

# Green Consumerism and Environmental Sustainability

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## Abstract

With the rapid growth in population and increasing per capita income leading to high purchasing power, world over, consumerism has reached a to new zenith. Men in its lust for more and more luxury and materialism has done irreparable injury to the mother earth and consequently we are witnessing increased frequency of devastating natural disasters in recent times. This paper seeks to examine the pros and cons of consumers going green, which implies preferential consumption or demand of products that are eco-friendly and less harmful to the environment in the long run. Because of increasing consumer awareness big corporates have been forced to adopt measures which are environmentally benign leading to a sustainable consumption and production pattern. This paper seeks to examine whether this new buzzword of green consumerism has any long-term benefit for the environment sustainability or is it merely a marketing gimmick in the name of green products. The author would endeavour to make suggestions for changing policy and outline the importance of environment centric consumer discourse including legal reforms, the development of eco-responsive policies for creating an environmentally sustainable consumer pattern.

**Keywords:** Globalisation, Climate Change, Consumption Pattern, Green Products, Green Marketing.

## I. Introduction:

In this era of globalisation, particularly in the twenty-first century, the explosive growth of population, consumerism, and

unmindful plundering of natural resources have led to serious concern for the environment for the present generation as well as future generations. In an economy

driven by the market, the consumer is king, and this seemingly mistaken belief has led to the fulfilment of consumers' rapacious demands at any cost, ultimately resulting in a complete disdain for our natural resources as human wants and desires are limitless. As in advanced capitalist societies, the market is becoming so irresistibly powerful that consumerism tends to be the ideology and culture of the masses, creating material aspirations that are not commensurate with their real situation (Pannikar 2007). The world order prevailing at the beginning of this century is unjust. Globalisation and consumer culture have widened the gap between the affluent and the poor (Jhunjhunwala 2010). Globalisation may be considered a process of trans nationalization of capital, production, and even consumer tastes and preferences under the logic of global exchange (Traber 2003). The term consumerism has several meanings. On the one hand, it invokes the doctrine of continually increasing rates of consumption as the basis for a sound economy, which in turn triggers a series of cultural effects, principal among these being the absorption of social life into the world of commodities (Hilton 2003).

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Substantial increases in income levels resulting in high purchasing power have led to a further increase in consumerism, creating a win-win situation both for consumers and for big corporations while at the same time recklessly ignoring the environmental costs involved by directly or indirectly accelerating environmental degradation and climate change. We are also witnessing a dramatic sociocultural transformation in India—the steady growth of a middle class with global aspirations, the spread of consumptionist culture, the revolution in mass media and information technology, and the changing modes of entertainment, leisure, and lifestyle (Pathak 2006). In this growing world of consumerism and materialism, everyone wants as much luxury and comfort as he can afford, forgetting its long-term implications for Mother Nature. The world over, there has been a recent spurt in devastating natural disasters, ranging from floods, droughts, cyclones, wildfires, earthquakes, and many more. In the weather cycle, such climatic disruptions are normal phenomena; however, in the last two to three decades or so, we have witnessed an intensity of devastation and destruction that was

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unimaginable in the past, and the root cause of all these problems is human interruptions in the natural environment. Although various initiatives have been taken at the national as well as transnational levels to strike an optimum balance between the two apparently conflicting ideas of consumerism and environmentalism, the balance is still tilted in favour of the former. Sustainable development embraces within itself certain basic notions such as the Public Trust Doctrine, a principle that the sovereign holds in trust for public use some natural resources; the Precautionary Principle, often summarised as better safe than sorry; and the Polluter Pay Principle, which essentially holds the polluter liable for the pollution caused to the environment.

