Area of Inquiry: Consumerism

Introduction and Key Concepts

Consumerism—the consumption of goods and services in excess of one’s basic needs, usually in greater and greater quantities—is not a new phenomenon, and early examples of consumerism can be traced back to the first human civilizations. A significant consumerist tide hit Europe and North America in the mid-18th Century as a result of the Industrial Revolution and the transformation of Western Europe’s and North America’s economies. The mechanization of a number of processes freed a certain percentage of the workforce from their jobs in areas such as farming and fuelled both the Industrial Revolution and population growth. As industrialization created the conditions for mass production and mass consumption, for the first time in history immense quantities of manufactured goods were suddenly available to everyone at outstandingly low prices.

The Second World War brought about a strong need to conserve natural resources, as the demands of war led to resource scarcity. The U.S. Government launched a massive campaign urging citizens to be patriotic and to conserve resources, reuse and recycle, grow their own food, and to share. As a result, frugality became the new norm. However, in the 1950s, factories and labour, which were used to produce weapons, planes, and ships during the war, became idle and needed to be employed. The government wanted to end the population’s penchant for austerity and induce them to consume. One of the architects of the consumer society was the retail analyst Victor Lebow, who remarked in 1955 that “Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfactions, our ego satisfactions, in consumption. […] We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing pace.” This line of thinking launched the consumer society and the growing conspicuous consumption of the United States (and Canada) that still prevails today.

Suggested Issues for Inquiry

What is consumerism? How is it described? What drives consumerism?
- History of consumerism
- Production of goods and services
- Variations of consumerism: affluence, conspicuous consumption, overconsumption, profligate consumption
- Quality of life versus acquiring goods
- Relationship between political and economic interests, investment decisions, production, marketing and distribution, and consumption

What are the impacts of consumerism? How does it affect different countries? Canada? How does it affect you?
- Ecosystem degradation and ecological overshoot (when our demands exceed our capacity)
- Increased waste streams

Draft Global Issues Pilot Team May 2016
• Planned obsolescence
• Unfulfilling jobs; working longer hours for reduced pay; job insecurity
• Economic inefficiencies
• Uneven resource distribution
• Growing disparities between the rich and poor
• Feelings of frustration, exclusion, of never having enough or being good enough
• “Keeping up with the Joneses”

What is the role of media in fuelling consumerism? What images does society project about how people should live and what makes them happy?
• The people/corporations that own the media
• Advertising to children and other groups
• Advertising in public spaces
• Consumerism and social status

What is progress? …wealth? …prosperity? …well-being? How are these measured?
• “Needs” versus “wants”
• Maslow’s hierarchy of needs
• Overconsumption and underconsumption
• Alternatives to Gross Domestic Product (GDP): Genuine Progress Indicator; Ecological Footprint; Gross National Happiness; Human Development Index; Satisfaction with Life Index; Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare; Living Planet Index

Solutions and Moving Forward
• Social movements and initiatives: anti-consumerism; culture jamming/”subvertising”
• Alternative lifestyles: voluntary simplicity; frugality; downshifting; green living; LOHAS (lifestyles of health and sustainability)
• The positive story of moving away from consumerism: time for friends and family; better health; more fulfilling lives; more efficient and resilient economies; better global relations
• Better product design and closed-loop systems that promote “clean production”: cradle-to-cradle; biomimicry; industrial ecology; design for sustainability
• Collaborative consumption or “what’s mine is yours” (renting, swapping, sharing)
• Community centres and attractive public spaces; progressive urban design
• Cheap, comfortable, and reliable public transportation
• Education for sustainable consumption and citizenship
• Re-localization of the economy
Suggested Inquiry Topics

- Consumer-based economies
- Capitalism and free market economies
- Citizen responsibilities and decisions
- Corporate responsibilities and decisions
- Culture of entitlement
- Culture of credit
- Culture of excess
- Commoditization of Indigenous cultures
- Impact of branding, marketing, and advertising
- Mass media manipulation
- Corporate sponsorship
- Product placement
- Perceived/planned obsolescence
- Lifestyle and health issues (e.g., obesity, chemical intolerances, allergies, illnesses, sedentary lifestyles)
- Energy and natural resource depletion
- Generation of waste
- Petro-politics
- Corporate and consumer greed
- Sweatshops
Suggested Essential Questions

- *How are the products and resources we consume actually produced? Where do they come from and who makes them? What happens to products when we’re finished with them?*

- *What are the impacts on the environment of production and consumption in North America? ...on society? ...on people here and around the world? How does our consumption affect poorer people and nations?*

