

# **Green Consumerism: Road to Sustainability in The 21<sup>st</sup> Century.**

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## **Abstract**

The increasing global population and changing lifestyles have led to an overall increase in the consumption of goods and services. This puts an enormous pressure on the limited resources and environmental well-being of our planet Earth. With the world facing environmental issues like rising sea levels, increasing global temperature, deforestation etc., consumers today are becoming more aware and concerned about making sustainable choices. This has led to the evolvement of a new segment of consumers- the Green Consumers. All products have an environmental effect and each purchase has an ethical, resource and community impact. Green consumerism is about minimising the negative impact while boosting consumer well-being at the same time. Consumers have the potential to bring about changes in the market and thereby create the future they want. This research paper studies the rise and relevance of green consumerism and the role of consumers in shaping green mindset of the markets. However, when considering adopting sustainable lifestyles, individuals face a complex decision-making process. This research attempts to address the conflicting issues involved and develop a theoretical reference for both the consumers and businesses to foster changes and move towards more conscious and responsible consumerism. Towards the end, the paper highlights the current trends and suggests how small life choices can contribute to a sustainable pattern of consumption and thereby make a bigger difference.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development, Green Consumerism, Green Consumption, Environment.

## **1. Introduction**

The advent of 21<sup>st</sup> century witnessed rapid industrialisation, increasing global population and changing lifestyles that led to an overall increase in the consumption of goods and services. This has put an enormous pressure on the limited resources and environmental well-being of our planet Earth. Sustainability as a concept recognizes that the environment is an exhaustible resource and it's about using the finite natural resources in a way that doesn't deplete or damage them permanently. The United Nations has defined sustainable development in the Brundtland Report as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Sustainability thus is about creating harmony between human wants and nature by balancing the different and often competing interests. Clean air, nontoxic atmospheric conditions, growth of resources,

water quality and cleanliness, are all benefits of sustainability. With the world facing environmental issues like rising sea levels, increasing temperatures, deforestation etc., consumers today are becoming more aware and concerned about making sustainable choices and this has led to the evolvement of a new segment of consumers- the Green Consumers.

All products have an environmental effect, however small. A consumer doesn't just buy a product but also everything that goes into its production along with everything that will happen in the future as a result of that product. Each decision to choose or not choose a product has an ethical, resource and community impact. Green consumerism is about minimising this negative impact.

Defined simply, Green Consumers are those who engage in behaviours that improve social and environmental outcomes while boosting consumer well-being at the same time. Consumption compatible with environmental conservation for the present and future generations is classified as green consumption. It includes making ethical and responsible choices regarding the purchase, use and post use of a product with respect to its environmental impacts.

The markets and its dynamics continuously change, the only constant being the supremacy of consumers and his preferences. Thus, consumers have the strongest potential to bring about changes and to shape a green mindset in the market.

As consumers are moving towards sustainability, there is a clear rise in demand for green products and resultantly businesses are also now getting drawn towards the green domain. It has become imperative for businesses to comprehend green consumerism- its trend and concerns. Green marketing is also gaining momentum due to factors like self-realisation, social responsibility, gaining competitive edge and cost or profit incentives. Special funds are being allocated and research is being done to develop new products or to redesign the existing products, supply chains are being recalibrated, source materials are evolving, travel requests are being carefully scrutinized and so much more.

### **THE PARADOX:**

However, sustainability has a cost i.e., often environmentally-friendly alternatives tend to have a higher cost attached to them and as such companies that introduce sustainable offerings face a frustrating paradox where while consumers are genuinely concerned about the future of the environment, they are also price-conscious. This creates a tussle between affordability and eco consciousness.

While in the past some decades consumers had diverged from health and moved towards convenience, the global pandemic seems to have made a drastic shift in consumer preferences. The pandemic and especially lockdowns gave people more time to contemplate on their choices and actions – as also the impact of their purchases and consumption. The debates around consumer behaviours have deepened during the last three years and “Healthy and Clean Consumerism” have emerged as buzzwords- and for the right reasons. Post Covid-19, consumers have become more sensitive towards environment and their focus has shifted from convenience to overall health and safety. In 2021, the IBM Institute for Business Value (IBV) found that 93% of global respondents said COVID-19 had influenced their views on sustainability. In a survey conducted in February 2022 of 16,000 global consumers in 10 major economies found that more than half (51%) of respondents said environmental sustainability is more

important to them today than it was before. 49% of consumers said they've paid a premium price for products branded as sustainable or socially responsible.

Even Businesses which were traditionally known to focus only on net earnings have shifted their focus to the approach of "Profit, People, and the Planet". Thus, it can be said that while businesses are working on developing cost effective green techniques, consumers at present are ready and willing to "Invest in our planet" as was the theme of Earth Day, 2022.

## **HOW TO GO GREEN:**

The good news is that solutions already exist. It's simply a matter of investing in them. This means transforming how we grow our food, power our lives, transport our goods and ourselves, and much more. Following are some ways which both, consumers and businesses, can adopt to contribute towards a sustainable lifestyle.

### **A. CONSUMERS/ INDIVIDUALS:**

1. Saving energy consumption in your surroundings: A lot can be done at a personal level by saving as much energy as possible while at home and work. This involves switching off lighting and other sources of power when they are not in use, using common rooms rather than operating from different rooms and pooling cars etc. Another way is checking the energy labels on appliances before their purchases. Products that consume too much energy ought to be boycotted and replaced by equipment that uses less energy.

2. Educate yourself: Acquiring knowledge and being aware of the dangers of environmental degradation, the benefits of sustainability and being sensitive to the environment- its balance and ecology is required.

