The challenge of achieving sustainable consumption

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Abstract. Promoting sustainable consumption and production represents a pivotal dimension of the broader objective of sustainable development, which seeks to attain lasting economic growth that addresses economic, social, and environmental imperatives. Governments operating at various levels, spanning from local to global, possess the capacity to shape sustainable consumption and production by establishing the regulatory frameworks that govern the conduct of businesses and consumers. This regulatory framework may encompass compulsory requirements imposed on producers and the imposition of taxes on goods and services deemed unsustainable. Additionally, governments can deploy educational initiatives and information campaigns aimed at motivating citizens and institutions to adopt sustainable consumption practices. Such efforts serve as effective tools for raising awareness and fostering the adoption of eco-friendly consumption patterns. In conjunction with legal and regulatory measures, the realm of soft law plays an essential role, encompassing best practices, codes of conduct, and business guidelines. Moreover, civil society initiatives with a focus on consumers are indispensable in complementing legislative endeavors. Consequently, the United Nations guidelines for consumer protection advocate for the collaboration of Member States and all relevant stakeholders in the development and deployment of a diverse array of tools designed to promote sustainable consumption and production.

1 Introduction

The concept of consumption has undergone significant transformations throughout history. Initially, consumption primarily revolved around fulfilling individual needs within households. However, as time progressed, there was a reevaluation of the value associated with consumption. The 19th and 20th centuries witnessed the industrial revolution, which laid the foundation for the linear economic model of consumption. This model operated on the premise of inexhaustible natural resources and largely disregarded waste disposal concerns [1].

In the contemporary world, the acknowledgment of limited resource reserves and the loss of sustainability in many ecosystems have reshaped the perspective on consumption. Despite this, consumption remains a crucial means of communication within communities

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and among societies. It serves as a way to combine personal and social benefits, with the pursuit of happiness often linked to acquisition. Manipulations by producers aimed at capturing consumers' attention have created a distinct social reality. As a result, society not only satisfies needs but also desires. This evolution has led to the development and proliferation of personal freedoms, individual entrepreneurship, and free competition. Abundant consumption of various goods, made accessible through mass production and credit systems, has given rise to the formation of a consumer society [2].

A consumer society can be defined as a network of social relations in which individual consumption, facilitated by the market, assumes a central role. The question arises whether such an economy necessitates a culture that encourages consumption beyond basic needs. Its existence is upheld by the sustained growth of capitalism, the expansion of mass production, the increased prosperity of a broader segment of the population, and the availability of leisure time. Additionally, key features of a consumer society encompass the development of media, which serves as both an informer and a catalyst for purchasing new products, as well as the growth of social interactions aimed at disseminating products and related information. Scholars like Jean Baudrillard have identified the principal characteristics of a consumer society, shedding light on its intricate dynamics.

2 Research Methodology

The concept of a consumer society is widely used to describe modern economically developed nations, yet various interpretations of this phenomenon exist. Despite differences in approach, there are overarching principles underlying the concept of a consumer society. In this context, consumption is not merely a means to fulfill basic needs but a form of personal, social, and cultural self-expression [3]. Consequently, in a consumer society, the consumption of goods and services extends beyond their utilitarian value to encompass contextual meanings, signs, and symbols. Some scholars even employ the term "virtual consumption," highlighting its inseparability from actual consumption.This condition prevails in societies capable of providing a certain basic standard of living, allowing individuals to contemplate self-expression through consumption practices. Additionally, it arises when economies and markets increasingly depend on the sale of non-essential goods. While globalization, the internet, media, and international tourism blur the boundaries of consumer societies, it is challenging to identify societies untouched by universal consumption symbols. Peripheral countries experience consumerism as an external factor facilitating integration into the international economic system.

The degree of engagement in forming a consumer society varies among regions, with the virtualization of the economy playing a pivotal role. In many societies, individuals predominantly consume through visual and auditory stimuli, such as advertising banners and enticing product packaging, despite limited access to advertised items. Consequently, consumer attitudes evolve more rapidly than economic modernization, causing dissonance between economic and cultural-symbolic factors. Food serves as a representative example. It swiftly becomes part of the consumer race within society, undergoing active symbolization. Food aligns with fundamental human imperatives – pleasure and health – while readily fitting into various cultural and symbolic frameworks [4].

