

# Consumption Origins And Sustainability: Can Understanding The Origins Of Consumption Within A Sustainability Framework Contribute To Further Human Progress?

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**Abstract:** With a human population nearing 8 billion people, it is imperative that we understand consumption behaviors, patterns and causes so that we can create actionable frameworks that address our 'need to consume', which is arguably at the core of our current global sustainability challenges. This paper explores the origins and genesis of consumption- its motivations, objectives, and purposes that have driven our 'need to consume' from its primal archaic role in human history to its' modern day expressions. Our findings highlight that we are still living within primal consumption behaviors and patterns that no longer serve the utility they once did- such as fulfilling our 'need to survive' and our 'conspicuous consumption' behaviors to test 'fitness' and 'genetic prowess'. The impact of this archaic and primal instinct to consume continues to perpetuate our human narrative and has created a pattern of overconsumption leading to resource depletion and environmental degradation and even larger 'hidden' impacts such as poverty, addiction, loneliness, social disease, stress, civic degeneration, and inequality. However, we still lack the reflection and understanding within our individual and global consumption behaviors and patterns in order to make real and effective changes. This paper continues the call for further research to understand the connections of our innate genetic, biological and social need to consume; in order to distinguish it from sustainable consumption and create policy, education and frameworks that surpass our primal consumption patterns into modern day sustainable consumption patterns and behaviors.

**Index Terms:** Conspicuous consumption, Consumption behavior, Consumption ethics, Human progress, Human development, Overconsumption, Sustainability, Sustainable development

## 1 INTRODUCTION

WHAT do we mean by consumption? Why should we care about consumption? And where does the need to consume come from? How has it impacted or affected us; shaped and transformed who we are and the environment in which we live including our political, environmental, economic, social and cultural frameworks? This paper aims to take us further into what consumption means exploring beyond resource depletion and environmental degradation into the evolving role of sustainable consumption to encapsulate the potential for human progress. Uncovering even larger symptoms and impacts of consumption such as poverty, addiction, loneliness, social disease, stress, civic degeneration, and inequality [26], [54], [128]. Additionally, this paper endeavors to highlight some of the deeper roots of why we consume the way we do. Exposing that, 'why we consume' may be hidden in our archetypes and epistemologies that are the bedrock of our current social phenomena and obsession with consumption [32], [76], [92]. The need to consume, as argued here, has its origins rooted in survival and primordial human. As E.O. Wilson, the world-renowned evolutionist and Harvard entomologist states that the theory of "why we consume" is within evolution- however this dialogue is "rarely incorporated into decisions" or decision-making [42], [84], [125]. But there may be a greater need that bids our attention- that of happiness, belonging, and cultural and spiritual integrity. And by understanding consumption and its place within our humanity, could help lead humankind beyond the entrenched bad habits of consumption and into noble and purposeful consumption [15], [73]. Major research continues to explore what we consume, why we consume, and how we consume. Unfortunately, the majority of this work is through corporate industry and marketing bodies where the data is used to continue to stimulate the economy and drive consumption behaviours even further- where major environmental impacts are not measured or considered [1], [11], [26], [98]. This is highlighted with global spending on advertising reaching \$446