## II. Evolving Consumer Patterns:

As people are increasingly becoming aware of the disastrous effects of environmental degradation, ranging from global warming to ozone depletion, due to various reasons, one of which is the unsustainable consumer pattern, they have slowly started to consume and are willing to pay for products that are environmentally safe and comparatively less harmful to the environment, leading to

a gradual change in consumer behaviour. With the concepts of green and low carbon deeply rooted in people's hearts and consumers' concern for environmental protection, green consumption has become a trend (Yu & Zen 2024).

Organisations and businesses, however, have seen this change in consumer attitudes, and they are trying to gain an edge in the competitive market by exploiting the potential in the green market industry (Cherian & Jacob 2012).

Though we are living in a market-driven society with a dominant consumer culture - a society revolving around the purchase and consumption of goods and services; and consumer sovereignty - that all economic production is ultimately driven by the preferences of consumers, yet increasing awareness about environmental sustainability has led to a marked change in the consumption pattern. The sustainability concept is also known as Triple-Bottom-Line (people, planet, and profit) and demands businesses for equal consideration of people (social) and planet (environment) instead of profit (economic) or the bottom line alone (Shan et al. 2018). White, Hardisty, and Habib in their very interesting study has suggested that the

social influence can also be used in different ways to achieve sustainable consumption. The first is by simply making sustainable behaviours more evident to others. In some of White's research, people were asked to choose between an eco-friendly granola bar (which had the tagline "Good for you and the environment") and a traditional granola bar ("A healthy, tasty snack"). The sustainable option was twice as likely to be chosen when others were present than when the choice was made in private. A second way to increase the impact of social influence is to make people's commitments to eco-friendly behaviour public. For example, asking hotel guests to signal that they agree to reuse towels by hanging a card on their room door increased towel reuse by 20%. In a similar study, asking hotel guests to wear a pin symbolizing their commitment to participating in an energy-conservation program increased towel reuse by 40%. A third approach is to use healthy competition between social groups. In one example, communicating that another group of students was behaving in a positively viewed way ("We are trying to encourage students to compost....

Recently, a survey...found that Computing

Science students are the most effective in composting efforts when compared across the student groups") made business students more than twice as likely to compost their biodegradable coffee cups (White et al. 2022). The rapid upward thrust of the economy has harmed the environment, which has been compounded by pollution. More and more people are becoming concerned about their surroundings and looking for strategies to mitigate their unfavourable consequences. This is seen in governments and enterprises' determination to expand and produce environmentally friendly products, as well as raise demand for green products (Nguyen et al. 2023). Human activities are clearly harming the global environment, and brands have no choice but to migrate to sustainable solutions and work towards building a circular economy. So, if brands don't switch, they lose consumers, investors, and all other stakeholders. While brands in India have already started taking baby steps towards converting their businesses into sustainable choices for consumers, we will get to witness more demonstrable actions in the near future. And those who fail to

prioritise Mother Earth will have to face consumers' wrath (Sharma 2022).

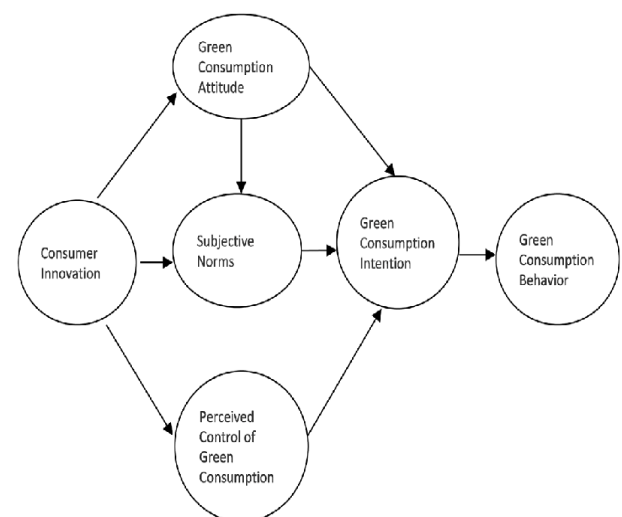
### III. Green Consumerism: Reality or Sham?