Advertising employs tactics such as experimenting with fillings, toppings, and product aesthetics to mythologize food. However, the intense social marking and virtual consumption of food may coexist with a significant gap in real consumption. In a study analyzing global dietary structures, it was discovered that while Russia's qualitative consumption pattern resembles the Western world's, quantitative differences exist. Russian food consumption includes a larger share of potatoes, tea, and dairy products. This suggests

the persistence of traditional dietary habits and Russia's limited integration into the more varied Western consumption patterns.

3 Results and Discussions

In 1973, George Fisk introduced the concept of responsible consumption, which involves the rational and efficient utilization of resources in the best interests of the global population [7]. Fisk argued that responsible consumption cannot be viewed solely from a local perspective because changes in resource usage in one country invariably impact other nations.

According to Frederick Webster, a socially responsible consumer should possess awareness of social issues, believe in their capacity to effect change, and actively engage with society (fig.1). In his work titled "Defining the Characteristics of a Socially Conscious Consumer" (1975), Webster aimed to establish the connection between indicators such as the social scale responsibility (SR) and the socio-consumer consumption index (SCC) to discern the influence of personal, socio-economic, and demographic variables on the actual behavior of socially responsible individuals [6]. The findings indicated that mobilizing socially conscious consumers to make socially responsible purchases is a challenging endeavor. The variables SCC, SR, and R explain only a small portion of the total variability of the behavioral measures employed. This research also revealed that society is not entirely ready to transition away from selfish behaviors in a socially conscious direction solely due to environmental concerns. Nonetheless, consumers remain inclined to uphold ethical practices and are willing to choose products from companies that contribute positively to society.

John Harbier Antil, in his work titled "Socially Responsible Consumers: Profile and Implications for Public Policy," develops a comprehensive profile of responsible consumers and discusses the consequences of consumer behavior data for shaping public policies. Socially responsible consumption encompasses actions and purchasing decisions connected to concerns about environmental resource depletion. Socially responsible consumers are driven not only by the desire to fulfill personal needs but also by their awareness of the potential adverse consequences of their actions [5].

As information about environmental degradation becomes increasingly concerning to the public, the concept of socially responsible consumption gains importance and relevance not only for consumers but also for businesses and governments involved in providing goods and services to citizens.

