have very different impacts on the sustainability of a consumer’s lifestyle.

PROBLEMATIC CONSUMPTION: QUALITY VS QUANTITY

Discussions about the need for consumption reduction are often couched in terms of a broadly stated set of problems related to environmental or human impacts, such as unsustainability described as a painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more. However, understanding and addressing such problems is aided by breaking consumption down according to specific (but potentially overlapping) problematic attributes that might prompt anti-consumption sentiments and consumption reduction efforts. Sustainability concerns and measurements such as “ecofootprints” often frame the need for consumption reduction in quantitative terms; however, problematic consumption can also reflect qualitative attributes concerning what is consumed and how:

- **Excessive Consumption:** “Hyper” or excessive consumption is often said to characterise life in contemporary industrialised societies, but the exact point at which consumption becomes excessive is hard to define. Attempts to differentiate between necessary and unnecessary air travel have, for example, proven difficult. More obvious perhaps are the forms of consumption that have passed well beyond that boundary. Owning a home or a pair of shoes is easy to recognise as a necessity, owning a second home, or a fiftieth pair of shoes, or engaging in space tourism, less so.
- **Wasteful Consumption:** Inefficiency through waste leads to over-consumption. Food waste has knock-on socio- environmental effects from the use of additional land, water and energy for food production and higher food prices. There are other areas where materially inefficient consumer choices can be viewed as wasteful including disposing of “unfashionable” but wearable clothes, driving when you could walk or cycle and over- heating homes to facilitate T-shirt wearing in winter.
- **Subsidised Consumption:** Arguably the failure to internalise the full external costs of consumption/ production systems means that much of our consumption is excessive and wasteful because it is subsidised (by the environment or other people). However, there are specific forms of consumption (particularly carbon critical sectors such as energy, flying, fuel and food) that are boosted through producer subsidies reducing consumer prices and therefore promoting over-consumption and waste.

PROBLEMATIC CONSUMPTION: MOTIVATIONS VS CONSEQUENCES

Making progress towards sustainable consumption is often framed simplistically as about persuading individual consumers to buy less and to meet their needs by choosing differently. This overlooks some key complexities relating to consumer behaviour (and PSBs in particular). Firstly, although purchase may be the most economically significant element of consumption, it is not the entire story. From a physical and sustainability perspective, behaviours surrounding the use and disposal of a product like a car or washing machine may be more significant. Secondly, consumption is not necessarily an individual affair. We may buy for others, and many of the most significant behaviours such as food, energy, transport and waste decisions and behaviours are shaped by the households or friendship groups to which we belong. Finally, consumption may not reflect free and rational choices. Our behaviours may be constrained and shaped by habit, choice restrictions, infrastructural barriers, social norms, cultural values, emotions or circumstances.

One quirk of conventional consumer behaviour theory when considering sustainability is that “green” consumers are judged by the motivations behind their choices. Not buying meat because you understand the embedded carbon burden makes you a green consumer, not being able to afford it just makes you poor. If you choose to buy a new electric car, drive it many miles to visit an eco-tourism destination, but then destroy it by crashing into the remaining specimen of a protected tree and injuring yourself, marketers will still classify you as a “green” or “ethical” consumer. What a sustainability perspective brings is a focus on the socio-environmental consequences of our consumption behaviours, as well as on the motivations and intentions behind them. This provides a further set of potentially problematic attributes of the consumption that we may wish to reduce:

Harmful Consumption: The impacts of some production/ consumption systems on the planet or society make them inherently unsustainable irrespective of the quantity consumed. The global trade in endangered species, destruction of peat bogs for soil conditioner, or the consumption of social or printed media or promoting hate would represent examples.

Unhealthy Consumption: Some products (like cigarettes) are inherently unhealthy, but for others, excessive consumption can generate negative utility via health impacts. Of particular concern is the impact of food of poor nutritional quality and in excessive quantity. Excessive social media consumption is also increasingly recognised as having negative health impacts. Driving at excessive speed could also be viewed in this category due to the health impacts of increased air pollution and the risks involved. Reducing unhealthy consumption would have a knock-on benefit of reducing consumption of healthcare products and services, and it has been a primary focus of the discipline of social marketing since its inception.

Addictive Consumption: Certain types of consumption that can be unhealthy are linked to addictive behaviours involving products including food, alcohol, tobacco, opioids, gambling products, video gaming and mobile phone use. For such behaviours consumers may want to reduce their consumption but lack the necessary sense of self-efficacy, requiring help from third parties such as health providers or advice services.

Compensatory Consumption: The “hedonic treadmill” metaphor characterises life in industrialised consumer economies as a vicious circle of working hard to earn enough to consume what’s needed to cheer us up after working so hard. If some consumption acts are primarily conducted to compensate for other experiences,

there may be scope to switch towards more sustainable “rewards” or to reduce consumption by improving those experiences or reframing our perceptions about them.

Socially Obligatory Consumption: Although consumption is often framed as reflecting an individual’s inherent wants and needs, in practice some consumption responds to a sense of social obligation (and therefore our need for social acceptance). This can apply to the commercialisation of those religious and cultural celebrations that manufacturers have successfully leveraged into festivals of consumption of chocolate eggs, fireworks, novelty items and cards. Similarly, according to the Carbon Literacy Project, the many “thank you” emails sent at the end of a chain of correspondence generate an estimated 4g of CO₂ equivalent each.

