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Sustainable Consumption: Sacrificing for the Future

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to shed some light on the sustainable view of consumption. Particularly, this paper seeks to answer the following questions: (i) How does sustainable consumption vary from the conventional view of consumerism? (ii) What are the dictates regarding sustainable consumption? and (iii) What are the barriers to embrace sustainable consumption practices? Relevant literature is critically reviewed to answer the research questions. It is found that conventional view of consumerism greatly varies from sustainable consumption in five aspects: (i) focus, (ii) orientation, (iii) types of needs and wants to be fulfilled, (iv) compatibility with religious views, and (v) characteristics. Review of literature also suggests that there are five basic ordains of sustainable consumption, which include: (i) conscious attempts to meet basic needs, (ii) moderation in expenditure, (iii) focus on quality life rather than materialism, (iv) care for future generation, and (v) care for environmental consequences. Lastly, the possible reasons for the shortfall of present day consumers are also highlighted. The present paper contributes to the knowledge by discussing consumption phenomenon from sustainability perspective and by clearly distinguishing this view of consumption from traditional view of consumption. Furthermore, pointing on the necessity of sustainable consumption, the present research calls for more research to consider sustainability standards in order to promote sustainable consumption practices.

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1. Introduction

Consumerism has become part and parcel of the modern life (Miles, 2006). It accelerates consumer movement, becomes the consumers' voice to express their rights, and mobilizes mass consumption. However, it is often criticized that consumerism ends up with giving the birth of materialism and overlooks the future need, durability, product origin and environmental consequences. Not only this but also consumerism provokes social maladies, such as extravagance, wasteful expenditure, no attention to the needy, barriers to national sustainable development, and so forth. Considering such negative aspects of consumption, the present paper attempts to highlight the difference between sustainable consumption and traditional view of consumption, as well as to examine the nature of shortfall of the present day consumerism. More specifically, this paper seeks to answer the following questions:

- How does sustainable consumption vary from the conventional view of consumerism?
- What are the dictates regarding sustainable consumption?
- What are the barriers to embrace sustainable consumption practices?

It is hoped that this study will contribute new knowledge in the existing literature in the field of consumer behavior by understanding it from the sustainability perspective. The rest of the paper is fourfold. *First*, a comparative discussion on conventional view of 'consumption' and 'sustainable view of consumption' is presented. *Second*, the sustainability ordains regarding consumption are highlighted. *Third*, an attempt has been made to understand the barriers that hinder the process of adopting sustainable consumption practices. *Lastly*, a conclusion has been made based on the overall discussion.

2. How does sustainable consumption vary from the conventional view of consumption?

Consumption enables meeting human needs and wants. It encompasses a big spectrum of need fulfilment activities and purposes including status acquisition, identity formation, social class identification and so on (Pink, 2009). The notion of consumption can be viewed from two perspectives. The first perspective focuses on '*basic need fulfilment with satisfaction-seeking orientation*', while the second perspective emphasizes '*pleasure-seeking orientation with gratifying desires and wants*' (Godazgar, 2007). The later approach stimulates the desire for possessing lavish, excessive and unnecessary goods and services. Godazgar (2007) has attributed this second approach as consumerism. Considering this categorization and clarification, the later approach covers the traditional view of consumption as well as the modern view of consumption. On the other hand, the former one advocates for sustainable consumption.

While discussing consumerism, in his book, Miles (2006, p.1) stated that, "Consumerism is ubiquitous and ephemeral. It is arguably the religion of the late twentieth century. It apparently pervades our everyday lives and structures our everyday experience and yet it is perpetually altering its form and reasserting its influence in new guises". In another note, other researchers (Heath, 2001; Borgmann, 2000; Mazurek & Hilton, 2007) mentioned that although consumerism provides freedom of choices, it also can be the cause of misuse of that freedom. Based on this discussion, it is obvious that consumption has two sides, namely; *constructive* and *destructive* (Godazgar, 2007).

Consumption is useful because it provides comfort, leisure and pleasure, fulfils the human needs, and solves need-related problems. Indeed, consumerism assures numerous choices in front of consumers and assures availability of goods and services through mass production, information availability through mass media and the internet. It is fueled by the facilities of use of credit and debit cards, as well as installment purchase. On the other hand, in its destructive sense, consumption allures extravagance, wastage and luxury, and sometimes even moral corruption (Wilk, 2004). It has created over dependency on labor saving technology, excessive earning power, necessity of full time work and mountain of wasteland population. Often it ignores the environmental welfare and need of future generation.

It is important to note that, some researchers suggest considering '*traditional consumerism*' different from '*modern consumerism*' (Ahmed, 1992; Campbell, 1994; Turner, 1991). Based on this school of thought, the traditional consumption is not only useful, but also essential since it fulfils the human needs, holds '*satisfaction-seeking*' orientation, and is derived from utilitarianism. Such notion is compatible with most of religious doctrines

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