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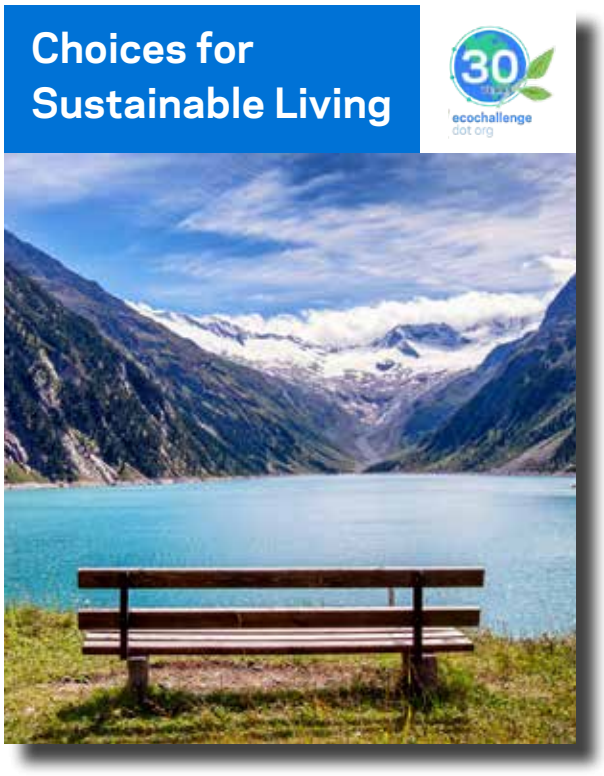
choices for sustainable living: consumption

DISCUSSION ACTIVITY



ABOUT THIS DISCUSSION ACTIVITY

This activity is inspired by the upcoming 30th-anniversary edition of our popular discussion book, ***Choices for Sustainable Living***, which encourages us to think critically about sustainability through interconnectedness and systems thinking. During this holiday season, we invite you to join others in this meaningful discussion to pause, reflect on our choices, and explore how they impact our well-being, our communities, and the planet.

Together, we'll reconnect with what truly matters—meaningful connections, thoughtful giving, and shared values—and explore how to celebrate the holidays with purpose and sustainability in mind.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

To learn more about our revised *Choices for Sustainable Living*, get in touch. For details on other programs including the upcoming Earth Month Ecochallenge, visit Ecochallenge.org or contact us!

Reach out with questions:
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PEOPLE DIDN'T USED TO BE 'CONSUMERS.' WHAT HAPPENED?

By Kate Yoder for Grist, 2020

Thousands of years from now, an anthropologist might attempt to understand American culture by watching videos from Black Friday. In a typical scene, people known as "bargain hunters" gather outside Best Buy in freezing temperatures after their Thanksgiving meal to ensure they'll be at the front of the line to snag a new TV the next morning. In the seconds after the doors open, a stampede sometimes pushes and shoves its way toward the season's must-have gadgets and half-off laptops — occasionally resulting in injuries or even death.

This year's holiday shopping weekend was a bit different, given the COVID-19 pandemic, but Americans remained undaunted in their ability to buy stuff. They spent a record-breaking $9 billion on Black Friday, a 21 percent increase over last year. Last week, Cyber Monday became the biggest online shopping day in U.S. history, with $10.8 billion in purchases.

Reading the news, you might notice that Americans aren't just "people" — they're consumers, customers, and shoppers. These words seem to distill a person into a one-dimensional being whose central function is to purchase things. The English language is full of subtle reminders to shop til you drop, much of it born in the field of economics.

Underlying this vocabulary is a "fundamental story" that people are innately selfish, and that economic growth is good, no matter if it makes people better off or damages the environment, said Arran Stibbe, a professor of ecological linguistics at the University of Gloucestershire in the United Kingdom. The language of economics goads us into being more selfish than we would be otherwise, research shows. It encourages consumerism and everything it entails — the needless extraction of resources, carbon emissions from production and shipping, and a pile of waste that collects when people move on to new things. A study from 2015 found that household consumption is responsible for about 60 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions, and between 50 and 80 percent of all land, material, and water use.

