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# Time to take a hard look at curbing consumerism

Are we genuinely into sustainability or just virtue-signalling?

Michelle Lee

A social media influencer once lamented how some of the beautiful wonders of nature would no longer be around unless the world learns to protect the environment. Yet she travels with a zeal and purchases two economy seats for each of her children when they fly, contributing far more carbon emissions than the average Singaporean. This same influencer said that more pressure should be put on the aviation industry to develop innovative, sustainable solutions to the carbon emissions problem. The contradiction is obvious. But there are many consumers like her whose behaviour does not square with their professed sustainability beliefs. Take those who dutifully use reusable bottles, mugs and shopping bags, but do not think twice about shipping in products from halfway around the globe. There are others who avoid the use of plastics, but are clad in athleisure wear made from nylon and polyester. We are all culpable to some extent of such double standards.

## THE ATTITUDE-BEHAVIOUR GAP

More often than not, the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak (or perhaps just inconsistent). Academics who study the attitude-behaviour gap point to various reasons. For example, we might engage in low-cost pro-sustainability actions to reduce cognitive dissonance – the discomfort a person feels when their behaviour does not align with their values or beliefs – but avoid other actions that deprive ourselves of benefits we are loath to forgo. Denying ourselves

luxuries we have become accustomed to, is hard.

To be fair, complete obedience to the sustainability ethos is unrealistic. It would mean not eating meat, giving up overseas holidays, never using disposables, and some would argue, forgoing parenthood. What we should and can do, however, is curb our overall consumption, even if unevenly across different purchase categories.

## WHY CURB CONSUMPTION?

The short answer is that everything that we consume is derived from nature, and humans are using these natural resources much faster than the earth can regenerate them. According to data by the York University Ecological Footprint Initiative and Global Footprint Network, the resources of 1.7 earths were needed to support the resource use of humankind in 2022. Humanity is in debt and borrowing against future generations.

The recycling of resources is a notorious weak link and cannot be the solution to this problem of high material throughput demanded by consumption. The recycling rate in Singapore in 2023 was 31 per cent for paper, 8 per cent for glass, and a dismal 5 per cent for plastic. Achieving high recycling rates is dependent on too many factors, including a critical mass of informed consumers, strong market demand for recycled materials and favourable prices compared with competing virgin materials. And of course, materials such as paper and plastic cannot be infinitely recycled.

## THINK TWICE ABOUT THAT PLASTIC TOY FOR YOUR KIDS

One way to curb our consumption

is to engage in more intentional transactional thinking. Consumers do, of course, already engage in this, but typically with monetary considerations on one side of the equation and product benefits on the other. We ask ourselves if a product is worth the sticker price and if we can afford it, given our limited budget.

Instead, we should ask if a purchase under consideration is worth the resources of the earth that go into making it. Just as our monetary budgets are limited, our natural resources are finite and whatever resources are used in the service of consumption ought to be resources well-spent.

This would mean, for instance, that the next time we consider purchasing a plastic toy that will entertain our kid for a day, we should consider if the tangible and intangible benefits are worth the natural resources used to make it.

This is, of course, a subjective judgment, but making it a conscious calculation is needed

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so that we do not forget that what we can afford may not be what the earth can afford. The refrain, "It's so cheap, you can't go wrong!" would ring a little hollow if we consider how flooding markets with cheap goods is pumping carbon into our atmosphere, depleting our natural resources and imperilling our very existence.

## CAN YOU GET MORE USE OUT OF THAT DRESS?

Increasing affluence has lowered our regard for our natural resources. Consider the example of tourists on beach holidays in Bali who buy clothes there and discard them before returning home, to dispense with the need to deal with soiled clothes.

Before we relegate anything to the discard pile, we ought to check in with ourselves on whether we have obtained as much use out of the product as possible – and not on the basis of querying if the product "sparks joy", as decluttering expert Marie Kondo would have us do.

The social media influencer who exhorted consumers to put pressure on companies to do better for sustainability had a fair point. As consumers, we can certainly insist that companies be more sustainable, but our roles should also include following through on that in our own lives. We mustn't become mere virtue-signallers that market entities respond to in superficial ways to "buy" our loyalty.

Instead of waiting on companies to innovate and offer more sustainable alternatives, we should take matters into our own hands and simply curb our consumption.

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