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Sustainable Consumption and Its Importance in Modern Consumerism

ABSTRACT

Consumerism has become an essential characteristic of modern societies which determines economic growth, production, and consumption practices. Consumerism has increased the access to goods and services, but also contributed to environmental degradation, resource scarcity, climate change, and more waste generation. Sustainable consumption is a crucial strategy in order to achieve a balance between economic growth, environment and social well-being. It promotes efficient use of resources, waste reduction, and environment-friendly consumption. The article focuses on the importance of sustainable consumption in today's consumerist world, the connection between consumerism and sustainability, the environment, the economy, and societal issues of responsible consumption, green consumerism, sustainable consumption, and legislation for sustainable consumption in India.

KEYWORDS

Sustainable Consumption, Consumerism, Green Consumerism, Environmental Protection, Sustainable Development

INTRODUCTION

Modern consumerism has become one of the defining characteristics of the twenty-first century, transforming economies, improving living standards, and expanding access to goods and services across the globe. Rapid industrialisation, technological innovation, digital commerce, and globalization have enabled consumers to enjoy unprecedented convenience, product diversity, and purchasing power. The emergence of e-commerce platforms, digital payment systems, and global supply chains has further accelerated consumption by making products accessible at the click of a button. According to the World Bank, global household final consumption expenditure exceeded US\$60 trillion in recent years, while the United Nations estimates that the world's population is expected to reach 9.7 billion by 2050, leading to a substantial increase in the demand for food, energy, housing, transportation, and consumer goods. Although these developments have significantly contributed to economic growth and improved quality of life, they have also intensified environmental degradation and placed immense pressure on natural resources.

The environmental consequences of excessive consumerism have become increasingly evident. The United Nations Environment

Programme (UNEP) estimates that global material consumption has more than tripled since 1970, exceeding 100 billion tonnes of raw materials annually, while less than 10% of these materials are cycled back into the economy through recycling. Similarly, the Global Footprint Network reports that humanity currently consumes natural resources at a rate equivalent to approximately 1.7 Earths each year, indicating that present consumption patterns are ecologically unsustainable. Rising levels of plastic pollution, electronic waste, deforestation, biodiversity loss, greenhouse gas emissions, and climate change are direct consequences of unsustainable production and consumption practices. For instance, the World Bank projects that global municipal solid waste generation could increase from 2.24 billion tonnes in 2020 to nearly 3.88 billion tonnes by 2050 if current trends continue.

In response to these challenges, sustainable consumption has emerged as a fundamental principle for achieving balanced economic development while safeguarding environmental and social well-being. Sustainable consumption refers to the efficient and responsible use of products and services in a manner that satisfies present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It encourages consumers to make informed purchasing decisions, businesses to adopt sustainable production methods, and governments to formulate policies that promote resource efficiency, waste reduction, circular economy practices, and environmental accountability. Consequently, sustainable consumption is no longer merely an environmental concern but a critical component of responsible governance, corporate sustainability, and inclusive economic development in an increasingly resource-constrained world.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. The Brundtland Commission put forward the idea of sustainable development that seeks to satisfy the requirements of today's generation without endangering the requirements of the coming generations
2. According to UNEP, sustainable consumption is about using goods and services which enhance one's standard of living without degrading the environment.
3. Herman Daly brings out the importance of balancing economic growth and environmental protection in his book entitled "The Economics of Sustainable Development".
4. L. Akenji and Bengtsson M discuss green consumerism and explain the growing preference for eco-friendly products, while also identifying challenges such as high costs and lack of awareness.

The data for the present study have been collected from books, research articles, reports of international organizations and legal sources. These resources provide a good basis for understanding the relevance of sustainable consumption, green consumerism, and responsible consumption practices in today's society.

CONSUMERISM AND SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

Consumerism is the social and economic structure that promotes the purchase of products and services in greater quantities. It also includes initiatives to support fair trade practices and safeguard consumer rights. By creating jobs, boosting demand, and improving living standards, consumption has helped societies. However, overconsumption has resulted in resource exploitation, damage of the environment, and overconsumption. Sustainable consumption, which prioritizes making ethical decisions and reducing waste creation, is an environmentally friendly substitute for traditional consumerism.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) defines sustainable consumption as utilizing goods or services that improve people's quality of life while having the least negative impact on the environment. Sustainable consumption is crucial to addressing today's environmental problems and fostering sustainable growth. Ecologically, sustainable consumption promotes the preservation of natural resources, low pollution, decreased carbon emissions, and biodiversity. Economically, sustainable consumption ensures efficient use of resources and promotes the growth of businesses that manufacture products using environmentally friendly methods. Companies that use sustainable practices usually have a good reputation and a competitive advantage. Green industries foster innovation and create jobs. Appropriate consumption practices help to mitigate the consequences of climate change and reduce ecological pressure. Socially, ethical corporate practices and fair resource allocation are aided by sustainable consumption.

