

## Consumption & Consumerism

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## **Preface**

The objective of this report is to examine and generate an understanding of the effects of the consumption of resources and products and of consumerism on the world. This report will specifically focus on the environmental and social repercussions of consumption and consumerism. It has only been in the last hundred years that society has become addicted to “consuming larger and larger quantities every year of coal, oil, fresh air and water, trees, topsoil and the thousand other substances we rip from the crust of the earth, transforming them into not just the sustenance and shelter we need, but much more that we don’t need”<sup>1</sup>. This report will investigate how developing countries are affected by growing consumerism around the world, as well as some solutions for over-consumption. *Cyclical consumption* and the causes of this phenomenon will be explored, as well as the main reasons behind thriving consumerism in today’s modern world. It is hoped that the reader will become fully aware of the vast effects that such an everyday thing can have on our planet.

Consumerism is defined as “a preoccupation with and an inclination toward the buying of consumer goods”<sup>2</sup>. Consumption is defined as “the utilization of economic goods in the satisfaction of wants or in the process of production resulting chiefly in their destruction, deterioration, or transformation”<sup>3</sup>. We consume a multiplicity of resources and commodities today having transcended goods needed solely for survival to extra

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Gore. *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992. Pg. 221

<sup>2</sup> "Consumerism." *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. 2008. <http://www.merriam-webster.com> (9 March 2010).

<sup>3</sup> "Consumption." *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. 2008. <http://www.merriam-webster.com> (9 March 2010).

items for pleasure and convenience. This consumption of goods out of desire and not for continued existence is not necessarily a negative thing as many of these products have improved our quality of life and made our lives profoundly more manageable. However, consumerism does present some imperative issues that must be recognized. A constant diversity of products must be manufactured in order to ensure that consumers will continue to purchase products, with no thought to environmental impact. *Planned Obsolescence* is “a business strategy in which the obsolescence (the process of becoming obsolete—that is, unfashionable or no longer usable) of a product is planned and built into it from its conception”<sup>4</sup>; this creates massive amounts of waste. It is estimated that four to six hectares of terrain is needed to support the consumption of the average person from a high-consumption country, but in 1990, there were only 1.7 hectares of arable or productive land for each human<sup>5</sup>. Consumerism is a global issue as it contributes to the use and misuse of all the earth’s resources and spreads the culture of consumption around the world. It is the world community’s responsibility to find healthy methods of consumption or eliminate needless consumption entirely.

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<sup>4</sup> "Planned Obsolescence." *The Economist*. 23 May 2009. 5 Mar. 2010. <[http://www.economist.com/business-finance/management/displayStory.cfm?story\\_id=E1\\_TPPVQPPN&source=login\\_payBarrier](http://www.economist.com/business-finance/management/displayStory.cfm?story_id=E1_TPPVQPPN&source=login_payBarrier)>.

<sup>5</sup> Robbins, John. *Diet for a New America*. Walpole, NH: Stillpoint, 1987. Pg. 209

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## **Summary**

As previously stated, the purpose of this report is to investigate the repercussions of consumption and consumerism worldwide. A definition of the issue as well as the background and evolution of the topic up until modern day is included. An expert on the issue will be identified and an interview with an individual who has a thorough understanding of the issue will be conducted. The role of control and power with regard to consumption and consumerism will be examined and three case studies will be identified and explored. They include China, an emerging consumer market with over one billion people that, to provide for consumer needs around the world, particularly in the West, have introduced sweatshops that have become a source of cheap labour for manufacturing goods. Secondly, Zimbabwe, where young women are pursuing images and ideals created by the Western media and the process of globalization and in the pursuit of these ideals and in the interest of new needs of modern products they engage in very risky sexual behaviours that contribute to the spread of HIV and AIDS. And finally, Brazil, where rainforests are being destroyed to create pasture land for cattle that are then exported to industrialized nations for consumption. Canada's role in consumption and consumerism will be discussed, as well as possible solutions. The research for this report is composed of a variety of sources including internet sites,

books, magazine articles, newspaper articles and internet videos. This report will attempt to demonstrate the importance, and expand the reader's perspective, of this topic.

## 1. Background

The origins of consumerism can be traced all the way back to when humans were first evolving their social skills; humans gathered in small groups where status and image were imperative for survival and attracting mates. This longing for high social status has evolved into purchasing impressive goods in today's monetary-based economy<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, consumerism did not take hold until the eighteenth century. Before modern times, societies often had clearly defined social hierarchies and as result of this, higher class citizens tended to try to prevent any consumerist activities in the lower-class, as this would allow them to cross social confines and enable individualism<sup>7</sup>.