In simple words, green consumerism implies preferential consumption or demand of products that are eco-friendly and less harmful to the environment in the long run. Green consumerism refers to a state in which consumers demand products and services that have undergone an eco-friendly production process or one that involves recycling and safeguarding the planet's resources. In other words, green consumerism entails the production, promotion, and advancement of the utilisation or use of goods and services based on their pro-environment benefits (Rinkesh 2022). Socio-demographic factors like his age, gender, income, education, and other factors like environmental knowledge, environmental concern, organisational green image, social influence, etc. become part of the green purchase perception of any consumer and will orient the consumer's behaviour towards green products (Sweta & Abdin 2020). One major and fundamental factor in understanding the perception of green consumers is their individual concern for

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the environment. There is a positive relationship between environmental concern and green consumer purchase intention. Environmental concern is totally different from pro-environmental behaviour because pro-environmental behaviour may lose the whole perspective of the environment. However, if an individual has an environmental concern, he will definitely exhibit pro-environmental behaviour (Sweta & Abdin 2020).



**Figure 1.** The influence of consumer innovation on green consumption behaviour. Source:

<https://doi.org/10.4236/ajibm.2020.103039>

The change in consumers' attitudes toward a more balanced consumption of green products is one of the driving forces in ensuring sustainable consumption.

Providing information on the importance of green consumption can reduce excessive consumption, reduce water waste and unnecessary energy consumption, or prevent paper waste by increasing skills in the use of technological products because a conscious consumer that is educated will enable the economy and society to change since this education will help consumers to shape their purchasing behaviour largely with environmental concerns in mind, that is, to turn them into active green consumers (Zeynalova & Namazova 2022). Kirmani & Naved, after their in-depth analysis of the findings of more than two hundred empirical papers, suggest that green consumerism is influenced by four categories of variables. The first category includes variables that are related to the environment (such as environmental concern, environmental attitude, eco-literacy, perceived environmental responsibility, and perceived seriousness of environmental problems) and hence are termed as 'environmental variables'. The second category is termed 'non-environmental variables' and includes variables such as collectivism, social influence, religiosity, etc. The third category includes the green marketing

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strategies (such as green labelling, green packaging, green advertising, green pricing, etc) used by marketers to influence green consumerism. The last and fourth variables include demographic variables such as gender, age, education, and income (Kirmani & Naved 2016). Green consumers share common values in their concern for the state of the environment and their awareness of the effect of overconsumption on the rate of environmental devastation. These values are reflected in an increased emphasis on the environmental costs of a product, which include its collective social and long-term economic impacts (Todd 2004). However, it is also argued that green consumerism does not address the root cause of environmental problems because it does not encourage a decline in consumption and, in fact, encourages corporate greenwashing that misleads consumers about "sustainable" business practices (Smith 1998). Critics also argue that green consumerism has proven largely ineffective in curbing collective rates of consumption; despite improved efficiencies and green-and-lean social norms and policies, society's aggregate resource and energy usage continues to

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climb. There is an urgent need to promote urgency and self-sufficiency with regard to individual conservation behaviours while simultaneously promoting mindfulness of collective impacts on the planet (Guckian et al. 2017). Some critics also argue that the current discourse on environmental sustainability has made the consumer a scapegoat. Promoting green consumerism at once lays responsibility on consumers to undertake the function of maintaining economic growth while simultaneously, even if contradictorily, bearing the burden to drive the system towards sustainability. Given the scope of the sustainability challenge and the urgency with which it must be addressed, the consumer is not the most salient agent in the production–consumption system; expecting the consumer through green consumerism to shift society towards Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) patterns is consumer scapegoatism (Akenji 2014).

