

# SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION:

## The Decline of Hyper Consumerism

BY RAQUEL SIQUEIRA, DIVA MARIA TAMMARO DE OLIVEIRA AND CHRIS SIQUEIRA

Recherche/FireflyMillwardBrown ▪ São Paulo, Brazil ▪ raquel.siqueira@fireflymb.com

**W**orldwide awareness of the negative impact of the current consumption model — hyper consumerism — is increasing, especially in relation to social inequality and environmental damage. Consumers, now more critical and engaged, are becoming more interested in conscious consumption that balances personal satisfaction and sustainability, valuing ecologically correct, socially just and economically viable alternatives.

Initiatives and actions, both at the individual and the institutional levels, encourage recycling and reusing, which represent a simpler, more authentic lifestyle, with less accumulated “stuff” and more awareness of what you have and what you buy. At the same time, there is increasing appreciation of the idea

of thrift stores, alternative commerce, handmade items and “doing it yourself,” especially among younger targets.

### Understanding the Trend

The international media has given great emphasis to issues associated with sustainability, ecology, the environment, consumerism, anti-consumerism and social responsibility. Other strong trends in sustainability include a general appreciation of minimalism — where “less is more” — and conscious food habits, whether through choosing organic products or expecting and demanding fair trade practices.

To what extent has society in developing countries, such as Brazil, incorporated such politically correct attitudes? How do sustainability and con-

sumption relate to each other in real-life practice?

A greater emphasis on such politically correct attitudes is also the case in developing countries such as Brazil. For instance, in *Veja* magazine, Brazil’s leading weekly news publication, the theme of sustainability was featured with considerable emphasis in the end-of-the-year specials for both 2009 and 2010. (A 2009 article covered “10 Ideas and Postures for a New World,” with concrete examples, mostly in the corporate sector for consumer goods, and in 2010, the magazine featured a special section on the topic.)

### The Perceptions of Consumption

While this may seem like a modern trend, discussion regarding sustainability and consumption has been around for at least 40 years. The watershed moment of international recognition for these themes was during the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden, in June 1972.

While the focus in the 1970s was on industry’s polluting effects, today we see increasing emphasis on the role of consumption on environmental damage.



