



MINDFUL CONSUMPTION: A CUSTOMER-ORIENTED STRUCTURAL SOLUTION TO A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

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ABSTRACT:

Traditional marketing functioned on the premise that human wants are limitless and planet earth's endowments are inexhaustible. However, the fact of the matter is that the planet's natural resources are finite and that necessitates limiting human consumption. So far, the onus of taking up the sustainability concern was primarily on the government, regulatory agencies and businesses. However, the issue of sustainability seen from this lens is just the tip of the iceberg. The effectiveness of the sustainability endeavours has seen limited success, probably due to an oversight by way of non-inclusion of consumers, in the team of solution-seekers to address the humungous problem of sustainability. Given the fact that world over, the population is continuously on the rise and natural resources are being extracted continually to meet the present needs; therefore, something at the grass root level of the consumer community needs to be earnestly initiated and implemented. Mindful consumption is the key to unlocking the great potential that rests in the common consumers to bring about unimaginable big results on the sustainability front. The present paper explores the concept of mindful consumption and how it can be implemented by the marketers while formulating their (sustainable) marketing strategies.

KEYWORDS:

Traditional marketing, Responsible consumption, Mindful consumption, Mindful marketing

INTRODUCTION

Traditional commercial marketing focused on serving consumers' needs and wants as they were, without making any assessment of their "rightness" or "wrongness". Influenced by capitalism, by offering want-satisfying solutions to customers thereby catering to all of their desires of purchasing anything they wish for and can pay for, marketing somewhat legitimized those undue wants and desires. Marketers never sought to try transforming the deeper needs, convictions and/or values that consumers wished to fulfill. However, over time some marketers observed that certain wants (such as those for cigarettes/alcohol) were potentially harming the people and society in general. In 1971, Kotler and Zaltman came up with a novel perspective of marketing aimed at decreasing unhealthy behaviours and named it as "social marketing". The social marketing campaigns became a baby of the "societal marketing" for they indicated leveraging the strength of marketing to create a better society. Social marketing, that is incidentally the anti-thesis of commercial marketing, has seen significant growth over a period of time. Initiatives encouraging people to consume nutritious food and work out more regularly; to save water; to plant more trees; to help save air quality and water quality; to quit purchasing goods with unnecessary packaging; to stop littering and help make the country clean under "Swatchchh Bharat Abhiyaan"; to give up plastic polythene and instead use cloth bags for day-to-day shopping; to quit using single-use plastics that enlarges the garbage ghost residing in the landfills, represent the quintessence of social marketing.

Today, the world is grappling with the serious problem of sustainability. The United Nations defined sustainability as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (www.un.org). The grave issue of climate change continues to make our planet earth warmer thereby causing costly climatic concerns. Corporates are exhorted to include "sustainability" in their business agenda; they need to mitigate the carbon footprints created by their business operations. When excessive carbon is released, it leads to heating up of the planet, unfreezing of the ice masses, submerging of coastal areas. Climate change causes more forest fires, cyclones, tornadoes, floods as well as extreme drying of earth's lithosphere.

Sadly, the torridity in the tropical countries becomes unbearable forcing their inhabitants to move to nations with relatively cooler weather (Kotler, 2022).

Corporates must strive to embrace business methods and procedures that will result in “zero carbon” generation. It is imperative for industry to replace the “linear business model: make–sell–dispose” with the “circular business model: conserve–reuse–recycle”. Corporates must go in for waste reduction and reusing of materials in order to mitigate the carbon emissions generated by their business operations. It is required that they should bear this externality cost by paying the “carbon price for their carbon emissions and buy carbon offsets to approach a net-zero carbon output” (Kotler, 2022). Corporates making such “sustainability” commitments fully comprehend that although costs will increase in the short-term yet higher returns will certainly accrue in the long-term. Firms are aware that today’s educated and sophisticated consumers, particularly the younger generation of “millennials” and “centennials”, admires their sustainable behaviour and investments. Moreover, the internal customers implying the employees also take pride in their corporation’s sustainability initiatives.

RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION

United Nations’ SDG # 12 is “Responsible Consumption and Production” that calls for “ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns, which is key to sustain the livelihoods of current and future generations” (www.un.org). Our planetary resource endowments are depleting fast; all the same, population rise is a continuing, world-wide phenomenon. As per a UN Report, “if the global population reaches 9.8 billion by 2050, the equivalent of almost three planets will be required to provide the natural resources needed to sustain current lifestyles” (www.un.org). Sustainability is a sombre global concern that requires the united efforts of various stakeholders. Government through its regulatory role enforces environmental protection policies like establishing targets for minimizing waste generation, encouraging circular economy practices as well as backing environment-friendly procurement policies. For businesses, shifting to circular economy paradigm encompasses developing products that are designed for a longer useful life, amenable to repairs and are recyclable; and encouraging sustainable practices like reusing, refurbishing and recycling product offerings to reduce wastages and mitigate resource depletion. Innovative offerings and sustainable product design solutions enable and motivate people to imbibe more sustainable lifestyle, mitigating the socio-environmental impact of their consumption as well as ameliorating their personal and planetary wellbeing. People at their personal individual level must imbibe more sustainable living by avoiding over-consumption, minimizing wastages, thoughtfully selecting environment-friendly offerings, purchasing from local and sustainable vendors, and mitigating carbon footprints generated by daily activities.

The virtue of “sustainability” will be fully embraced when consumer behaviour undergoes a radical change. Incidentally, the social marketing initiatives exhort people to imbibe novel behaviour and moral principles in a bid to minimize carbon footprints; in other words, strive to become “mindful consumers” (see Exhibit 1). People in developed nations show disproportionate trend of consumption. By virtue of their prosperity, they tend to binge, reside in bigger homes, and purchase greater apparel relative to the people dwelling in developing nations. Many of them are obese; they practice the “throwaway culture” whereby “landfills dot the landscape carrying old cellphones, appliances, mattresses, refrigerators, and other junk” (Kotler, 2022). It is a clarion call for people residing in developed nations to reduce their (over)consumption and imbibe simple living.

Producing garbage sans knowing how to dispose it of is a serious threat to a nation in terms of health and safety of citizens. The irresponsible behaviour of the households severely pollutes the environment, poses health risks and adds to the ever-increasing indirect costs to the public. Landfill is the most popular way of disposing of commercial and domestic waste. This kind of waste disposal technique contaminates underground water. Burning waste also creates dangerous and harmful gases in the atmosphere. The only key to address such issues is to execute the 3R’s strategy implying reduce, reuse, recycle. *Reduce* implies minimizing the trash being generated by people. *Reuse* implies discovering novel ways to utilize the things that were otherwise meant for casting away. *Recycle* implies transforming some old, worthless object into new, usable product (roguedisposal.com).

Research Through Innovation

Exhibit 1: Sustainable Consumer Behaviour**Things you can do from your couch**

- Save electricity by plugging appliances into a power strip; turning them off completely when not in use, including your computer.
- Stop paper bank statements and pay your bills online or via mobile.
- Turn off the lights. Your TV or computer screen provides a cosy glow, so turn off other lights if you don't need them.

Things you can do at home

- Air dry. Let your hair & clothes dry naturally instead of running a machine. If you do wash your clothes, make sure the load is full.
- Take short showers. Bathtubs require gallons more water than a 5-10 minute shower.
- Compost — composting food scraps can reduce climate impact while also recycling nutrients.
- Recycling paper, plastic, glass and aluminium keeps landfills from growing.
- Buy minimally packaged goods.
- Replace old appliances with energy efficient models and light bulbs.
- If you have the option, install solar panels in your house. This will also reduce your electricity bill!

Things you can do outside your house

- Shop local. Supporting neighbourhood businesses keeps people employed and helps prevent trucks from driving far distances.
- Shop smart — use shopping lists and avoid impulse buys.
- Bike, walk or take public transport. Save the car trips for when you've got a big group.
- Use a refillable water bottle and coffee cup. Cut down on waste and maybe even save money at the coffee shop.
- Bring your own bag when you shop. Pass on the plastic bag and start carrying your own reusable totes.
- Take fewer napkins. You don't need a handful of napkins to eat your takeout. Take just what you need.
- Shop vintage. Brand-new isn't necessarily best. See what you can repurpose from second-hand shops.
- Maintain your car. A well-tuned car will emit fewer toxic fumes.
- Donate what you don't use. Local charities will give your gently used clothes, books and furniture a new life.

Things you can do at work

- Ensure your company uses energy efficient heating & cooling technology; adjust thermostat, lower in winter, higher in summer.
- Does your company invest in clean and resilient infrastructure? It's the only way to keep workers safe and protect the environment.
- Try to reduce waste, since most waste ends up in our oceans.
- Examine and change everyday decisions. Can you recycle at your workplace? Is your company buying from merchants engaging in harmful ecological practices?