- *How do the media affect our thoughts and actions? Who/what influences our consumption choices? Whose needs are being met when we consume?*

- *Why does our society generally think of consumption as a good thing?*

- *What is a necessity and what is a luxury? How do we differentiate between “needs” and “wants?”*

- *Does consuming make us happy? What are the requirements for a “good life?”*

- *How do consumption habits change as societies change? How do these changes affect our relationships with other people, here and around the world?*

- *How does consumerism relate to our social status? How do our values around consumerism affect our relationships with others?*

- *What are the relationships among consumption, wealth, and population growth?*

- *What does it mean to be a consumer versus being a citizen?*
Did You Know? Some Facts about the Consumer Society

Canada’s ecological footprint (measure of human demand on Earth’s ecosystem) is seventh-largest per capita among 130 nations measured in WWF’s *Living Planet Report*. Approximately half of this footprint is the result of carbon emissions from transportation, heating, and electricity production from fossil fuels, which contribute significantly to climate change. This is more than twice the average global citizen’s consumption rate and would require approximately four Earths to sustain if every human were to live as Canadians do. (WWF, 2010)

The U.S. and Canada, with 5.2% of the world’s population, are responsible for 31.5% of consumption. South Asia, with 22.4% of the population, is responsible for 2% of consumption. (Worldwatch Institute, 2004)

“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

- consume 45% of all meat and fish, the poorest fifth consume 5%
- consume 58% of total energy, the poorest fifth consume less than 4%
- have 74% of all telephone lines, the poorest fifth have 1.5%
- consume 84% of all paper, the poorest fifth consume 1.1%
- own 87% of the world’s vehicle fleet, the poorest fifth own less than 1%”

(UNDP, 1998, p. 2)

Annual expenditures on luxury items compared with funding needed to meet basic needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Annual expenditure ($US)</th>
<th>Social or economic goal</th>
<th>Additional annual investment needed to achieve goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Makeup</td>
<td>$18 billion</td>
<td>Reproductive health care for all women</td>
<td>$12 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pet food in Europe and the United States</td>
<td>$17 billion</td>
<td>Elimination of hunger and malnutrition</td>
<td>$19 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfumes</td>
<td>$15 billion</td>
<td>Universal literacy</td>
<td>$5 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ocean cruises</td>
<td>$14 billion</td>
<td>Clean drinking water for all</td>
<td>$10 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ice cream in Europe</td>
<td>$11 billion</td>
<td>Immunizing every child</td>
<td>$1.3 billion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Worldwatch Institute, 2004, p. 10)

“In the past three decades, one-third of the planet’s natural resources base has been consumed.”

(Hawken, et al., 1999)
“…75 per cent of the major marine fish stocks are either depleted, overexploited, or being fished at their biological limit.” (WEHAB Working Group, 2002, p. 7)

The western world spends more on luxury products than it would cost to achieve the UN’s Millennium Development Goals. (Worldwatch Institute, 2004)

“Each person in the United States makes 4 1/2 pounds of garbage a day. That is twice what they each made 30 years ago.” (The Story of Stuff Project, n.d.)

“For every one garbage can of waste you put out on the curb, 70 garbage cans of waste were made upstream to make the junk in that one garbage can you put out on the curb.” (The Story of Stuff Project, n.d.)

“Some 4 billion PET recyclable bottles end up in the U.S. waste stream each year, costing cities some $70 million in cleanup and landfill costs. A plastic water bottle can take up to 1000 years to degrade in a landfill; when plastic is burned in incinerators, it releases dioxins, some of the most harmful human-made chemicals that exist.” (The Story of Stuff Project, 2010)

“Between 10 and 15 percent of the price of a bottle of water goes to advertising costs. Effective marketing of bottled water has contributed to undermining confidence—and investment—in public tap water and encouraging underfunding of public agencies.” (The Story of Stuff Project, 2010)

“Numbers from Nutrition Business Journal put the organic food and beverage market in the U.S. at $29.2 billion in 2011, with growth projected at 9.4%, as compared to an anticipated growth in the low single digits for conventional food and beverages.” (Daniells, 2014)

“Organic Monitor estimates that organic food and drink sales worldwide reached almost $64 billion in 2012.” (Soil Association, 2014, p. 20)

“In 2006, people around the world spent $30.5 trillion on goods and services, and in 2008, they purchased 68 million vehicles, 85 million refrigerators, 297 million computers, and 1.2 billion cell phones.” (Worldwatch Institute, 2010, p. 4)

“The world extracts the equivalent of 112 Empire State Buildings from the earth every single day.” (Worldwatch Institute, 2010, p. 4)
Thought-Provoking Quotations

“We are not going to be able to operate our Spaceship Earth successfully nor for much longer unless we see it as a whole spaceship and our fate as common. It has to be everybody or nobody.”

