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Consumerism: A Society in Search of Satisfaction



[<<https://www.zmescience.com/medicine/brain-effects-effects-brain-0423/amp/>>, accessed 18/10/2022]

'Consumerism has become a hypnosis that keeps our culture immature, as it keeps us overly focused on ourselves and on material desires, instead of on cultivating deeper soul richness.'

— Sandra Ingerman

[<<https://quotefancy.com/quote/2314597/Sandra-Ingerman-Consumerism-has-become-a-hypnosis-that-keeps-our-culture-immature-as-it>>, accessed 18/10/2022]

Consumerism can be defined as the preoccupation of society with the acquisition of consumer goods, and it is the main contributor of economic growth and measure of the productive success, as well as ensuring the overall happiness and well-being of individuals in a capitalistic society.

Consumerism offers several positive effects; the economy is driven forward, it generates jobs for workers and wealth for business owners, it ensures the supply of goods and services that are in demand, it promotes competition between companies and resultant innovation, thereby ensuring a wide range of services and goods. Thus, potentially improving the quality of the lives of individuals who can afford these goods and services. One could argue that consumerism is important to the development of the economy on both a national and global scale.

However, psychologists and sociologists believe that consumerism creates a preoccupation with acquiring consumer goods that do not serve a genuine need or want but is rather about the conscious and/or unconscious desire to lift one's social status. As a result of this, it is believed that humans no longer base their worth and purpose on the quality of their relationships and connectedness with one another, but rather on the possession of certain materialistic items.

In addition, the increase in demand of goods brings with it an increase in production, which has been criticised for causing a breakdown of traditional cultures and ways of living; for weakening unselfish moral values; impoverishing many communities and civic lives; for creating environmental issues such as land wastage, pollution, high levels of waste, and depletion of natural resources; and the prevalence of negative psychological states such as stress, anxiety, insecurity, and depression. In addition, it has allowed for the psychological manipulation of consumers through sophisticated corporate advertising and marketing campaigns.

One might also argue that many individuals in society are 'consuming each other' – where the true value of oneself, and those of others, are not acknowledged or understood and we live disconnected from each other. The increased need for instant gratification and the fast, mass production in the supply chain of goods has led to many social ills; massive wealth inequalities, human trafficking, child labour and other injustices are major problems in our society.

Many people live in excess of what they actually need, while others are heavily deprived. But, regardless of whether we live in excess or in deficit, we remain dissatisfied with our lives. And, while there are many advantages to consumerism, it appears that the negatives far outweigh the benefits.

A radical change must be seen; we need to find ways to protect and conserve ourselves, each other, and our natural resources for generations to come. It is all our responsibility – institutions must make huge changes and adaptation to how they operate, and most importantly, education on unsustainable consumption remains a strong weapon to address this worldwide issue.

AIMS OF THE 2023 CAT

The 2023 Common Assessment Task will require you to explore the world of consumerism and to reflect on your own attitudes towards this, almost unavoidable, way of living. You will also be exposed to the greater negative impact of our consumeristic society and be asked to analyse, reflect on, and suggest a way forward. Question 4 will require you to research a problematic area in industry of your own choosing and then to thoroughly discuss a viable intervention strategy.

The aim of the CAT is to challenge you to:

1. Critically evaluate different sources and contexts to determine your ethical stance and identify areas of concern. Your educator will assist you with this process.
2. Realise the importance of questioning your lifestyle choices in the aims of understanding the degree to which your choices, actions and behaviours are ethical, responsible, and emotionally healthy.
3. Gain an understanding of the changes that are necessary for our society to become healthier. Ignoring the issues that are being caused by our consumeristic lifestyle will be detrimental to our global environment and to our people.
4. Understand that we are not entirely powerless in this trajectory – but change can only take place through collaborative action – communities, industry, civil society, and the government must work together to bring about positive change.
5. Actively engage with the resources and questions to ensure that you have gained the necessary skills to suggest a sincere and effective plan of action in Question 4. This will encourage you to consider what impact you are able to make in this world and how you can action this.

****Please note that a glossary of terms has been included at the end of this document. The words have been placed in order of source. Please utilise this resource, should you not understand the meaning of any words to ensure a full and proper grasp of the nuance and sentiments of the authors.***

*****Please note that the sources that follow in this document present perspectives and opinions of authors and journalists that aim to inform but may not necessarily offer alternative perspectives. You are encouraged to consider these alternative perspectives and then draw your own conclusion, provided you are able to justify these conclusions.***

NB: ASSESSMENT REQUIREMENTS

Question 3 (20 marks) and 4 (60 marks) are compulsory questions for assessment.

Please work through Questions 1 to Question 2 with your classmates and educator and take careful note of the comments and observations made. These will give you insight into the multiple perspectives of each contextual source that you may not have previously considered. This will aid you in providing quality responses in the CAT A and B.

Regarding your responses in both CAT A and CAT B – please ensure that you provide sufficient detail in your answers. You are required to think deeply about each question and to ensure that your opinions and thoughts are supported by valid reasoning.

QUESTION 1**CONSUMERISM: THE GOOD, THE BAD & THE UGLY**

Aim: To gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms behind, and influences of, consumerism on society.

Consumerism is the idea that increasing the consumption of goods and services purchased in the market is always a desirable goal, and that a person's well-being and happiness depend fundamentally on obtaining consumer goods and material possessions.