1972

## WHAT'S CHANGED?

**CONSUMPTION:** central aspect of the discussion



DEC. 2009

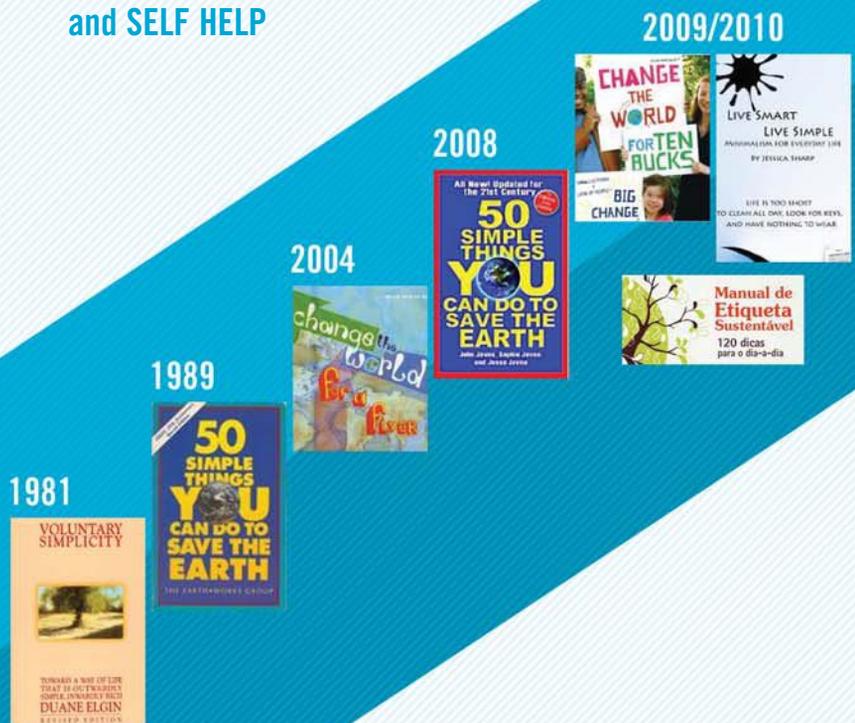


DEC. 2010

What seems to have changed since then, though, is the perception of consumption, which the mass media now portray as the big villain, the cause of the environment's disastrous situation. While the focus in the 1970s was on industry's polluting effects, today we see increasing emphasis on the role of consumption on environmental damage.

In the book *Eco-Standards, Product Labeling and Green Consumerism*, Magnus Bostrom and Mikael Klinton point out that the mentality today is that of a "risk society," in which common people are bombarded by news that generate fear of everything — food contamination, deforestation, climate change, genetically modified products, etc. The authors call attention to people's cynicism and lack of faith in institutions and authorities. This is further supported by the observation that many people are compelled to take individual action or engage in environmental campaigns and conscious consumption, and they are often willing to pay more for "sustainable" products.

## INDIVIDUAL ACTIONS and SELF HELP



**Looking for Answers...**

To address these questions, we made deliberate choices in our recent study in terms of the consumer sample and theme while planning our data collection and establishing the project’s scope.

We focused on a certain segment of consumers — cultured and conscious, more critical and well informed (i.e., trendsetting consumers) for the primary data. These consumers have both the power to influence mainstream consumers and the ability to tackle the complexity of this debate. We also chose to focus on the themes of consumerism versus anti-consumerism (without completely ignoring the considerable growth of the luxury market) and, on the other extreme, recent access by Brazil’s lower social classes to a wide variety of consumer goods, which has propelled unprecedented development of the low-income segment.

This work utilized a “bricolage” methodology, or triangulation of qualitative techniques. Our collection of data included:

- In-depth interviews with opinion makers and experts (six interviews — two social scientists, one corporate executive, one ecologist, one non-governmental organization director and one magazine writer who specialized in ecology and conscious consumption)
- Online bulletin board and ethnographic approach
- A total of 50 consumers of high education level and different professional specializations
- Men and women aged 23-62 years
- Most resided in different regions of Brazil and some abroad (U.S. and Europe), to include a more international perception of the theme.
- Extensive collection of secondary data, including desk research, bibliographic research and reviews of Brazilian and international media (newspapers, magazines, web)

**Sustainability in Brazil**

In this study, the consumer data we collected among Brazil’s trendsetters is aligned with international sentiments and can serve as a barometer for greater insights about sustainability in a modern society.

First and foremost, where sustainability is concerned, there seems to be general distrust of institutions, companies and the government. Moreover, Brazilians are expressing cynicism towards “advertising” and “marketing” in the broader sense, where both are regarded as manipulative tactics used by companies and corporations to shape public opinion.

There is also a sense of fragility when it comes to personal relationships and “what really matters.” This perception appears as a constant background to the central discussion and seems to characterize an authentic crisis of values. This attitudinal pattern manifests as a tendency to oscillate between the rationalism that this intellectual condition allows and the desires and needs of people in a consumer society.

This conflict was clearly expressed by our respondents, who tended to over-emphasize the generic concept of “sustainability,” while demonizing consumption and blaming themselves for exaggerated consumerism. Generalizations were frequent, as there was confusion between subjects and concepts. Broad themes — such as consumption,