3. Use renewable energy sources: Using solar products like solar heaters, solar streetlights, solar backpacks, solar geysers, and solar bulbs. While their initial cost may be more, they are more environment-friendly and last longer as they utilize natural energy. Other renewable energy options such as biofuels, biogas, solar, and wind power must also be promoted.

4. Buy locally grown and organic foods: Locally grown and organic foods are not only healthier but also minimises the use of artificial pesticides and fertilizers that are diminishing the quality of soil and resources. Additionally, it lowers the effects of carbon emissions during transportation as well.

5. Recycling and using eco-friendly products: The simplest and most effective way of practicing green consumerism is recycling of the products you use or using those that are eco-friendly. For example: using a hybrid car significantly reduces carbon emission or instead of buying bottled water, you can opt to carry your own refillable water bottle. Following are some market trends which are gaining momentum:

- i. Use of Bamboo Toothbrushes: Apart from being naturally antimicrobial they are completely decomposable. Bamboo brushes are being sold by a number of entities like Bamboo India, Ecohoy, and Terra for Rs 100 to Rs 150.

- ii. Bio-degradable cutlery instead of plastic cutlery: Several startups like Samanvi and Pappco Greenware are making cutlery from natural materials like corn starch and rice husk, and are increasingly being accepted by consumers. The move to ban disposable plastics, by a few states across the country, has also increased the willingness as well as awareness to move to eco-friendly cutlery.
  - iii. Upcycled Clothing: Sustainable fashion is on a rise. Designers and brands are slowly moving towards the re-use of old and worn-out pieces. Be it individual designers like Delhi based Kriti Tula or Mumbai based Cornucopia or brands like H & M that offers special discounts on giving back used clothing.
  - iv. Menstrual Cups: Startups and NGOs are making biodegradable pads and creating better alternatives to sanitary napkins themselves. One such innovation being a menstrual cup, which is not only 'reusable' thereby reducing the generation of waste, but it also turns out to be cheaper in the long-run.
  - v. Grocery bags: Use of reusable cotton grocery bags instead of plastic bags is on a rise. Many households have made this shift as a small but significant step towards more conscious consumption. Many companies like Vitara Organics and Magnus Eco Bags are dedicated to the cause.
6. Adopting minimal lifestyle: Green consumerism is not just what we buy, but also how we live. Recent years have witnessed a huge change in lifestyles specially with online shopping becoming popular. Though online purchasing might seem convenient but each purchase leaves so much carbon footprint in terms of its packaging, warehousing, transportation etc. Adopting a minimal lifestyle can go a long way in maintaining the harmony between human wants and natural resources. Shop with a purpose and move from "nice to have" to "must haves".

## **B. BUSINESSES/ COMPANIES:**

- 1. Eco- friendly practices: Designing for recycling and re-use, replacing plastic with bioplastic, decreasing release of emissions and other pollutants during production and transportation processes etc. are some practices which can make significant impacts.
- 2. Sustainable packaging: Aspects such as packaging need to be reassessed and re-engineered with the environmental impact considered. Packaging waste must be reduced and the increased use of frugal options like paper packaging must be encouraged.
- 3. Being transparent: Organizations need to find a competitive edge by exposing as much information as possible about their sourcing and production processes. Access to the corporate practices and details of products and services should be provided to the consumers as part of a green marketing strategy.
- 4. Durable products: Producing durable products that ensure extended utility over their life cycle. Companies that have taken the responsibility of minimizing the life cycle impacts of their products have attained noticeable benefits as green consumers always want a product that not only provides value for their money but also lasts longer in their lifetime use.

5. Activism: Brands are now moving towards “Purpose” and “Activism” as part of what they stand for. Brands are also educating consumers on the possible options that can be made around sustainable choices. For example, Nike’s Flyknit technology that reduces waste on the factory floor or Adidas that have pledged to use 100% recycled polyester in their products by 2024 to end Ocean plastic. This trend is likely to continue as consumers look to Brands to stand for their own beliefs; including that of sustainability.

6. Shaping habits: Companies and other businesses can help eliminate negative habits and substitute positive ones by making sustainable behaviour the default option. For example, setting green electricity as the default option in residential buildings, or making reusing towels etc as a default option unless the customer expressly asks otherwise; or receiving electronic rather than paper bank statements; not serving drinks with plastic straws unless customers explicitly request so, etc. Another strategy would be to make the desired action the easier action, for example, placing recycling bins nearby, requiring less complex sorting of recyclables etc. companies can also offer incentives. For example, In the UK, Coca-Cola has partnered with Merlin Entertainments to offer “reverse vending machines” from which consumers receive half-price entry tickets to theme parks when they recycle their plastic drink bottles.

7. Using the Emotional quotient: People are more likely to engage in a behaviour when they derive positive feelings from doing so. Feelings like hope, pride and recognition can enhance behaviours. For example, public praise for energy saving efforts, use of hashtags etc. or other campaigns recognising the efforts and actions of individuals, either by themselves or by the companies, will not inculcate a sense of pride and recognition in them but will also instil a sense of responsibility. Additionally, social media validation can turn individual efforts into bigger movements.

8. Adhering to eco standards, eco-labelling and environmental product declarations can contribute towards eco products.

## **Conclusion**

Regardless of who we are, where we live, and what we do, we all have a moral obligation towards each other, our future generations, and other species as well. Sustainability ensures a future for all. Green consumerism is about sustainable and responsible consumption and production without having to compromise on the overall quality of life. We, as consumers, have the power to shape a green mindset and create the future we want. Businesses have also realised the need for sustainability and shifted from mere profit to a more holistic approach of people, profit and planet. While, we still have a long way to reverse the environmental damages already inflicted and develop sustainable models of consumption and production, even small life choices that we make today can contribute to a sustainable pattern of consumption and thereby make a bigger difference.

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