Simply reading the word consumer prompts people to act more selfishly. One study presented participants with a hypothetical scenario where they had to share a well with four other people during a water shortage. The researchers found that people who were labeled as "consumers" rather than "individuals" were less trusting of others and less likely to work together with others to deal with the crisis. Similarly, another study found that participating in a "Consumer Reaction Study" triggered a materialistic mindset that left people more preoccupied with wealth and status than those who took a "Citizen Reaction Study."

"Change one word and you can subtly but deeply change attitudes and behaviour," writes Kate Raworth in Doughnut Economics, a 2017 book that sought to develop a more sustainable model for economics.

One experiment, for instance, asked corporate executives to solve riddles that contained words like "profit," "costs," and "growth." After the exercise, the executives had less empathy for their colleagues and worried that expressing concern for others would be seen as unprofessional.

The vast sum of money spent on holiday shopping so far this year left some unimpressed — sales were supposed to be even higher. So media coverage was filled with negative words. A Washington Post headline said that last weekend's sales were "disappoint[ing]," and a sign that the economic recovery from the pandemic was "stumbling." The article noted that high unemployment and rising coronavirus cases had put a "damper on consumer spending during the

all-important shopping period" after Thanksgiving, framing the situation as if the main problem wasn't the deadly pandemic or unemployed people, but the fact that those things impeded shopping. The long-term environmental impact of Black Friday and Cyber Monday was entirely ignored.

That's not to single out the Washington Post; this framing is a norm, a default setting that's resistant to change. "This story is so entrenched and embedded in our culture," Stibbe said. "The media don't realize that they are constantly spreading this damaging story."

The roots of consumer offer the first hints of trouble. It traces back to the Latin consumere, meaning to destroy, devour, waste, or squander. From there, it's only a slight leap to today's definition: "a person who uses up a commodity; a purchaser of goods or services," according to the Oxford English Dictionary.

In 2013, the British writer Owen Hatherley wrote that English had become a "peculiarly capitalist" language. That same year, researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, used Google Ngram — a tool that catalogues words and phrases in millions of books — to see how the language had changed over time. They found that the last two centuries had brought a remarkable increase in the use of words related to acquisition, like get, self, and choose. Meanwhile, people were using community-focused words like give less often.

This reflects a long history of regarding humans as homo economicus, rational beings in pursuit of their own selfish needs. Nineteenth-century thinkers like John Stuart Mill and William Stanley Jevons sought to simplify the complex behavior of people into what one critic called the "dollar-hunting animal."

The term consumer grew in popularity over the 20th century, pushing aside the once-common citizen. Some of the word's biggest critics have been, at least historically, the disparagers of capitalism: socialists. "It is clear why 'consumer' as a description is so popular," wrote Raymond Williams, a Welsh socialist, in the 1961 book The Long Revolution. "[A] considerable and increasing part of our economic activity goes to ensuring that we consume what industry finds it convenient for us to produce. As this tendency strengthens, it becomes increasingly obvious that society is not controlling its economic life, but is in part being controlled by it."

There are plenty of alternatives to consumer. The classic, of course, is the generic people. Citizen sounds promising, as it's basically somebody who lives in a city and long carried a unifying sense of "we're all in this together," though the common legal use excludes non-citizens. Human has a sci-fi ring to it, seeming to imply that aliens might be out there somewhere.

Raworth writes that using words and phrases like neighbors, community members, and global citizens will be "incredibly precious for securing a safe and just economic future." Stibbe, the ecolinguist, jokingly suggested using shopaholic.

To be sure, replacing the word consumer won't change the underlying widespread assumption that economic growth is the top priority, Stibbe said. As a substitute for gross domestic product (GDP), some countries track "gross national happiness" — a measure of living standards, education, and mental and physical health. It was made famous by the South Asian kingdom of Bhutan, when King Jigme Singye Wangchuck first proposed the idea in 1972.

Stibbe suggests using language that directs people away from buying things, and toward spending time in nature and helping their communities — "all those things which would genuinely give some well-being, don't cost anything, and don't destroy the environment," he said.

It's not just ecolinguists who are searching for a new philosophy. The "degrowth" movement holds that governments should actively try to shrink their economies. "Post-growth" advocates, alternatively, would rather ignore growth altogether and focus on measures like happiness and well-being.

You can hear echoes of these ideas in speeches by Greta Thunberg, the 17-year-old Swedish climate activist. "We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth," Thunberg told world leaders at a United Nations summit last year. "How dare you!"