billion in 2002 with over \$220 billion spent alone in the U.S. markets- all aimed at driving consumer spending [99], [100], [104], [127], [123]. This annual marketing expenditure exceeds nine times the amount needed to provide global basic needs such as: reproductive health care for all women (\$12 billion), elimination of hunger and malnutrition (\$19 billion,) universal literacy (\$5 billion), clean drinking water for all (\$10 billion), and immunizing every child (\$1.3 billion) [101], [102], [103], [123]. Further research that is specific to consumer behaviour, dynamics, and policy making, to drive consumption patterns, has been led by microeconomist, and the social sciences including psychology, marketing and management with some aspects of anthropology [9], [14], [70], [89], [91], [94]. Psychology under marketing and the social sciences, for example have often studied aspects such as: how consumers think, feel, reason; how consumers are influenced by culture, family, and media; the behaviour of consumers while shopping; consumer motivations; and the consumers information processing abilities and consumer knowledge [78]. Bennett and O'Reilley expand on this within their discussion on how modern marketing and governments have "exploited the unconscious" mind within the fields of consumer research [8]. Here they refer to the works of Sigmund Freud in the 20's on consumer behaviour aimed at therapeutic treatment (p. 11) [8]. However, it was taken up by the "father of public relations" Edward Bernays, "as a golden opportunity for industry to connect with customers in new more powerful ways and to convince them to buy" [8]. This is where tools to manipulate customers "including projective and hypnotic techniques, semiotics, imagery and the psychology of colour" began to be developed and used (p. 12) [8]. Economics, however, have and continue to reign within consumption discourse. With development and research on consumption within economics traced from major key works such as, Adam Smith and *The Wealth of Nations* (1776); Milton Friedman's treatise *A Theory of the Consumption Function* (1957) and in recent times

Simon Kuznets formulation of gross domestic product or GDP for the U.S. Congress (1937) with theories relating back to marketplace and the Athenian Democracy (pp. 23-46) [24]. Essentially consumption as foci within economics has varying pinnacles and creator's dependent on the purpose of investigation such as: behavioural (marketing), production (policy and economic growth), use (behavioural and economic expenditure), or more recently waste (environmental degradation) [14], [27], [30], [45], [52], [82], [95]. However, this foci in economics and marketing places its core purpose as one to further drive consumption patterns and behaviours. They very patterns and behaviours that lead to unsustainable consumption and the environmental degradation we face today- whilst also creating greater social challenges. Rather than addressing the questions 'do we need to consume' and how do we address our insatiable appetites to consume without forethought and conscious consumption frameworks that achieve both economic, social and environmental progress.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Emerging Research

Research is now recognizing the vital significance of understanding consumption and its place in our world, acknowledging the "growing importance of mass consumption to ... economy, polity, culture, and social landscape from the 1920s to the present" (p. 236) [17]. As Pellandini- Simanyi states "consumption [is] moving to center stage" (p. 7), and is recognized as a key field to answer and address the fundamental questions such as what is a "good life", "justice", and the inherent link to the human condition [42], [77]. With this is the recognition that the current reign of conventional economic models in consumption research are "inadequate for addressing sustainable consumption" (pp. 1-5) [94]. Further, consumption is now recognized in "modern consumer societies" (p. 7) as the key domain in which 'values' are defined and pursued [77]. Ritzer and Slater further grandstand this notion by stating that the material culture of consumption "may [well] be central to all human society" (p. 6) [84]. In addition, such works as from Davidson in his discussion on 'consumerscape' (p. 25) and Gerth on consumption and Nationalism (pp. 44-45, 433-434); highlight the fundamental authority of philosophical and political frameworks noting the 'precarious linkages' between democracy and freedom, taxes, laws, as well as the power of cultural mores and ideological positions that define, shape and influence consumption and consumer behavior [24], [36]. This understanding may be essential in enacting change to our current valuation processes and frameworks, which currently grossly misalign the needs of humans as a whole [38], [83], [117]. Not only are we degrading our environments natural services from which human survival depends, but we are chewing away at our values [107]. As one of today's well-known philosophers Amartya Sen reflects, human development is about achieving richness in life rather than richness in economy where economy is merely one aspect [34].

### 2.2 Research Gap- Interdisciplinary and Sustainability

It is this understanding that provides current impetus for research and discourse on consumption across multiple fields [94]. The missing gaps in consumption research may include both a lack of understanding the consumer in relationship to