Consumer spending is the key driver of the economy and that encouraging consumers to spend is a major policy goal as it fuels economic growth. A healthy economy is signified by healthy consumer demand, which is influenced by how confident members feel about their own and their countries financial position, a high percentage of retail sales over a period, and the prices consumers are prepared to pay for goods. Business owners, workers in the industry, and owners of raw resources can profit from sales of consumer goods either directly or through downstream buyers*.

Consumerism also refers to the tendency of people living in a capitalist economy to engage in a lifestyle of excessive materialism that revolves around thoughtless and wasteful overconsumption. It is widely understood to contribute to the destruction of traditional values and ways of life, consumer exploitation by big business, environmental degradation, and negative psychological effects.



[<<https://climateandcapitalism.com/2018/03/23/ecosocialism-and-consumerism/>>]

High rates of thoughtless consumption often resulting in negative bank balances as real resources are used up to purchase goods that are not valued for their use but rather the image they portray. Consumerism creates incentives for consumers to take on unsustainable debt levels that contribute to financial crises and recessions*.

It can serve as a signal to others and help establish one's identity. When it comes to being a consumer, social factors (e.g., peer pressure, in-groups, advertisers) limit our free choice. Consumerism is blamed for increasing status anxiety, where people experience stress associated with social status and a perceived need to 'keep up with the Jones's' by increasing their consumption.

Consumerism is often criticised for creating a materialistic society that neglects other values. Traditional modes of production and ways of life are replaced by a focus on consuming ever more costly goods in larger quantities.

Consumerism is often associated with globalisation in promoting the production and consumption of globally traded goods and brands, which can be incompatible with local cultures and patterns of economic activity.

Psychological research has shown that people who organise their lives around consumerist goals, such as product acquisition, report poorer moods, greater unhappiness in relationships, and other psychological problems. Psychological experiments have shown that people exposed to consumerist values based on wealth, status, and material possessions display greater anxiety and depression. In other words, science shows that consumerism does not make people happy at all.

Moreover, consumerism begins to define people by what they own. According to some sociologists, mass culture popularised via the advertising industry creates consumers who play a passive role manipulated by brands, rather than as active and creative beings.



[<<https://medium.com/the-shadow/the-value-of-vandalism-e1e0395867fa>>, accessed 26/12/2022]

'People like shopping. There's a psychological dimension to it. We're trying to fill a void, we're trying to fulfil an emotional need,' said Mathis Wackernagel, founder, and president of the international research group Global Footprint Network.

[Paraphrased from: Hayes, A, 28/09/2022 Consumerism Explained: Definition, Economic Impact, Pros & Cons, Investopedia, <<https://www.investopedia.com/terms/c/consumerism.asp>>, 19/12/2022]

Please note that many of the questions that follow in this section refer to all levels of the supply chain. Consider all the levels when reflecting and responding.

The supply chain is a network of businesses and processes that contribute to the creation, distribution, and ultimately the sale of a product. A supply chain includes five levels: Planning (e.g., developing an overall strategy for the supply chain), Sourcing raw materials, Manufacturing, Delivery and Returns.

1.1 THE LOOKING GLASS DISCUSSION

Many of these questions are reflective questions that only require a facilitation of response from you – responses should be unique to your learners' communities – dependent on their socio-economic status and personal circumstances. Learners may well feel that their circumstances are different to those of their community. You will be required to lead your learners to think on many levels and to listen to the experiences of others.

- In what ways are the positive effects of consumerism discussed in this article relevant to your community?

Spend time going through the positive effects with your class (as mentioned in the article and from their own knowledge) and then discuss the relevancy with them.

- In what ways are the negative effects of consumerism discussed in this article relevant to your community?

Spend time going through the negative effects with your class (as mentioned in the article and from their own knowledge) and then discuss their relevancy with them.

- In what ways might they be irrelevant? **(Facilitate a discussion on this – relevant to learners and their communities)**
- Which communities are more vulnerable to the influence of consumerism? Why do you believe this?

This question refers to all levels of the supply chain. Draw your learners' attention to each of the levels and discuss these individually. You will need to discuss the different kinds of vulnerabilities of people as well.

- **Planning (e.g., developing an overall strategy for the supply chain) – those making the decisions don't consider those in the primary sector and how they might suffer because of the production of goods or the environmental impact. Therefore, the environment (including animals and plants) and people in the primary sector are vulnerable.**
- **Sourcing raw materials – primary industries (agriculture (farms/farmers), forestry, fishing, mining, and extraction of oil and gas) impacts the environment and workers in this industry are vulnerable to exploitation.**
- **Manufacturing – the environment (pollutant derivatives) and workers are vulnerable.**
- **Delivery and Returns – workers in this sector and consumers are vulnerable.**

A vulnerable consumer is a consumer who is particularly susceptible to detriment due to their personal circumstances.

- **Low capability due to financial issues**
- **Job loss and needing to sustain current standard of living**
- **Low resilience to marketing manipulations or an inability to say no**
- **Suffering a negative life event/chronic illness/difficult personal circumstances – spending money to appease 'negative' emotions (retail therapy)**

Other perspectives to consider ...

e.g., Wealthy people/middle-class citizens are more vulnerable to being manipulated into spending enormous amounts of money on things they don't need, to 'keep up with the Jones's' and/or to become indifferent or unempathetic of those who are struggling financially, etc.

Those who struggle financially are vulnerable to feeling unworthy or that their lives are unfair, since they see what others have and cannot afford these things. They may also attempt to buy goods on credit and accumulate large amounts of debt that they cannot repay or have their choices removed because they are desperate for money and are exploited as a result, etc.