Consumerism in the Western World made a very gradual increase as worldwide trade and urbanism began to take hold. The primary indications of consumerism began with the growing demand for sugar in Europe. Countries like England, France and Spain increased the production of sugar in their colonies in the Americas and on the islands of the southern Atlantic. Sugar became one of the first worldwide, mass consumer goods

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<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey Miller. Spent: Sex, Evolution, and Consumer Behavior. New York: Viking, 2009. Pg. 1

<sup>7</sup> Peter N. Stearns. Consumerism in World History: The Global Transformation of Desire. New York: Routledge, 2006. Pg. 1

and helped develop a desire for products that were not entirely necessary. This development of colonial trade continued with products such as coffee, tea, cotton and spices<sup>8</sup>.

Advertising, in its modern form, first started to appear in the eighteenth century, as fashion magazines and newspaper clippings were becoming commonly used to display merchandise<sup>9</sup>. These promotions encouraged upper-class as well as lower-class people to buy more consumer goods and created rapid growth in the list of items that people regarded as necessities. People added products such as coffee, soap and sugar to the list, products that were considered to be luxuries just one hundred years before<sup>10</sup>.

Consumerism quickly spread worldwide through the colonies of the powerful empires of the time. The middle class became more and more defined after the industrial revolution, introducing an entirely new faction of consumers. Consumerism especially blossomed in North America. In the United States, department stores started to become extremely popular and catalogue buying was all the rage. The advent of the radio became a fierce advertising tool for the steadily-rising amount of consumer goods available<sup>11</sup>. Automobiles became one of the first big-ticket items at the turn of the

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<sup>8</sup> Stearns, Op. Cit. Pg. 17

<sup>9</sup> IBID. Pg. 19

<sup>10</sup> IBID. Pg. 22

<sup>11</sup> Stearns. Op. Cit. Pg. 49, 50

century and quickly penetrated all the way down through the social classes by the 1930s.

Consumerism was not regarded as an issue until the late nineteenth century, as socialists and intellectuals started to attack consumerism for causing distorted values, frivolity and a new kind of social hierarchy. The environmental concerns of consumption and consumerism were not identified until fairly recently when humans realized that we contribute immensely to climate change. The largest source of greenhouse gas emissions is fossil fuel combustion in automobiles and manufacturing industries<sup>12</sup>. We must realize the endless waste that is created by overconsumption; ridiculous amounts of packaging and superfluous products that we buy to try and fill a void in our lives then throw out when we realize it did not help.

Cyclical consumption is a phenomenon that is a result of a monetary-based economy. There are basically three different roles in a monetary system: the employee, the consumer and the employer. The employee works for the employer in exchange for a salary while the employer sells services or products to the consumer for revenue. Both the employee and the employer are consumers as their salary and profit are used to purchase goods and services. This act of consuming enables the employer to draw in

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<sup>12</sup> United States. Environmental Protection Agency. *Inventory of U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Sinks*. 15 Apr. 2002. 7 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/emissions/downloads06/02CR.pdf>>. Pg. 9.

revenue and the employee to receive a salary. The problem with this consumption is that it cannot stop, or our economic system would fail, as the employer would not have money to pay the employee and both the employer and employee would not have money to continue to consume. The major consequence of cyclical consumption is that every product manufactured must become obsolete or stop working in a certain amount of time that will allow the financial circulation between the consumer, employer and employee to continue. Cyclical consumption is dangerous and inherently corrupt as it does not allow for environmentally sustainable practices to occur<sup>13</sup>. The constant production of substandard goods desecrates available resources and poisons the earth.

## **2. Expert: Juliet B. Schor**

Juliet Schor is a professor of sociology at Boston College who has researched consumerism extensively in the last ten years. She is also the author of *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture* and the American best-seller, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* and *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need*. Prior to teaching at Boston College, she worked at Harvard University for 17 years, on the Board on Degrees in Women's Studies and the Department of Economics. Ms. Schor has lectured

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<sup>13</sup> *Zeitgeist Clips Series - Episode 2: Cyclical Consumption*. Dir. Peter Joseph. The Zeitgeist Movement, 2010. <<http://vimeo.com/8948971>>.

extensively all over the United States, Europe and Japan to a variety of business, labour, civic and scholastic groups. She has appeared on nationwide and worldwide television and radio, and articles on her have been featured in a variety of magazines and newspapers, including *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Newsweek*, and *People magazine*<sup>14</sup>.

Her book, *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture*, takes an in-depth look at marketing that affects children and influences them to become consumers at a very young age. Schor says the average ten-year-old has memorized approximately 400 brand names; the typical kindergartner can recognize around 300 logos and she says that kids become addicted to brands at as early of an age as two. Television shows, toys, video games, food and clothing, according to Juliet Schor are what children today know too much about, but do not understand enough<sup>15</sup>.

Juliet Schor is one of the few people who has the courage to expose the growing commercialization, materialism and consumerism that is leading people in the direction of not knowing what is necessary and really important in the world. She is currently

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<sup>14</sup> "Short Bio." *Boston College*. 09 Mar. 2010. <<http://www2.bc.edu/~schorj/bio.html>>.

