

Conscious Consumerism—An Illusion of Change or a Green Reality?

The year is 2022, and the world is on fire—both literally and figuratively. Pollution and global carbon emissions by individuals and corporations have increased manifold in the past decade. From floating plastic ‘islands’ in the Pacific to microplastics in our food and water, the effects of our carbon and plastic footprints are becoming more and more evident. These in turn, cascade into both long-term health effects on people and the environment and have devastating short-term consequences—rapid climate change. From forest fires and unprecedented changes in weather patterns to unforeseen fuel prices and inflation, the paradigm of this century seems to be one of a transitive dystopia. The need for sustainable development has never been greater.

Sustainable development, in simple terms, is a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Clearly, this is easier said than done. Such an endeavour entails the cooperation of both individuals and organizations; in other words, society as a whole must come together to accomplish such a task.



[Graffiti artwork on Regent Street, London depicting a shopper with many shopping bags and an ironic "I love Earth" slogan. Credits: Colin O'Brien onepointzero.com]

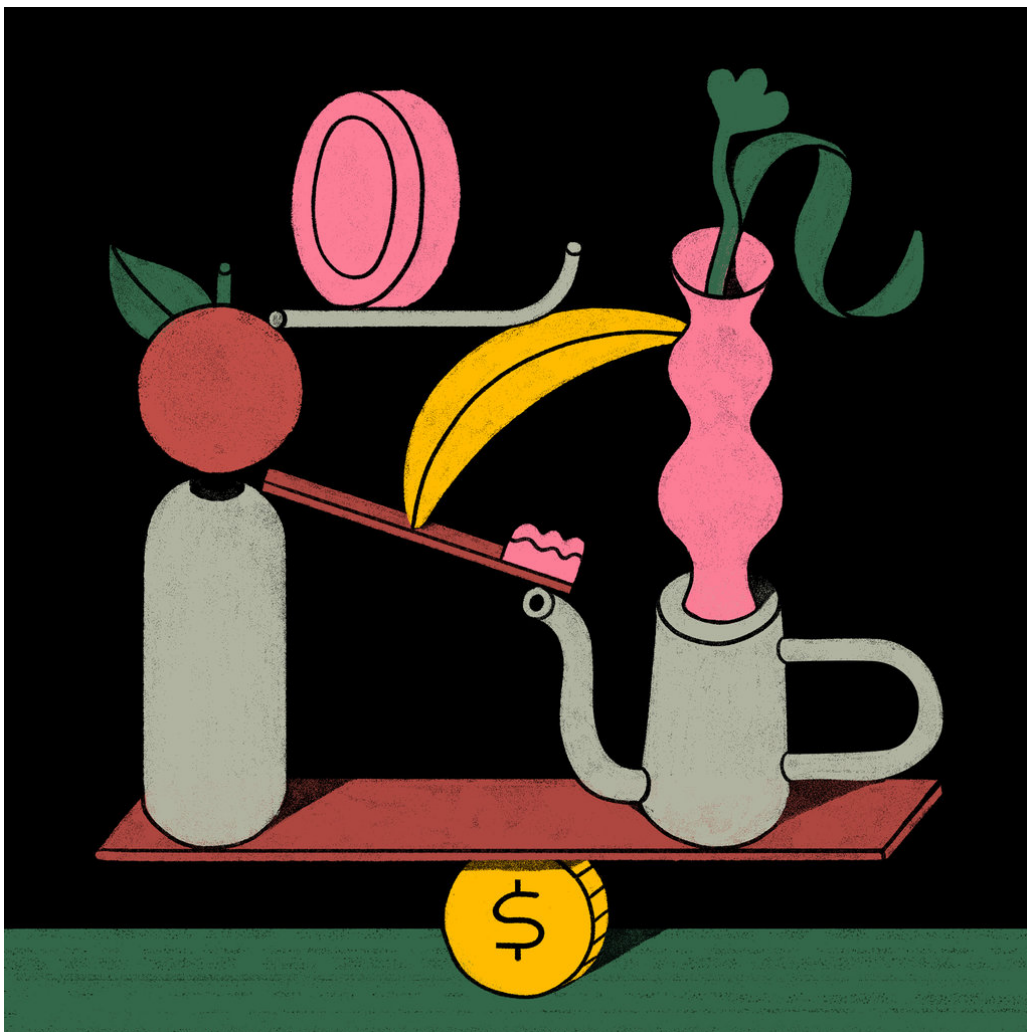
One way to do this is through "conscious consumerism", a concept that has seen growing momentum lately, with a somewhat controversial term coined rather recently, but has been in practice earlier than one might think. During the 1800s, black abolitionists started the free-produce movement that encouraged people to buy free-made goods—that is, products not made with slave labour. They even organized "free produce" stores, making it easier for fellow consumers to shop for the alternative. It was one of the first documented acts of solidarity and a rejection of the unjust status quo. By spending their money elsewhere, these activists hoped to do their part in reducing the power of the structures propped up by slave labour. These early consumer activists understood consumer power as a moral and ethical force that had the potential to change the world for the better.

