

SUBJECT AREAS:

Social science

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION:

Creating, Discussion, Research

OBJECTIVES:

- To define "consumer society" and identify its key characteristics;
- To show how consumer behavior affects the quality of human life and the environment;
- To analyze the relationship between consumption patterns and environmental degradation;
- To propose strategies for more sustainable consumption;
- To understand how socioeconomic factors influence environmental awareness and consumer behavior.

MATERIALS:

Whiteboard or projector, markers, pens, handout with discussion questions (see below), access to internet for brief research

GRADE/LEVEL:

Secondary school (15-18)

DURATION:

Preparation time: 5 min.
Activity time: 40 min.

PLACE:

Classroom

AUTOR:

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Consumer Society and Environmental Impact

INTRODUCTION:

Consumption trends are unlikely to improve much in the coming years. However, more and more citizens are realizing that smart spending will reduce pressure on the environment. Citizens can expect a significant influence from different economic sectors in their daily consumer choices in stores and supermarkets. Sociological statistics and surveys have shown that environmental awareness among citizens increases in line with household income.

People go to the store to buy what they need, but often they don't think so much about what they really need but rather pay more attention to the activity of buying.

It often happens to us that we enter a store without knowing in advance what we are going to buy. The reason for entering may be to relax, to socialize, to get acquainted with new trends, or simply to satisfy the need to buy something. When this practice plays a very important role in our lives, we are faced with one of the most widespread examples of consumption today.

We have all experienced this to a greater or lesser extent. Products and purchasing power are for many the most important status and class symbols. Having a higher status for many people means being associated with the most frequently and most advertised products. And instead of buying what we need, we satisfy the psychological need for unnecessary and wasteful purchases. This behavior has a detrimental impact on the environment.

Changing our consumer culture is imperative, for our own happiness and for the sake of the planet.

BACKGROUND:

Based on a sociological theory, living in a consumer society will not make people happier, despite having all the things they need.

By an economical approach, it is not sustainable to grow all the time, making it inevitable to have an economic crisis from time to time.

The biggest disadvantage is that by over-consuming, we harm our environment. Our ecological footprint is growing. Year by year, we consume more and more goods, thus overwhelming our environment.

Unfortunately, as we interfere with the circle of nature, we cause huge environmental pollution. We are the reason for 99% of environmental damage.

The root of the problem is that industries are using non-renewable resources for production. With renewable resources, we could avoid catastrophes. Also, factories should focus more to minimize the use of pollutant chemical compounds and create products with eco-friendly solutions.

Procedure:

- Begin by asking students: "What does it mean to be a 'consumer' in today's world?" Write down their ideas on the board.

Briefly introduce the concept of a "consumer society" – a society where the economy is driven by the consumption of goods and services. Mention that while consumption can improve quality of life, it also has significant environmental consequences.

- Divide students into small groups (3-4 students per group). Provide each group with a large sheet of paper or access to a digital whiteboard. Instruct each group to create a "consumption web" centered on a common everyday item (e.g., a smartphone, a t-shirt, a fast-food meal).
- Explain the students, that the web should illustrate the item's journey from raw materials to production, distribution, use, and disposal. For each stage, students should identify the environmental impacts (e.g., resource depletion, pollution, waste).

For students who need more support: Provide a partially completed consumption web as a starting point. Offer sentence starters for discussion questions.

For students who are ready for a challenge: Encourage them to research specific examples of corporate greenwashing or to analyze the environmental impact of different types of packaging.

- After 10 minutes, have each group briefly present their "consumption web" to the class.
- Lead a class discussion about Economic Influence and Environmental Awareness, using several questions (provided on a handout).

Be prepared to facilitate a discussion about potentially controversial topics, such as the role of corporations in environmental problems.

Emphasize that sustainable consumption is not about deprivation but about making informed choices that benefit both people and the planet.

Optional you can show a short video clip related to consumerism and environmental impact to spark discussion. (Example: a short documentary about fast fashion).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H2bxO-PgcT0>

- Summarize the key points of the lesson, emphasizing the complex relationship between consumption, economic forces, and environmental sustainability.

Ask students to consider one small change they can make in their own consumption habits to be more environmentally responsible.

FUN FACTS:

- *75% of consumers will participate in “stress shopping”.*
- *89% of shoppers do research online before making a purchase.*
- *It is much easier to sell to an existing customer than to gain a new customer (60-70% vs. 10-20%).*
- *The fashion industry produces about 10 % of annual global carbon emission, which is more than all international flights and maritime shipping combined (World Bank, 2019).*
- *The fashion industry uses 93 billion cubic meters of water annually (World Bank, 2019).*
- *54 million tons of global e-waste created annually.*
- *The EU’s regulation enforces manufacturers to use a single type of charging port (USB type-C) by the end of 2024.*
- *In the fashion industry, Patagonia leads sustainable practices in the fashion industry best demonstrated by the founder’s words, “the best jacket for our planet is one that already exists” (Batten, 2020). Patagonia has launched the “Worn Wear” program where customers can buy second-hand Patagonia items that have been repaired, if necessary, while also offering a repair option to customers.*

ASSESSMENT:

- Participation in group activity and class discussion.
- Quality of the “consumption web” created by each group.
- Thoughtfulness and insightfulness of responses

EVALUATION:

The teacher encourages students for several extension activities. For example:

1. Students can research and present on different certifications or eco-labels that help consumers make more informed choices (e.g., Fair Trade, Organic, Energy Star).
2. Students can conduct a waste audit at home or at school to identify opportunities for reducing consumption and waste.
3. Students can write a persuasive essay arguing for or against government regulations on advertising or product design to promote sustainability.

Handout for teacher

Economic Influence and Environmental Awareness

Questions

1. How do different economic sectors (e.g., advertising, manufacturing, retail) influence our consumer choices? Provide specific examples.
2. In what ways might companies encourage unsustainable consumption?
3. Sociological studies suggest that environmental awareness tends to increase with household income. Why might this be the case? Is it always true?
4. What are some examples of "smart spending" that can reduce pressure on the environment?
5. What are the limitations of relying solely on individual consumer choices to address environmental problems? What other solutions are needed?