

## CONSUMPTION IN AFFLUENT SOCIETIES

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### Summary

The minority of humans in the more affluent world consumes the majority of the world's resources and cause a correspondingly disproportionate negative impact on the environment. Rather than accept responsibility for these unsustainable levels of consumption, affluent world consumers have tried in various ways to ennoble their own consumption and shift environmental attention to the less affluent world.

At the same time, because it is easier to give up something we have already enjoyed than to give up something perceived as highly desirable that we have never enjoyed, those in the more affluent world are also more likely candidates for voluntarily simplifying their lifestyles. Based on our work studying materialism and the accounts people offer to justify their own high levels of consumption, we are very pessimistic about voluntary simplicity as a mainstream lifestyle of the future in the affluent world barring ecological catastrophe. The key to more sustainable consumption is argued to lie in the mutual perceptions of each other by consumers in the more and less affluent worlds. As long as those in the more affluent world continue to see others as the locus of environmental problems and as long as those in the less affluent world continue to see others as enjoying a vastly more desirable life, sustainable consumption is not a sustainable hope.

## 1. Round Up the (Un)usual Suspects

It seems readily apparent that consumption in much of Western Europe, North America, and a few other wealthy regions of the world is obscenely wasteful. While most of those in the less affluent world walk, ride bikes, and take trams, buses, trains, or commuter vans, most of those in the more affluent world choose to drive private cars, ride in private taxis, and travel longer distances by air. While most who live in the less affluent world return their containers of sodas, beer, cooking oil, and wine to be refilled, most of those in the affluent world still send containers to landfills or in some cases, as in the large cities of northern Europe, deposit them to be recycled via environmentally hazardous remanufacture. People in less affluent societies also make ingenious use of empty metal containers for toys, ornaments, planters, and watering cans. They grow their own organic vegetables, build their own homes, do their own vehicle repair, and by and large do without microwave ovens, air conditioners, computers, clothes dryers, dishwashers, and other power-hungry appliances.

They pollute less, use less energy, use fewer natural resources, do less harm to the ozone layer, and create far less waste than those in more affluent societies. Very little of this is done out of any sense of ecological consciousness, however, and despite their conservative consumption practices, their environments are anything but enriching, safe, and pure. To be poor, especially in the less affluent world, means urban crowding, dilapidated public facilities, impoverished educational opportunities, dangerous sanitation, rampant disease, and inadequate food. In much of the less affluent world where finding enough to eat is critical, the ecological consequences of the specific consumer goods acquired simply are not a compelling concern. Under such conditions conservation activities are undertaken out of necessity for day-to-day survival. This is involuntary simplicity. Voluntary simplicity, implying as it does a choice, is an affluent world concept. For all their arguably obscene consumption, some affluent world consumers find creating a sustainable and safe environment to be an important and desirable goal and even alter their consumption behavior, at least to a degree, toward achieving this end.

These two opposing tendencies in the affluent world—the drive to wasteful environmentally harmful consumption and the drive to more conservative, environmentally friendlier consumption—suggest alternative futures that warrant a more thorough examination. Rather than offering a simple indictment of the affluent world for pushing the planet ever closer to environmental catastrophe, in the paragraphs below we explore some of the ways in which consumers in the more affluent world regard their consumption and what this might mean for the future of the planet. While other chapters more thoroughly consider the role of the consumption of the world's more affluent societies as a potential model or motivator for the consumption of consumers in less affluent societies, because of the increasingly interconnected and global consequences of many environmental concerns, we briefly consider how the less affluent world views the consumption of the more affluent world and vice versa. Barring ecological catastrophes or major environmental inconveniences, we argue that these mutual perceptions and attributions of the haves and have-nots of the world may well be the key to willingness to change destructive consumption patterns for the sake of the environment.

## 1.1 The Disproportionate Consumption of the Haves

Both as a proximate cause of many environmental problems and as a determinant of the ways in which those in the more affluent world are regarded by those in the less affluent world, we must begin with the observation that the haves have so much. The affluent North has 20% of the world's population and consumes 70% of the world's resources. The imbalance is even greater in terms of energy consumption. Furthermore, the gap is growing rather than narrowing, paralleling the growing disparity in the world's wealth. The ratio of income between the 20% of the world living in the richest countries and the 20% living in the poorest countries increased from 30:1 in 1960 to 82:1 in 1995. And in our interconnected world in which core countries exploit the human and natural resources of periphery countries, there is no arguing that the wealthy are only hurting themselves or that they will suffer consequences in proportion to their own relative consumption levels. Environmental injustice means that the sins of the wealthy are visited most upon the poor. The consequences of resource extraction and pollution are greater when money and regulatory power are lacking to assure cleanup. It is too tempting to trade off a bleaker tomorrow for a brighter today in the less affluent world. The long-term consequences of global warming, ozone depletion, and acid rain are also greatest in the economically developing world where desertification, drinking water shortages, drought, malnutrition, famine, soil erosion, deforestation, and declines in fish and wildlife populations are felt most acutely.