<sup>15</sup> "Born to Buy: A Groundbreaking Exposé of a Marketing Culture That Makes Children "Believe They Are What They Own.": Product Description." *Amazon.ca*. 09 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.amazon.ca/Born-Buy-Groundbreaking-Marketing-Children/dp/0684870568>>

working on issues of environmental sustainability and their relation to Americans' lifestyles.

### **3. Role of Control**

People often think that the control and power when it comes to consumption and consumerism belongs solely to consumers as they are the ones that buy products and support the companies that produce them. If one day, every consumer, or a large number of them, just stopped buying things that they did not need for basic survival, many major corporations would go out of business and nearly all of the environmental destruction caused by consumerism and consumption would cease to take place. Consumers are in almost total control of consumption cycles; different trends that are being followed have an effect on consumption and different feelings about the state of the economy either encourage or discourage people to consume.

The only problem is that this control is essentially an illusion as the consumer is influenced and manipulated by the corporation on a day to day basis. Without even realising it, millions of people are exposed to a plethora of advertisements on television, the internet and billboards that influence their thinking and convince them to buy more products and services. This manipulation by advertising is a tool used by modern-day

corporations to keep humans subdued and ready to consume as much as is needed for companies to attain a profit.

Corporations also use product design and market research to their advantage. For example, the Heinz Ketchup Company conducted a study in which researchers were sent into people's homes and studied the way the average family consumed ketchup. Heinz knew that the typical five-year-old uses about sixty percent more ketchup than the average forty-year-old. What Heinz realized through this research was that the heavy glass bottles that ketchup used to come in were too cumbersome for these young children. As a result, Heinz introduced the EZ Squirt bottle, made out of lighter, squeezable plastic with a nozzle for easy transfer from the bottle to the plate. After the introduction of the EZ Squirt bottle, the amount of ketchup consumed in the average household rose by twelve percent<sup>16</sup>. This is a perfect example of the resources and techniques used by corporations to control consumers and how much they consume.

Planned Obsolescence, as previously stated, is the practice of deliberately withholding the efficiency of a product or the manufacturing of a poor quality product as a result of cutbacks to save money. Corporations use the power of being able to control the manufacturing of goods to their advantage. When they want consumers to keep buying their products, they make sure that their goods will breakdown in a specified

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<sup>16</sup> Malcolm Gladwell. *What the Dog Saw and Other Adventures*. New York: Little, Brown and, 2009. Pg. 45

timeframe, ensuring that the consumer will have to buy the product again and again as long as they need it. Trends are also an example of Planned Obsolescence. Companies release new versions of products every few months or years and project an image of 'coolness', convincing consumers that the old version of the product isn't cool anymore and that they just *have* to buy the new one<sup>17</sup>. For example, Apple Inc. has released a new version of its iPod approximately once a year since 2001<sup>18</sup>. Consumers see the new version of the iPod and see that their iPod is out of date so they go and buy the newer model. Planned obsolescence is a dangerous tool of control as it creates endless waste and pollutes our earth.

Corporations need this control as they have no choice but to make a profit as it is demanded by their shareholders; without profit and shareholders they would go out of business. Consumers need this control and should have it to manage how much they consume, as they need to control their debt and the devastation of the environment caused by their reckless spending habits and the destructive practices of industry. Due to the over-consumption of unnecessary products, Canadian household debt was at "an all-time high of \$1.3 trillion"<sup>19</sup> in 2008, showing the dwindling control of our own

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<sup>17</sup> *The Story of Stuff*. Perf. Annie Leonard. Free Range Studios, 2007. <<http://www.storyofstuff.com/>>.

<sup>18</sup> "2001 to Present." *iPod History*. Web. 09 May 2010. <<http://www.ipodhistory.com/>>.

<sup>19</sup> "Canadian Household Debt Swells to \$1.3 Trillion." *CBC News*. 26 May 2009. 9 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.cbc.ca/consumer/story/2009/05/26/canada-household-debt854.html>>.

consumption. It is obvious that we, as consumers, do not have control of our consumer habits.

#### **4. Religion & Spirituality**

Religion has been an enemy of consumerism for hundreds of years. When it comes to consumption and consumerism, many religions have very similar views; almost every modern-day religion opposes consumption for the sake of consumption. Some Buddhists claim, "We want therefore we consume, we want therefore we suffer"<sup>20</sup>. Many Christians believe that one may enjoy the good things in life, but people must not gain their possessions in ways that injure others and they must take responsibility for those who lack basic necessities<sup>21</sup>. Within the Jewish faith, it is often believed that one must trade fairly for goods and take waste and pollution into consideration when consuming resources<sup>22</sup>.

There are two worlds, the material world and the spiritual world<sup>23</sup>, and many people believe that there is an imbalance between these two worlds. Our society used to be

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<sup>20</sup> Allan Badiner. *Mindfulness in the Marketplace*. Berkeley, Calif.: Parallax, 2002. Pg. 2

<sup>21</sup> John B. Cobb. "Consumerism, Economism, and Christian Faith." *Religion Online*. 10 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1089>>.