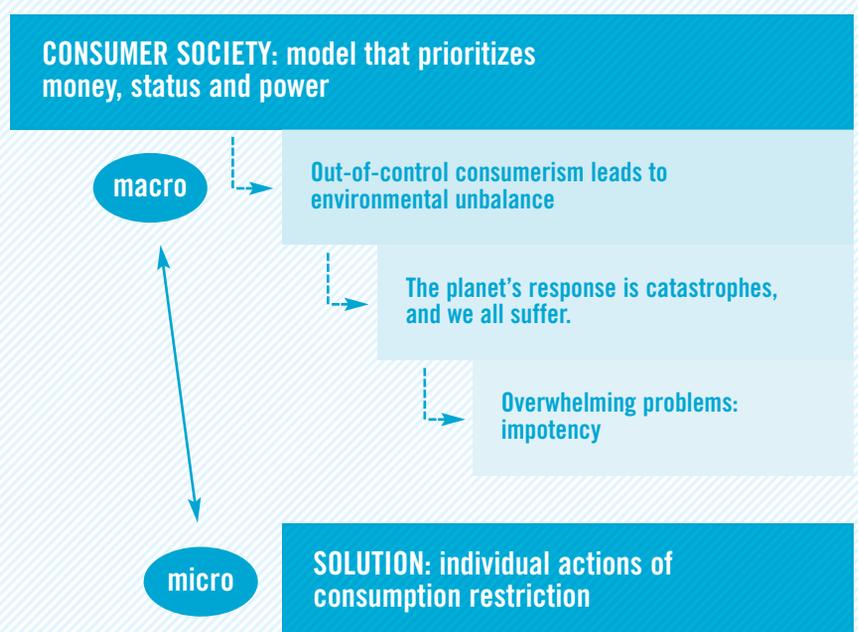
sustainability, ecology, “doing good,” social justice, responsibility, consciousness, health, well-being, global warming and spirituality — were virtually interchangeable and part of the same overall discourse.

The following rationale seemed to be attached to these ideas, repeated by many respondents, with little variation:

1. Exaggerated consumption or out-of-control consumerism leads to environmental unbalance.
2. A model that emphasizes consumption, money, status and the idea that “you are what you have” or “you are what you consume” is causing the planet to suffer, and all of us (including our children) will pay the price for this.
3. The planet’s answer will be further destruction, environmental catastrophes, floods, etc. The problems are overwhelming, and everyone feels helpless in the face of the current situation.

It is important to realize that there is a constant in this line of thought — i.e., an established cause-consequence relationship between consumerism and the Earth’s environmental problems in general.

**FROM CONSUMPTION TO DISASTER**



At the same time, the respondents attributed great importance to personal responsibility. All respondents tended to believe that there is a light at the end of the tunnel, and this light resides in individual action and consciousness (i.e., each person doing his or her part). They understood that “their part” meant small actions, such as recycling garbage, buying less, eating organic food, etc. In this context, companies and institutions invariably appeared as negative agents, and public or corporate campaigns promoting sustainability or social responsibility were only very rarely mentioned spontaneously.

When pondering potential solutions, respondents tended to become philosophical and suggested a need to recover “true human values” and “faith” in people and spirituality. Some also suggested that strict laws, regulations and standards must be established, with severe punishment to those (people or institutions) who break the rules.

Product consumption, however, was not all about “guilt.” When thinking about consumption, our respondents admitted that it is necessary to consume (there is a basic/actual need for it) and that what is consumed may satisfy pleasurable desires and dreams. In practice, the respondents tried to combine both ideas, looking for the pleasure and joy in the consumption of necessary/“compulsory” goods.

*“The good side of consumption is being able to satisfy a need, to feel the satisfaction of owning something that will last.”*

*“It’s about being able to satisfy your desires, to pleasure the soul...”*

Product consumption, for them, was something unavoidable. Not only a way to express themselves, consumption also represented power towards others and towards themselves. Additionally, our respondents highlighted the satisfaction contained in consuming — the simple pleasure in the act itself and the ability to buy and experience things. The social/group side of consumption was also important because consumption was seen as an instrument for social insertion: identification with the larger group and with what is “in” (fashion). To consume also appeared as an

incentive, a *motivation* to work/earn money/produce.

The negative side of consumption was, for respondents, clearly centered around excess — loss of control — which generates waste, debt, anxiety and frustration at having no time to enjoy what was bought/acquired.