Rather than marshal statistics on the disproportionate and environmentally threatening consumption of those in affluent societies, Harold Wilhite and colleagues have considered the human and cultural face of consumption in the United States, Norway, and Japan. They find that in the United States, the current rage for large four-wheel-drive utility vehicles, houses with three-car garages and high ceiling "great rooms," and large refrigerators with ice and ice water dispensers, signal status through the conspicuous waste of needlessly high energy consumption. They find that in Norway the cultural value of entertaining in a warm snug house with incandescent lamps scattered about has similar results. And in Japan, Wilhite and colleagues find the gradual replacement of the double duty living/sleeping room with Western style private bedrooms and air conditioning turned up at home in order to match the levels that are experienced at work. The trend in these and numerous other instances of affluent world consumption is toward consumption that squanders resources through a more/bigger is better ethos. This trend is exacerbated by the affluent world's tendency toward privatization and individualization of what were once shared family or even community commodities. Rather than a family car, family television, family musical device, family telephone, family meal, family camera, family outing, and family library, it is increasingly the case that each member of the family has his or her own.

These trends toward individualized and upsized consumption can perhaps be seen most clearly in the case of vehicles. Half of the US domestic vehicle market now consists of sport utility vehicles (SUVs), light trucks, and minivans, which have less stringent fuel economy requirements because of their presumed work status. The term "utility" in the SUV category is an oxymoron, in that the heaviest work duty most of these vehicles ever see is hauling weekly loads of groceries back to commodious refrigerators in the large suburban homes of their owners. Cars have long symbolized freedom, geographic

and social mobility, sexual prowess, and adventure. The suburbanization of America and the network of roads, motels, regional shopping centers, and superhighways have resulted in automobile-based lifestyles. Western Europe is less automobile-dependent, but the number of cars per capita is approaching American levels and their size is slowly growing as well. However, it is noteworthy that the movement toward larger, less fuel-efficient, more status connoting cars was reversed for a time during the OPEC oil embargo of the early 1970s. For a time, smaller cars became the rage and buses, commuter trains, and car pools became more appealing as queues appeared at service stations and the prices of cheap American gasoline soared. But by the 1980s US fuel prices had begun to decline and car size began to grow again. The emblematic vehicle became the monster truck sitting high atop tractor tires and able to climb over everything in its path. It was not long before suburban Americans on the plains began to notice that, like wearing cowboy boots, there is a feeling of superiority in standing or sitting above others looking down. Needlessly large four-wheel-drive vehicles provide the driver a sense of being above all the chaos of road rage and able to meet any challenge ahead, even if they are never taken off the pavement. And while these larger vehicles offer more room for fellow passengers, they are no more likely to be shared with other commuters than the smaller “passenger cars” they are currently supplanting. Supplanting is not entirely accurate either, since despite an average of 0.575 cars per person in the United States, there are many households with more cars than people. Like the proliferation of items in our wardrobes, the explosion of specialized shoes in our shoe collections, our arsenals of specialized tools, our panoplies of specialty sporting equipment, and the diverse array of foods from various cuisines in our cupboards, those of us in the more affluent world are coming to regard vehicles as not only individual possessions, but also as specialty vehicles taking their places as part of a stable of such use-specific vehicles.

## **1.2 Social Class, Consumption, and the Environment**

Not all members of affluent societies are engaged in a quest to determine who can consume most lavishly. Some consumers are, in varying shades, green. They recycle, live more simply than they might, consider to at least some degree the ecological consequences of their product choices, and give money to environmental causes. Although Amitai Etzioni has recently argued that the motives of green consumers and voluntary simplifiers are different, a substantial overlap exists among these only partially different groups. In the 1970s, on the heels of the OPEC oil embargo, Duane Elgin predicted that by the present time the majority of those in affluent countries would be full or partial voluntary simplifiers. Unfortunately, the trend toward voluntary simplicity waned as fuel prices in North America declined. Voluntary simplicity is now a lifestyle embraced by only a small minority of Americans. They tend to be middle or upper middle class, highly educated, high-income families. They have experienced and subsequently tired of a “good” material life and are now trying something simpler, which they may see as either an altruistic moral sacrifice or as a way to rid themselves of the obligations and demands imposed by owning numerous complex possessions. Apart from students and those poor who, like those of the less affluent world, engage in involuntary simplicity, members of the lower classes who have not already lived a good material life show little interest in simplifying their consumption or consuming more responsibly.

