

Enquiry: Consumerism and Anti-consumerism

Do the perspectives below raise any question that you have not thought about before? What are the assumptions informing these perspectives? What are the implications of those assumptions?

We consume a variety of resources and products today, having moved beyond basic needs, to include luxury items and technological innovations, to try to improve efficiency. Such consumption beyond minimal and basic needs is not necessarily a bad thing in and of itself, as throughout history we have always sought to find ways to make our lives a bit easier to live.

The pressure to buy and measure our success in life through the things we acquire is overwhelming. Education should offer a way for students to seek a good life that means more than just wealth. It saddens me to see our schools become part of this marketing machinery. State schools should be a respite from the constant onslaught of advertisers.

Advertising teaches us that buying products can fulfill our deepest needs, at the same time that it hides the conditions under which those products are made, as well as the environmental consequences of endless consumption.

We do not need this luxury and comfort. We can live a simple, happy and healthy life growing our own food and living with very little. If everyone followed my example, the world would be much better.

Inequalities in consumption are stark. Globally, the 20% of the world's people in the highest-income countries account for 86% of total private consumption expenditures - the poorest 20% a minuscule 1.3%. More specifically, the richest fifth own 87% of the world's vehicle fleet (the poorest fifth owns less than 1%) and consume: 45% of all meat and fish (the poorest fifth 5%), 58% of total energy (the poorest fifth less than 4%) and 84% of all paper (the poorest fifth 1.1%). Runaway growth in consumption in the past 50 years is putting strains on the environment never before seen.

"I buy, therefore I am" – this is the slogan of our times. To reduce consumption affects the economy. If the economy is affected, there will be less jobs. If there are less jobs, there will be more people in poverty. To be against consumption is contrary to poor people's interests.

Our environmental footprint is huge! If the whole world consumed like the average person in the UK, we would need six planets to live in. In the next 20 years, environmental change and conflicts over diminishing natural resources will make us suffer the consequences of our unsustainable choices.

We cannot reduce consumption; we need to find a way to address its consequences. Through science and technology, we will soon find a way to create clean sources of energy and reduce the impact of waste.

Informed Thinking

What informed your current perspective on this topic? What shapes the mainstream perspectives available to the public? Where can you find out about different perspectives? How do you make your decisions about what you think about it?

Reflective Questions

Take three minutes in silence to reflect about the following:

1. How do you define your priorities for consumption? What most influences your needs and wants?
2. What do you think your clothes, hair-style, shoes, accessories and make-up say about you? How are those interpreted by other people? Can they be interpreted in different ways, in different contexts?
3. Who defines the parameters of what a successful or unsuccessful person should look like in the communities you belong to?
4. What do you think about consumption and consumerism? How was your perspective constructed? How often has it changed in recent years?
5. To what extent are you open to share your perspective with others and to have your assumptions questioned/challenged?

Open Space Questions

Read through the list of questions below. Are there any other burning questions you would like to add to this list? Select two 'priority' questions for discussion in your group.

1. How do material values influence our relationships with other people? What impact does that have on our personal values?
2. Which actors influence our choices of consumption? Which actors influence how and why things are produced or not?
3. How much of what we consume is influenced by the needs of businesses and advertising versus our needs?
4. What is the impact on the demands of the wealthier nations, and people that are able to afford to consume more, on poorer nations and people?
5. How are the products and resources we consume produced? What are the effects of this process of production on the environment, society and individuals?

6. What are the consequences of over-consumption for the environment? How would you define over-consumption? What is a necessity and what is a luxury?
7. How do consumption habits change as societies change?
8. What are the possible consequences (good and bad) of schools being involved in the advertisement of products and services?

Responsible Choices

How does this topic relate to your context of work? To what extent does asking these questions affect your decisions?

- A primary school pupil reports that she feels excluded from the group. You ask her why and she says that if she could afford the same toys, or have the same hair colour of the English girls, she would be able to fit in. She then adds that she is lucky - at least she is not like the 'Black' girls who will never be accepted. You know she is not an isolated case. You have to prepare a 2-hour intervention with her class, but you want it to be something that really challenges their parameters for social exclusion/inclusion (you don't want something where they just say what you want to hear and then continue to act as usual). What would be your approach? The choice of age group is yours.
- You are working with a group of young people who want to organise a 'label' fashion show to raise funds for a charity to end poverty in Uganda. You have a 2-hour workshop to raise awareness about interdependence (including the implications of consumerism, body image and trade justice). You want to help them reflect about their assumptions, aims and objectives. You do not want them to lose their motivation to do something and think independently, but you want them to act in an informed, responsible and ethical way. What would your workshop outline look like?

Debriefing

Think about your learning process today. What have you learned about yourself? What have you learned about others? What have you learned about knowledge and about learning? Do you feel you and other participants could express themselves in an open and safe space? What could be done to improve the learning process of the group and the relationships within the space?