The conscious consumerism we see in practice today is quite congruent to this philosophy, with more of an emphasis on preserving nature. In short, it is a way of sustainable shopping where each individual consumer makes conscious decisions regarding their purchases, in such a way that there are minimal adverse effects on people and the environment. This includes shopping for organically grown produce, supporting local businesses, and overall buying consumer products that do not leave a permanent negative environmental or ethical footprint.

One of the core principles of conscious consumerism is placing the onus on the consumer. It describes a system where the power to limit carbon emissions and help prevent climate change lies with us, the buyers, and not the sellers or corporations. This not only includes purchasing organic produce or recycled products but also making smart and 'green' decisions in how we shop and consume. Reusing old products, recycling and segregating waste, and reducing the amount of trash we produce are all part of this philosophy. The hard part about this, of course, is that it requires impeccable cooperation among people from every stratum of society to have any appreciable positive change. If you think about it, if a few hundred or even a thousand determined individuals were to make conscious decisions every time they went shopping, their efforts would still be drowned by the millions of consumers who would choose convenience over responsibility.

A significant factor here is the role of producers, that is corporations and enterprises which are trying to balance their monetary gains against socially acceptable production choices. The public demand for transparency on the products they purchase has sharply increased in the last few decades. Big conglomerates like Nestle and Volkswagen have been embroiled in controversies after being discovered to be fraudulent with their sincerity and integrity regarding environmental concerns. And this too is a trend that has seen an increase in

recent times, where a company tries to fool consumers into believing they are eco-friendly when in reality they aren't. This deceitful practice, termed 'Greenwashing' can be as subtle as misleading packaging choices all the way to petroleum companies posing themselves as eco-champions. Either way, greenwashing is a harmful and deceptive way of advertising, and is yet another hurdle for conscious consumers to overcome.



[Credits: The New York Times]

There is also a matter of privilege involved here. The sustainability movement is advertised as something that everyone at every economic level can and should practice. But digging deeper, one can quickly figure out that this "movement" is mainly isolated among the upper classes of society. The reason for this wealth disparity is simple—you