#### **IV. Green Products as an Alternative:**

Green products are usually identified by having two basic goals: reducing waste and maximising resource efficiency. They are manufactured using toxic-free ingredients and environmentally friendly procedures, JULY-SEPTEMBER 2024  
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and they achieve certifications such as GreenPro. There are certain special characteristics of green products that differentiate them from traditional products. They are recyclable, reusable, and biodegradable. They are generally made of natural ingredients using nontoxic chemicals. These products do not harm or pollute the environment, are not tested on animals, and come in eco-friendly packaging. Consumers also get a number of advantages by using green products. These products are cost-effective as they last longer than conventional products, and they consume less energy, also leading to reduced bills for the users, like hybrid cars. Green products are not only environmentally friendly but also have lower operational costs in comparison to traditional products, e.g., solar lights. If a consumer regularly uses green products, then not only his physical health but also his mental health will improve considerably, as we can see in the case of green buildings with large windows that allow healthy and fresh air along with natural lighting in abundance, leading to improved mental health and reduced stress. One of the best examples of successful green product in India in recent

times is the Mamaearth, a personal care product brand, which initially made organic products for new born babies but subsequently expanded its product base to include the whole family. Launched in 2016, the huge success story of Mamaearth in a very short span of time lies in its safe to use, all-natural, toxin-free skincare products made from natural products only. There are a number of advantages to going green for society as well: it generates more jobs, prevents overuse of resources and fossil fuels, encourages the generation of energy using natural resources, and protects the environment (Das 2023). Though comparatively green products are costlier initially; in the long run they are obviously less expensive. Companies should make their systems, policies, and products green in order to withstand economic and non-economic pressures from their consumers, business partners, regulators, citizen groups, and other stakeholders (Emre 2014). In India, Tata Consultancy Services, Wipro, ITC Limited, MRF Tyres and number of other companies have successfully adopted green practices in their products and services and being a torch bearer on the path of sustainability.

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#### **V. Green marketing:**

Green marketing is the marketing of products that are presumed to be environmentally safe. It incorporates a broad range of activities, including product modification, changes to the production process, sustainable packaging, and modifying advertising. Green marketing is also known as environmental marketing or sustainable marketing. It refers to all activities that facilitate any exchange intended to satisfy human needs and wants in such a way that the satisfaction of the said needs and wants occurs with the minimum detrimental impact on the natural environment (Roshani 2021). There are five reasons for companies to adopt green marketing: enhancing corporate images, complying with environmental trends, taking advantage of green opportunities, obtaining competitive advantages, and increasing product value (Chen 2008). Ali Tezer and H. Onur Bodur, in very interesting research, have shown that marketers can enhance consumption experiences by going green. For example, a movie theatre offering recycled (vs. conventional) 3D glasses, a gym implementing eco-friendly (vs. conventional) gym tools, or a restaurant



offering bamboo (vs. plastic) chopsticks can improve the consumer experience. The experience providers should effectively communicate the environmental benefits of the products to enhance consumers' enjoyment of the offered experience. Moreover, by promoting green versions of products that are accompanied by consumption experiences, brands can benefit from the positive downstream consequences of the green consumption effect. For instance, participants were more likely to purchase the green (vs. conventional) headphones after listening to music, suggesting that brands can also increase consumers' intentions to purchase the products that are instrumental in the consumption experience (Tezer & Bodur 2020). Green marketing will be successful only in the long run, so the business needs to plan for the long term rather than a short-term strategy. Green marketing should not be considered just one more approach to marketing; it must be pursued with much greater vigour as it has an environmental and social dimension to it. With the threat of global warming looming large, it is extremely important that green marketing become the norm rather than an exception (Janarthanan 2012). Green

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marketing aims to market sustainable and socially responsible products and services. Now is the era of recyclable, non-toxic, and environmentally friendly goods. This has become the new mantra for marketers to satisfy the needs of consumers and earn better profits (Vijaya Lakshmi 2014).