*“Too tired and without time for so much music, so many movies, so much TV, so much food...”*

Also considered negative was the idea of mandatory, compulsory or imposed consumption (whether for an actual need or from media pressure), which they believed “pushes” consumption by characterizing it as a way to position oneself in a group. Our respondents pondered that consumption exposes injustice and social and financial differences, as it excludes those who are unable to consume. The “illusory” face of consumption appeared in this context: consuming to be happy, yet being unable to find happiness in it.

During the study, respondents were asked to associate a set of pictures with the project’s major themes of myself, the future, consumption, consumerism and sustainability. Something that stands out in respondents’ images sent was the widespread presence of brands, logos and marketing icons. Importantly, there were no references to companies, brands or products in the associations with a *positive* scenario.

On the contrary, these images established the tone of the respondents’ *negative* projections. Based on this exercise, if the question “Which side are the brands on?” is considered, it is clear that they are in the negative side of the story, despite all marketing investments made by companies attempting to associate themselves with the positive concept of sustainability.

### What Can Brands Do?

One of the basic assumptions is that sustainability should not be treated as a

## CONSUMPTION: pros and cons

PROS	CONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rational side: needs</li> <li>• Highly informed by emotional needs: pleasure</li> <li>• Expression, inclusion, identification, motivation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rational side prevails</li> <li>• Excess: loss of control, anxious consumption</li> <li>• Waste, debt, frustration, guilt</li> </ul>

**EIGHTH CAPITAL SIN: consuming is good, nice, tempting... but it is becoming condemnable**

possible way for brands and companies to improve their standing with consumers. It is, in fact, the *only* way. It is not an option. It is not a niche. It is not a trend. It is reality. Ethical and green principles must become a part of a brand's baseline and a part of its DNA.

The issue is not whether or not to be sustainable, but how to integrate the concept into the company's mission and procedures, and how to communicate it to consumers in an effective way.

How to make the company sustainable in its essence is the hardest part and involves issues outside of the scope of this study. To go beyond "greenwash" and empty discourses of sustainability is a complex task that must involve the corporation as a whole. This is an in-depth paradigm shift, something structural that takes time and demands the combined efforts of all of the company's departments.

Moreover, it is not possible to trace (at this point and based on this study alone) specific directives or norms of how companies should communicate sustainability. It is possible, however, to build an understanding of how consumers relate to the theme and to then raise possibilities for company and brand actions within this scenario.

This research indicates there is considerable burnout when sustainability is concerned. Consumers feel paralyzed and resentful of the preaching tone and "moral lessons" surrounding the theme, resulting in a somewhat "empty" discussion.

It is not uncommon for communication campaigns dealing with sustainability to take on a dramatic or accusing tone. Although the impact of this approach is undeniable, its effectiveness must be questioned. To position oneself on the side of the problem, surround-

ing itself with negativity, is not an effective way to emotionally connect with consumers.

### One Possible Approach

According to a paper written by Anthony Kleanthous and Jules Peck for the NGO World Wildlife Fund ("Let Them Eat Cake," 2006), one of the ways to deal with the issue is to increase the understanding of the interaction between what they call Brandscape, Brainscape and Behavior.

- **Brandscape** can be understood as the wider scenario of the brands and everything associated with them (positioning, communications, logos, actions). It is, in fact, what we can call "the market." It is like a map of brands and services, including everything involved in this process: sales, pricing, production, marketing, competition, promotional actions, etc.

WE REALIZE THAT IT'S  
"LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION."  
SO WHICH LOCATION DO YOU PREFER?

- (A) OUR CONVENIENT DOWNTOWN CHICAGO FACILITY
- (B) OUR ORIGINAL OAK PARK FACILITY
- (C) OUR BRAND NEW OAK BROOK FACILITY

focusscope, inc. | CHICAGO | OAK PARK | OAK BROOK

WWW.FOCUSCOPE.COM 708.386.5086

focusSCOPE

Come see for yourself why  
Impulse Survey consistently rates  
Focusscope as having some of the  
world's best research facilities.

