

Sustainable Consumption: More Using, Less Shopping

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The old premise that consumption means growth, and growth is good ✕ Consumer culture as we experience it has developed over the past decades based on the premise that consumption means growth, and growth is good. Following industrialization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which enabled the mass production of consumption goods, individuals were trained to pursue life goals – status, stability, happiness – through consumption and were convinced of the importance of doing so. Since then, consumption has been designed to be enticing and pleasurable. When that is not possible, it is commanded as a civil duty – for good citizens should support their countries' economies.

Considering these assumptions, it becomes easier to understand why, in consumption culture, buying more is better than less. Collecting is encouraged, materialism is not necessarily frowned upon, and unusual attachment to possessions such as hoarding, which has its origins in a mindset of scarcity, are considered pathological deviations that impede the flow of the consumption cycle. Similarly, new is better than existing. In new objects and novel experiences, consumers search for excitement and the constant improvement of their even unfolding identity projects. Finally, fast is better than slow.

Consuming equals shopping ✕ We are all too familiar with the consumption cycle: It starts with the need for something – be it a new phone to replace an old one that has given in; a new dress that signals one's trendy style or a holiday somewhere idyllic to escape routine. That need triggers the search for offerings that could placate it. As consumers search for alternatives, they are faced with thousands of options that may address the original need just as well as open up others: earphones and covers for the smartphone; new shoes and handbag to go with the dress; the next escapade that simply must be booked. As each purchased solution addresses a need, the cycle progresses through use and disposal – for to

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consume is to use up. The phone quickly becomes obsolete, the dress dated, the holiday forgotten. As such, consumption is fueled by the constant lack, insistent desire, and impossible pursuit of having it all and using it too. Because the consumption cycle is at the core of economic development, consumers are often considered in their roles of shoppers – populating retail environments, choosing and acquiring goods and services such as groceries and haircuts to address their own needs or those of others. Consumer spending is usually the biggest component of many countries' GDP, and as such, consumption is seen as a force for economic growth and a sign of a healthy economy. But this is not the end of the story. It cannot be.

The more-new-fast culture is being questioned ✕ Since the early 1970s though, scientists have been demonstrating that constant growth rates in population and consumption

are not sustainable. For example, the United Nations report “Our Common Future,” published in 1987, already alerted that living standards that go beyond the basic minimum are hardly sustainable for the planet. That is, in good part, because the more-new-fast triad of consumer culture comes along with other values that support this extremely damaging proposition: cheap, convenient, disposable, global (see Figure 1).

Those early promoters of sustainable consumption had it clear that sustainable development requires the promotion of different values – some that encourage consumption standards that are “within the bounds of the ecological possible and to which all can reasonably aspire,” as the United Nations report demands. Although what those values are remains unclear, it helps to frame them as the complete opposite of what we have been accustomed to (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 1 > Typical and randomly displayed meanings of consumption over the past decades



Source: Editors

FIGURE 2 > New and randomly displayed meanings of consumption that need to be promoted for change



Source: Editors

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A degrowth mindset is gaining traction ✕ As we emerge from the forced deceleration caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is very encouraging to notice early signs of a shift toward a more positive direction. Generation Z consumers, born in 1996 or later, have shifted the emphasis from price/quality relationships to ethics and sustainability. Now in their 20s, Gen Zers demonstrate a greater degree of thinking and discipline behind their consumption choices. What moves them to purchase is not the pursuit of more-new-fast, but spending their money on something they believe in. This mindset is well attuned to the radical perspective of economic degrowth – which many claim is the only way to achieve sustainable consumption.

Degrowth makes the case that we have to produce and consume differently, and also less; that we have to share more and distribute more fairly, because even those few who consume the most can do significant and irreversible damage to the environment. Degrowth proponents have been working to devise ways in which consumption can support pleasurable lives in resilient societies. They warn us that this will require values and institutions that produce different kinds of persons and different types of relations between persons and things.

The degrowth mindset: To consume is to use, not to buy ✕ While many still lag behind in the goal of achieving “pleasurable lives,” unable to afford the products and services that would address their very basic needs, lavish lifestyles are exhibited for their aspirational power in reality TV shows, fashion shows, and social media. For the meaning



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of consumption to change, we need to radically dissociate consumption from the desire that fuels it and reconnect it to the most basic meaning of the term – to consume is to use. This means a consumer does not need to be a shopper, but can be a maker, a keeper, a fixer, a tinkerer. And consumption need not be dissociated from pleasure – gardening and crafting, for example, have been shown to offer enjoyment and reduce stress and anxiety, with the added benefits of producing goods one can consume or gift, rather than emptying one's wallet.