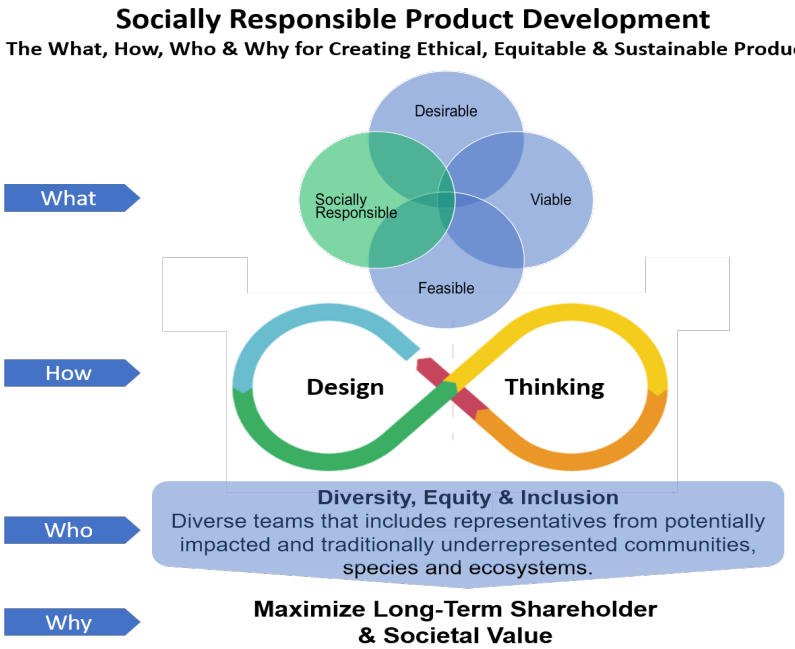

Fig. 1. Integrating social responsibility into product

Sustainable consumption (fig.2) and production encompass several key elements, including the promotion of resource and energy efficiency, the development of sustainable infrastructure, ensuring access to essential social services, creating green and decent employment opportunities, and enhancing overall quality of life for all individuals. Implementing such a program contributes to the attainment of comprehensive development goals, reduces future economic, environmental, and social burdens, enhances economic competitiveness, and mitigates poverty.

In the coming two decades, the global middle class is expected to expand significantly. While this represents an opportunity for individual prosperity, it also intensifies the demand for already limited natural resources [4]. If the world's population reaches 9.6 billion by 2050, sustaining current lifestyles would necessitate the resources of nearly three Earths. Each year, approximately 1.3 billion tons of food, valued at around US$1 trillion, is produced. Regrettably, a third of this food either goes to waste in consumer and retail trash bins or spoils due to inadequate harvesting and transportation. Furthermore, households consume nearly 29 percent of the world's energy and contribute to up to 21 percent of the total CO2 emissions. Therefore, it is imperative to reduce waste generation and rethink consumer choices.

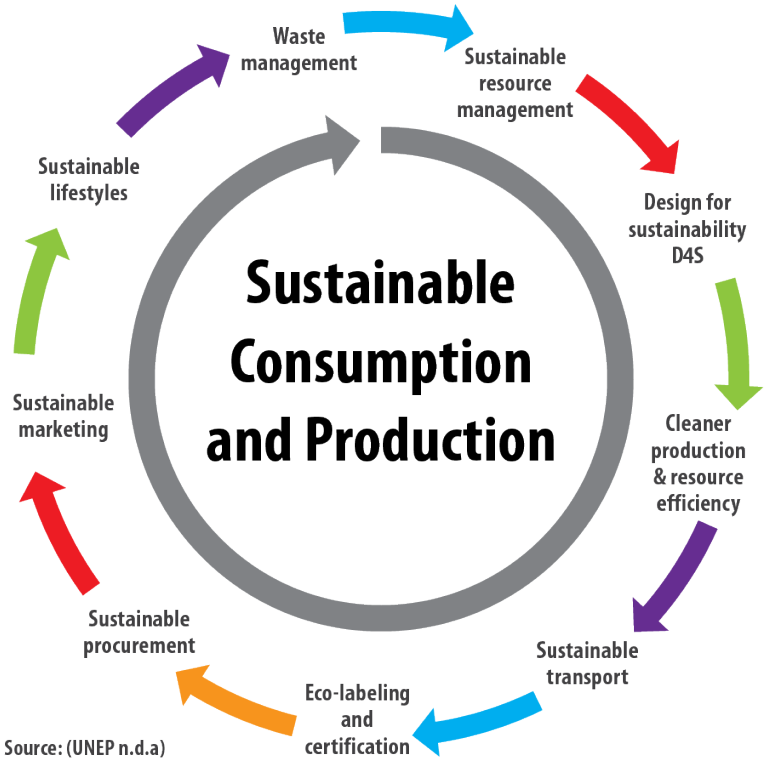

Fig. 2. Sustainable Consumption

Simple shifts in consumer behavior can yield significant benefits. For example, if people worldwide transitioned to energy-efficient lighting, global savings could amount to a substantial US$120 billion annually [3]. The textile industry ranks as the second-largest contributor to water pollution, trailing only agriculture, and many companies exploit textile workers in developing nations. By consuming textiles more consciously, opting for environmentally responsible products, and supporting local producers, individuals can contribute to environmental preservation and ethical labor practices.

In the context of rapid advancements in social reproduction, there is growing global awareness of the consequences stemming from pervasive human activities. The progress in science and technology has enabled humanity not only to extract essential resources from nature but also to fundamentally alter the natural world itself.