PROUD MEMBER OF

FIRST CHOICE  
FACILITIES

## What is the survival period now, for instance, of large vehicles with poor gas mileage (such as SUVs), frequent plane trips, long showers and even flushing too often?

- **Brainscape** is the mindset of the people — attitudes, values and beliefs that permeate consumers’ choices and lifestyles. The Brainscape affects and is affected by the Brandscape: individuals’ demands lead to innovation, which leads to new modes of consumption, new products and new possibilities.
- **Behavior** is what people actually do and how they effectively act in the world. This is influenced by the relationship between Brandscape and Brainscape — that is, between the macro scenario of the brands/services and the beliefs, values and attitudes of individuals and of society as a whole.

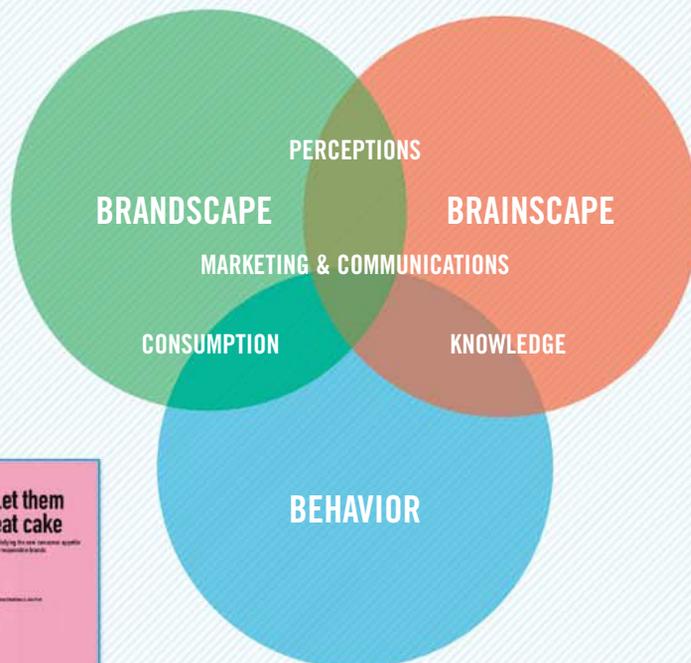
This dynamic became clear in the interviews and throughout the fieldwork conducted for this study. There is a macro scenario with great movement promoted by governments, non-governmental organizations, corporations and their brands in order to impose the discourse of sustainability. At the same time, individual movements point to the same direction: respondents were highly involved with the theme and the discussion (which is made clear by the recurrence of the “anti-consumerism” discourse), which demonstrates the relevance and urgency of this topic in their lives today.

With this, we see extremely fertile ground for change. A number of

factors indicate that the combination between Brainscape (the general attitude of the individuals) and Brandscape (the macro scenario of the brands) can effectively lead to actual behavioral change.

Behavioral change is not yet widespread (not all consumers pay more for green products; not all recycle; and not all are actually mobilized by the theme). There is, however, a very important transformation in terms of attitude: What used to be considered acceptable is condemned today. What is the survival period now, for instance, of large vehicles with poor gas mileage (such as SUVs), frequent plane trips, long showers and even flushing too often? (There is even an award-winning campaign in Brazil for people to start “peeing in the shower,” aired by a number of channels, including some geared at children, such as Cartoon Network!) It would be naive to assume that people will continue to consume in the same way that they do today.

### CHANGES ARE UNAVOIDABLE



### The Changing Consumer Mindset

It is important to keep in mind that mindset and attitude may not reflect people’s behavior in the short term, but these latent wishes and desires emerge when the right opportunities arise. This mindset speaks to how people want to feel, how they want to perceive themselves and how they want other people to perceive them. It is about self-image and projected image. Buying “politically correct,” ethical, green or sustainable products is a way to feel good about yourself and project a more positive image of yourself to the world.

Above all else, the current moment is one of increased consciousness. People are starting to realize that they are part of the larger process. They are beginning to pay attention to the amount of trash they produce, how much they consume, how much they spend and how much they waste. They are starting to effectively feel as part of the entire “negative” cycle of consumption.