servicing a higher state of human development as well as attaining unification of multidisciplinary research to achieve this [39], [66], [78]. Ulph and Southerton, for example, call on a "deeper understanding of consumption" by amalgamating and developing what may potentially be an, "overarching grand theory of sustainable consumption" (p. ix) that embraces all disciplines in order to progress to higher aspects of human life such as poverty alleviation and equality [94]. Trentmann also recognizes the gap in the 'human aspect' of consumption when he observes how we have studied "budget books, diets, housing and spending patterns... [but] the acquisition, use and waste of things, taste and desire were not part of a shared research agenda" [112]. Here Trentmann discusses not only to the environmental impacts of today but also to the ethical and value-laden choices built within current consumption patterns [112], [113]. Davidson further contends that the 'human aspect' of consumption is greatly misunderstood and understudied recognizing that though current research exists such as "status- objects, gender, money and exchange", the debate about the 'ancient Greek consumer' (pp. 23-46) still existing within us today, has not been a key subject and needs to be better understood if we are to address consumption at its root [24]. Barnett et al. likewise advance the need of values and ethics to be better placed within consumption research noting, "existing research on consumption fails to register the full complexity of the practices, motivations and mechanisms which the working up of moral selves in undertaking in relation to consumption practices" (p. 23) [6]. They further that ethical consumption involves not just governing of consumption but of governing the "consuming self" (p. 23) [6]. By governing our consuming self, we gain understanding of our "consumer" condition and are able to act as an agent of change for our own inherent or intrinsic behaviors that may no longer serve purpose or utility [6]. This gap in consumption research leaves the application of consumption discourse deficient in contemporary mainstream economic and political decision making- both of which are key paradigms of human existence [13], [69], [122]. Part of the solution, as discussed, however is an interdisciplinary approach that can act as an segue for policy-makers to design policies that achieve more sustainable consumption [94].

### 2.3 Definitions

Consumption takes many forms but is generally understood from its two semantic roots, one embedded within contemporary economics and the other more broadly applied to how people use and dispose of items [81], [113]. In general, contemporary economic use of consumption refers to the "satisfaction of our wants by use of commodities and services" (p.1) [85]. And within economics this 'satisfaction' of our wants is the key emphasis [17], [18], [24], [85]. The latter interpretation, however, stems from its Latin roots, later developed into early English, and carries with it negative connotations meaning to destroy or waste [47], [113]. This later interpretation is now what we see when referring to environmental degradation and impacts from mass consumption (p. 376) [113]. However, there may not be one agreed definition that suits the multi-facet aspects of consumption, consumption norms, and consumption behavior with the 'act and process of consumption ... understood and value[d]' (p. 1). in very different ways [22]. Further "what is meant by the term consumption is far from clear" (pp. 21-22) and can refer to either: the act of purchase; the use of goods;

the quantity of material possessions, services, entertainment, the production of the commodities and services; or, the process by which consumer goods and services are created bought and used' [22], [77]. Campbell for example defines consumption as "selection, purchase, use, maintenance, repair and disposal of any product or service" (p. 100) [10]. Pellandini- Simanyi note that though this definition is broad and extends beyond 'the mere act of purchase and beyond material goods', (p. 20) the definition still relies on the term 'purchase' relating to market exchange and thus limits the scope of consumption to incorporating other "allocation mechanisms such as redistribution and reciprocity" [77]. Understanding these complications of what is meant by consumption and its effects has not gone unnoticed and in the last 20 years (as discussed previously) consumption "has become a major focus of endeavor in modern social science" (p.423) amongst other disciplines (human geography, anthropology, psychology, sociology, economics, and philosophy) [37]. However, it is worth noting that this is a growing discourse and before the 1980's research on consumption across multidisciplinary fields was minimal if not entirely absent (p. 423) [37].

### 3 RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

This study analyzed current understandings and concepts of sustainability challenges within the context of consumption origins and a western background. Particular focus was on developed countries such as the United States, Australia, and countries within the E.U., and exploration of key themes such as:

- Definitions and understandings of consumption.
- Definitions and understandings of human progress and human development.
- Current tools and frameworks for assessing human progress or human development.
- The significance of consumption within current discourse.
- Provide a compelling hypothesis to warrant further investigation.
- Drawing comparisons and illustrate the relationship between consumption and human development.