Sustainability can be cool, chic, and enjoyable ✕ Consumers themselves – who do not want to have their status, identity projects, or pleasure threatened – have been working in movements to reclaim and revalue crafts, thrift, and DIY cultures. In movements that have been organically growing online and off, individuals are creating new practices, meanings, and lifestyles – ones in which sustainability can be chic, cool, enjoyable. Take, for example, the #madebyme movement, which has accumulated more than five million posts on Instagram, where people proudly display their creations and often receive the accolades of others who are reusing materials, mending clothes, and cooking their own food. One can be a sustainable hedonist – but individuals will need to be trained in the new rules of the role once again, and be convinced of the importance of consuming sustainably.

Sustainability can be a worthwhile business model

✕ Understanding consumers as users – rather than shoppers – can prompt organizations to reconsider what they can do to create value for consumers. Rather than extracting resources from the planet to produce more goods that could feed into the cycle of purchases, organizations can devise value-creating ways to collect, reuse, and recycle post-consumption resources. They can consider the many ways in which services can be offered to support consumers in using the products they already own for longer, like the Australian fashion brand Kuwāii (Box 1). Other fashion brands have integrated services offering to dye or upcycle pre-purchased clothes. Others, like the yoga brand Manduka, have started to educate consumers about how long they can expect their products to last (“the lifetime of our yoga mat is approxi-

mately 10 years of regular use when loved and cared for”), and offer guarantees that a product will be repaired during that expected lifetime.

Examples of innovative ways in which waste can be turned into profit abound, and many small initiatives can gain scale given sufficient investment. For example, FabBRICK makes decorative and insulative bricks out of old clothes, reducing textile waste and the demand for natural resources in the construction industry. Each brick uses the equivalent of two to three T-shirts' worth of material – not only cotton, but also polyester, elastane, PVC, and other materials – and can be used for many purposes. Fashion brands could redirect production and post-consumption way to similar initiatives, offsetting the costs of recycling programs by using the bricks to insulate stores, build fitting rooms, showrooms, and furniture.

How to clear the road for a more sustainable economy

✕ Developing a sustainable economy will take a concerted effort from multiple market and non-market actors. While consumers and their actions in the marketplace play a key role, responsibility cannot be placed on consumers alone. In this issue, Thompson and Kumar analyze (p. 19) the chances and limits of responsabilizing consumers and come to the conclusion that consumer responsabilization is no panacea but one of the many pieces in the puzzle of a more sustainable society. Brands and regulators also need to contribute to shifting the fundamental assumptions underlying consumption, and replace the logics, structures, and incentives that support these assumptions. While more sustainability can be fun in some cases, people will also need to make peace with the fact that consuming sustainably will not necessarily be convenient, cheap, or fast. Those solutions that are cheap and that bring only minor inconveniences, such as replacing a combustion engine with an electric one, will not do. Consumers will need to reconsider travelling; they will need to ride their bikes; they will need to walk – and that will slow them down.

How to sell this idea to consumers who, for the past century, have been convinced of the need for speed, flexibility, and ease? How to direct individuals in finding solutions to their

BOX 1



Kuwaii – A new, sustainable business model

The Australian fashion brand Kuwaii designs and produces garments in small runs, often with a pre-order approach to reduce production waste. They produce every single garment locally in Melbourne within a 15km radius of their head office, providing jobs for the community and keeping trades alive. Fabrics and fibers are selected carefully considering the environmental impacts of their production and their quality: how durable they are, how long they will last, how easy they will be to care for, and the overall quality of each particular material. Each season, Kuwaii uses more recycled, organic, and sustainable fabrics and their goal is to source 100% of fabrics from entirely natural, traceable sources with minimal environmental impact by 2025. They also use production surplus fabrics from larger fashion brands by repurposing the textile waste generated that would otherwise end up in landfills.

The brand has a “Wear, Care, and Repair” program, and offers to mend, repair, or recycle any garment or shoe they have produced, no matter how old. Returned garments in need of minor patching or repairs are mended and then prepared for re-sale or donation. Garments that are deemed unwearable or unrepairable are used for art or for making other products such as cleaning cloths or rags.