<sup>22</sup> Neil Amswych. "A Jewish Ethic for Consumerism." *The Movement for Reform Judaism*. 8 Mar. 2010. 9 Mar. 2010. <<http://news.reformjudaism.org.uk/assembly-of-rabbis/a-jewish-ethic-for-consumerism.html>>.

<sup>23</sup> Remez Sassoon. "The Spiritual Path and Material Life." *Self Improvement - Spiritual Growth - Inner Peace - Success Consciousness*. 19 Jan. 2008. 10 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.successconsciousness.com/blog/spiritual-growth/the-spiritual-path-and-material-life/>>.

concerned with how we treated other people. We used to focus on treating people with love, respect and kindness or in other words, we focussed on the 'spiritual world'.

Nowadays, our society is more concerned with the material world, the things we buy, the things we own and the things we want. We have forgotten about the spiritual side of life, we are more worried about nice cars and large homes than helping fellow human beings. Spirituality is about who we are and what we do on this planet. Consumerism has taken over as our spirituality; we are more worried about how much money we earn and what we spend it on than what direction we take in life.

Humans need to find a healthy balance between the material world and the spiritual world. Through the spiritual world we can take care of the material world. If we care about the earth and the collective 'spirit' of the human race, we can provide for the material side of life in a healthy, productive manner.

Religion itself, in a way, has become a 'consumer product'. Different religions attempt to 'sell' their respective beliefs to people using many methods of advertising that are used to promote everyday consumer products. For example, televangelism is the practice of promoting Christianity on television. Television shows and entire television stations are devoted to the promotion of the Christian faith, using modern technology to

spread the message to a larger audience.<sup>24</sup> This method closely resembles television advertising of consumer products and could have a negative effect on religion and society as it depersonalizes religion. Religion has always been a very personal and intimate subject. People have their own individual views on religion – not just between different faiths, but also within the same faith. With the use of a mass-advertising tool like television, it is difficult for people to have their own separate views and to choose the religious institution that fits their needs best.

## **5. Case Studies**

### **China: An Emerging Consumer Market**

With a population of over 1.3 billion people, the People's Republic of China represents a dramatic change in the global economic and consumer climate, not only because it is a low-cost producer of consumer items, but because it is becoming a fervent consumer culture with a gigantic consumer-market. China's economy has grown so that it has become the third largest economy in the world, behind Japan and the United States.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Wendy Raustin. "All-Faith Thoughts on Christian Televangelism." *Tribes*. Web. 13 May 2010. <<http://tribes.tribe.net/safereligiousdiscussionforum/thread/b9814de9-24fb-4aa8-8b72-61b5c2747507>>.

<sup>25</sup> Li Yanping. "China's Growth Surge May Make Inflation Task Tougher." *Bloomberg.com*. 05 Apr. 2010. <<http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601080&sid=aFDxDlcc0wXo>>.

Due to its large workforce of over 800 million skilled labourers<sup>26</sup>, China is able to provide cheap labour in the many industries that are present in the country. This inexpensive workforce has resulted in China's massive manufacturing industry that produces cheap consumer products for western nations. According to Zhu Sendi, director of the Experts Commission of the Chinese Machinery Industry Association, "Chinese manufacturing industry remains an industry featuring a speedy growth in dozens of years to come"<sup>27</sup>. China's role as a consumer nation is growing and will continue to grow into the future, bringing a higher standard of living to the Chinese people, but wreaking havoc on the environment and available resources.

After its long history of supplying consumer products and services to wealthier, western nations, China is now able to provide these amenities to its own people. China has made its goal of becoming a developed country with western lifestyles a reality in some parts of the country. Western businesses and restaurants are becoming more and more ubiquitous in and around the urban centres in China and housing development in the country has been booming. By the year 2015, China will add 126 million new homes. Demand for fish and meat products has also increased with prosperity in China;

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<sup>26</sup> Bobby Jan. "Cheap Labour in China." *Gaebler Ventures*. Web. 3 May 2010. <<http://www.gaebler.com/Cheap-Labor-in-China.htm>>.

<sup>27</sup> Zhu Sendi. "2nd International Equipment and Manufacturing Fair." Speech. China. 5 Sept. 2003. *People Daily*. 9 May 2010. <[http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200309/09/eng20030909\\_124031.shtml](http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200309/09/eng20030909_124031.shtml)>.

over-fishing has become a problem on the on coasts and vast ecosystems have been converted to farmland and pastures to care for animals.<sup>28</sup>

China's 'ecological footprint' is becoming too large for the earth to support it. The average Chinese person requires 1.6 hectares for their consuming habits to be supported and this number is slowly on a rise.<sup>29</sup> If the average ecological footprint of a Chinese person reaches the level of the average American, the earth would not be able to support human consumption any longer.<sup>30</sup> With American influences all over the world, many developing countries desire the consumer culture of the United States and other developed countries. China is starting to see this gravitation towards American consumer habits and tendencies.