- **What role do brands, and product labels play in your community? Which labels are most attractive? Why do you believe this?**

Branding means something for so many people. By linking yourself to certain brands you make a statement about who you are, what you stand for (linked to self-worth and identity) and the choices you make, etc.

Ask learners to consider and explore which labels are desired by themselves and by their community members. What do these labels mean to them and how susceptible are they to spending money specifically to purchase these labels.

- Are teenagers and children becoming consumerists earlier? Explain your answer.

The answer to this question may be dependent on how consumeristic your learners perceive themselves to be and what they observe in those in their same circles, etc.

However, young people are very vulnerable given the time they spend online and because they are natural risk takers. Young people are constantly exposed to advertisements for all sorts of goods. This results in pressure being put on parents to purchase goods or disappoint their children. Is this marketing ethical?

Affluent young people also have the means to purchase goods and enjoy the 'thrill of the shop' if they feel their lives are boring and they catch onto market trends quickly, etc.

Instruct learners to spend time researching this and to share their findings with their class.

- In what way does mass media and society affect teenage consumerism?

Ask your learners which media influences have the most impact on them – YouTube, Instagram, magazines, television, the internet, etc. and what they think these influences are.

Then ask your learners to do some research together in groups and feed back to their class, topics like 'The Psychology of marketing persuasion' or 'Manipulative marketing techniques', etc. This makes for an interesting conversation.

Young people are growing up in a world saturated with an ever-expanding influence of technology and media. They have almost unlimited information at their fingertips – through radio, newspaper, magazines, television, and the internet.

Through the influence of advertisements, teenagers buy into the culture of letting other people decide the attitudes they develop, the clothes they wear, the foods they eat, how they behave, and how they treat other people.

Advertising influences teenagers easily because adolescence is a critical stage in the development of identity as well as personal ideals and values. Teenagers behave in ways that increase chances of acceptance and validation among their peers.

- In your opinion, are consumerist people less creative?

Ask your learners to consider whether people who are easily manipulated to buy goods they don't need, who are unable to extend themselves beyond the urgency of the purchase or who overconsume, lack creativity. Spend time exploring this idea.

One might argue that the '*wanting, hunting, and getting of things*' – whether they be tangible (a new computer) or intangible (information) – is distracting people from being creative. The act of 'finding it' – the search, the anticipation – is addictive. Our consumerist impulse stimulates the same part of the brain that fires when we come up with new ideas. The consumerist search capitalises on the same 'seeking' part of the brain that fuels the creative rush.

Consumerism can serve as an addictive substitute for the stimulation of creative activity but offers only short-term reward. It's been proven that hardship – being deprived of things – stimulates creativity more than being well-off.

- Do you believe that extreme consumerism is a sickness? Explain your response.

A disease – in this context – psychological illness

Ask learners to consider the line between acceptable and unacceptable consumption. Should we view unacceptable levels of consumption as an illness?

One might argue that a compulsive buying disorder or an addiction to shopping (a shopaholic) is an illness because the addiction is perpetuated by factors that lie within the psychology of the person and, which is often, beyond the control of the consumer.

Your learners can do further research on this phenomenon. What are the causal factors of a person becoming addicted to shopping?

1.2 ARE YOU BEING MANIPULATED?

Watch:

Psychology of Consumerism (3,45 mins):

[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJaSneH_Jwg>]

How Apple and Nike have branded your brain | Your Brain on Money | Big Think (5.30 mins): [<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4eIDBV4Mpek>>]

Self-reflection (and optional class discussion):

These questions feed off the discussions in the previous section and from the video. Allow your learners to spend time in class reflecting on the below questions and answering them on paper. Then invite your learners to share any insights or personal convictions with their class (if they wish to).

- Have you ever been manipulated into 'wanting more stuff' (even if you can't buy it)?
- In what ways (and to what extent) are you personally subject to any of the negative effects of consumerism?
- If you are being easily manipulated, what should, or could you do about it?
- If not, why do you think you are not being impacted by it?
- Did anything specific resonate with you in the YouTube videos you watched? What were these aspects and why did you resonate with them?

1.3 **CONSUMERISM IS MAKING US SICK, BUT THAT'S JUST WHAT CAPITALISM WANTS**

Consumerism is not beneficial for individuals in society, because the 'good-life' is not achievable for all and negatively impacts mental health.

Consumerism thrives from our desire to consume goods that immediately satisfy us, despite this feeling being temporary. The goods then need to be replaced regularly to maintain this satisfaction and prevent us feeling unhappy or inferior to others with more affluent goods. Our consumer society makes us constantly feel the need to compare what we have with others, judge who is superior and if we need to consume more to improve ourselves. Thus, we rely on consumerism to improve our self-esteem, social identity, and mental well-being.

Consuming goods presents individuals with more choice regarding how they construct their identities which may allow them further social integration with certain groups. This increased choice and goods allows some freedom of identity, social mobility, and satisfaction, but this is not the case for poorer individuals who do not possess the means to obtain more affluent goods. Therefore, they are left with the struggle to try and achieve unreachable goals and commonly experience high levels of distress and anxiety whilst doing so. Even the wealthiest of individuals are riddled with common mental disorders. Their strive for the 'good-life' has left them alone and under high pressure to maintain their prestige.

The concept of 'Affluenza' refers to the importance placed on accumulating 'money, possessions, appearances (physical and social) and fame' to mark success, which has worked to increase the inequality gap between the wealthy and the poor in developed countries as it's only those who possess substantial wealth that can afford these affluent* things.