Consider those leisure pursuits on which higher and lower social classes in the West stereotypically differ most strikingly: snowmobiles, jet skis, power boats, motorized dirt bikes, and quadrunners versus cross country skis, sailboats, canoes, mountain bikes, and hiking boots. In the former, blue collar, cases the preferred objects are noisy, fuel-consuming, air-polluting devices. In the latter, white collar, cases the preferred objects are instead quiet, human-powered, ostensibly more environmentally friendly devices. Generalizing from these examples and from profiles of voluntary simplifying consumers, the desire to simplify consumption is not only a phenomenon of the more economically developed world, it is within the affluent world a distinctly upper-middle-class phenomenon. It is, furthermore, a decidedly soft, feminine orientation and voluntary simplifiers are most likely to be women. Effete greens may love forest animals, blue collar men hunt them. Educated elites may embrace vegetarianism, “real men” eat meat. Greens are apt to be characterized by non-greens as tree-hugging romanticists who are sentimental about nature in a silly and effeminate way.

We can return to the case of the private vehicle in terms of social class as well. As upscale and expensive four-wheel-drive vehicles and elite models by Mercedes, Rover, and Lexus suggest, higher social classes have now embraced such vehicles. In Tokyo it is not unusual to find such vehicles with skis on top despite the driver’s total lack of intention to go skiing. It is instead a show of lifestyle and image. Despite the upscaling of high-end SUVs, in the United States in particular, the lower echelons of four-wheel-drive enthusiasts are still blue collar, as they have been for the past half century. Off-road users of four-wheel-drive vehicles also tend to be largely blue collar. Monster truck competitions (races and car-crushing spectacles) draw a predominantly blue collar audience. The appeal here seems to be that the powerless gain a sense of extreme power, if only vicariously, through the fantasy spectacle they have come to watch. As the announcer at one such event pined, “Wouldn't you like to have it during rush hour on State Street [the main street of town]?” While such vehicles may represent the fantasy of going where you want when you want, their four meter height, maximal fuel consumption, and the “carnage” they create in car crushing spectacles also evoke the American old west ethos of the conquest of nature in a pitched battle against it. This is the antithesis of tree huggers embracing nature in recognition of the interdependency of our ecosystem. Monster truck competitions, like demolition derbies of an earlier generation in North America, enact a rite of reversal inverting everyday norms. Within this particular inversion, working-class monster truck owners and spectators participate in a fantasy in which the weak crush the establishment and their “monsters” terrorize and dominate the natural world while loudly celebrating dirt, pollution, chaotic noise, and ambiguous forms in a world where machines dominate nature. The machine has come to disrupt and dominate the garden.

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### Biographical Sketches

**Russell Belk** is N. Eldon Tanner Professor in the David Eccles School of Business at the University of Utah. He has taught there since 1979 and has had previous appointments at the University of Illinois; Temple University; the University of British Columbia; the University of Craiova, Romania; Africa University, Mutare, Zimbabwe; and Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia. His Ph.D. is from the University of Minnesota. He is past president of the Association for Consumer Research, and is a fellow in the American Psychological Association, the Society for Consumer Psychology, and the Association for Consumer Research. He is past recipient of the University of Utah Distinguished Research Professorship and two Fulbright Fellowships. He currently edits *Research in Consumer Behavior*, has been an advisory editor for the *Journal of Consumer Research* and an associate editor for the *Journal of Economic Psychology*. He is currently associate editor of the *Journal of Consumer Culture and of Visual Sociology*. He has also served on the editorial review boards of 25 journals, has written or edited 18 books or monographs, and has published over 250 articles, papers, and videotapes. His research primarily involves the meanings of possessions, materialism, collecting, non-First World consumer culture, and gift-giving. Since the mid-1980s much of his research and writing has been qualitative and cross-cultural.

**Güliz Ger** is professor of marketing and associate provost at Bilkent University, Turkey. She has her Ph.D. (1985) in Marketing from Northwestern University (USA), MBA (1977) from Middle East Technical University (Turkey), and BS (cum Laude) (1974) in Psychology from University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana (USA). She has been a visiting professor at INSEAD (France), Odense University (Denmark), London Business School (UK), Theseus (France), Michigan State University (USA), Northwestern University (USA), CEIBS (Shanghai, China). She previously taught at University of Illinois at Chicago (1985) and Northwestern University (1983-1984).

Ger has publications in journals such as *California Management Review*, *Journal of Economic Psychology*, *Journal of Consumer Policy*, *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, *Journal of Material Culture*, and *International Journal of Research in Marketing* and volumes such as *Advances in Consumer Research*, *Cognitive and Affective Responses to Advertising*, *Consumption in Marketizing Economies*, and *The Why of Consumption*. She is the coeditor of *Consumption in Marketizing Economies*. She is currently working on consumption and marketing in transitional economies, consumption desires across cultures, consumption among immigrants, production and consumption of cultural products, historical analysis of art and consumer culture, consumption practices and the environment, and product-country images. Ger is a member of the Board of Directors of the International Society for Marketing and Development, and the Editorial Board of *International Journal of Research in Marketing*. Born in 1952, she is married and has two sons.