The devastating effects of China's transition to a consumer-based society are already becoming apparent. The Chinese people do not want to stop their economic growth because their lifestyle is drastically improving, but the planet cannot support the consumption of so many people. This creates a complicated problem that is not easily solvable.

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<sup>28</sup> Maryann Bird. "Consumption and Consumerism." *China Dialogue*. 05 Apr. 2010. <<http://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/189>>.

<sup>29</sup> IBID.

<sup>30</sup> IBID.

## **Zimbabwe: Desperate for Consumer Products**

Countries in Africa are, for the most part, economically unstable and generally are very poor; Zimbabwe is not an exception. People are not able to find safe jobs to make a living and will often turn to illegal or dangerous employment in the search for wealth. With one in seven adults living with HIV<sup>31</sup>, Zimbabwe is experiencing one of the most severe, extensive AIDS epidemics on the planet. There is no doubt that these two issues are linked and that the spreading AIDS problem is flourishing due to the extreme poverty in the country. According to the United Nations, 60 percent of adults with HIV in Zimbabwe are women.<sup>32</sup>

As western culture has spread to developing countries around the world, materialism and consumerism have become prevalent in these poor countries contrary to popular belief that poverty stricken people are not concerned with such things. This consumerism and materialism contributes to the spread of HIV as these women who are infected, turn to illegal prostitution as a source of income so that they are able to purchase consumer goods. The global media and global consumerist pressure push

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<sup>31</sup> "2008 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic." *The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS*. 05 Apr. 2010. <[http://www.unaids.org/en/KnowledgeCentre/HIVData/GlobalReport/2008/2008\\_Global\\_report.asp](http://www.unaids.org/en/KnowledgeCentre/HIVData/GlobalReport/2008/2008_Global_report.asp)>.

<sup>32</sup> "Zimbabwe." *The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS*. 05 Apr. 2010. <<http://www.unaids.org/en/CountryResponses/Countries/zimbabwe.asp>>.

these women into dangerous situations where either they are infected with HIV or they infect the 'clients'.<sup>33</sup>

This problem is hard to prevent and monitor, as the illegal dealings take place in secret and there is no way of tracing them. The use of contraceptives is a very effective method of reducing the spread of sexually-transmitted infections and diseases such as HIV. If these modern contraceptives were made more available to people in Zimbabwe, women would be able to protect themselves and others if they were to be in an illegal prostitution situation. This problem is also an error of the western media; if media influences were to change how they portray products, these Zimbabwean women would not feel as though they need to do dangerous things to obtain them. These cases show the more personal dangers that consumption and consumerism produce. Consumer culture can change a person on a personal level and encourage them to participate in potentially harmful occupations.

### **Brazil: Consequences of the Over-Consumption of Food**

Brazil has over one third of the world's rainforests; the Amazon Rainforest covers approximately 50 percent of Brazil's land area. This biodiversity rich ecosystem is

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<sup>33</sup> Sandra Bhatasara. "Poverty and the Consumerist Culture; An Analysis of HIV and AIDS Infections among Young Women in Zimbabwe." *University of Kwazulu-Natal*. Nov. 2008. 01 Mar. 2010. <<http://iolsresearch.ukzn.ac.za/Sandra18625.aspx>>.

rapidly being destroyed due to industry and demand from developed countries. Brazil has lost 8.1 percent of its rainforests since 1990.<sup>34</sup> A survey on deforestation and greenhouse gas emissions has shown that “deforestation may account for as much as 10% of current greenhouse gas emissions”<sup>35</sup>.

This can be attributed to several factors; logging, infrastructure improvements and clearing for cattle pastures. The clearing of rainforests for the development of cattle pastures is the leading cause of deforestation in Brazil. Brazil is the world’s largest producer of beef; according to the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR):

Between 1990 and 2001 the percentage of Europe's processed meat imports that came from Brazil rose from 40 to 74 percent and by 2003 for the first time ever, the growth in Brazilian cattle production—80 percent of which was in the Amazon—was largely export driven.<sup>36</sup>

The rainforests are cut down using the ‘slash and burn’ technique, and then cattle pastures are created to provide for industrialized nations. Often, more forest than what is needed is burned, devastating the natural environment in and around the cattle

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<sup>34</sup> Rhett A. Butler. "Brazilian Deforestation." *Mongabay*. 2005. 01 Mar. 2010. <<http://rainforests.mongabay.com/20brazil.htm>>.

<sup>35</sup> Robert K. Innes. "Effects of Deforestation." *Earlham College*. 06 May 2010. <<http://www.earlham.edu/~pols/17Fall96/inneske/effects.HTM>>.

