

Do You Really Need That?

Dear Young Adults in America,

If I were to ask you what is one thing you cannot live without, what would your answer be? Would you say your phone? Access to the internet? Your car? These are all things we are so accustomed to having that it is hard to imagine a world without them. We depend on these items so much that they have begun to feel like necessities. We value them just as much, if not more, than the air we breathe and the water we drink. In reality, they are luxury goods. Things that make life easier and more convenient, blurring the lines between needs and wants. But this convenience comes at a cost. In pursuit of these luxury goods, we overlook the psychological and ecological damage they cause. The misguided prioritization of our current wants are dwindling our ability to meet future needs. We get lost in the cycle of consumerism and miss the long-term consequences while focusing on the short-term rewards. Buying a new iPhone has a much higher cost than what is on the price tag.

As a society consumerism has us in a chokehold. The desire to purchase items is instilled in us from a young age. In *Consumerism*, Norton August states "...children in the United States spend over a week of their lives every year (10,700 minutes) watching television advertisements..." (August, pg.1). As a child, how many times did you ask your parents for a new toy, disregarding the ones you already owned? Holidays that should be focused on spending time with family and being appreciative of what you have are now focused on buying more. Getting gifts for others has become a primary method of showing love and affection. While this is not ideal, the main problem is not that we buy certain goods but rather the amount of goods we purchase and use is not sustainable. As seen in the graphic below, it would take 5.1 Earths to sustain worldwide American level consumption (Global Footprint Network, 2022).



Source: National Footprint and Biocapacity Accounts 2022
Additional countries available at overshootday.org/how-many-earths

This graphic represents an analysis of our ecological footprint, measuring the impact our practices have on the Earth. If our lifestyle is impossible for everyone to live, should we really be living it?

Imagine a man named Tim has just graduated from college. Upon graduation, Tim receives a \$10 million inheritance from an older relative and puts this money into a savings account with a 3% annual interest rate (\$300,000). Over the years, Tim puts this money to use and racks up his living expenses to \$500,000 a year. He decides he still has plenty of money to spend and treats himself to a yacht and a new home, totaling \$4.5 million. Unexpectedly his uninsured brother suffers a medical emergency, and Tim offers to take care of the bill, costing him another \$2 million. By the time he is 30 years old only \$2 million remains of his initial \$10 million, leaving him with only \$60,000 dollars a year in interest. Realizing his funds are dwindling, Tim decides to cut his living expenses nearly in half to \$300,000 a year. While this was a dramatic change for him, it was not enough. Eight years later Tim finds himself with a bounced check and no more money. You may be thinking that Tim was just irresponsible, and you would never make that sort of decision but in a way you already have. If you replace Tim with humanity and his inheritance with Earth's natural resources, you will find that we are headed down an eerily similar path. We tend to view Earth as an unending source of raw materials, but our planet is finite. Just like Tim's inheritance, there is only so much capital we can draw upon until it is all gone. Renewable resources take time to regenerate but we are depleting them faster than they can come back. In *Plan B (4.0)* Lester Brown states, "In 2008, the world pumped nearly 31 billion barrels of oil but discovered only 7 billion barrels, World oil reserves are now in decline, dropping every year" (Brown, pg.37). The following year, we used 40% more resources than the earth could regenerate during that time (O'Neill & Dietz, pg.26). If we continue going down this road, what will the world look like for future generations? What resources will be left for our children and their children? How much longer until our check bounces?

Now that we have discussed how overconsumption impacts our future, let's examine its effect on the present. In order to make the luxury goods we enjoy and rely on; raw materials have to be taken from the earth. Land that was previously lush and home to a number of organisms becomes an extraction site for the things we have convinced ourselves we need. According to World Wildlife Fund, "The world's forests, swamps, plains, lakes, and other habitats continue to disappear as they are harvested for human consumption" (WWF, 2020). We are destroying other organisms' homes in order to add more things to ours. It is bad enough that we deplete local resources, but we do not stop there. To meet our unlimited demand we draw upon the natural capital of developing nations, aiding in the destruction of more ecosystems and their services. When you purchase a new phone, water bottle, or even a shirt your focus is on the good itself and not what it takes to produce it. As long as we have the product we want, we turn a blind eye to the processes required to make them. This is a privilege most do not even know they have. But what about those that do not have that privilege? In an article done by Maryland Population Research Center, Dr. Klaus Hubacek states, "Wealthier counties are often able to keep pollution levels down by outsourcing their dirtier manufacturing practices to places with cheaper labor and looser environmental regulations...leaving local people to suffer the environmental and health

effects...” (Hubacek, n.d.). Those living near extraction and production sites are left with polluted air and waterways while we get new technology and products we do not actually need. Our desires become their burdens; our wants hinder their needs. The brunt of the repercussions are felt by those in developing countries, but we all share one planet. Our air is their air, our water their water. It is only a matter of time till we are faced with the consequences of our actions.