– Buckminster Fuller, American engineer (1895–1983)

“Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell.”

– Edward Abbey, author and environmentalist

“Educational and cultural institutions, governmental agencies, financial institutions, and even the family itself changed their meaning and function to promote the consumption of commodities.”

– Richard Robbins, author of Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism

“The only reason a great many American families don't own an elephant is that they have never been offered an elephant for a dollar down and easy weekly payments.”

– Mad Magazine

“There must be more to life than having everything!”

– Maurice Sendak, author and illustrator

“The world will no longer be divided by the ideologies of “left” and “right,” but by those who accept ecological limits and those who don’t.”

– Wolfgang Sachs, German researcher and teacher (1946–)

“Change is disturbing when it is done to us, exhilarating when it is done by us.”

– Rosabeth Moss Kanter, American professor at Harvard Business School (1943–)

“We need new thinking, new leadership, and innovation to create a post-carbon economy. Our goal is not to undo industry, but to remake it into a force for sustainable wealth generation.”

– Richard Branson, British entrepreneur, (1950–)

“The most critical task facing humanity today is the creation of a shared vision of a sustainable and desirable society, one that can provide permanent prosperity within the biophysical constraints of the real world in a way that is fair and equitable to all of humanity, to other species, and to future generations.”

– Robert Costanza

“We are human beings, not human havings.”

– Mike Nickerson

“Anything you cannot relinquish when it has outlived its usefulness possesses you. And in this materialistic age, a great many of us are possessed by our possessions.”

– Mildred Lisette Norman
Making a Difference

Organizations

One Earth Initiative Society
The One Earth Initiative is a non-profit research and advocacy group based in Vancouver. We seek to transform unsustainable consumption and production patterns locally, nationally, and internationally. One Earth is engaged in convening policy, communication and action initiatives to transform the consumer lifestyle—and the economic, industrial production, financial, political, social, and cultural systems that support it.
http://oneearthweb.org/

The Story of Stuff Project
The Story of Stuff Project was created by Annie Leonard to leverage and extend the impact of the original Story of Stuff film. The project aims to amplify public discourse on a series of environmental, social, and economic concerns and increase the Story of Stuff community’s involvement in efforts to build a more sustainable and just world. The online community includes over 150,000 activists, and they partner with hundreds of environmental and social justice organizations worldwide to create and distribute films, curricula, and other content.
www.storyofstuff.com/

Center for the New American Dream
The Center for the New American Dream helps Americans consume responsibly to protect the environment, enhance quality of life, and promote social justice. They work with individuals, institutions, communities, and businesses to conserve natural resources, counter the commercialization of our culture, and promote positive changes in the way goods are produced and consumed. Its focus is on shifting our understanding of well-being away from “stuff” and back to opportunity and relationships.
www.newdream.org/

Interface
Interface is a sustainable flooring company dedicated to eliminating by 2020 any negative impact of its business on the environment. Its mission is to serve as a model to the business community and to show the industrial world what sustainability is in all its dimensions: people, process, product, place, and profit. Its business model runs on what they have termed the “7 Fronts of Sustainability.”
www.interfaceglobal.com/

Adbusters
Based in Vancouver, Adbusters is a not-for-profit, reader-supported magazine with a circulation of 120,000. It is concerned with the erosion of our physical and cultural environments by commercial forces. Adbusters offers incisive philosophical articles, as well as activist commentary from around the world addressing issues ranging from genetically modified foods to media concentration. In addition, its annual social marketing campaigns like Buy Nothing Day and Digital Detox Week have made it an important activist networking group.
www.adbusters.org/
People
- Tim Jackson
- Juliet Schor
- William Rees
- Erik Assadourian
- Mike Nickerson
- David Orr
- Michael Maniates
- Helio Mattar
- Chris Jordan
- Edward Burtynsky
- Reverend Billy (and the Church of Life after Shopping)
Suggested Resources

Books


Websites

UNEP/Wuppertal Institute Collaborating Centre on Sustainable Consumption and Production
“The Centre provides scientific support to clients from the private and the public sector, such as UNEP and other organizations in the field of SCP. This support includes the development, testing, implementation and monitoring of concrete projects, especially in developing countries, which enables these countries to leapfrog to sustainable consumption and production patterns using life cycle thinking and regional perspectives as guiding principles.”
www.scp-centre.org/home.html