<sup>36</sup> James Clarke. "Beef Exports Fuel Loss of Amazonian Forest." *Center for International Forestry Research*. 05 Apr. 2010. <[http://www.cifor.cgiar.org/Publications/Corporate/NewsOnline/NewsOnline36/beef\\_exports.htm](http://www.cifor.cgiar.org/Publications/Corporate/NewsOnline/NewsOnline36/beef_exports.htm)>.

pastures. This accounts for 91 percent of the deforestation in the Amazon and is a large contributor to climate change.<sup>37</sup> A large portion of the population in Brazil relies on the production and distribution of beef as an economic industry. Without this industry, the economic strength of Brazil would be significantly less. As a result of this, there has been a minimal effort to stop the environmental destruction in the country.

What can be done about this growing problem? The Brazilian government has already taken some action on this issue. Brazil's President Luis Inácio da Silva announced a new action plan to avert and manage deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon Rainforest. The plan focuses on methods of reducing deforestation, including enhanced land use development, superior enforcement of laws concerning deforestation and the prohibited occupation of government owned land and improved surveillance of deforestation.<sup>38</sup>

## **6. International Organizations**

There are several roles played by international organizations when it comes to consumption and consumerism. There are some organizations that deal with the awareness of the negative effects of consumerism, some that are blatantly anti-

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<sup>37</sup>Sérgio Margulis. *Causes of Deforestation of the Brazilian Amazon*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2004. Pg 9.

<sup>38</sup> "The Impact of Growing Demand for Beef on the Amazon Rainforest in Brazil." *Tropical Rainforest Conservation*. 06 Apr. 2010. <[http://www.mongabay.com/external/brazil\\_beef\\_amazon.htm](http://www.mongabay.com/external/brazil_beef_amazon.htm)>.

consumerist and some that advocate more conscious consumerism. Many environmental organizations, such as Greenpeace, have a role in taking action on the effects of over-consumption and consumerist behaviours.

Greenpeace, an organization that promotes peace and environmental protection, has held numerous campaigns promoting the consumption of environmentally friendly products and condemning the production and consumption of environmentally destructive products. In 2010, Greenpeace launched a campaign criticizing the confectionary giant Nestle and its use of palm oils from companies that destroy rainforests in Indonesia, endangering hundreds of species of animals and the livelihoods of local people<sup>39</sup>. The campaign asks consumers to boycott Nestle products in order to send a message to the company that the destruction of rainforests for profit is not acceptable. Greenpeace also offers several guides and ratings on popular consumer products such as electronics and food, assessing the environmental effects of these products and suggesting products that use recyclable and non-toxic materials. For instance, Greenpeace International's 'Guide to Greener Electronics' ranks the world's top 18 electronics manufacturers "according to their policies on toxic chemicals,

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<sup>39</sup> "Ask Nestle to Give Rainforests a Break." *Greenpeace*. 02 Apr. 2010.  
<<http://www.greenpeace.org/international/campaigns/climate-change/kitkat>>.

recycling and climate change”<sup>40</sup>, giving consumers a chance to ensure that the products that are purchased are environmentally responsible.

Adbusters is a not-for-profit organization and magazine that describes itself as, “a global network of artists, activists, writers, pranksters, students, educators and entrepreneurs who want to advance the new social activist movement of the information age” and whose goal is “to topple existing power structures and forge a major shift in the way we live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century”<sup>41</sup>. One of Adbuster’s main goals is to change the ways that information flows through the world. Through a series of spoof-advertisements, Adbusters satirizes the obsession with consumer-products and the manipulative advertising methods that companies use to convince people to buy their products. Adbusters has also created a campaign called “Buy Nothing Day” where they encourage people to put a “24 hour moratorium on consumer spending” on November 27<sup>th</sup> in North America and November 28<sup>th</sup> worldwide<sup>42</sup>. Adbusters wants to put a stop to consumption all together, saying that it is destroying our earth and that we will not survive if we maintain our level of consumption.

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<sup>40</sup> "How the Companies Line up." *Greenpeace*. 02 Apr. 2010.

<<http://www.greenpeace.org/international/campaigns/toxics/electronics/how-the-companies-line-up>>.

<sup>41</sup>"About Adbusters." *Adbusters Culturejammer Headquarters*. Web. 02 Apr. 2010.

<<https://www.adbusters.org/about/adbusters>>.

<sup>42</sup> "Buy Nothing Day." *Adbusters Culturejammer Headquarters*. 02 Apr. 2010.

<<https://www.adbusters.org/campaigns/bnd>>.

The Centre for a New American Dream is an organization that focuses on changing western culture from an irresponsible consumer-based culture to a culture that “consumes responsibly to protect the environment, enhance quality of life, and promote social justice”<sup>43</sup>. Juliet B. Schor is the co-founder and co-chair of the Centre for a New American Dream and actively participates in campaigns and programs executed by the organization<sup>44</sup>. The organization attempts to change the way that people think about life, moving from a more materialistic lifestyle to a society that values family, community, health and nature.