One way the negative impacts of consumerism are already manifesting is through climate change. In a Columbia Climate school article, Renee Cho asserts, “A typical American’s yearly carbon emissions are five times that of the world’s average person” (Cho, 2020). Now carbon is naturally in our atmosphere and there are ecological systems in place to handle it. As we know, plants uptake carbon dioxide and release oxygen during photosynthesis. Unfortunately, our consumptive habits are disrupting this natural process. When we clear land for extraction, we also remove the vegetation that was previously there. According to *The Story of Stuff*, “...80% of the planet’s original forests are gone” (Leonard, 2009). The solution is not as simple as planting more trees. Like any renewable resource, they take time to grow and accumulate to their previous abundance. In that time, more carbon would be emitted through our daily practices and habits. With less vegetation to absorb it, the carbon remains in our atmosphere and acts as a greenhouse gas, raising global temperatures and causing a number of ecological issues. In *Plan B (4.0)*, Brown states, “Higher temperatures diminish crop yields, melt the mountain glaciers that feed rivers, generate more-destructive storms, increase the severity of flooding, intensify drought, cause more-frequent and destructive wildfires, and alter ecosystems everywhere” (Brown, pg.59). Despite this reality we continue on like Tim, ignoring our dwindling inheritance in favor of purchasing items we have convinced ourselves are necessities.

A phone is never just a phone. It is health issues, deforestation, and a warming planet. How did we get to the point where the true cost of goods is so poorly reflected in their prices? One of the more proximate reasons, discussed earlier, is the lack of regulation on extraction, production, and disposal practices. While these may be monitored locally, many developing countries have less environmental, as well as labor, policies keeping them in check. Manufacturing companies use cheap labor to extract cheap materials and sell cheap products. This is because they know the value of money in our society and its heavily weighted influence on most of the decisions we make. It is easy to blame corporations for consumerism and its negative implications, but we play a large role in enforcing this cycle. As consumers, we gravitate toward the cheapest products without second guessing what allowed them to be such low prices. Our society encourages us to purchase unneeded goods, and we blindly obey. One recent example of this is the Stanley water bottle phenomenon. After trending on social media, the company had a 400% increase in units sold (House, 2024). People began buying them in multiple different colors and patterns, negating the point of a reusable water bottle. Judgement was placed on those with other brands, further pushing the demand of Stanleys. Something as trivial as the water bottle you owned became a symbol of status. The root cause of this butterfly effect is our misguided relationship with material goods. We seek fulfillment from stuff, leading us to believe the more we have, the better off we are not only financially, but mentally. We wrongly equate happiness with spending more money and having more items. The joy we get

from shopping is conditioned, fleeting, and untethered to true fulfillment. When it fades, we add something else to our shopping carts, repeat the cycle, and reinforce the system. While this is difficult to acknowledge, if our choices aid the system, they also have the power to change it.

Imagine two women, one named Claire and the other Sasha. They are both 26 and live in middle class America, but the similarities stop there. Claire's favorite pass time is shopping. She prides herself on staying on top of trends and never repeating outfits. Many of the items she purchases just accumulate in her apartment or get thrown away when they are no longer in style. To her 2 million Instagram followers, her life seems perfect. Little do they know, maintaining that lifestyle is not easy. When Claire is not shopping, she works 40 hours a week as an accountant and babysits on some weekends. She loves art and always wanted to pursue it but knew the salary would not sustain her way of living. With her busy work schedule, she rarely has time for friends and family and cannot remember the last time she picked up a paint brush. She is doing everything society tells her will lead to success and can afford anything she wants, but she still feels like something is missing. In contrast, Sasha lives a more minimalistic lifestyle. While she is aware of trends, she is not guided by them and only buys items she knows she will use. Before buying anything, she researches the product to ensure that it is ethically sourced and durable. Sarah works as a teacher and while the salary is not the greatest, she is doing what she loves. She might not be able to afford the newest phone or most luxury vehicle, but that is not what she values. Her hours allow her to have a weekly dinner with her family and see her friends at least once a month. As Sarah loves nature, her remaining free time is spent going on hikes or biking around her neighborhood. When she examines her life, Sarah feels truly happy.

While consumerism is deeply ingrained in American culture and society, it is not the only way of life. We do not need to rely on material goods, like Claire, to make us happy or feel fulfilled. What if we lived more like Sasha and instead of striving for luxury goods, we prioritized life's simple pleasures like spending time with loved ones and exploring passions. How much different would our lives be? In Denmark, they call this concept *hygge*. According to *Scandinavian Standard*, "Hygge is about coziness and surrounding yourself with the things that make life good, like friendship, laughter and security, as well as more concrete things like warmth, light, seasonal food and drink" (Norman, 2018). These comforts are much closer to actual necessities when compared to smartphones, internet access, or a car and are much less likely to impede the needs of others. Regardless of consumerism's negative impacts, no one is going to force you to reign in and reexamine your desires. Left to its own devices, society thinks much more like Claire and searches for fulfillment through material goods, forgoing true happiness in the process. It is our responsibility to recognize our harmful spending habits and the psychology behind them. It is our responsibility to consider future generations and ensure they have access to the resources they need. It is our responsibility to use our buying power for good. This is not to say that this change is easy. It is challenging to alter your mindset and lifestyle, but a critical effort well worth the benefits.

With hope,

Alyssa Heron (fellow young adult in America)

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