Individuals who hold the values of affluenza are more likely to suffer from instances of depression, anxiety, personality disorders and addictions and thus reveal consumerism to be making us susceptible to mental disorders instead of making us happy, because those who cannot conform to its demands for consumption are deemed as failures for not achieving the good life. This 'failure' is viewed as the fault of the individual rather than that of the market being inaccessible to some. Individuals may fall into depression or distress due to feeling inadequate for not fitting the norms of our consumer culture.

In addition, mental illness has become marketised to stimulate profits for medical businesses. Adverts are created to encourage the individual to seek medical drug treatments for their mental health issues instead of addressing potential wider social, cultural, or economic issues which may be impacting their health.

Capitalism presents us with the idea of meritocracy; that everybody has the same chance for success regardless of their background if they are willing to work hard for success. This pressure to be successful has detrimental effects on mental health, explaining its increase, as well as that of eating disorders and suicide. This pressure produces many risks for those who struggle to achieve the demands of the good-life and may turn to illegitimate means of obtaining wealth and affluence; when individuals' access to achieve cultural goals is hindered, they may turn to crime.

There has also been an emergence of risk prevention strategies as a response to the risks we face today. It could be argued that money lending companies allow individuals to consume goods they couldn't afford alone which in turn could reduce their mental strains and need to turn to crime. In addition, many businesses have introduced corporate wellness programmes for employees to improve their physical and mental health, these include fitness trackers and award schemes. However, money lending schemes only produce another risk of individuals falling into debt that they cannot pay back thus, placing them back in the same mental vulnerability they started in. In addition, one fifth of lost workdays in the UK has been found to be the result of anxiety and depression in the UK and so suggests corporate wellness programmes to lack in effectiveness.

[Extract and paraphrased: Fergie, L, 16/04/2019, Consumerism is Making Us Sick, But That's Just What Capitalism Wants PDF, Critical Reflections: A student Journal on Contemporary Sociological Issues, <<https://ojs.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/index.php/SOC/article/view/4583>>, accessed 19/12/2022]

Self-reflection (and optional discussion)

Allow your learners to spend time in class reflecting on the below questions and answering them on paper. Then invite your learners to share any insights or personal convictions with their class (if they wish to).

- To what extent is your self-worth, identity and mental well-being influenced by consumerism?
- To what extent are you able to resist comparing what you have to what others have? Why?
- Can you relate to not being allowed to purchase a specific item, standard of living or a specific experience that others around you have?
 - What are these items?
 - How have you been left feeling?

Class Discussion

- Some people spend a large percentage of their income on clothing and other outward expressions of 'wealth', despite not being able to afford these things and neglect other important aspects of living. Why do you think this happens?

Spending money on the status symbols like nice cars and clothes can be tickets to better jobs (upward mobility). Persons are more likely to not judge them by appearance because they may dress in expensive suits, drive luxurious cars, and it also increases their self-esteem (helps people feel better about themselves – feel more dignified) and gives others the perception of class and wealth.

- Consider the implication of needing to 'keep up with the Jones's' in the light of our current declining economic context.

Discuss with your learners this concept of potential ruin – constant debt and dissatisfaction with life. Always wanting the biggest and the best.

- Refer to the image below and then answer the following questions ...
 - Discuss 'meritocracy' in the light of this image. In what ways might this create judgement on those who have less?

Meritocracy = a society governed by people selected according to merit.

It justifies the inequalities in our society by attributing them to the skill and hard work of successful people and the incompetence and shortcomings of unsuccessful people.

Meritocracy is a mechanism for transferring wealth from one generation to the next. Meritocracy is the idea that people get ahead based on their own accomplishments rather than, for example, on their parents' social class. And the moral intuition behind meritocracy is that it creates an elite that is capable and effective and that it gives everybody a fair chance at success.

The misconception of a meritocracy could be that less affluent people may be judged by society for being incompetent, lazy, or unintelligent. That impoverished people (even middle-class citizens) cannot get ahead and be as successful as their wealthier counterparts because their effort is not 'good enough'. This is not true. Access to a good education and to money allows for better opportunities and a greater chance at easier success.

Bring in this perspective as well: However, in the same light more affluent communities struggle with higher levels mental health issues as they compete to sustain their standard of living and meet the expectations placed on them, often having to manipulate themselves or their environment to do so.

Discuss these attitudes and allow your class to respond and to share their perceptions in comparison to the above perceptions.

- Consider how those living on the right might feel when they look out at the homes on the left, or work in those suburbs and visa-versa. How might these opposing emotions and attitudes influence people's behaviours? (Wealth versus Poverty)



[Adjoining neighbourhoods – but different worlds:
<https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/09/23/unpicking-inequality-in-south-africa>, accessed 26/12/2022]

Allow your students to put their empathetic skills to the test.

Generally speaking, less affluent people feel the physical impact of long hours of physical work, emotional pain and malnutrition. The pressure of being dependent on others for money and for their lack of power over their lives and choices due to their financial positions. People may lack the resources to care for themselves or their family members adequately (medical facilities and nutritious food deficiencies, etc.).

When impoverished people see what they can't have, these emotions are compounded. Emotions felt may be distress, insecurity, fear, anger, envy, helplessness, hopelessness, and shame.