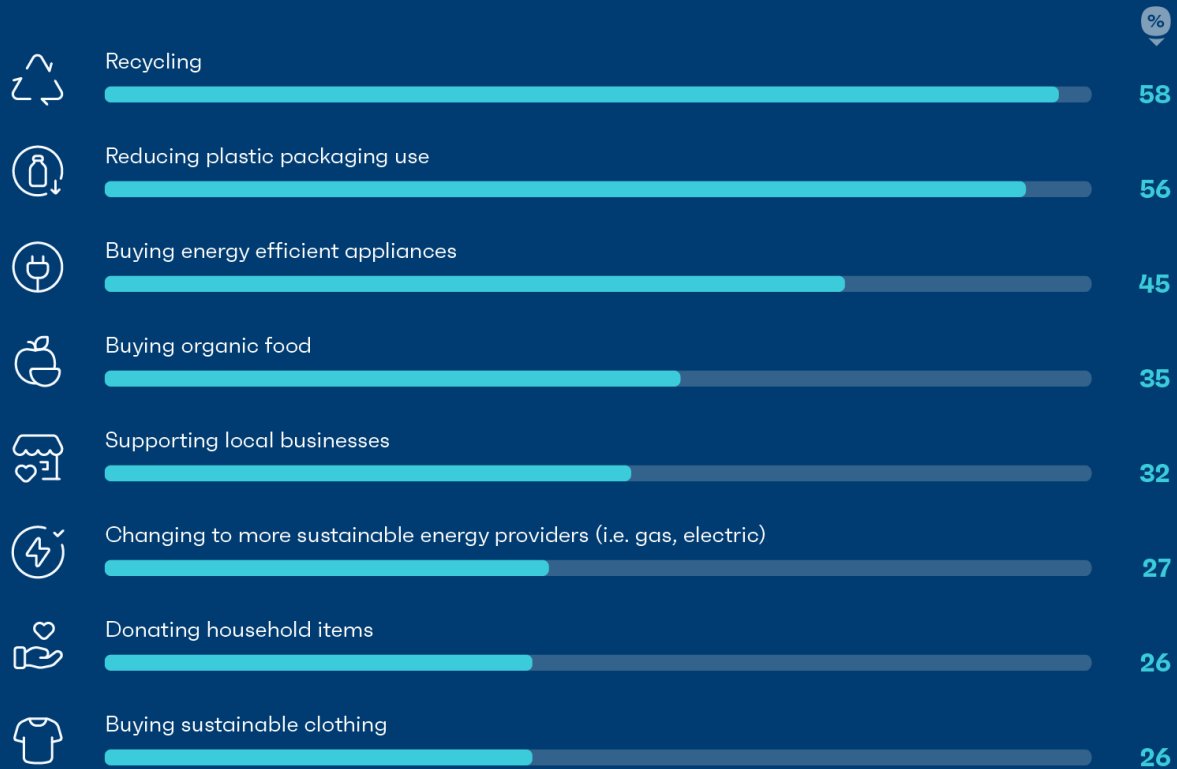
need a fair amount of disposable income to afford ethical and sustainable consumption options. Not everyone has the time or dime to research their purchasing decisions and ignore the more inexpensive options for more environmentally safer alternatives. There's also the problem of 'Green companies' charging more for their products since meeting green regulations and paying their workers fair wages increases production costs.

According to the saga of conscious consumerism, every purchase you make is a "moral act"—an opportunity to "vote with your money" for the world you want to see. We are led to believe that if we don't like what a company is doing, we should stop buying their products and force them to change. We like to think that informed consumers with transparency and information will always make the ethical choice. But sadly, this is not how the largely capitalist world of the 21st century works.

Making a series of small and ethical purchasing decisions, however multitudinous in amount, while ignoring the enormous structural incentives for companies' unsustainable business models won't break through the exploitative system that has been established. It merely makes us feel better about ourselves. Proof of this is clearly evident in the data from a 2012 study that compared the carbon footprints of "green" consumers who try to make deliberate eco-friendly choices to the footprints of regular consumers and found no meaningful difference between the two.

Many of us are on the same page about plastic

% of consumers who are currently doing the following



? Which of these, if any, are you currently doing? © GWI Zeitgeist March 2022

👤 12,890 internet users in Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, UK, USA aged 16-64

[Findings from a recent survey depicting consumer practices. Credits: gwi.com]

While refraining from indulging in fast fashion, ensuring your seafood is ethically sourced, and recycling old newspapers can make you feel better about yourself, it is no substitute for a systematic change, one where corporations and governments are held responsible for their practices. Although some degree of scepticism and cynicism around conscious consumerism is rightly warranted, there are a few diamonds in the rough that we cannot ignore.

The increasing gap between the profession of conscious consumerism and the practice of it still signals that ethical consumption is most definitely a socially desirable behaviour. People tend to behave in ways that society values—when those actions are within reach. So if it becomes less cumbersome and more affordable for a person to be a conscious consumer, or if societal nudges are calibrated to make ethical consumption a more realistic option and less of an aspirational one, then this gap will most definitely shrink.

So what can you, as a consumer, do to participate in or at least further this movement? One sure-fire way is to educate yourself and others. Read labels and packaging, look for the recycled symbol on new products and use social media to read and spread information about companies that do and don't follow green practices.

All in all, conscious consumerism is a good starting point for people to start taking action and thinking about how their individual behaviour impacts larger communities, social groups, and the planet.

Featured image credits: The Drum