

Christmas is right around the corner. The shops are filled with Christmas products: Christmas sweatshirts, Christmas presents, a Christmas tree of course, wrapping paper, Christmas lights, black Friday deals, more presents for your loved ones... the list goes on. Capitalism makes all of it possible. If you need something, you can buy it right away. Capitalist societies have formed a standard way of living: mass consumption.

Consumption can be defined as the use of goods and services for the direct satisfaction of needs by private households or public households.¹ Mass- Consumption societies can be seen as those, where not just a few individuals or the upper class, but most families enjoy the benefits of increased productivity, constantly expanding their range of consumer goods.² Does that sound familiar? Well, the USA and Europe make up the two largest consumer markets in the world. Consuming without rethinking its origins, its production chain, as well as throwing away those goods when defects show up instead of repairing them.

Even more interesting seems the growing trend of selling “sustainable products” as an alternative to mass consumption. Sustainable marketing for products can be found nearly everywhere in the global north. It all started with groceries being marketed as “good for the environment”: Vegetables that grew local and organically for example got much more attractive for the consumer. The fashion industry followed that trend of promoting sustainability by selling clothes that are made from sustainable fabric or produced differently than their opponents do. It does not end here: Even the car industry promotes electric cars as a more sustainable option although it is already confirmed that the production of electric car batteries is bad for the environment too.

Whether those products are actually sustainable or not is another question, but it is much more important to what extent this whole trend towards sustainability truly brings real change in our consumption behavior and ultimately also to our economy and climate change.

Critics of “sustainable consumption” already mentioned that consuming means to use it up or to destroy it, which is the opposite of sustainability.³ Even if all products that claim to make an impact on climate change and consumption behavior, many people are hardly able to follow the trend of sustainable consumption, be it due to poverty, social environments, or other reasons. Fast fashion clothing brands like “*Shein*” for example are much more affordable for people with low income than organic but expensive products.

An actual problem can be seen in the economic and financial benefits that companies gain of this trend: Consumers believe any symbol on products claiming to be “environment friendly”, no matter how much truth there is behind it. This whole phenomenon is called “greenwashing”.⁴ One-way companies do Greenwashing is by having a key business that is polluting just by itself, for example cruise ship companies. Another great example for greenwashing is the clothing line “*Primark*” and their clothing line called “*Primark cares*”, which are clothes they sell made from sustainable wool. Still, Primark factory workers suffer from inhumane working conditions no matter how sustainable the wool used for it is.⁵

Does that mean that sustainable consume is all a lie and we can just continue to live our lives? Of course not. Rather than keeping the focus on environment-friendly products only, we have

¹ <https://www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/lexika/lexikon-der-wirtschaft/19828/konsum/>

² Matsuyama, The Rise of Mass Consumption Societies (2000).

³ Gordon, Carrigan, and Hastings, A framework for sustainable marketing pp. 143-163 (2011).

⁴ <https://academic-eb-com.ezproxy.mdx.ac.uk/levels/collegiate/article/greenwashing/607195>

⁵ McDougall, The hidden face of primark fashion, in: The Observer, pp.22-23 (2008); <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1850342442?pq-origsite=primo>

to shift our attention to our general relationship with consuming and supporting companies by buying their products. Even more important, we must stop blaming consumers only and start taking the producers and policy makers into accountability. Because even though today's worldwide economical connections and supply chains make it nearly impossible for us to clearly understand its complexity, the simple truth is that these consumption patterns cannot continue at their current rate.⁶ The mass consumption behavior of the Global North is generally only possible because in the course of globalization many production sites have been relocated to countries in the Global South in order to save costs in production and thus selling more products for less money. While doing so, companies take advantage in exploitation of resources, cheap labor, and the economic dependence of these countries integrated through colonialism and imperialism. This leads us to the conclusion that Western consumerism would not be possible without exploitation of political and economic instability of the Global South. Because there is no obvious connection of this problem to the consumer itself, it is still questionable if our consumerism will change in the future.

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⁶ Lim, W. Inside the sustainable consumption theoretical toolbox: critical concepts for sustainability, consumption, and marketing, in: Journal of Business Research Vol. 78 (2017).