Conversely, moneyed people are afforded choice. Although different personal circumstance may restrict this choice, the reality is that money brings with it a certain amount of comfort and power and can either deepen and entrench social barriers, or erase or shift them by their level of awareness and the choices made and/or actions taken.

Some wealthy people in larger society may choose to distance themselves from the less wealthy by judging them. These stereotypes may include lack of ambition, lack of education, lack of will and/or unintelligence. This in turn dismisses the worth of other people.

The crime and discomfort that is associated with poverty creates a climate of fear and distrust. This may result in some people stigmatising poverty as a source of physical danger, dirtiness, poor health, lacking in intelligence and motivations – pushing people to the fringes of society.

Thus, in our global society wealth is an indicator of social success. Therefore, less affluent people can be seen to have less social power. This gives rise to many of the discriminatory and exploitative behaviours we see in our society across the inequality gap.

Resultant and consequential behaviour:

Because feelings are determined by thoughts and behaviours are influenced by emotions. The following behaviours could be expected ...

Less affluent people are consumed by survival, which could be expressed as anger or a lack of belonging. This could explain why people join gangs or become involved in crime.

Essentially, materially comfortable people experience fear of their comfort being targeted and so protect themselves and their comfort through high walls, private security and isolation from the poverty that they see. Some people choose to disengage from the discomfort they experience through wealth contrasts and the harsh reality of inequality.

Discuss these attitudes and allow your class to respond and to share their perceptions in comparison to the above perceptions.

- Have you felt pressure to succeed?
 - If so, under what circumstances and in what areas have you felt this pressure?
 - Who has placed this pressure on you?
 - Has this pressure affected your mental health in anyway? If so, how?

Ask your learners to reflect on these questions, write down their answers and report back to their class (if happy to). These questions are designed to help learners further understand the negatives of consumerism, to develop empathy and to reflect on their own emotional health.

- Research and discuss examples of how mental illnesses have become commercialised.

Give your class time to do this in groups/pairs and then report back and share their findings with the class, e.g., expensive psychiatric medicines, expensive psychological therapies, many more expensive and private mental health clinics, etc. often only treating the symptoms as opposed to curing the root issues of the problem.

- Consider the 'risk prevention strategies' created to mitigate the risks on a consumeristic society.
 - Discuss examples of these mentioned in the source and consider other examples you might know of.
 - Under what circumstances could these be effective?
 - What else could be done to mitigate the effects of consumerism on mental health?

Ask your class to brainstorm answers to the above questions in groups, do some research then report back to the class. Some themes to discuss ...

Mental Health programmes and support groups

Resident psychologists on site

Work-life balance incentives and the enforcement of regular holidays, etc.

Gyms on site

Policies and processors for reporting structures of unhealthy and unjust treatment, etc.

Ensuring non-toxic, fair and inclusive employee environments where everyone feels validated

These strategies can be effective when employers genuinely desire their workers to be happy and healthy. When these strategies genuinely aim to educate employees on their mental well-being and on self-care etc. and are not an unethical cover for ulterior motives and unemphatic drive to force workers to turnover a large profit, etc.

QUESTION 2**BLIND OBSESSION**

Aim: Through the analysis of contextual sources, you will respond to concepts linked to consumerism and briefly unpack the negative social justice and environmental effects in the supply chain.

2.1 ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

Environmental problems are frequently associated with consumerism to the extent that consumer goods industries and the direct effects of consumption produce negative environmental externalities*. These can include urban sprawl*, pollution, resource depletion, and problems with waste disposal from excess consumer goods and packaging.

'The production, processing, and consumption of commodities* requires the extraction and use of natural resources (wood, ore, fossil fuels, and water); it requires the creation of factories and factory complexes whose operation creates toxic by-products, while the use of commodities themselves (e.g., automobiles) creates pollutants and waste. Yet of the three factors environmentalists often point to as responsible for environmental pollution – population, technology, and consumption – consumption seems to get the least attention.



[<<https://sprout.link/oceana/>, accessed 27/12/2022>]

One reason, no doubt, is that it may be the most difficult to change; our consumption patterns are so much a part of our lives that to change them would require a massive cultural overhaul, not to mention severe economic dislocation*. A drop in demand for products, as economists note, brings on economic recession or even depression, along with massive unemployment.

[Richard Robbins, Global Problem and the Culture of Capitalism, (Allyn and Bacon, 1999
<<https://www.globalissues.org/article/238/effects-of-consumerism>>, accessed 22/12/2022]

Watch:

Consumerism 🚀 Do we really need to consume so much? (3,46mins):

[<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bY9x0Yoc73g>>]

Class Discussion

- To what extent should we take responsibility for the global environmental problems, especially since the First World are largely responsible?
- Is there anything we can do about it?

These questions are designed to encourage learners to think about where their responsibility lies and what is beyond their control.

Learners living in rural areas or away from cities may feel no sense of responsibility for the environmental problems. Learners in the city may feel indifferent since they are removed from visible exposure to the damage caused, etc. While others who possess a strong sense of justice may feel more passionate and concerned. Allow for all these voices to be heard and facilitate a discussion about what can be done, if anything.

Simple solutions for an ethical stance:

- **Volunteer at an environmental organisation.**
- **Reduce/Recycle paper.**
- **Recycle more often.**
- **Save resources.**
- **Buy sustainable products.**
- **Decrease meat & dairy consumption.**
- **Only buy what you need.**

However, these won't make any significant global difference – citizens on a massive scale would need to do the same. So – how does one begin to influence a global consumeristic society?