All packaging is either biodegradable, compostable, recyclable, or reusable, and the brand strives toward a fully circular system where no packaging or garment hits the landfill.

www.kuwaii.com.au/



Wear, Care, Repair

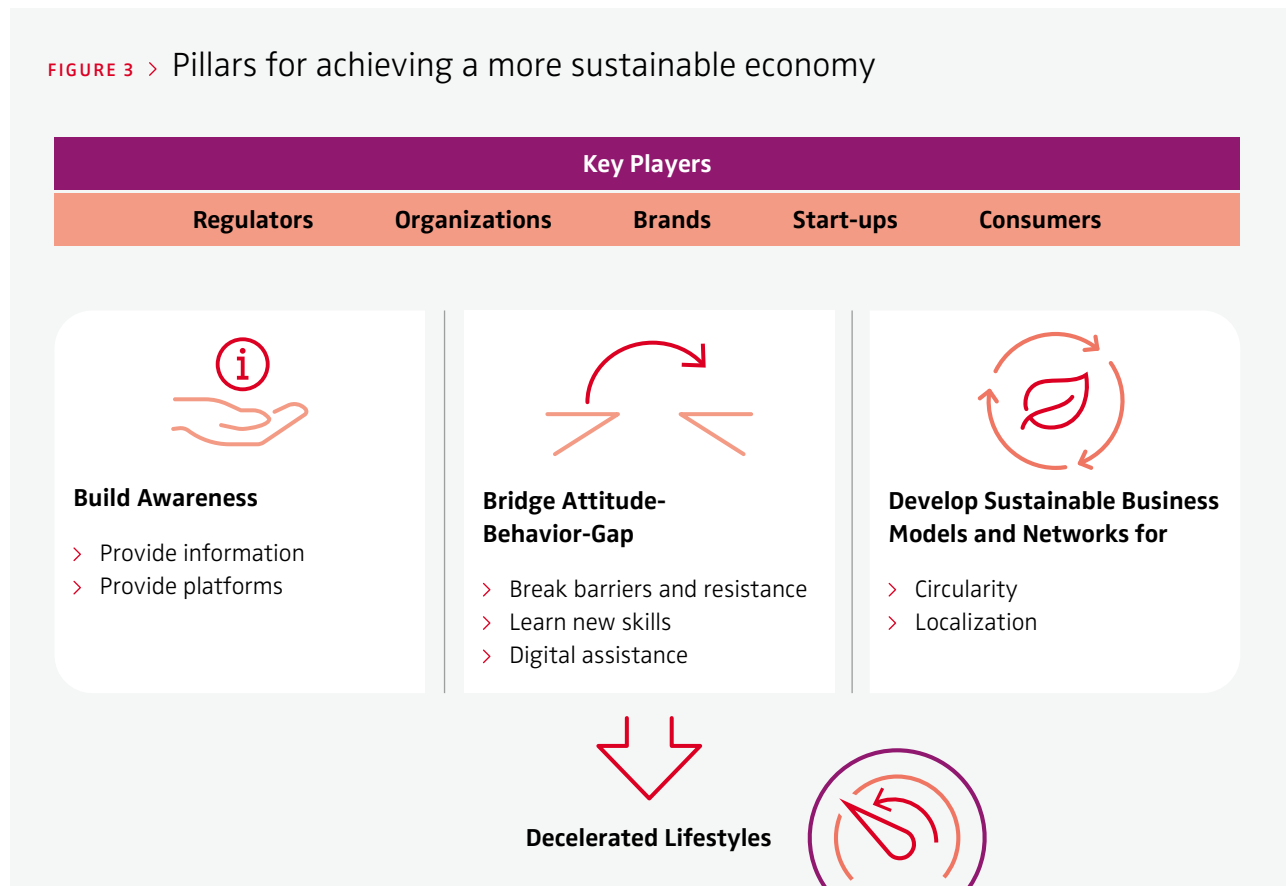


Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

needs and desires elsewhere, when they should shop much less? Marketing researchers and professionals are already hard at work in answering these questions and in this issue, we have covered some findings: All stakeholders are challenged to jointly raise awareness for sustainability issues of those who do not yet see the need for change. Furthermore, they need to support those who want to change their consumption style in their transition from intentions to actions. And brands and startups will have to shape the supply side to create offers that incorporate new consumption values. With these changes comes the mandate to decelerate lifestyles (Figure 3).

> **Building awareness** ✕ Even if Generation Z is already sensitive concerning the consumption styles of affluent countries, many people still need to learn more about the deeper implication of the dominant consumer culture. In this issue, Kozinets (p. 43) describes how people can use digital platforms to gain more information, but also to become drivers of change and how platform architecture and algorithms can either spur or inhibit consumer action. In another article, Stoltenberg and her coauthors discuss the role of product labels in guiding more ethical consumer choices, demonstrating how important it is to carefully plan what information is included in labels (p. 49).

