

Human Consumerism Behavior: The Rise of the Throwaway Culture

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Each year, the United States generates over 400 billion pounds of municipal solid waste. That's 4.5 pounds of waste and half a pound of plastic waste created by the average person every day. (Stevens, 2002, p. 16) This rise in human consumption behavior due to the "having" way of life in developed countries is the root cause of today's environmental crisis. Humans possess an endless supply of needs that require substantial exploitation of the environment's resources. This consumerism culture led to the rise of plastic use as the leading material in numerous industries, causing great environmental, economic, ethical, and social harm. Understanding why consumerism is the environment's greatest issue requires an analysis of consumer purchasing habits, which are responsible for a society reliant on plastic material. Additionally, insight into businesses' economics and their methods to meet this growing consumer demand demonstrates the multi-level harm of single-use products. To repair environmental damage and establish a culture of sustainable consumerism, a fundamental shift in both human consumption behavior and business procedures is essential for the success of new and existing green initiatives. All of which present significant challenges for a utilitarian society motivated by the art of "having."

Human consumption patterns reflect both internal and external characteristics of the individual as well as their environment. Factors such as social relationships and family obligations lead an individual to modify their behavior regarding more than just themselves but also their household, as a community member, and as an inhabitant of the earth. (Cordier, 2021, p. 3) The modern marketplace for products such as food, retail, and automotive vehicles competes to satisfy all consumer obligations. As GDP increased dramatically with technological advancements, markets exploited environmental resources to meet this unprecedented scale of consumption demand. (Roy, 2021, p. 55) With consumers demanding products at extreme rates, markets adopted mass production as the new standard, introducing a market saturated with plastic-based products designed for single use. Products that are both inexpensive to manufacture and inexpensive to purchase have resulted in a throwaway culture approach to single-use convenient, accessible, and inexpensive products.

To meet consumers' large demand for products, the plastics industry became the answer for many markets. Plastic as a material is not inherently more harmful to the environment than alternatives such as glass, aluminum, or metal, given that all common materials have environmental impacts associated with their lifecycles and produce carbon emissions. (Bose, 2020) The issue lies in the large quantity of plastic produced without adequate waste management processes. Early waste

management included the "Reduce-Reuse-Recycle" way of environmental conservation, which contained many limitations given the types of plastics used and the available technology to theoretically recycle them. (Stevens, 2002, p. 18) Consumers were originally responsible for most recycling efforts in waste management strategies for end-of-life plastic. Relying on consumers to correctly recycle plastics is an unrealistic waste management strategy given the great confusion about plastic types and how to recycle them. Misinformation, accompanied by a lack of effort to correctly recycle, led the United States to discard over "60 billion pounds of plastic into the waste stream" in 2020. (Stevens, 2002, p. 16) This represents a significant increase from four billion pounds of waste plastic in 1970. Without a sufficient plan to recycle plastics independently from consumers, incessant consumer demand for low-cost products made from non-renewable resources such as crude oil, natural gas, and coal results in an unsustainable extortion rate of natural resources, causing problems in a variety of industries.

As consumerism culture becomes more reliant on plastics, product lifecycles become an issue for both the environment and the economy, and plastic pollution remains a major consequence of both pre- and post-consumer plastic waste. The production, use, and disposal of plastic products not only contribute to pollution in the environment but also carry economic consequences. Plastic production generates greenhouse gases and other pollutants that lead to litter and pollution in the air, water, and soil when disposed of improperly. The pollutants from plastic production and disposal lead to associated costs for cleaning up pollution or mitigating the impacts of climate change. These costs from self-interested decision making are often not reflected in the price of plastic products and affect the welfare of bystanders, illustrating negative environmental externalities. Unintended consequences from plastic use and production warrant negative externality abatement to account for the decisions that brought about the externality. Resource depletion and waste externalities continue to be a major environmental issue in our throwaway culture. Because the production of plastic products requires finite resources such as oil and natural gas, the extraction and processing of these resources can also have negative impacts on the environment, including air and water pollution. A common response to reduce these consequences includes waste management and plastic recycling efforts to prolong product lifecycles.

When plastic products are not properly disposed of or recycled, they lose their value and become waste, incurring economic losses for businesses and governments. The disposal of plastic

waste is also expensive; it requires specialized infrastructure and equipment, which warrant recycling efforts to reprocess post-consumer and pre-consumer plastic waste into usable products. Current recycling technology allows all pre-consumer plastic waste or manufacturing scrap to return to the plastic production stream, but due to the various plastic types in post-consumer plastic waste, only 8.7 percent of plastic is recycled. (EPA, 2022) Developing new technology and methods to increase the proportion of plastic suited for recycling is essential to "reducing the need for new plastic feedstock" from finite materials and instead relying on recycled ones. (Rudolph, 2020, p. 15) Reduced production is the leading advantage of recycling plastic, as less production requires less energy, negating the amount of CO₂ and greenhouse gas emissions. (Rudolph, 81) Reducing plastic production requires modifications for both business and consumer consumption practices. An adaptation of "sustainable consumerism" through incentivizing environmentally friendly behavior seems like it would work but often falls short because of businesses' agendas. (Roy, 2021, p. 57)

Sustainable consumerism urges consumers to purchase products that minimize negative impacts on the environment by considering the longevity of a product's lifespan and use. This requires both consumers and businesses to make conscious decisions when purchasing or producing a product and to possess knowledge about the product's total impact. Problems with this consumption method stem from inaccurate, false, and fraudulent product information, which distorts consumer behavior. As businesses recognize new demand for environmentally friendly products, their decisions regarding how they market those products aren't always comprehensive. Falsifying products to appear more environmentally friendly than they are to consumers is a strategy known as "Greenwashing." (Bose, 2020) There are many shades of Greenwashing, ranging from intentional manipulation to unintentional information regarding a product's true environmental footprint. (Szabo, 2021, p. 16) Businesses often use green nudges to "trigger people to engage in environmental behavior" and intervene in their decision-making process. (Wensing, 2020, p. 2) Consumer preference for bio-based packaging increases when exposed to any type of green nudge in studies analyzing the effect of green nudges for most cognitive styles. A majority of consumers are willing to pay a price premium for plastic packaging labeled bio-based, organic, compostable, and recyclable because they believe it's better than the un-nudged alternative. (Wensing, 2020, p. 6) However, both Greenwashing and green nudges aim to increase the consumption of a business's products. As a result, if consumption continues to rise, any environmental benefit of purchasing green products will be lost. Regardless of whether the product is indeed environmentally friendly, one of the greenest things to do is buy fewer items.

Exposing mass consumerism as the environment's greatest enemy encapsulates the results of a utilitarian society chasing efficiency and productivity. Humans often use a cost-benefit analysis of their values, beliefs, and norms to guide their decision-making process. Although one might consider how their actions impact the people and areas around them, the modern world is often blind to each action's everlasting impact. Culture plays a large role in impelling one's values, and due to a rise in productivity, the need to produce more causes extreme harm to the earth and its resources. Green nudges find that many consumers are willing to pay a higher price for products, demonstrating some awareness of the impact of their consumption on the environment. Consumer awareness, however, is not comprehensive in addressing the root issue, overconsumption.

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