Youth Xchange
“Planet Earth is facing a severe global crisis. Inefficient consumption and production patterns are putting an unbearable strain on our planet. youthxchange is designed to help trainers and individuals to understand and communicate on sustainable lifestyles.”
www.youthxchange.net

Global Footprint Network
Global Footprint Network is “an international think tank that provides ecological footprint accounting tools to drive informed policy decisions in a resource-constrained world.”
www.footprintnetwork.org

Interview with Richard Heinberg from the Post Carbon Institute
Interview with Richard Heinberg, an American journalist and educator who has written extensively on energy, economic, and ecological issues, including oil depletion.
http://transitionvoice.com/2011/03/interview-richard-heinberg/

Interview with James Howard Kunstler: “The old American dream is a nightmare”
Interview with James Howard Kunstler, an American author, social critic, public speaker, and blogger.

Buy Nothing Day
“Buy Nothing Day is an international day of protest against consumerism celebrated annually just after Thanksgiving.”
www.adbusters.org/campaigns/bnd

Good Stuff? – A Behind-the-Scenes Guide to the Things We Buy
‘Have you ever wondered where chocolate comes from, if antibacterial soap is good for your family, or how to recycle an old computer? If you’ve had these or other questions about the environmental and social impacts of the products you buy and use, Good Stuff is for you. It contains many of the tips, facts, and links you’ll need to start making more informed purchases that benefit your health and the environment.”
www.worldwatch.org/bookstore/publication/good-stuff-behind-scenes-guide-things-we-buy

Affluenza
A one-hour television special that explores the high social and environmental costs of materialism and overconsumption. You can learn more about the show, get an “affluenza diagnosis,” and check out resources for treatment at www.pbs.org/kcts/affluenza/
The Hairy-Nosed Wombat
In this video, a hairy-nosed wombat explains what life on earth should be like.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=l5i714FbDJw

The Solutions Journal
Solutions for a sustainable and desirable future.
www.thesolutionsjournal.com/

Yes! Magazine
"YES! Magazine reframes the biggest problems of our time in terms of their solutions. Online and in print, we outline a path forward with in-depth analysis, tools for citizen engagement, and stories about real people working for a better world."
www.yesmagazine.org/

What is Gross National Happiness?
Gross National Happiness is explained in 3 minutes by Morten Sondergaard.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Zqdqa4YNvI

Curriculum
Facing the Future. Buy, Use, Toss? A Closer Look at the Things We Buy (free download)
“This two-week unit provides multiple entry points to help students think critically about consumption, while building math, science, and civil discourse skills.”
Lesson 1: Garbology
Lesson 2: Mapping the Impact (Mapping and networking our varied impacts on the planet)
Lesson 3: Drilling down to Sustainability (Exploring what sustainability really means)
Lesson 4: The Cost of Production
Lesson 5: On the Road to Retail (Analyzing distribution and a product’s externalities)
Lesson 6: Why Buy? (Considering values and the effects of advertising)
Lesson 7: Defining Happiness (What is the “good life?”)
Lesson 8: It’s a Dirty Job (Designing a waste management plan)
Lesson 9: A System Redesign (Brainstorming a more sustainable economy)
Lesson 10: Analyzing the Message (Critically analyzing the Story of Stuff)

Understanding Sustainability: Two-Week Unit for Social Studies Grades 9–12 (downloadable PDF)
Understanding Sustainability is an activity-based curriculum unit that contains eight engaging and inspiring lessons that help students build the connections among economy, history, democracy, and sustainability. Each lesson in the two-week unit is aligned with the National Council for the Social Studies curriculum standards for easy classroom integration.
This curriculum package was developed by NEW BC, a non-profit organization based in Victoria, British Columbia, to accompany a 1997 book by Northwest Environment Watch (now Sightline Institute) called Stuff: The Secret Lives of Everyday Things. An entire web of connections and impacts is revealed behind those everyday items we normally don’t even think about. In learning about their stuff, students will also explore new ways of looking at their world and make links among the environment, their society, and themselves.
www.sightline.org/research_item/stuff/

Multimedia

The Sustainability Project / 7th Generation Initiative
An educational, non-profit organization that exists to collect, study, develop, and teach ideas, information, technologies, and customs that promote green values and lead toward a sustainable future.
www.sustainwellbeing.net/