#### 3.1 Limitations

Investigations and concepts of key themes such as GDP, human progress, sustainability and sustainable consumption cannot be explored completely given the natural time and volume limitations, and understanding that each key theme warrants a discussion in its own right. Investigations are bounded within a western context and focused on the metrics and data, including comparison, from mostly developed countries with only small comparisons to developing countries. Further considered are natural limitations such as available data, influx of data and data management, and research gaps. Where gaps in research are identified, these have become the focus key consideration and investigation.

#### 3.2 Assumptions

This paper highlights the following major assumptions in the production, analysis and conclusions drawn here within. Specific macro assumptions include (1) that GDP is a global phenomenon and a key player in global economy; (2) biology and general understandings of evolution are implied; (3) sustainable consumption and unsustainable consumption are

generally understood; (4) sustainability is generally understood; (5) other terms such as social capital are generally understood; (6) 'impacts' - both direct and indirect- both are assumed and defined as 'impacts' with a general understanding of the difference, though, not represented here; (7) 'consumption' refers to consumption choices, patterns and behaviors with a general understanding of the difference, however, not thoroughly represented here.

#### 3.3 Methodology

The production of this research included a wide literary review including data gathering, review and analysis. The use of journalistic search engines, books, journals and articles including: (1) the use of Internet search engines (Google, Explorer and Safari) to access peer reviewed and published books, journals and articles; (2) searches include key words, phrases, and concepts; (3) literature obtained was categorized by subject, read, and annotated with notes; (4) the information was then re-categorized with any variations and formed the basis of first draft of writing; (5) second draft of writing saw a re-introduction of new literature where appropriate with peer review, edits and feedback. Given the paper is 'theoretical' in objective, research was limited to literature review and did not include field work, surveys, observations or other methods.

### 4 CONCLUSION

Sustainable consumption may be the key to achieving global sustainability given its unique fundamental function in human choice, behavior and patterns that influences our world with every consumer transaction- from resource extraction, manufacturing and waste- through to our social impacts and disparities such as obesity and addiction [23], [49], [87], [121]. These impacts have been globally acknowledged by major global initiatives such as Agenda 21, Oslo Symposium and WSSD and the 10Y Framework Program [50], [65], [115], [118]. As well as fifty-eight of the worlds' academies of science including: Royal Society in the United Kingdom, National Academy of Sciences in the United States, the Indian National Science Academy, The Brazilian Academy of Sciences and the Third World Academy of Sciences [2], [10], [43], [59], [74], [110], [126]. Of which exist a global consensus carrying similar sentiments such as Paul and Anne Ehrlichs: "the magnitude of the threat... is linked to human population size and resource use per person.... [where] resource use, waste production and environmental degradation are accelerated by population growth... [and] further exacerbated by consumption habit" (p. 8) [31]. And though there is no repudiating the role of population, consumption and its impacts can no longer be ignored. As Annie Leonard states "Our consumer self is so overdeveloped that we spend most of our time there. You see it walking around... we interact with others from our consumer self and are most spoken to as our consumer self" (p.19) [20]. Trentmann is more epigrammatic when he states 'consumption is a mirror of the human condition' (p.1) fundamentally composing the essentials of our human existence [12]. Growing evidence reinforces this by continually underlining how fundamental consumption truly is from survival and well-being through to attaining our desires, status, identity and ultimately lending itself as a framework for our culture, politics and economics [20], [68], [122]. The origins of our consumption illustrate our journey from satiating our physiological needs for caloric intake, where we began developing food identity between deciding optimum and

