How Consumption Affects Society and the Environment

Consumption is an integral part of how society works, and one that can't be separated from our social systems and the environment. With each purchase we make, each place we visit, and each decision we make about our leisure time, we have choices which impact the economy, the environment, and our communities' relations to the world.

I live in an urban area, so my consumption pattern is influenced by advantages and disadvantages of city life. With high density of population and good public transportation, commuting in public transit is an easy option for me, and consequently, I do not have to use a car. That contributes positively to the environment because I spend less in terms of resources and generate less pollution than an individual in an urban area, where driving can be the only choice. My use of goods and services is also determined by location—urban life provides greater availability of shops, eateries, and entertainment, tending to promote greater consumption overall.

Prior to the pandemic, I used to shop primarily at local businesses for everything. With the lockdown caused by COVID-19, online shopping became the easiest. I didn't have to step outside, and everything would be shipped to me. Now, however, those deliveries had consequences—additional waste in terms of packaging and an increased carbon footprint due to shipping. Since the pandemic, I still shop mainly online, yet now I consciously put more effort into noticing what is used for packaging and shop locally when possible. That enables me to have a lighter carbon footprint yet still get what I need.

The pandemic changed everything. Work and school shifted online, and suddenly I was consuming more electricity and using electronic devices more than ever. I didn't really pay much attention at the time, but the more I think about it, the more I see that energy to fuel those devices and sustain our virtual lives has its own carbon footprint. That increased energy consumption, usually derived from non-renewable energy, is part of an even broader discussion about just how our virtual lives affect the planet.

With urbanization and an increase in population, one can see clearly that as city sizes increase so does resource consumption. With more people come increased consumption—food, energy, products—putting pressure on the planet. Cities must contend with issues such as waste, poor air quality, and boosted energy consumption, all of which stem from daily life and consumption. As populations relocate to urban environments in greater numbers, such problems worsen, so our consumption is now directly tied to planet health.

Ultimately, consumption isn't merely purchasing items—it's recognizing how those items are affecting society and the planet. My own consumption has been influenced by urban living and the pandemic, and represents broader movements in society. As urban centers expand and people multiply, we must balance our consumption against the desire to keep the planet safe. With a little more consideration given to the effects of our everyday activities, such as avoiding waste and shopping at environmentally-friendly stores, we can all do our part for the health of the planet.