

ENVIRONMENT

Consumerism, 'e-waste' and the environment

JO-ANNE NINA SEWLAL

BSc., MPhil., FLS, AMIBiol.
Dept of Life Sciences,
University of the West Indies



THERE has been a lot of attention given to "going green" during this decade with environmentally friendly products, appliances, and building materials all designed to help protect the environment, conserve energy and money along the way. It may not cross our minds, but the way we spend our money not only affects our financial status but that of the environment around us. Let's take a look at how consumerism and certain aspects of consumerism affect our environment and leads to other disastrous consequences such as resource depletion.

Some people equate happiness with the purchase of material things in excess of their basic needs, we term this consumerism. Consumerism shares many similarities with the school days game "follow the leader" where persons of poor financial status copy the wealthy by buying expensive products; and the wealthy in turn imitate celebrities and their advertised extravagant lifestyles. The trend then shifts to buying products for the purpose of supplying happiness and improving one's social status. The industrial revolution in the 18th century helped consumerism. It brought with it great change; previously scarce goods could then be mass produced, and with this mass production a lowering in cost.

Evidence of the influence of consumerism in our society is abundant. For example in the early 1990s "making a lot of money" was the main reason for attending college by Americans, whereas in the past "being an expert in the field of study chosen, or using one's knowledge to help others was more important. Although consumerism is believed to be associated with the Western World, it is in fact practised internationally. Consumerism is also not a recent development, ancient civilisations such as Babylon, Ancient Egypt and Rome all practised consumerism and we all know what happened



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to them - they ceased to exist; could this be the fate of our modern civilisations as well?

But can we as a population consume too much? The theory of over-consumption basically states, that there will be a time when the resources will not be able to sustain a moderately dense population. This raises the question of how long will our planet's resources last.

Resource depletion has been cited as the main reasons for the collapse of civilisations throughout history. Some examples include the Norse settlers in Greenland, the Polynesians of Pitcairn Island. Resource depletion coupled with climate change is responsible for the collapse of the Anasazi and Mayan societies in North and South America respectively. Of course when these societies are lost so too are their culture and technological advances. We can see from the

evidence exists that humans have not really "progressed" but have probably been re-inventing technology throughout history.

There are several causes of resource depletion, such as the unnecessary or excessive use of natural unrenewable resources and renewable resources. The uneven distribution of these resources, overpopulation, development of industries and technology and finally practices like slash and burn agriculture.

Sometimes when objects like small appliances (a clothes iron), stops working we insist that the manufacturers planned it that way; so it won't last forever and we would have to replace with new ones. Other situations may include the repair technician telling you it is more expensive to fix the appliance due to lack of parts or that they just do not make replacement parts and it is

cheaper to buy a new one. You are not exactly wrong in suspecting it is a conspiracy to make you buy more products. The technical term for this is planned obsolescence or built-in obsolescence. This was first developed in the 1920s and 1930s when every part of the manufacturing process was subject to analysis.

Therefore, by using less expensive components, cheaper products can be produced but with a limited lifespan. This also helps the company as consumers need to replace part or the entire product from them on a regular basis. Consumers also benefit as manufacturers are pressured to make better products with more features. The backlash of this strategy is that if the period of replacement is too short consumers may turn to another manufacturer for a more durable product.

The drawbacks to the environment are how these products—now known as "e-waste" are disposed of once they become obsolete. Unfortunately most end up dumped in rivers, streams or at the side of the road. Although more and more attention is being paid both by manufacturers and consumers to recycling these products, focus is also being placed on their biodegradability, the rate at which new products are made is cause for concern as they rapidly fill up our dumps and landfills.

This rapid production of new products and technologies can also cause certain aspects of quality control to be overlooked. Currently, a lot of time is not devoted to researching the long term effects of disposing of "e-waste". As some products degrade, they release toxic chemicals into the air; others leach into our water supplies, or affect our bodies directly if we ingest or apply them to our skin.

Let's face it nothing lasts forever and it is consumerism that drives the economy. But falling for marketing gimmicks like trends, keeping up with the Jones's or buying brands that have a limited life span or have irreplaceable parts may be doing more than just burning a hole in your wallet. Now more than ever we need to lead sustainable lifestyles to preserve our environment for ourselves and future generations.