FIGURE 3 > Pillars for achieving a more sustainable economy



But becoming conscious of the issue is only the first step toward sustainable consumption. Following through and actually changing one's well-established consumption patterns can be a challenging process that needs to be supported.

- > **Bridging the attitude-behavior gap** × The various articles in this issue discuss what different stakeholders can do to bridge this attitude-behavior gap. Walker Reczek and her colleagues (p. 25) analyze why consumers' values are not always reflected in their behaviors and present strategies to break such barriers. Beverland (p. 31) identifies identity conflicts that come along with new, sometimes conflicting personal goals and offers strategies to help consumers solve these tensions. Joubert and her colleagues investigate consumer reactions to sustainability regulation – in their case a ban of free plastic bags for shoppers – and suggest guidelines to avoid and overcome resistance (p. 37). Finally, in our interview with consumer researchers Shaw and Duffy we talk about the Save Your Wardrobe App and offer further insights on how more sustainability, more circularity can be achieved

in the fashion industry (p. 54). The app helps consumers in building the skills one requires to be a “good consumer.” These skills move away from knowing where to find the best deals or exclusive products or keeping up with trends and accumulating experiences. A “good sustainable consumer” will need to understand materials and ingredients and know where to store, how to care for, when to use, and how to fix, preserve, restyle, and reinvent objects and parts. To become sustainable consumers, individuals will need to creatively envision multiple functions for versatile objects.

- > **Developing sustainable business models and networks** × Brands, organizations, and startups need to reconsider the vast amounts of resources that are used to develop, produce, and promote ready-made solutions consumers can go without. Such resources can be redirected to support efforts to establish networks and consumer collectives in developing waste-free, tailored solutions to specific needs at the local or individual level. For example, Patagonia, an outdoor clothing brand, created a platform called Patagonia Action Works to



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connect committed individuals to organizations working on environmental issues in the same community. The platform enables anyone to discover and connect with environmental action groups and get involved with the work they do. The brand also offers grants to grassroots environmental activists and has notably withdrawn all its advertising from Facebook since 2020, as part of the #StopHateforProfit campaign.

In fact, organizations need to support consumers in their path to sustainable consumption, or else they will be accused of lagging behind in their share of responsibility. Consumers will not stop at choosing brands that are less damaging – they will search to bring down those that are more damaging. Whereas most brands have already incorporated storylines associated with sustainability, low waste, appropriate ingredients, or appropriate packaging, conscious consumers are aware and avoidant of greenwashing – the deceptive practice of branding a company as environmentally friendly without adopting legitimate sustainable operations. The environment is the cause that Gen Z consumers care the most about, and they are willing to put the effort in making sure that those brands and products that are detrimental to the cause will be stopped. For example, giant online retailer Amazon has been making efforts to connect to younger consumers, but had not managed to resonate with Gen Zers who feel guilty after shopping in the online retailer and are the generation that is the most eager to cut back on their Amazon purchases. Who will offer an alternative immersive online experience that does not involve shopping and ticks all of the sustainability boxes these consumers are looking for?

- > **Decelerating lifestyles** ✕ If sustainable consumption seems too time-consuming, it is because it is. Lack of time is often cited as a barrier to repairing objects or selecting them more carefully. The implication is that sustainable consumption will also require us to decelerate our lives. Making time for things will help them last longer, as making time for experiences makes them more fulfilling. Hopefully, as individuals adopt this new way

of consuming, we will see consumers developing lasting relationships to materials and objects, and these may inspire individuals to better care for their bodies, their homes, their communities, themselves, and others. Finally, sustainable consumers will need to see disposal for what it is – a responsibility – and be supported in devising ways in which objects that are no longer usable can feed back into the planet, ranging from composting to reusing water or growing their own food from seeds that would otherwise be wasted.

Let's face the exciting challenge of reframing consumption

✕ Rethinking consumption as use is a radical approach. But radical approaches are needed if we are to find solutions to the climate emergency. Sustainable consumption as use can still fuel the economy – degrowth is not the same as a recession, for it is planned and intentional. Rather than a linear and downward destructive path, a sustainable economy will move in a circular route, in which each new iteration adds value without extracting, producing, and polluting. Value, then, needs to be found in doings rather than things, in searching for social justice rather than cheaper prices, in connecting to nature rather than TikTok, in caring for oneself and others rather than playing status games. Reducing consumption should not be seen as a terrifying outlook, but as an exciting challenge that, once addressed, can bring about the best in society. ✕



FURTHER READING

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