innocuous food choices, and the principle of incorporation- 'you are what you eat'. We developed feeding niches "specializing on large, valuable food packages" increasing our social groupings, promoting food sharing and lowering mortality rates and predation risk- allowing us the mechanisms to increase lifespans. This included solidifying bonds and kin relationships to increase our inclusive fitness for propagation and our indirect fitness where we invested in siblings, parents, and community. And as our population grew so did our communities, our states, nations, and our multinational alignments- where individual and community identity became national identity and a convergence of international identity for growth. Here consumption began shaping and entrenching paradigms under the regime of accumulation, growth and development. We have arguably always been a 'consumer', however it was here we slowly entered the world of consumerism. The distinction is one where consumerism is signified through the use of mass-produced goods and services, the proliferation of media, and orientation of social life. And the new 'growth' regimes seen through fiscal and policy efforts such as the Great Depression and Fordism, centered on the moral and honorable principle of a "cycle of mass production and mass consumption". This growth regime saw businesses and government researching, inventing and designing ever more creative ways to 'tap' into our subconscious and hidden 'natures' to drive consumption to ever-higher heights. And at present it can be argued as Leonard and Morris allude to, that we live within a consumption mania- so ingrained in this human condition, it is the lens through which we interact with just about everything. Morris states this as a "human obsession" [70]. Where Leonard contends, "we've allowed our citizen self to be dwarfed by a relatively new reflex action – consume, consume, consume" [19], [20]. The significance is observable- there is massive environmental, economic, social, cultural and spiritual impacts from our consumption. The culprits have been population growth and human consumption. Where consumption, as reported by the United Nations Environment Programme, accounts for more than 60% of all environmental impacts globally and our doubling of wealth increases CO2 emissions by 80%. With our wealthiest 10 % accounting for 60 % of global private consumption. And the threat of climate change, which continues to loom, is led by anthropogenic causes through human consumption activities such as electricity, heat production, industry, agriculture, forestry, and transportation. We are also depleting the services and natural resources our environment affords us, such as the ozone, air, freshwater, forests, fish and other food sources dependent on agriculture. But there are other impacts in the undercurrent of our climate crisis potentially impeding human potential for a 'good life' and degrading our 'soul'. That of the loss of social capital, civic degeneration, time famine, culture identity, happiness, and spirituality as well as addictions- such as pathological gambling, pornography, compulsive shopping and eating disorders [86], [109]. All of which have an impact on our well- being, happiness, and our health with considerable medical and financial costs to our societies [14], [62]. And with this growing sentiment of major international governments and global agencies now recognize- we must address consumption and its impacts. And while we may focus on Homo Faber (our ability to solve problems with technology) to solve the problems of Homo 'Consumerous', we may well be missing the point of why we need to address

our inherent desire to consume in the first place. Essentially even with the advent of technology, resources, and capabilities to feed the poor and cut emissions in an attempt to enter into a new era of 'sustained' consumption. What we may still be missing is the internal examinations- going from 'external' material gain to 'internal' intrinsic gains [7], [88], [108], [126]. Essentially by understanding how the "consumption of things" has ruled us, we may begin to see how it has, quite possibly, outlived its utility beyond a 'consumption threshold', one that substantiated our need for survival. Here we can see consumption as a redundancy with a need to shift our focus, now, on fostering in further human progress. As Khalid Malik, Director of the Human Development Report Office and the Human Development Report, respectively declare, "The need for discussion and debate about human development has never been greater" (p.1) where human development is about evolving as a whole, "expanding the richness of human life" not just the economy [50], [62]. Bhutans GNH (Gross National Happiness), Max-Neef and Maslow may provide a guide of what this human progress and richness of life looks like [19], [94]. According to Maslow this would be a place where we achieve a state of self- actualization, a self-fulfillment achieved by realizing our personal potential [2], [67]. However even here, we may have misinterpreted Maslow, believing that we need to climb the ladder sequentially rather than holistically. We may have mistaken and allowed the first pangs of survival, shelter, identity and belonging to justify consumption and over- rule aspects of self-actualisation- which 'could' have been or 'should' be inherent in the ascent from the beginning. Max-Neef, provides a more holistic approach, where the scale of human development, is not a ladder at all, but a system that is "interrelated and interactive" [64]. Here he offers how we are able to replace our "insatiable needs for consumption" by aspects that promote overall well-being, understanding, participation, and leisure [64]. Additionally, Bhutans' GNH along with the WHR (World Happiness Report) are now receiving increasingly global attention with the focus on happiness as the core of our being, the essential apotheosis to our divine plan and the ultimate goal [75], [79], [124]. This is where sustainability encapsulates these conceptions and is leading on a global scale in direction- both within a global framework that can be adopted into policy and one that can be adapted and evolved. Born from understanding the deleterious impacts witnessed from consumption and growth, sustainability is a holistic approach considering the role and relationships between the environment, economy and our social and political systems [93]. Its evolution of recent times has expanded this and the evolving nature of sustainability now recognizes the gravity and significance of culture, spirituality, well-being and values as part of the sustainability mantra [6], [64]. Global efforts to embrace the evolving and holistic underpinnings of sustainability have seen the inception of these considerations on an international scale, whereas UNESCO, within their 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and their World Culture Report state, "no development can be sustainable without including culture" (p. 3-5), where the importance of "values and spirituality" (p. 3-4) provides "guidance for sustainable living" (p. 3-4) [105], [106]. We have seen these principles furthered in an attempt to break free from the reign of GDP as a mode of measuring and assessing our human progress to embracing new methods to promote and realize what human progress may entail. And such measures as HDI (Human Development Index), SPI

