**How is the global consumerist culture inhibiting the prospect for sustainable development?**

**Abstract**

This paper elaborates on the irreversible culture that consumerism is shaping, analysing how consumption patterns within food and energy directly inhibit the prospect for sustainable development. In respect to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, this paper provides focus on the conflict between consumerism and global goals: ‘’End Hunger’’ (Goal one), ‘’Climate action’’ (Goal 13) and ‘’Life on Land’’ (Goal 15). The analysis also presents how overconsumption manipulates an inefficient allocation of resources, providing consequences on a global scale.

**Keywords**

Consumerism; Sustainability; Agriculture; Energy Consumption

**Paper**

Consumerism is the active ideology that the meaning of life is found through purchasing goods and pre-packaged experiences (Bocock, 1993). Resting on this ideology, levels of consumption have become a function of global culture, following the misconceived assumption that infinite growth can operate within a world of finite resources. Conflicting with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable development, the current economic system of perpetual growth contradicts the vision for global goals: ‘’End Hunger’’, ‘’Climate action’’ and ‘’Life on Land’’ (United Nations, 2015), whereby the desire for consumption is influencing an era of exploitation and depletion. Despite many stressing their concern for these global issues, few scrutinise their rates of consumption, and it is this incomprehension that is leading the way towards ecological suicide.

Today’s global production systems have been shaped in seek of perpetual consumption, to bolster national economies and provide economic benefit to many contemporary business organisations. These same systems however, generate diverse environmental and social pressures, impairing the vision for sustainability. Per recent analysis from the European Environment Agency (EEA), it is suggested that the majority of these consumption influenced pressures, derive from housing and infrastructure, eating and drinking, as well as mobility (EEA, 2010).

Energy consumption within housing and infrastructure is mostly inconspicuous, derived from a household’s desire for comfort, convenience, security and normality (Shove and Warde, 1997). Shaped by cultural expectations, household consumption is rising dramatically, with European households recognising a 23% increase in consumption expenditure from 1996-2012 (EEA, 2015). This rate of consumption is mainly contributed through the form of gas, oil and electricity, whereby the later has increased at an unprecedented rate following an era of technological advancement. Progression within the technology market stimulates the culture to consume, encouraging the acquisition of electronic goods, which in turn increases energy consumption. The provision of electricity however, generates substantial levels of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases, absorbing and emitting radiation into the Earth’s atmosphere (Thompson, n.d). Contributing to an unnatural degree of global warming, this conflicts directly with both climate Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), inhibiting the aspiration for a sustainable future. Not only does consumerism fuel the desire for acquisition of goods, but promotes hunger for greater ownership. The world’s largest consumers of electricity, the United States of America, have recognised a 38% increase in the size of the average household since 1975 (Dirksen, 2009), evidence of consumer desire to expand their sense of possession. Following increases in household capacity, greater levels of energy consumption are required, which in turn accelerates the rate of production from energy providers. With consumer behaviour driving all production industries, the world’s consumerist mindset has formed excessive levels of production, whereby the consumption patterns are manipulating a near irrevocable structure.

Current food consumption patterns are also considered to be unsustainable. Ignoring the fundamental human need for nutrition, food is no longer seen as a necessity, instead, a consumer good (Notarnicola et al., 2016). Seen as a consumer item, the consumerist culture encourages the acquisition of optimal amounts, which has seen rates of food consumption meet unsustainable levels. Consumption of meat is of particular concern, whereby recent studies suggest that the average meat-eating individual will consume over 7,000 animals in a lifetime (King, 2015). This excessive rate is exceedingly unsustainable, production within modern practises of animal agriculture directly contributes to water and air pollution, as well as producing perilous levels of carbon dioxide emissions. The rate at which these emissions are produced is estimated to be responsible for approximately 9 percent of total carbon dioxide emissions, making animal agriculture one of the largest carbon emission contributors globally (LandRoots, 2012). Production of cheap meat is also one of the main contributors to deforestation and land degradation. Industry-leading fast-food businesses have previously faced conflict with major environmental groups over deforestation concerns, with suggestions that food packaging contains wood from endangered rainforests (Telegraph, 2012). Additionally, to deforestation, findings also suggested that every pound of red meat, poultry, eggs and milk produced, five pounds of irreplaceable farm field is eradicated too (Shiva, 2000), a direct contradiction to global goal ‘Life on land’. The exposure of meat exploitation has meant that businesses within the food industry are having to produce more ethically, and consider future impacts of overproduction. Derived from our culture to consume, the overconsumption of animal productions has formed an inefficient allocation of resources, where the desire for personal optimisation has denied significant opportunity to many.

Progression in the pursuit to ‘End Hunger’ is an opportunity cost of animal agriculture. Levels of consumption dictate available resources, where there is a great demand within animal agriculture, resources are prioritised to the product itself. It is estimated that a person dies of hunger or a hunger-related cause every ten seconds (Poverty.com, 2017), yet is not the unavailability of resources, instead, it is the distribution. Agriculture of animal products requires substantial quantities of grain and water to provide desired quantities of meat, and consumption patterns are only advancing. In seek of meeting this level of consumption, grain is overproduced for animal feed, to the extent where if all grain was consumed directly by humans, it would nourish five times as many people as it does being converted into meat, milk and eggs (Shiva, 2000). This demonstrates how overconsumption of specific food products inhibits a sustainable future for Least Developed Countries (LDCs), whereby the provision of greater resources could help eradicate global poverty. Additionally, the amount of water required for meat breeding is around 190 gallons per animal, per day, equivalent to ten times what an average Indian family is suggested to use within one day (Shiva, 2000). This inefficient allocation of resources derives from the culture of consumption, whereby in seek of personal optimisation, we desire increasing levels of meat. As consumerism suggests it is the meaning of life to consume, the conversion of food from a necessity into a consumer item, makes our culture increasingly less sustainable.

The ideology of consumerism has become a function of the developed world. Following political and business encouragement, strives for growth and profit have created a structure that will be challenging to alter. Although there are contradictions within 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the surge from the United Nations is promoting vital improvements in sustainable energy supplies. The United Kingdom has recently invested a record £15.2 billion into the production of sustainable energy (Evans, 2016), showing the desire for sustainability from an influential member of the intergovernmental organisation. Additionally, the rise of the ethical consumer has been promoted worldwide, exploitation of animal agriculture standards and environmental impacts has recognised a shift in consumption. This reduction is only minor however, the decrease in the rate of business is not going to occur within the short future; urbanisation and rising incomes mean that meat consumption will only increase, with worldwide meat consumption expected to double by 2050 (The Economist, 2013). The rise of the ethical consumer may begin to influence future consumption patterns, but a culture of consumerism developed over decades may be irreversible.

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