There are very few intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) that actively acknowledge or try to prevent the negative effects of consumerism in the world. This could be attributed to the fact that the majority of modern-day economies rely on consumerism consumption and without them, these entire economic systems would collapse as the production and distribution of goods would nearly cease to occur. IGOs and governments actually often advocate frivolous consumption. For example, after the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 attack on the World Trade Centres, in his address to the nation, George W. Bush asked for America’s “continued participation and confidence in the

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<sup>43</sup> "About the New American Dream." *New American Dream Home*. 02 Apr. 2010. <<http://www.newdream.org/about/index.php>>.

<sup>44</sup> "Board of Directors." *New American Dream Home*. Web. 02 Apr. 2010. <<http://www.newdream.org/about/board.php>>.

American economy"<sup>45</sup>. In a time of crisis, George W. Bush, the most powerful man on earth, told people to continue consuming. Obviously the values of today's western society are backward when consuming resources and supporting the economy are more important than ensuring that human lives are saved and in the future human life is preserved.

## **7. Consumerism & Consumption in Canada**

Being the twelfth richest country by gross domestic product in the world<sup>46</sup> and being so heavily influenced by American spending habits, Canada's economy has evolved so that it greatly relies on consumer spending within the country to survive. The government implements tax cuts and policies that encourage consumerism. For example, in 2009, during the economic recession, Canada's government implemented Canada's Economic Action Plan. Included in the plan is the Home Renovation Tax Credit, this tax credit gives an incentive for people to buy the materials to renovate their home even if the home is not in need of renovation or repair. The government is forced to encourage mindless consumerism because without it, the economy would go into recession and eventually depression. Canada has moved to a point where creating new

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<sup>45</sup>George W. Bush. "President Bush's Address to the Nation." United States Congress, Washington, D.C. 21 Sept. 2001. Speech.

<sup>46</sup>"Report for Selected Countries and Subjects." *International Monetary Fund*. 04 Apr. 2010. <<http://tiny.cc/8oo79>>.

jobs and stimulating the economy is more important than saving the environment and reducing huge amounts of waste.

Canadians spend large amounts of money on consumer products every year.

According to Statistics Canada, the average Canadian spent \$2856.00 in 2008 on clothing alone<sup>47</sup>, approximately two times the amount that fifty-percent of the world's population earns in one year<sup>48</sup>. Canadians spend over 12.4 billion dollars per year on alcoholic beverages<sup>49</sup>. According to the United Nations Human Development Report, approximately 13 billion dollars are required to provide basic health and nutrition needs for the entire human population<sup>50</sup>. These statistics show the excessive consumerism that Canadians partake in and shows the need for us to correct such distorted values where having the latest fashions is more important than ensuring everybody has their basic survival needs met.

## **8. Possible Solutions**

Consumption and consumerism is a complicated problem to solve because it is such an everyday thing to so many people. It has become part of our culture to consume,

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<sup>47</sup> "Average Household Expenditures." *Statistics Canada*. 04 Apr. 2010.  
<<http://www40.statcan.gc.ca/l01/cst01/famil16a-eng.htm>>.

<sup>48</sup> Anup Shah. "Poverty Facts." *Global Issues*. 04 Apr. 2010.  
<<http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>>.

<sup>49</sup> "About Alcohol." *Centre for Addiction & Mental Health*. 04 Apr. 2010.  
<[http://www.camh.net/About\\_Addiction\\_Mental\\_Health/Drug\\_and\\_Addiction\\_Information/about\\_alcohol.html](http://www.camh.net/About_Addiction_Mental_Health/Drug_and_Addiction_Information/about_alcohol.html)>.

<sup>50</sup> United Nations. *Consumption for Human Development*. By Graciela Chichilnisky. New York: Human Development Report Office, United Nations Development Programme, 1998. Pg 37.

when a human is born they are taught that they must have toys to have fun, new clothes that look good and the newest, coolest electronics. In order for humans to solve this problem, we must change our methods of thinking and look backwards to what was valued by our ancestors and what really matters in life.

One solution for consumption and consumerism is 'conscious consumerism'.

Conscious consumerism involves purchasing products and services that are made without exploiting humans, animals or the environment. People who practice conscious or ethical consumption purchase products such as free-range eggs and poultry, free-trade and organic food products and recyclable 'green' products. Consuming these 'ethical' products puts a positive spin on consumerism, allowing for the monetary-economy of today to survive while protecting the environment and the workers that produce the goods. The downside to conscious consumption is that these ethical products are often more expensive and are less widely available. This can be attributed to supply in demand, as people have not yet created the demand for these products so manufacturers produce less of these goods and charge more for them. Another downside of conscious consumerism is the fact that there is not the incentive of immense profit initially when these products are fabricated and sold. The priority of corporations is profit, so it may take a mass movement of conscious consumers to make ethical products widely available and more affordable.