The primary focus of every nation is to enhance socio-economic development, particularly by elevating the standard of living for its citizens [2]. The 20th century witnessed a rapid evolution in medicine, resulting in the development of technologies that extend the lifespan of the ill and even prevent certain diseases. These advancements have led to an overall increase in human life expectancy, contributing to a continuous rise in the world's population and, consequently, individual resource demands.

According to the UN Secretary-General's 2019 report, the global population stood at 7.7 billion in 2019, projected to reach 9.7 billion by 2050. During this period, significant progress has been made, including a substantial reduction in extreme poverty rates, decreased maternal mortality rates, and a considerable increase in life expectancy. Between 1994 and 2019, the under-five mortality rate declined by 540/6. On a global scale, life expectancy has surged from 64.9 years in 1994 to 72.3 years in 2019, with a further expected increase of approximately 2 years by 2030 [1]. While these achievements are undoubtedly positive, they also pose challenges in terms of the planet's finite resources.

Recognizing the issue of limited resources in light of current circumstances, society is striving to enhance resource efficiency and optimize consumption through the development of innovative technologies related to raw material processing, recycling, and other areas.

4 Conclusions

The solution to excessive consumption lies in transitioning to a circular economy model. This shift entails moving away from the traditional "take, make, discard" approach and embracing a system where waste is not expelled from the cycle but rather reused and regenerated. In this model, resources are used more efficiently, and products are designed and manufactured with repair, reuse, or remanufacturing in mind. Such an approach has the potential to mitigate climate change and reverse the alarming loss of biodiversity. Notably, there are already positive examples of companies adopting this circular model, such as Timberland, which creates shoes from recycled tires, and DyeCoo, which has developed a waterless fabric dyeing method, reducing the need for additional chemicals.

Increasingly, people worldwide recognize the severity of the environmental crisis, perceiving it as a significant threat to their countries. This awareness has grown substantially since 2013. Consumers, being a crucial component of any production and consumption system, play a pivotal role in driving change. Consumer choices offer a means to influence the world around us in several ways, including product and service selection, disposal practices, and advocating for systemic changes in supply chains and regulations. Despite their considerable economic power within the existing model, consumers may still struggle to exert the desired level of influence.

To unlock consumers' potential for greater impact, understanding their role in driving change is essential. The demand for sustainable products is on the rise, especially among younger consumers. Surveys have indicated that 66% of consumers are willing to pay more for brands offering sustainable products. However, the actual purchase of sustainable products currently stands at only 20-30%. Selecting sustainable products often requires consumers to invest time in researching and locating these items, adjust their consumption behaviors, and potentially spend more money. Nonetheless, consumer choices can drive systemic change, even without immediate purchases. By advocating for improved infrastructure that supports sustainable purchasing, consumers can encourage wider adoption of sustainable products.

Consumers wield substantial influence in the transition to a circular economy, and barriers hindering them from adopting sustainable consumption patterns must be addressed. This can be achieved by improving access to sustainable products, making them more affordable, enhancing their consumer appeal, and employing other strategies. Food systems are a major contributor to global greenhouse gas emissions, with agriculture and livestock farming leading to energy-intensive practices, deforestation, heightened emissions, and excessive water usage. Additionally, a significant amount of plastic waste, much of it from the food industry, ends up in landfills or the environment. Agriculture has also played a role in diminishing soil biodiversity and genetic diversity in crops and livestock. Only a handful of plant species contribute significantly to global crop production, highlighting the need for greater diversity.

Addressing these challenges becomes more pressing as the planet must support an additional one billion people by 2030. Consumers can contribute by opting for locally grown, seasonal foods, reducing their consumption of animal products, and supporting food producers who employ sustainable practices. Transitioning to a plant-based diet, for instance, can significantly reduce land use. Despite some regions experiencing an increase in meat consumption, particularly in Asia, where it is projected to grow by 78% by 2050, efforts to reduce meat consumption can lead to more sustainable practices.

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