(Sustainable Process Index), The Gender Inequality Index (GII) and The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), GNH and WHR amongst others, have worked to address the constrictive and misaligning aspects of GDP [10], [28], [75], [81]. Instead, these have included aspects such as individual empowerment, opportunity, choice, well-being, and happiness where the focus is “on improving the lives people lead rather than assuming that economic growth will lead” and where “happiness is considered to be the proper measure of social progress and the goal of public policy” [75], [81]. Where such inclusions, as advocated by the United Nations, should be better employed to “help guide and measure progress” towards a more accurate form of sustainability [35], [51]. With this we see an evolving definition and understanding of sustainability, this can be seen in its ever changing and adaptations to the notions of culture, spirituality well-being and happiness. Here again, sustainability as a framework offers resolution, the premise of which sustainability is founded is holistic in and of itself, inclusive, multidimensional and multidisciplinary as well multi-temporal (intergenerational). It is a mainstay for global discourse and represents a global voice. Where the early consumer activist- born from the inequalities and detriment that one experienced in an effort to correct or change these. Today, takes on this global voice, adopting cross-cultural and cross-temporal physiognomies. And sustainability can be seen as the face of this. Within sustainability’s multidimensional and multidisciplinary premise, it provides the foundation and the forum for an ever-evolving representation of growing voices within the minority of people, systems, species, and other considerations. However, through the lens of the growth regime, efforts such as the Human Development Index have been slow to adopt, as noted by Fukuda-Parr, where he asserts that such efforts are ‘sluggish at best’ and at ‘worst’ heedless across the board of mainstream commerce and activity- where GDP still reigns (pp. 301-303) [34]. This aligns with what many proponents may argue- that even with the onset of HDI and other measures, consumption discourse, outside of “how much” pp. 301-303) we consume, still lags and still ignores ‘why’ we consume [34]. With this the OECD, and other major international efforts, highlight the necessity to do more work on understanding consumption patterns in order to develop policies that promote sustainable consumption and contribute to human development and progress (p.6) [75]. However, as Bennett and O’Reilly note with respect to the “erosion... of... environment, communities and values”- consumption is at center stage of “hot socioeconomic and political debate” [8]. Thus, consumption discourse in some aspects is emerging, however one can-not ignore the substantial work within the area of sustainability and sustainable consumption, not covered and outside the scope of this paper. Instead, the aim here was to highlight the significance of “why” we consume, as an integral foundation to understanding and lending itself to the human progress/human development discussion. Within this, this paper aligns the potential for such discourse within the global sustainability forum- where already pre-existing within sustainability’s foundation, is a nexus for uptake. Sustainability itself is a holistic and evolving tool that was built on representation of ‘unheard’ voices within a paradigm of interdependent but interrelated natural and human phenomena. By understanding our idea of human development with respect to our origins and the role of consumption, we are able to adopt a more holistic and

sustainable roadmap for further human progress.

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