#### **VI. Greenwashing as an Indirect Fraud:**

Greenwashing, also called "green sheen", is a form of marketing spin in which green PR and green marketing are deceptively used to persuade the public that an organisation's products, aims, and policies are environmentally friendly. Companies that intentionally adopt greenwashing communication strategies often do so in order to distance themselves from the environmental lapses of their suppliers. Greenwashing is not a recent phenomenon; since the mid-1980s, the term has gained broad recognition and acceptance to describe the practice of making unwarranted or overblown claims of sustainability or environmental friendliness in an attempt to gain market share (Dahl 2021).

In November 2022, at the 27th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP27), which took place in the

Egyptian coastal city of Sharm el-Sheikh, Secretary-General of the United Nations António Guterres said, "We must have zero tolerance for net-zero greenwashing." Referring to the recent net-zero commitments made by private companies and sovereigns, the Secretary-General observed that they had "varying levels of rigour and loopholes wide enough to drive a diesel truck through." (Smith 1998).

In March 2023, the European Commission, in an effort to prevent greenwashing and improve transparency for consumers, introduced a proposal for a directive titled "Green Claims Directive" to protect consumers from greenwashing and to achieve other objectives as stated in the framework of the initiative.

To check this unethical practice of greenwashing, huge fines and penalties can be imposed on large corporations that indulge in such activities. On April 8, 2022, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) made a public announcement that it was issuing a \$5.5 million penalty via its Penalty Offence Authority to Kohl's Inc. (\$2.5 million) and Walmart, Inc. (\$3 million) due to their deceptive environmental claims about rayon products. This is the largest civil penalty in FTC history.

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## VII. Do your bit:

Barack Obama once said, "Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek." We, at the individual level, need to change our consumption pattern. Small efforts like the use of biodegradable products, reduced use of plastic, reduced energy consumption by using products with a high star rating, using organic food products, using an electric vehicle, using more solar and other renewable energy sources, etc. can go a long way in mitigating environmental degradation. The recent landslide subsidence in Joshimath and its neighbouring areas in Uttarakhand, which occurred in January 2023, is a striking example of how men, in their lust for more enjoyment and more luxury, are tinkering with the environment. Preliminary reports suggest that the main cause of this disaster was the high inflow of tourists in that area, leading to high extraction of groundwater as well as the building up of large hydroelectric projects in hilly areas. The costs of environmental damage become the benefits of environmental protection and restoration if they are thereby mitigated or

avoided. There are three broad environmental strategies to deliver these benefits, the 'triple-de': decarbonisation, to reduce the level of global warming; detoxification, to reduce the emissions or impacts of other pollutants; and dematerialization, to reduce the environmental impacts associated with resource extraction, conversion, and processing (Ekins & Zenghelis 2021). Humans are creatures of habit. Many behaviours, such as how we commute to work, what we buy, what we eat, and how we dispose of products and packaging, are part of our regular routines. Often, the key to spreading sustainable consumer behaviour is to first break bad habits and then encourage good ones. Habits are triggered by cues found in familiar contexts. For example, using disposable coffee cups (a habit repeated a staggering 500 billion times a year across the globe) may be a response to cues such as the default cup provided by the barista and a trash bin illustrated with a picture of a cup, both common in coffee shops. Companies can use design features to eliminate negative habits and substitute positive ones. The simplest and probably most effective approach is to make sustainable

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behaviour the default option (White et al. 2019). The pace of technological advancement is closely connected with the deliberately short life span of modern consumer products of all kinds, which in turn is a decisive factor in their total environmental impact. The commercial imperative to maintain and increase sales often dictates planned obsolescence-tyres, batteries or cars that last too long are not good for business- and continual technological improvements can make this process publicly acceptable, as it does for instance in the field of consumer electronics. Even the benefits of technological improvements in vehicle fuel efficiency can be reduced, or even cancelled out, by the wasteful rush to buy the new model with all its attendant production costs rather than see out the life span of the old one (Hannis 1998).