"Growth is always going to sound good," Stibbe said. "What we can do is stop talking about growth altogether, and start talking about well-being instead."

REMARKS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

By Robert F. Kennedy, March 18, 1968

History offers us valuable lessons about the challenges we continue to face today. In this 1968 speech, Robert F. Kennedy reflects on how society's focus on material wealth often overshadows deeper values like purpose, community, and well-being. His words remind us that concerns about overconsumption and misplaced priorities are not new—they have been part of public discourse for over 50 years. While some of the language reflects the era in which it was delivered, the core message about redefining progress beyond material accumulation remains profoundly relevant.

And this is one of the great tasks of leadership for us, as individuals and citizens this year. But even if we act to erase material poverty, there is another greater task, it is to confront the poverty of satisfaction - purpose and dignity - that afflicts us all. Too much and for too long, we seemed to have surrendered personal excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things.

Our Gross National Product, now, is over $800 billion dollars a year, but that Gross National Product - if we judge the United States of America by that - that Gross National Product counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for the people who break them. It counts the destruction of the redwood and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl. It counts napalm and counts nuclear warheads and armored cars for the police to fight the riots in our cities. It counts Whitman's rifle and Speck's knife and the television programs which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children.

Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country, it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile. And it can tell us everything about America except why we are proud that we are Americans.

BEYOND THE GDP: RETHINKING PROGRESS FOR A HAPPIER, SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

By Ecochallenge.org

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has long been the dominant measure of a country's success. At its core, GDP is the total monetary value of all goods and services produced within a country, offering a snapshot of economic activity. However, this single number tells us little about citizens' well-being, the environment's health, or the equity of opportunities. GDP's shortcomings highlight the need for alternative progress indicators, like the World Happiness Report inspired by Bhutan's focus on national happiness, highlighting the importance of measuring societal well-being beyond economic growth.

The consumer-oriented mindset embedded in our culture has reinforced GDP's dominance as a marker of success. As you saw in Kate Yoder's article, simply labeling people as "consumers" subtly changes how we think and act, often driving consumerism and a push for increasing GDP above other people-centered priorities.

Robert F. Kennedy's 1968 remarks remind us of what GDP fails to measure. His words invite us to focus on what truly makes life meaningful—connections with others, purpose, and the beauty of the world around us. This is a particularly poignant reminder during the holiday season, a time often overshadowed by shopping and consumption.

As we head into the holidays, let's reconnect with what matters most. Let's be inspired to focus on relationships, experiences, and thoughtful giving. Reflecting on today's discussion, we can look for ways to celebrate sustainably—whether by crafting handmade gifts, choosing eco-friendly options, or simply spending quality time with loved ones. By prioritizing these values, we can create a holiday season that honors the well-being of our communities, our planet, and ourselves.

This year, let's redefine the holidays as a season of sustainability and connection as we realign our actions with what truly matters. By embracing these meaningful changes, we can celebrate the holidays with a spirit of generosity, joy, and a commitment to a better future—for ourselves and the planet.

CIRCLE QUESTION:
If you could give one non-material gift to everyone in the world this holiday season, what would it be and why?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. When reflecting on needs versus wants, what choices can you make during the holidays to align more closely with your values? How can you share these choices with others without judgment or pressure?

2. The Kennedy speech reminded us of the things GDP does not measure, like the health of our children or the joy of their play. What do you think should be included in measuring the success of a society? Consider exploring the World Happiness Report for ideas.

3. In the article by Kate Yoder, it was noted how the term "consumer" shapes behavior. This article shows us that words matter and can have a profound impact. How do you feel about being labeled as a consumer, especially during the holidays? Are there other words that you can think of that we use in our society that might influence our consumptive behaviors? What would you like to be called instead?

DO YOU NEED AN IDEA FOR A CLIMATE-FRIENDLY GIFT? GRIST HAS 79!

NOTES:

ABOUT ECOCHALLENGE.ORG

Building a more sustainable world and healthier planet can't be done alone. Ecochallenge.org, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, provides the programs and resources to transform behaviors at work, school, and beyond. Our online challenges are fun, educational, and engaging, while our discussion books go a bit deeper and teach participants how to reflect and act on environmental and social justice conversations. With these programs, we support individuals in connecting daily actions to science-based solutions that affect climate change to create a more sustainable world.

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