

# Addicted to consumerism

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Two weeks before Christmas 2007, the Swedish Employers Association launched an advertising campaign to persuade people of the benefits of consumption. The campaign, a response to critics of consumerism, showed a housewife reducing the amount of holiday shopping she did, thus leading to the dismissal of a poor worker on the other side of the world.

The reaction was intense.

In a feature article, the Swedish newspaper Dagens Nyheter reminded readers of the devastating consequences of overconsumption on the environment and on developing countries, while the director of the campaign responded that it is through consumption that companies will be able to develop environmental protection practices. At the same time, Taiwan's government directly subsidized consumption by distributing vouchers with a value of 3,600 Taiwanese dollars (about \$110 U.S.) to 23 million citizens, while the president of the country himself set an example by shopping in front of the television cameras.

"Every week, a French person has a choice of 1,250 new books, 10 new perfumes and 13 new movies, whilst he consumes, on average, a box of medicine and 1 1/2 kilos of meat," said Elisabeth Laville, a French economist and author and the director of the Observatory of Responsible Consumption. "Two-thirds of consumers, in fact, have bought up to 10 items of clothing that they have never worn."

Laville said that since 1960, personal annual consumption has tripled.

"Our addiction to consumption is, without a doubt, the biggest taboo of our modern societies," she said. "We keep consuming more, convinced that consumption is the key to our individual happiness."

However, research has shown that materialism doesn't translate to happiness; "The opposite happens," Laville said.

"People who place more value on consuming are almost always less happy. Their level of self-esteem is significantly lower. So is the quality of their relationships. They have a higher risk of depression, antisocial behavior, substance use and psychological disorders. ... Ultimately, they dedicate less time to the actual factors of happiness: friends, family and a fulfilling job.

Indeed, a lifestyle focused on materialistic values maintains and even exacerbates our feelings of insecurity, according to Laville.

"As soon as we start to consume beyond meeting our basic needs, the goal of consumption is to climb the social ladder," she said. "We consume to act like everyone else, to attain the same level our neighbors have, to resemble the role model suggested to us by advertising. However, this endless race for material happiness intensifies the feeling of frustration, because there will always be someone who has more goods than us."



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ELISABETH LAVILLE,  
DIRECTOR OF THE OBSERVATORY OF RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION



PHOTO COURTESY OF FLIKR

*Many people around the world have discovered that material goods don't bring them happiness, and they're finding satisfaction in a life lived far from the pressures of consumption*

## A vicious cycle

Dimitris Begioglou, a Greek clinical psychologist specializing in drama therapy, said overconsumption is an addiction that is far from harmless.

"Like any other addiction, it distorts simple pleasures into the illusion of omnipotence, and the person will finally become a prisoner of his habits," Begioglou said.

"The addiction to overconsumption has the same magnitude as that experienced by a drug user, a gambler or an alcoholic. A person, before the impulsive act of consumption, feels a tremendous euphoria, which, once the act is completed, will give place to relaxation and, later, to guilt and depression, until we start to seek euphoria through consumption again. This is the vicious circle of addiction."

In an interview with Shedia, Street Roots' sister paper in Greece, Maria Petropoulou described her personal experience with addiction to consumption.

"I constantly wanted to buy things, mostly clothes and shoes," she said. "This intensified when I was 16 to 17 years old. ... At the instant of the purchase, I felt completeness, joy, euphoria. Once it was completed, there was guilt, remorse and melancholy."

These negative feelings would intensify at first, she said, but they'd fade after a few days, "and the need to buy would start again."

## Voluntary simplicity

A growing number of people around the world are challenging the values of consumerism and, through limiting consumption and embracing simplicity, are seeking a better life that relies more on human relationships and essential contact with nature.

One of them is the Canadian doctor and author Serge Mongeau, the co-founder of the Québec Network for Voluntary Simplicity. Mongeau is considered the father of this movement in Canada.

"There were two main influences for me," he said. "My mother, whose youth was marked by the economic crisis of the '30s, and scouting, which taught me to make more out of less."

"It was only later that I theorized my way of life. We do not experience any feeling of deprivation in voluntary simplicity. We do not choose to have less money but to need less money," said Mongeau, who lives in Montreal. "It is not the possession of goods that gives meaning to life. When you review your life, you will not say: 'Oh, I used to have the best lawn mower in the neighborhood!'"

"We are isolated when we consume," he said, "which encourages the system to sell a growing number of products at the expense of the notion of collegiality. However, a system which relies on endless consumption



The first iPhone X customer shows his new device, which he bought Nov. 3 from the Apple Store in Beijing.

PHOTO BY REUTERS/DAMIR SAGOLJ

leads with mathematical precision to the destruction of the environment – our own."

Mongeau said he has a television only to watch movies he borrows, and he doesn't have a car, instead traveling by bus or bike.

"Many believe that they will find themselves in a position of inferiority if they ask for something from someone else," he said. "It is, however, the way that human contacts are built. With my partner, if we need clothes, we buy them from the junk store around the corner, and we have also reduced our meat consumption. We only buy organic products from local producers and cultivate six vegetable gardens: one at the back of our yard, one in our neighbor's yard and four more in the area."

Alexandros Prelourentzos, a Ph.D. student in the Department of Home Economics and Ecology at Harokopio University, Athens, tries to structure his daily life in accordance with the imperatives of voluntary simplicity and in opposition to consumerism.

Prelourentzos takes public transportation, uses the same cellphone he's had for a decade, swaps clothes with friends and eats a sustainable diet.

"I do not need any money in my daily life to do things that make me happy," he said. "You must attain a certain level of self-realization to be able to determine within you what you really need. For me, after covering my basic livelihood needs, it is my

intellectual and emotional needs that count: to read a book, to stroll along the seaside, to play basketball with my friends, to cook meals together."

## Educating young consumers

Even if the movement of voluntary frugality concerns only individual "anti-consumers," there is no lack of (limited) political initiatives that accompany the fight against consumerism. In 2014, the city of Grenoble, France, became the first European urban center to remove advertising billboards from its territory, and in 2016, the French National Assembly banned advertising within children's programs shown on state television. In 2000, Sweden banned advertising in children's programming on both public and private channels.

The example of the French prefecture of Nord-Pas-de Calais is also impressive. In 1988, it created a number of "Consumer Schools," which have since been extended to 50 municipalities. These schools offer special education programs for middle school and high school students to encourage measured, responsible and ethical consumption.

Even if such actions seem like a distant dream, Greece's economic crisis offers some lessons.

During the crisis, purchases by Athens

residents decreased by about one-third, according to a study by the National Centre for Social Research (EKKE).

"The respondents from the middle- and upper-middle classes adopted with more intensity the rhetoric of moral devaluation of consumerism, while those of the lower classes adopted the stance of frugality," said Nicos Souliotis, a researcher from EKKE.

The attitude change wasn't voluntary, Souliotis noted; it was based on "an important change in their material conditions ... and hardly leads to the creation of new consumption models."

However, it's worth noting that the reduction in spending didn't have a substantial impact on consumers' happiness either.

"Since social layers, as whole, have lost income and seen their consumption activities restricted, people have the reassuring feeling that their relative position has not changed," Souliotis said. "The result is that dissatisfaction is limited. It is significant that, in 2013, three years after the start of the crisis, the Average Life Satisfaction Index had not significantly changed compared to a year of prosperity like 2003, even in regard to the lower layers."

*Courtesy of Street Roots' sister paper Shedia in Athens, Greece / INSP.ngo Translated from Greek by Antigone Debbaut.*