The Story of Stuff
The Story of Stuff has fostered a community of over a million change-makers worldwide who are working to build a healthy and just planet. This site provides resources that explain how our “stuff” is produced, distributed, disposed of, etc., including our cosmetics, electronics, and bottled water. It also provides an overview and cap and trade, as well as additional information, downloads, activity guides, annotated scripts, FAQs, etc.
http://storyofstuff.org/
Discussion Guide: https://www.nwf.org/~media/PDFs/Eco-schools/annie_leonard_discussion_guide.ashx
Teaching Tools: http://storyofstuff.org/resources/

Consumerism! The Musical
A short satire/song on excessive consumption.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=hGaOQKJik-s

The Good Consumer
A short film on expectations around consumption.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_ut93YYZu8&feature=related

Rachel Botsman
In The Rise of Collaborative Consumption, Rachel Botsman “charts the growth of a movement that is transforming the way we consume and contribute.”

David Harvey
“In RSA Animate: Crisis of Capitalism, Harvey asks if it is time to look beyond capitalism, towards a new social order that would allow us to live within a responsible, just and humane system.”
David Biello.
“So are the world's environmental ills really a result of the burgeoning number of humans on the planet—predicted to reach at least nine billion people by 2050? Or is it more due to the fact that although the human population has doubled in the past 50 years, we have increased our use of resources fourfold?”

Chris Jordan
His art explores the phenomenon of American consumerism.
http://chrisjordan.com/gallery/camel/#gastrolith

Edward Burtynsky
Edward Burtynsky’s original photography depicts global industrial landscapes.
www.edwardburtynsky.com/

Movies

The Age of Stupid
“The Age of Stupid stars Oscar-nominated Pete Postlethwaite as a man living in the devastated future world of 2055, looking back at old footage from our time and asking: why didn't we stop climate change when we had the chance?”
www.spannerfilms.net/films/ageofstupid

The Corporation
“Provoking, witty, stylish and sweepingly informative, The Corporation explores the nature and spectacular rise of the dominant institution of our time.”
www.thecorporation.com/

What Would Jesus Buy?
“An examination of the commercialization of Christmas in America while following Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping Gospel Choir on a cross-country mission to save Christmas from the Shopocalypse (the end of humankind from consumerism, over-consumption and the fires of eternal debt). The film also delves into issues such as the role sweatshops play in America's mass consumerism and big-box culture.”
https://freedocumentaries.org/documentary/what-would-jesus-buy

The Greed Game
“As the credit crunch bites and a global economic crisis threatens, Robert Peston reveals how the super-rich have made their fortunes, and the rest of us are picking up the bill.”

The 11th Hour
“With contributions from over 50 politicians, scientists, and environmental activists, including former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, physicist Stephen Hawking, Nobel Prize winner Wangari Maathai, and journalist Armand Betscher, and Paul Hawken, the film documents the grave problems facing the planet’s life systems. Global warming, deforestation, mass species extinction, and depletion of the oceans’ habitats are all addressed. The film’s premise is that the future of humanity is in jeopardy.”
https://freedocumentaries.org/documentary/the-11th-hour
The Cost of a Coke
This documentary takes a critical look at Coca-Cola and the actions it has taken to become the world’s most popular soda.
http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/the-cost-of-a-coke/

Money as Debt: International Bankers Own the World and This is How
“This highly informative and easy to understand film covers just about everything that isn't taught in school regarding the corrupt banking system. It explains how these institutions get away with robbing the unsuspecting public by creating monetary policies designed to enslave society, while keeping the system in a perpetual state of rising debt.”
https://freedocumentaries.org/documentary/money-as-debt-international-bankers-own-the-world-and-this-is-how

Online Lessons

Group Activities from the Story of Stuff
“The Story of Stuff is a 20-minute film that takes viewers on a provocative and eye-opening tour of the real costs of our consumer driven culture—from resource extraction to iPod incineration.”
www.agnt.org/earth/group_activities.pdf

Facing the Future: Engaging Students through Global Issues – Activity-Based Lessons and Action Projects
“Motivate students to take creative action in their local and global communities. Engaging Students through Global Issues is an activity-based lesson book that bridges social studies, science, and environmental studies to help students make connections between complex global issues and sustainable solutions.”

Lesson 4: Making Global Connections (Connect issues using everyday materials.)
Lesson 7: Systems are Dynamic (Explore dynamic systems through movement.)
Lesson 12: Watch Where You Step! (Create a web diagram of all the resources they use in their everyday lives and the mark or “footprint” this consumption leaves on the environment.)
Lesson 22: Livin’ the Good Life? (Develop indicators to measure quality of life and conduct a survey of peers and adults to obtain data for their indicators.)
Lesson 38: Metaphors for the Future (Explore world views and mental models.)
Bibliography