GREEN CONSUMERISM

Green consumerism refers to the conscious and responsible purchasing of products and services that have a minimal impact on the environment throughout their life cycle. It reflects a growing awareness among consumers regarding issues such as climate change, pollution, resource depletion, and waste generation, encouraging them to make environmentally sustainable choices. Rather than focusing solely on price, quality, or convenience, green consumers increasingly consider factors such as recyclability, energy efficiency, biodegradability, ethical sourcing, carbon footprint, and sustainable packaging while making purchasing decisions.

The rise of green consumerism has significantly influenced business practices across various industries. Companies are increasingly adopting sustainable production methods, reducing plastic packaging, investing in renewable energy, improving waste management systems, and incorporating environmentally friendly technologies into their operations. According to the Nielsen Global Sustainability Report, nearly 73% of global consumers are willing to modify their consumption habits to reduce environmental impact, while studies by IBM's Institute for Business Value indicate that more than 60% of consumers are willing to pay a premium for products that are environmentally sustainable and ethically produced. This growing demand has encouraged businesses to integrate sustainability into their corporate strategies, product design, and supply chain management.

Practical examples of green consumerism include the use of reusable shopping bags instead of single-use plastic bags, purchasing energy-efficient appliances with high energy ratings, choosing electric or hybrid vehicles to reduce carbon emissions, opting for biodegradable household products, supporting brands that use recyclable or compostable packaging, and preferring locally sourced or organic food products. Many consumers also favour products certified by recognised eco-labels such as Energy Star, Fairtrade, FSC, and organic certification schemes, as these provide greater assurance regarding environmental and ethical standards.

Despite its growing popularity, green consumerism faces several challenges, including higher product prices, misleading environmental claims (greenwashing), limited availability of sustainable alternatives, and inadequate consumer awareness. Nevertheless, the continued growth of environmentally conscious purchasing behaviour demonstrates a gradual shift in consumer priorities towards sustainability. Green consumerism has become an important driver of corporate innovation, responsible production, and environmental stewardship, contributing significantly to the achievement of sustainable development and the transition towards a more circular and resource-efficient economy.

SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES FOR CONSUMERS

Consumers are key agents in the process of developing sustainability through their decisions and choices in life. The five Rs concept that is Reduce, Reuse, Repair, Recycle, and Refuse provides direction for the creation of sustainable lifestyles. Consumers should reduce the number of things that they consume because that will help to reduce the use of natural resources and minimize the amount of waste generated. Consumers should also reuse the products that they use, which will

make them last longer and reduce the extraction of resources. Consumers should repair the broken products in order to conserve natural resources. Recycling helps consumers to manage the waste sustainably. Some other consumer practices involve the reduction of energy consumption, reduction of food wastage, buying of locally manufactured goods and using public transport.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK RELATING TO SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION IN INDIA

India has adopted several legal measures to promote sustainable consumption and environmental protection.

Consumer Protection Act, 2019 aims at protecting the rights of consumers, regulating the unfair trade practices, and dealing with the issues of e-commerce and product liability. As such, the law indirectly promotes sustainable consumption through proper business conduct. Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 is the major environmental law in India that gives the framework for environmental pollution control and conservation. Plastic Waste Management Rules, 2016 is one of the laws in India dealing with plastic usage and disposal and promoting recycling efforts and alternatives to single-use plastics. The Energy Conservation Act, 2001 promotes efficient use of energy and is the backbone of environmentally sustainable production systems.

The Indian Constitution also provides a foundation for environmental protection. Article 21 guarantees the right to life, which has been interpreted by courts to include the right to a clean and healthy environment. Article 48A makes it obligatory on the part of the State to conserve and improve the environment. The same applies to citizens through Article 51A(g).

INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORK

Sustainable consumption is one of the key objectives of international environmental governance. UN guidelines for consumer protection promote the need for governments to support sustainable consumption behaviours and increase consumer consciousness. It acknowledges sustainability as an integral component of consumer happiness. Sustainable production and consumption are the focus of the 12th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 12) of the UN 2030 agenda. The primary elements are resource efficiency, waste minimization, sustainability of business operations, and consumer accountability.