Conspicuous Consumption: Although there is debate over whether this is a behaviour of the rich, or of those who want to appear richer, there is evidence that some people engage in “status- orientated consumption” when purchasing certain clothing brands or homes and vehicles larger than they need. Conspicuousness in consumption is however only truly problematic when combined with one of the other attributes identified above.

CONSUMPTION REDUCTION AS BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

Changing or directing behaviour is a focus of multiple social science disciplines and encompasses laws and their enforcement, political campaigning, education, fiscal policy, urban planning, building and product design, health promotion and many other fields. Changing behaviours to reduce consumption is of interest to commercial marketers seeking to make their products, companies and industries more sustainable; to policy- makers seeking to achieve societal goals related to climate change and wider sustainability; and to sustainability- orientated NGOs. The literature on influencing sustainable consumption frequently splits into two broad (and sometimes antagonistic) camps. One, rooted in psychology, focusses on the motivations and choices (particularly purchases) of individual consumers. The other, rooted in sociology, is concerned with social practices, social influences and the unconscious habits that shape how we run our households and lives. The core consumption categories from a sustainability perspective clearly combine both approaches. Buying a particular car or fridge, choosing new clothes, installing a boiler or picking local, organic, or fairtrade produce are classic consumer behaviour decision-making scenarios. Driving or maintaining a car, remembering to close the fridge, washing clothes, operating a central heating system or dealing with food leftovers are more likely to be driven by habit. The range of factors with the potential to shape and potentially reduce consumption is usefully summarised in the “SHIFT” framework of White et al. (2019):

- **Social Influence:** Including social norms that encourage or oblige us to share in behaviours adopted by those we identify with and avoid those they might disapprove of; and the adoption and projection of a social identity that we feel will make a good impression on others (such as being “a recycler”);
- **Habit Formation:** Many of the most important behaviours for sustainability, including food shopping, transport choice, household energy use and waste disposal are strongly habitual rather than being determined by individual conscious decisions. This makes it important to get people to confront and break unsustainable habits and to encourage them to form new and better ones;

- **Individual Self:** The classic behavioural foundations of self-interest still apply in PSBs and appealing to self-interest is one means to promote consumption reduction, for example stressing the money-saving benefits of reduced energy use. PSBs are also more likely to be adopted if they match our sense of self-identity and generate a sense of self-efficacy in making a positive difference;
- **Feelings and Cognition:** There is a “head and heart” dimension to PSBs in that consumers may respond to emotional appeals and cues that generate guilt, fear, pride or hope and also to factual information about sustainability problems and the potential for particular behaviours to address them;
- **Tangibility:** To counter the sense that sustainability issues can seem abstract and relating to the future and to distant others by stressing the more immediate, local and tangible issues and impacts. Another dimension of tangibility is the opportunity to promote the dematerialisation of consumption with less emphasis placed on consumers owning tangible goods.

The levers within the SHIFT framework can be used individually or in combination to persuade consumers to purchase less, choose more sustainable options, engage in less wasteful consumption practices and even play new roles (including as co-creators) within emerging resource-efficient “product-service systems”.

CONCLUSIONS

The prospects for consumption reduction may seem slight, and arguing for it is easily characterised as naïve or unrealistic at best, and at worst puritanical, or hypocritical when delivered from a position of privilege. With the majority of the world’s population still seeking to survive on under \$5 per day, and the global economy still reeling from first the 2008 credit crunch and then the COVID pandemic, voluntary consumption reduction may seem like a strange priority to many. These things however are interconnected, and many of the recent and emerging crises are symptoms of the unsustainable nature of our production systems and our consumption levels. Pursuing consumption reduction represents a classic commons dilemma:

“... a phenomenon in which the members of a social group face choices in which selfish, individualistic, or uncooperative decisions, though seeming more rational by virtue of short-term benefits to separate players, produce undesirable long-term consequences for the group as a whole.” (Shultz & Holbrook, 1999 - Marketing and the tragedy of the commons: A synthesis, commentary, and analysis for action)

It runs contrary to our most fundamental biological instincts to accumulate resources to improve our chances of surviving and thriving. It is at odds with a materialist dominant social paradigm that values individualism and views consumption as the reward of hard work and a means to signal our success and identity. It may be difficult to achieve in practice within communities often physically structured in ways that promote socially atomised living or make car ownership seem necessary. It may also be hard to frame as attractive in the face of an avalanche of persuasive pro-consumption communication from manufacturers’ marketing or the glamorous instagrammed lifestyle portraits of social media influencers. We might have a powerful desire to be more sustainable consumers, but we also want to seem well-travelled, fashionable, attractive and successful to ourselves and to others in ways that prompt us to consume more. As a marketing challenge,

consumption reduction is something of a “hard” sell. Reframing consumption reduction as attractive may be challenging but is not impossible.

Consumption reduction has always been attractive to some people. For thousands of years a minority have rejected materialism as an expression of their religious beliefs, and it is notable that frugality is an explicit value within all the World’s major religious belief systems (although it seems to be one of the more easily overlooked ones in terms of religious practice).

But perhaps the most widespread and enduring illustration that people can embrace consumption reduction is the willingness of parents across the world to forego spending to save money to invest in their children’s education. This logic translates very neatly into a consumption reduction agenda to reduce carbon emissions and promote sustainability. Like education, changing our behaviours to desire and accumulate less could represent a vital investment in the quality of life and prospects of the next generation.

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