Ultimately our governments and people in powerful positions must encourage people to factor the environment into their everyday lives and purchases and lead citizens to more sustainable consumption. How can we get the attention of the government? Not an easy feat – but the use of social media to educate, boycott, encourage others to live in ethical ways and to support environmental organisations with power to speak on our behalf, approach people with power to encourage them to speak out, etc.

2.1.1 COKE IS A SPONSOR OF THE CLIMATE SUMMIT IN EGYPT. SOME ACTIVISTS AREN'T HAPPY.

They refer to recent report that says the company's production of plastics is increasing.

The decision to include Coca-Cola as a major sponsor of this year's United Nations climate summit in Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt, has angered many climate activists, who refer to a recent report that says the company's production of plastics is increasing.



The beverages giant, which was named the world's leading polluter of plastics in 2021, has increased its use of new plastics since 2019 by 3 percent to 3.2 million tons, according to an annual report issued this month by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, which has united 500 organisations in a 'global commitment' to reduce plastic waste.

Activists note that most plastics are manufactured using fossil fuels like oil, coal and natural gases. The British government, which hosted the previous round of global climate talks last year in Glasgow, took a stricter approach to corporate responsibility issues, barring fossil fuel companies from sponsorship arrangements.

A delegate from last year's conference, Georgia Elliott-Smith, called to cancel Coke's corporate sponsorship in an online petition, which garnered more than 238,000 signatures in the lead-up to the summit.

'Plastic is suffocating our planet and, year after year, one company leads the pack of polluters – Coca-Cola,' Ms. Elliott-Smith wrote on the petition's webpage.

'Coca-Cola spends millions of dollars greenwashing* their brand, making us believe that they are solving the problem,' she said, adding that 'behind the scenes, the company had a long history of lobbying to delay and derail regulations that would prevent pollution, keeping us addicted to disposable plastic.'

In an email, a Coca-Cola representative, who did not give their name, said the company shared the goal of eliminating waste from the ocean and appreciated efforts to raise awareness about this challenge.

'While we recognise that we have more work to do, we believe that effective climate solutions will require all of society to be involved including governments, civil society and the private sector,' the press officer said.

The company says it plans to make its packaging recyclable worldwide by 2025, according to its Business & Environmental, Social and Governance Report, published last year. Coca-Cola also produced 900 prototype bottles in 2021 made almost entirely of plant-based plastic, excluding the cap and the label.

But the progress report released by the MacArthur Foundation this month has cast doubt on its environmental ambitions, revealing that the target of shifting all packaging to reusable, recyclable, or compostable packaging by 2025 will 'almost certainly' not be met.

'The report clearly shows that voluntary commitments from companies to address plastic pollution have failed,' said Graham Forbes, a global project leader focused on plastics at Greenpeace. 'Instead of tackling the plastic pollution crisis, big brands like Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, and Mars actually increased the amount of plastic they create since the EMF Global Commitment was launched in 2018.'

[Engelbrecht, Cora, 7/11/2022, Coke Is a Sponsor of the Climate Summit in Egypt. Some Activists Aren't Happy, New York Times, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/07/climate/coca-cola-sponsor-cop27-climate-egypt.html>>, accessed 22/12/2022]

Class discussion

- Coca-Cola is accused of greenwashing, despite them reporting on their intentions to shift to more environmentally friendlier bottles by 2025. Discuss the accuracy of this statement.

Learner perception here. Does your class feel that these accusations are warranted or false?

- Coca-Cola has been included as a major sponsor of the climate Summit, despite being reported for increasing their new plastics by 3% since 2019.
 - Is this sponsorship by Coca-Cola a purely unselfish gesture?
 - Brainstorm and discuss the possible reasons for this acceptance of sponsorship by the organisers of the climate summit.
 - Discuss the implications of your reasoning (on the above two points of discussion) on positive progress and change in environmental preservation.

As above. No specific conclusion is required, but learners must understand that multi-million-dollar industries rarely act altruistically. That these kinds of sponsorships are to influence reputation in some positive way and possibly even to mask unethical behaviours. The point here is to think critically and to question everything (scientific scepticism – not take things at face value) and then to be able to justify their stance.

2.2 SOCIAL EXPLOITATION

2.2.1 FAST FASHION SOCIAL IMPACTS AND HOW IT AFFECTS SOCIETY

Fast-fashion garments are cheap and disposable, made to be replaced with new pieces of clothing as fast as possible. It has many effects on society, some with a positive social impact, others disastrous.

Fast fashion is a global phenomenon that has gained massive popularity over the last 20 years for many reasons. It answers the rising consumer demand for new trendy and affordable clothing. But more and more people are questioning the catastrophic social and environmental impact of the fast fashion industry. Overproduction and overconsumption of cheaply made clothing changes the world in multiple ways.

Many people love to shop for fast fashion because it's a fun activity. Some even buy new clothes daily or are addicted to shopping. People feel pleasure, excitement, and an adrenaline rush when they hunt and finally discover beautiful clothes they want to buy.

Fast fashion promotes the throwaway culture*, excessive consumerism, and makes clothes disposable commodities. Many consumers make purchasing decisions based on their emotions. Retailers use that behaviour and tap into the subconscious of consumers.

Consumers wear a high-street garment on average only 7 times. Under normal wear and tear, the average life expectancy of clothing would be more than 2 years. People are now conditioned to consider clothes as commodities, to buy cheap trendy clothes that go out of style quickly, and to renew them very often. Consumers are very happy to buy imitations with very low standards. Most of them don't even use a good portion of their clothes.