The toxic legacy of the digital age—electronic waste, or e-waste—is an apt example of how mindless growth in consumerism may have a catastrophic effect on the environment. It is a ticking time bomb, caused mainly by the insatiable lust of humans for the latest and innumerable tech devices. They have the unimaginable potential to inflict

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irreparable harm on the whole ecosystem in the long run. Almost all e-waste is not properly recycled and disposed of. They are dumped illegally in landfills, releasing heavy toxic chemicals like mercury, lead, etc., causing huge damage to the air, groundwater, and soil, which directly or indirectly finds its way into the human body.

### VIII. The Road Ahead:

Paul Hawken, in his book, categorically fixes the main responsibility for addressing the social and ecological implications of human consumption on corporations. He underlines three issues that define this corporate responsibility: "what it takes," the material and energy resources extracted from ecosystems; "what it makes," the commodity and service effects of industrial production processes; and "what it wastes", the collective social and environmental costs to consumers, society, and ecological habitats (Hawken 1993). We need a bold new approach called conservation concessions, which provides a potentially powerful way to expand the green market from its present dependence on products to the broader notion of green services—the opportunity to purchase biodiversity preservation directly

(Hardner & Rice 2002). We are currently consuming more resources than ever, exceeding the planet's capacity for generation. In the meantime, waste and pollution grows, and the gap between rich and poor is widening. Health, education, equity and empowerment are all adversely affected. Crucially, Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) can contribute substantially to poverty alleviation and the transition towards low-carbon and green economies. To do this, SCP requires building cooperation among many different stakeholders as well as across sectors in all countries.

There is a famous saying, "he who sups with the devil should have a long spoon." To save humanity from this demon of climate change, which has posed an imminent threat to our existence, drastic measures are needed at the individual consumer level as well as at the governmental level. Different innovative ways and out-of-the-box thinking have become unavoidable. Incentivize people to go green. Encourage them to adopt environmentally friendly measures like increased use of renewable energy sources, rejecting single-use plastic, reducing wastage of water and electricity, avoiding

the use of personal cars, using car cooling, or making more use of the public transport system, using cycles or walking to work (WoW), and adopting traditional ways of living. At the governmental level, more resources should be allocated to research and development for developing and providing eco-friendly alternatives to consumers at a reasonable price. Discourage people from such consumption that is not environmentally sustainable, e.g., impose high taxes on ultra-luxurious goods, limit the number of cars a person can own even if he or she can afford them, and adopt different ways to implement the polluter pays principle at the micro level. The government of India has already taken various initiatives like the use of CNG, the ban on single-use plastics, the promotion of eco-friendly vehicles, etc., but a lot more needs to be done. NGO's must play an important role in marketing green ideas more intensively to make people more aware and knowledgeable about environmental issues and problems, so that there will be a new breed of green-minded consumers to keep themselves healthy as well as make contributions to preserving our planet for our next generations. While it is appropriate to acknowledge the trend

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towards green consumerism as a first step in creating institutional change, we have significant work remaining before us if we desire to function as social provisioners within a truly sustainable economy. A starting place to support social provisioners would be to improve the effectiveness of green regulations and the truthfulness in green advertising. Additionally, careful consideration is necessary if we are to develop and support an effective green evolution of institutions. Importantly, we must acknowledge and use our social natures to change not only the way we consume but also how much we consume and the place of consumption within our economic system. A truly green revolution requires institutional change that reconstructs our economy and the provisioning of life by changing customs, social norms, and policies (Kepner & Cole 2013). We must not forget the three R's to save the environment, i.e., reduce, reuse, and recycle. And lastly, we need to inculcate in our youth a futuristic vision— a vision for balancing the inherent conflict between growth in consumerism and environmental sustainability. A whole new generation of informed citizens, which may be called the Green Generation, a

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generation that is more inclined and focused towards going green, a generation that is more aware of the environmental implications of their consumption patterns, is the need of the hour.

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