And this is the main point: consumption is being perceived as the villain of this entire scenario. Marketing and “propaganda” are blamed for “out-of-control consumption” (to use two expressions that reoccurred among our respondents), for excess, for the search for extreme satisfaction through consumption, for the accumulation of unnecessary goods. To consume is almost a capital sin: something that is nice, seductive and hard to resist, but that does not lead to eternal bliss, much less to salvation.

Therefore, it is crucial to rethink the role of consumption in people’s lives. In fact, many people are already doing this — consuming less, recycling in different levels and choosing alternative modes of consumption. The questions remain: how can brands position themselves on the “good” side, and how can they propagate the culture of conscious (and toned-down) consumption without shooting themselves in the foot?

We see great movement on brands’ part to connect with such consumer mood, albeit unsuccessfully so far. One of the possible mistakes concerns focus. Most of the communication studied in this project dealt with major situations: they said a lot about the need to act in emergency situations, the environment (e.g., global warming, reforestation, development of renewable energy), yet ended up too distant from people’s actual lives. By addressing these major issues, they sounded repetitive (“*Sounds like they all say the same thing,*” respondents said) and suggested a rather empty rhetoric. They lost relevance and did not bring about effective change that either affected consumers’ lives or added brand value.

Another problem is the tonality that is typically employed. It is common for publications and major campaigns (by the government, companies and brands) to emphasize restriction and guilt. Those advocating light water use or water rationing, for instance, almost always adopt a “preaching” stance. Editorials and articles are almost always framed as a “wake up call,” something like: “We need to do something! Wake up and quit your alienated life!”

There is no doubt that this approach generates attention. But it also creates frustration and causes people to feel

bad about themselves and the future. The enormity of the problems becomes paralyzing. Our respondents were often overwhelmed by the task at hand and disappointed by the actual opportunities for change.

In addition, this type of “police” approach fails to establish an emotional connection with consumers. On the contrary, it leads to a connection based on rationality, duty and obligation — all of which have little to do with the universe of desire, fantasy and experimentation promoted by consumption.

With this scenario in mind, companies and brands that are able to differentiate themselves and surpass these barriers will stand out. They will be those who are able to go beyond the dramatic, preachy tone, helping consumers cope with this new world order and making them feel connected, conscious and, especially, free of guilt.

From a constructive perspective, therefore, companies and brands should:

- Help consumers feel better about themselves and their attitudes.

- Change the tone: no guilt, no preaching, no restrictions. They should position themselves as an agent of change for the better.
- Propose friendly solutions that make people’s lives simpler, as opposed to more complicated.
- Make consumers feel that they are gaining something, as opposed to performing more tasks (paying more for local products, washing packaging for recycling, carrying batteries in their purse for the recycling center, carrying trash in the car trunk, looking for recycling facilities, etc.).
- Make people’s lives easier by creating mechanisms that make “living ethically” something possible and valued. One example is the action of organizations such as the Salvation Army, which, through a massive campaign, was able to change the perceptions of donations in Brazil by effectively enabling the reuse of consumer goods.
- Help people live in a more sustainable manner, by offering information as well as services and possibilities to act.

## BRANDS CAN...

Position themselves as positive agents of change  
Change the tone – no guilt, preaching, restrictions

Help consumers feel better about their attitudes

Provide friendly solutions that make life easier

Make it possible to live in an ethical way: offer products and services that have this basic mission incorporated into its positioning, its DNA

Total transparency: provide information to consumers

## Final Thoughts

In short, it seems to be more important to “walk the walk” than to “talk the talk.” Companies/brands must communicate concrete results, before they publicize their noble intentions. They must maintain sustainability in their DNA and in the entire product mix: in the packaging, the ingredients, the way communication is produced and the message itself.

With hyper consumerism at a decline, it is vital to assume that sustainability should be part of the business and not its entire image. It is not philanthropy and should exist in both the macro and micro spheres. Most importantly, sustainability should truly bring relevance to the business in a way that makes sense to consumers. 