Fast fashion also exploits local and underserved communities in sweatshops* to produce cheap garments. It employs more than 300 million people in the whole world. Most of them are young women who frequently face terrible conditions and abuse. They work on farms and in garments factories, being exploited and even forced to abort their pregnancy to continue working.

The majority of fast-fashion production takes place in overseas countries with poor labour laws and human rights protections. Many farmers and garment factory workers live in low-income countries, where labour is shockingly cheap.

Fast-fashion brands and retailers are pushing for lower production costs to increase their profit margins and meet customer demand. Meanwhile, manufacturers keep wages unliveable and working conditions terrible.

Fast fashion is responsible for cases of forced and child labour still reported to this day in countries like Bangladesh, China, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

Fast fashion is severely criticised for its negative social impacts. It doesn't promote decent work conditions, gender equality, diversity, or inclusivity. Instead, retailers foster a culture of discrimination, harassment, and violence.

Poorly paid employees and dangerous working environments are very common among fast-fashion brands and retail giants. Women especially are the victims of fast fashion as they are subject to daily violence on the basis of their gender.

Thankfully, consumers with their buying power can drive positive change in the fashion industry for a better society. Simply making more conscious clothing choices can change the world.

[Assoune, A, 2022, Fast Fashion Social Impacts and How It Affects Society, Panaprium.com <<https://www.panaprium.com/blogs/i/fast-fashion-society>>, accessed 22/12/2022]

Class discussion

- To what extent is your community reliant on the purchasing of fast-fashion products? (Consider your own attitudes towards fast fashion when responding.)
- To what extent can you relate to the 'adrenalin rush' that many experience while shopping? What are your own attitudes around this?

The above two questions are for self-reflective purposes. Facilitate a general class discussion after learners have had time to reflect and write their thoughts down.

- Discuss the phenomenon of the 'throw-away culture'. What implications does this have on society? Discuss positive and negative factors.

Throw away culture (as per glossary): It features overconsumption and a preference for short-lived products, which maximise profit, rather than creating durable goods that don't need constant replacing. For example, single-use plastic straws, plastic bags, polystyrene plates, and polypropylene utensils for takeaway food forming the material basis of daily life. Everything could be acquired quickly, was easy to consume, and what was left could be dumped in the bin.

Possible benefits: Boosts the economy. Technology improves constantly and more jobs are created.

It provides a path for regenerative and restorative living. If action is taken now then all products, especially textiles, plastics and even metals, must be designed for the intention of recovery, recycling and reuse.

Possible negatives: These include impact on land use, biodiversity loss, energy, water consumption, and end of life pollution. There aren't enough landfills to hold all the items that are thrown away. More and more products are made, only to be thrown away soon after purchasing. Our food and water sources are polluted. Products are burned to create more space, which creates greenhouse gases, etc.

Other disadvantages extend to how we treat people. If we no longer value our possessions and they bear little value, this often transfers to how we view and treat people – do we treat people as commodities too?

- What do you believe happens to all of the clothes that are thrown away?

Given away, sold or thrown away (most common – landfills are full of old clothing).

- Would regular global awareness campaigns on the atrocities of exploitation in the fast-fashion industry make people question (and change) their spending habits? (Reflect on your own attitudes after reading this article, when responding.)

Self-reflection is required here. Will awareness of these issues create any change in behaviour and attitudes in our learners or will societal influences and consumeristic attitudes prevail indifferently? You will find that many learners will care about this issue a little, but not significantly enough to bring change.

Do learners regard themselves as representatives of larger society?

- Under what circumstances would awareness campaigns not work? What else could be done?

If done in isolation by only a few people. Those with power and influence in the greater society must be seen to be acting and speaking out. How can these powerful voices be reached?

- Under what circumstances would awareness campaigns work?

If awareness campaigns would work on them personally, would they be effective on a global scale? Potentially if done regularly and consistently and from powerful voices?

- Why are workers in fast-fashion industries exploited to such an extent?

In a consumeristic society – products must be made as cheaply and as quickly as possible. This means that quality is reduced and the amount of funds available for the bottom-end of the service chain becomes less. Therefore, factories in developing countries are sought, unskilled workers are sourced and exploited to maximise efforts and minimise payment. This gives rise to other exploitative behaviours as workers are not valued and are desperate for work. Their choices are limited and they do not speak out because they are afraid of the consequences or do not know any better; hence industry leaders continue with the exploitation as they are not being held accountable for greater costs.

- Refer to the last paragraph. Do you believe that this is a viable solution to the problem?

Facilitate a class discussion here. Perhaps if enough consumers act to put a dent in the market – but this would need to be significant. How can consumers be reached?

2.2.2 BITTERSWEET: THE CHOCOLATE INDUSTRY'S TESTIMONY TO GLOBAL INJUSTICE

Chocolate is considered the universal expression of love and affection towards the ones we cherish. Chocolate holds great symbolic meaning and is therefore frequently given on occasions when our words simply cannot articulately* express the appreciation we have for someone. However, behind this beautifully constructed facade, a horrid story of exploitation and unequal exchange reveals itself. Overshadowed by injustice and hardship, the chocolate industry has difficulties clinging onto the romanticised idea of its delicacies*.