CHALLENGES TO SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

Despite increasing global awareness regarding environmental

conservation and responsible consumer behaviour, the transition towards sustainable consumption continues to face significant practical, economic, social, and regulatory challenges. While governments, international organisations, and businesses have introduced numerous sustainability initiatives, the gap between environmental awareness and actual consumer behaviour remains substantial. Sustainable consumption requires not only environmentally conscious choices but also systemic changes in production, marketing, governance, and public participation.

One of the foremost challenges is limited consumer awareness and environmental literacy. Although sustainability has become a widely discussed concept, a considerable section of consumers still lacks adequate knowledge about the environmental impact of their purchasing decisions. Many individuals are unable to distinguish between genuinely sustainable products and conventional alternatives or are unaware of eco-labels, recycling practices, and product life-cycle impacts. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), household consumption contributes to nearly two-thirds of global greenhouse gas emissions, yet consumer understanding of sustainable purchasing remains comparatively low, particularly in developing economies. In countries like India, awareness is often concentrated in urban centres, while rural and semi-urban populations continue to have limited access to information regarding sustainable alternatives.

Another major concern is greenwashing, where businesses exaggerate or falsely portray their products as environmentally friendly to attract environmentally conscious consumers. Companies frequently use vague terms such as "eco-friendly," "natural," "green," or "sustainable" without providing verifiable scientific evidence or recognised certifications. Such misleading marketing practices undermine consumer confidence and make it increasingly difficult for individuals to identify genuinely sustainable products. For instance, several international fashion and consumer goods companies have faced regulatory scrutiny for promoting sustainability claims that were inconsistent with their actual environmental practices. The absence of uniform sustainability standards and effective monitoring mechanisms further aggravates this problem.

The high cost of sustainable products also acts as a significant barrier. Eco-friendly goods, organic food products, electric vehicles, renewable energy solutions, biodegradable packaging, and sustainably sourced consumer products generally involve higher production costs, which are ultimately passed on to consumers. For middle- and lower-income households, affordability often outweighs environmental

considerations. Although sustainable products may provide long-term economic and environmental benefits, their higher initial cost discourages widespread adoption. This economic challenge is particularly evident in developing countries, where price sensitivity significantly influences consumer purchasing decisions.

Changing deeply rooted consumer behaviour and lifestyle patterns presents another complex challenge. Modern consumerism is characterised by convenience, instant gratification, and frequent replacement of products rather than repair or reuse. Fast fashion, single-use plastics, disposable electronics, and excessive online shopping have encouraged a culture of overconsumption. The rapid growth of e-commerce has further accelerated packaging waste and carbon emissions associated with logistics and delivery services. According to the Global Footprint Network, humanity currently consumes natural resources at a rate equivalent to approximately 1.7 Earths each year, indicating that present consumption patterns are ecologically unsustainable. Overcoming such behavioural patterns requires long-term changes in social attitudes, education, and cultural values rather than merely introducing new regulations.

Another practical obstacle is the limited availability and accessibility of sustainable alternatives. In many regions, environmentally friendly products remain difficult to access, particularly in smaller cities and rural areas. Consumers who wish to adopt sustainable lifestyles often encounter limited product choices, inadequate recycling facilities, poor public transportation systems, and insufficient infrastructure supporting circular economy practices. Without accessible alternatives, even environmentally conscious consumers may be compelled to rely on conventional products.

Weak implementation and enforcement of environmental laws also hinder sustainable consumption. Although many countries have enacted comprehensive environmental legislation governing waste management, plastic pollution, emissions, and product standards, enforcement frequently remains inconsistent. Regulatory agencies often face resource constraints, monitoring challenges, and coordination issues among different governmental departments. Inadequate penalties for environmental violations and prolonged enforcement proceedings reduce the effectiveness of sustainability regulations. In addition, informal sectors involved in manufacturing, packaging, and waste disposal frequently operate outside formal regulatory oversight.

Corporate practices and market dynamics further complicate the transition towards sustainability. Businesses frequently prioritise short-term profitability and market competitiveness over long-term

environmental responsibility. Aggressive advertising, planned obsolescence, and promotional strategies encouraging excessive consumption continue to drive unsustainable purchasing behaviour. At the same time, many organisations remain reluctant to invest in sustainable technologies due to concerns regarding increased operational costs and uncertain consumer demand.