Another solution for consumerism is to just stop consuming all together. People could grow their own food, make their own clothes and trade for items that they cannot acquire by themselves. People would become self-sufficient, overcoming the need for businesses and corporations to manufacture and distribute goods. Environmental destruction would practically not exist, as the main contributors to climate change and the destruction of natural environments are corporations and industry.<sup>51</sup> This solution would have great consequences though. Since our economic systems, as stated previously, rely on the transaction involving manufacturer/employer, employee and consumer, the entire system would collapse because this exchange would stop happening. There would be chaos worldwide as governments would fall and other existing institutions would fail due to the fact that our society relies so heavily on the use of money to function. Also, people would be extremely reluctant to change their ways so drastically. A major catalyst would most likely be required, such as worldwide climate change destruction or a world war.

Although not entirely a solution, a third course of action would be to do nothing and continue our consumption habits as they are today. This course of action would not require mass consensus, which would be an extremely difficult goal to reach,

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<sup>51</sup> United States. Environmental Protection Agency. *Inventory of U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Sinks*. 15 Apr. 2002. 7 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/emissions/downloads06/02CR.pdf>>. Pg. 9.

because it would be only the richest people on earth that would be the ones consuming and a catastrophe of some kind would not be necessary to motivate people. The citizens of western industrialized nations would be able to continue living in comfort, while people in poorer nations would continue to starve and live in poverty. Eventually, climate change would overtake the earth and millions of people would become environmental refugees, as industry causes a 3 percent increase in greenhouse gases in the earth's atmosphere every year<sup>52</sup>.

The issue of consumerism can be linked back to the economic structure of the world today. Monetary economies of today rely on the exchange of goods between consumer and manufacturer, also called consumption. It is in the best interest of manufacturers and business owners to spread consumer-culture around the world, creating more customers. A solution to this would be to find an alternative to a money-based economic system. One of such alternatives is a resource-based economy. A resource based economy is:

“A system in which all goods and services are available without the use of money, credits, barter or any other system of debt or servitude. All resources become the common heritage of all of the inhabitants, not just a select few. The premise upon

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<sup>52</sup> Michael R. Raupach, et al. "Global and Regional Drivers of Accelerating CO<sub>2</sub> Emissions." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*. 23 Jan. 2007. 5 Apr. 2010. <<http://www.pnas.org/content/104/24/10288.full.pdf>>.

which this system is based is that the Earth is abundant with plentiful resource; our practice of rationing resources through monetary methods is irrelevant and counterproductive to our survival.”<sup>53</sup>

If modern-day technology was optimized to provide enough resources such as food, water etc. to the population of the world, there would be no need to put a price on products. Without money, corporations would not need people to consume continually in order to make a profit. There would be no motivation to promote consumerism; as a result, our culture would slowly change to a socially and environmentally conscious society.

Consumption and consumerism are both problems of culture and of economic structure. Western culture has evolved so that it has become ingrained in peoples' minds that they must buy things, but western economic systems have evolved so that the entire system relies on the exchange involving manufacturer/employer, employee and consumer. These two factors have made the issue of over-consumption and consumerism built into our society requiring rather drastic changes in our values systems and economic systems in order to solve them.

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<sup>53</sup>Jacque Fresco. "Resource-Based Economy." *The Venus Project*. 9 May 2010. <<http://www.thevenusproject.com/a-new-social-design/resource-based-economy>>.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix I:**

#### **Email Interview with Juliets B. Schor**

**Q: When did you first become interested with consumerism?**

A: For as long as I can remember, I've had some sort of interest in the topic of consumerism, but when a friend of mine showed me the magazine "Adbusters" I became very interested in the topic and the rest is history, as they say.

**Q: What do you think are the main causes of "Consumption & Consumerism"?**

A: Consumerism is a complicated problem as the main causes can be traced to our culture. We have been consuming for thousands of years, but now we are consuming so much that we actually threaten our own existence. Did you know that after World War II, our consumption *doubled* from what it was before? Consumption and consumerism is now so ingrained in our culture that it is a very difficult problem to solve.

**Q: What does the Center for a New American Dream do?**

A: The Center advocates conscious consumerism and mainly promotes awareness about the subject of consumerism in the world. People don't realize that consumerism is a significant problem in our society today, so we have taken on the task of making the general population aware that their actions have major consequences.

**Q: What are some current projects that you are working on?**

A: Well, I have been very busy with the Center for a New American Dream and I have been doing some research regarding environmental sustainability and American lifestyles. I am also teaching of course.

### **Appendix II:**

#### **Consumption Compared with Basic Social Services by Spending**

<b>Global Priority</b>	<b>\$U.S. Billions</b>
Cosmetics in the United States	8
Ice cream in Europe	11
Perfumes in Europe and the United States	12
Pet foods in Europe and the United States	17

<b>Global Priority</b>	<b>\$U.S. Billions</b>
Business entertainment in Japan	35
Cigarettes in Europe	50
Alcoholic drinks in Europe	105
Narcotics drugs in the world	400
Military spending in the world	780

<b>Global Priority</b>	<b>\$U.S. Billions</b>
Basic education for all	6
Water and sanitation for all	9
Reproductive health for all women	12
Basic health and nutrition	13

(Source: The state of human development, United Nations Human Development

Report 1998, Chapter 1, p.37)