Akin* to many other commodities we attribute sentimental value to, chocolate is by no means devoid of the ugliness within the global economic structure. Unfortunately, the conditions within the chocolate industry are no exception from the exploitation that frequently entails today's globalised manufacturing. Tainted by the capitalist mindset of continual growth, the global economy is premised on the concept of unequal exchange. Ultimately, profits are being produced by an already wealthy minority at the expense of the vast majority of people in the world.

For example in Côte d'Ivoire, the cocoa production has caused apparent difficulties in various guises* for the people involved within the chocolate supply chain. In the 2019 Netflix docu-series *Rotten*, the dark side of the West African chocolate industry as well as cocoa production is clearly demonstrated. The region is one of the world-leading suppliers of the cacao bean, especially in the case of the two adjacent countries Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. Jointly, the two countries constitute about approximately 60% of the total supply of cacao worldwide. However, in the vast supply chain of chocolate, cacao farming is nothing but a testimony to tragedy. Not only is the cultivation of the crop a lengthy and laborious process, but also an extremely volatile and dangerous industry*.

West African cacao production is also tainted by the foul play of multinational corporations, colloquially* known as cocoa traders, and by the unequal exchange of labour and materials provided by the cacao farmers. Within the supply chain, various so-called middlemen profit from the exploitation of smallholders. Farmers at the bottom of the supply chain are working in abject* conditions, which in the documentary was compared to modern slavery, earning under a dollar a day whilst large and powerful corporations produce huge profits at the expense of the farmers. As a matter of fact, farmers solely receive approximately 6% of the product's final market value whilst manufacturers and retailers respectively claim about 44% and 35% of the share.

Evidently, the primary beneficiaries of the manufacturing of chocolate are without a doubt the almighty multinational corporations. Namely, well known corporations such as Nestlé and Mars. This means that when we purchase any chocolate product at the set market price, hardly any of the actual profit reaches the cacao farmers. In short, the multibillion-dollar industry of chocolate is explicitly able to exclude the people at its nexus* with impunity*. This further demonstrates that some people in the world are fortunate enough to benefit from the global economy, whilst others only seem to bear the burden of it.

Structurally, the world is economically organised on the basis of injustice. The global economic system is constructed in a manner which excludes the majority of people keeping it afloat. For instance, the vast majority of people within the Global South have unjustifiably been economically marginalised, which has kept the Global South in a peripheral* relationship to the further industrialised and wealthy Global North. The devaluation of the labour force in third world countries directly translates to lower wages, insecurity of employment and income for already vulnerable people such as women, migrants and those living in poverty.

In the case of Côte d'Ivoire, it is clear that the cocoa industry is neither intended for the people within the country nor at service of their own national interests. Rather, the Ivorian cocoa production seems to solely exist to supply the demand of foreign markets.

[Björk, L, 23/01/2022, Bitter Sweet: The Chocolate Industry's Testimony to Global Injustice, Utblick Magazine, <<https://www.utblick.org/2022/01/23/bitter-sweet-the-chocolate-industrys-testimony-to-global-injustice/>>, accessed 22/12/2022]

Class discussion

- Discuss the significance of the statement: 'Akin to many other commodities we attribute sentimental value to, chocolate is by no means devoid of the ugliness within the global economic structure.'

It is a loaded statement – one can expect there to be cases of significant exploitation of people and unethical practices in every industry.

- Discuss this concept of 'unequal exchange' – what does this ultimately mean and why are third world countries (and farm workers) so vulnerable to this?

Third world countries are in the receiving end of every exchange – capitalism is set up this way – goods become more expensive the further up they are in the service chain. Because farm workers and third world countries are reliant on first world countries to 'bring their money' to buy goods and services – they must often accept the price offered to them.

- The article indicates that countries positioned geographically in the southern hemisphere are in an 'unequal relationship' with northern located countries. All of us – our families, our communities, our country's people, our neighbouring African countries – are potentially exploited in varying degrees.
 - What emotions arise because of this knowledge?
 - What is needed for this situation to change?

Facilitate a class discussion and personal reflection time here. These questions are largely repetitive to exercise learner's problem-solving abilities in various contexts. What is needed to create change in the chocolate industry? Not an easy feat since chocolates are enjoyed by many and so easily accessible, etc.

- Discuss the implications of the following statement: 'In short, the multibillion-dollar industry of chocolate is explicitly able to exclude the people at its nexus with impunity'.

Ultimately, those responsible for the way an industry is run, for the exploitation of people, and for other unethical practices, are never held accountable. They are largely untouchable. This leaves one feeling helpless to creating any change in this industry. This statement is largely true for people in other industries and for politicians, etc. When you have power and privilege and wealth – you can easily conceal the truth through bribery and other unethical means. The danger being that you can, mostly, buy your way out of any foreseeable legal consequence.

- Does the gravity of the information outlined in the article potentially alter your attitude towards buying chocolate? Explain your response.

Facilitate learner responses here. There is no required conclusion.

- Ultimately, consumers are at the mercy of the societal climate in which we live – and may feel relatively powerless to deflecting the demands of a consumeristic lifestyle or to make any positive change in the world in this area. Is this a viable conclusion to make? Explain your response.

Facilitate learner responses here.

But learners should feel some level of empowerment here and motivation to create change. Even if it feels seemingly impossible. There is always something that can be done – allow your learners to brainstorm and discuss these possibilities.

Ultimately – the industry must be altered at every level of the entire service chain. It must start with our leaders and government and then change must filter down from there. Allow learners to consider the positions they are aspiring to in their lives post Grade 12 – will they move into more influential positions and be able to create change then? Will they remain ethical and value their employees or those under their leadership well?