Finally, limited citizen participation and stakeholder collaboration remain significant barriers. Sustainable consumption cannot be achieved through government regulation alone. It requires active participation from consumers, manufacturers, educational institutions, civil society organisations, and local communities. Public awareness campaigns, environmental education, responsible corporate governance, and community-based sustainability initiatives are essential for creating long-term behavioural change. Without collective responsibility and shared commitment, legal reforms alone cannot achieve meaningful progress towards sustainable consumption.

CASE STUDY: PLASTIC BAN IN INDIA

Plastic pollution has emerged as one of the most pressing environmental challenges in India due to the widespread production, consumption, and improper disposal of single-use plastics. Rapid urbanisation, population growth, changing consumption patterns, and increasing dependence on plastic packaging have significantly contributed to the generation of plastic waste. According to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), India generates approximately 4.1 million tonnes of plastic waste annually, with an estimated 26,000 tonnes of plastic waste produced every day. Of this, nearly 40% consists of single-use plastics, many of which are discarded immediately after use. A substantial portion of this waste remains uncollected or is disposed of in landfills, water bodies, and open spaces, resulting in severe environmental degradation, harm to wildlife, and adverse public health consequences.

Recognising the gravity of the issue, the Government of India introduced significant regulatory reforms under the Plastic Waste Management Rules, 2016, which were subsequently strengthened through the Plastic Waste Management (Amendment) Rules, 2021 and 2022. These amendments culminated in the nationwide prohibition, effective 1 July 2022, on the manufacture, import, stocking, distribution, sale, and use of identified single-use plastic (SUP) items that have low utility and high littering potential. The ban covers products such as plastic cutlery, plates, cups, straws, stirrers, earbuds with plastic sticks, wrapping films around sweet boxes and invitation cards, plastic flags, and certain packaging materials. Simultaneously, the Government introduced Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) guidelines, requiring producers,

importers, and brand owners to ensure the collection, recycling, and environmentally sound disposal of plastic waste generated through their products.

The plastic ban has played a significant role in advancing the objectives of sustainable consumption and production. It has encouraged businesses to invest in eco-friendly alternatives such as paper, bamboo, cloth, jute, biodegradable polymers, and compostable packaging materials. Many retail outlets, food delivery platforms, supermarkets, and e-commerce companies have gradually shifted towards reusable and recyclable packaging solutions. The policy has also stimulated innovation in sustainable packaging technologies and created new market opportunities for environmentally responsible enterprises.

From a broader perspective, the plastic ban aligns with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12 on Responsible Consumption and Production, SDG 13 on Climate Action, and SDG 14 on Life Below Water. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), plastic production globally has exceeded 400 million tonnes annually, while only about 9% of plastic waste is effectively recycled, making regulatory interventions increasingly necessary. India has also strengthened public awareness through nationwide campaigns such as "Swachh Bharat Mission", "Beat Plastic Pollution", and "Lifestyle for Environment (LiFE)", encouraging citizens to adopt environmentally responsible consumption practices.

Despite these achievements, several implementation challenges remain. Enforcement varies across States, affordable alternatives are not uniformly available, and informal sectors continue to rely heavily on inexpensive plastic products. Therefore, the long-term success of the plastic ban depends not only on effective legal enforcement but also on increased public awareness, technological innovation, industry compliance, improved waste management infrastructure, and responsible consumer behaviour. The Indian experience demonstrates that legislative intervention, when supported by stakeholder participation and sustainable market practices, can significantly contribute to reducing plastic pollution and promoting a circular economy centred on sustainable consumption.

CONCLUSION

Consumption has significantly contributed to economic growth, improved living standards, and enhanced access to goods and services. However, the rapid expansion of consumerism has also intensified environmental degradation, resource depletion, and socio-economic inequalities, highlighting the urgent need for a more balanced and responsible approach to consumption. Sustainable consumption offers a

practical framework for harmonising economic development with environmental conservation and social well-being by encouraging the efficient use of resources, responsible production, and informed consumer choices.

Achieving this objective requires a collaborative effort among governments, businesses, civil society, and consumers. While constitutional principles, legislative measures, and international commitments provide a strong foundation for promoting sustainability, their effectiveness ultimately depends on robust implementation, regulatory compliance, public awareness, and ethical consumer behaviour. Sustainable consumption is therefore not merely an environmental aspiration but a shared responsibility and an essential pillar of inclusive economic growth, intergenerational equity, and sustainable development. By embracing sustainable consumption practices today, societies can ensure a resilient, equitable, and environmentally secure future for generations to come.

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