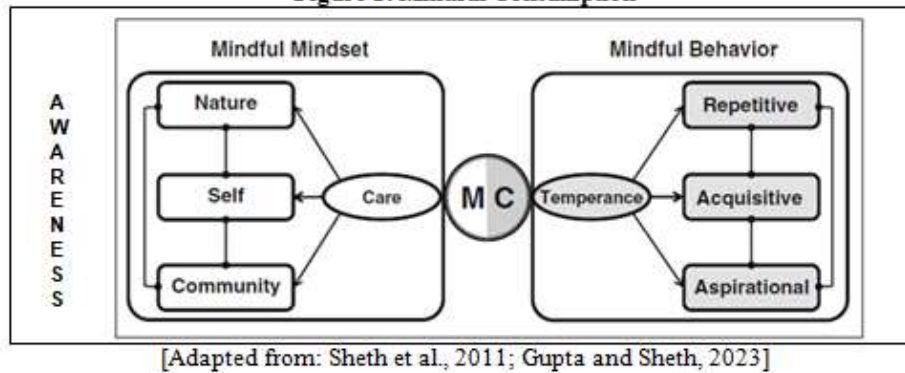
[Source: Adapted from www.un.org]

From Exhibit 1 it may be inferred that mindful or responsible consumers apply mindfulness to the very process of consumption. They harbour empathy for others and reckon elevating even ordinary purchases into becoming meaningful and purposeful actions. For instance, they take their personal, washable cloth bag for purchasing fruits, vegetables or groceries in order to prevent themselves from using polythene bags. They are also seen to be aware of the marketers' tricks like "click bait, zero pricing and misleading front-of-package interpretive labels" (Gupta and Sheth, 2023). Instead of reacting they prefer to respond to marketing communications because of their mature, ethical and responsible mindset. They are the prudent ones who tend to purchase products less often yet relish their selected purchases way more than others. They purchase a product/service after analyzing its effect on their own selves, society and the planet. They are not fussy about a specific variant of the product; they are more adaptable to accepting alternative versions with similar merits. They are generally happier, more satisfied, trusting and committed customers of environment-friendly offerings who tend to possess higher brand loyalty, in terms of both their attitude and behaviour, relative to less mindful customers. These informed customers may be mindful of the entire consumption process, marketers' tactics or price-quality assessment (Gupta and Sheth, 2023).

CUSTOMER-ORIENTED SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY: MINDFUL CONSUMPTION

The sustainability benchmark needs remodeling to make it more customer-centric in order to foreground the consequences of business activities assessed holistically through the metric of personal, economic and environmental wellbeing of the consumer. It necessitates recasting the three aspects of sustainability viz. social, environmental and economic, from the perspective of consumers. *Mindful consumption* lies at the foundation of customer-centric sustainability. It is conceptualized as a blend of "mindful mindset and mindful behaviour" (see Figure 1). Mindful mindset is operationalized as "a sense of caring for self, for community, and for nature". Mindful behaviour is operationalized as "tempering of excesses associated with the three modes of consumption: acquisitive, repetitive and aspirational" (Sheth et al, 2011). A sense of awareness of one's own self, of the community and the planet; caring for one's impact of consumption on one's own self, on the community as well as on the ecology; and temperance implying restraint in one's consumption, is the essence of mindful consumption (Gupta and Sheth, 2023).

Figure 1: Mindful Consumption



There are two aspects of consumption viz. tangible and intangible. While the tangible aspect is the consumption behaviour, the intangible aspect is attitudinal that involves values and expectancies encompassing consumption behaviour. There are twin ways in which the mindset matters; firstly, the consumption choices are determined by values and attitudes; secondly, they also ascertain the way consumption impact is understood by the consumer, thereby raising or lowering the likeliness of additional consumption of a related nature. In order to address the issue of over-consumption effectively, it is imperative to alter both the behaviour as well as the mindset. This transformation may be produced by instilling “mindful consumption”. Mindful consumption is founded on attitudinal and behavioural cognizance of effects of one’s consumption. It presumes that an individual is in a state to opt for what and how much he/she does consume. This implies that an individual is not compelled or constrained by his/her specific considerations or market situations to consume in a particular manner, for instance, being pressurized to cut down consumption. Instead, one consciously chooses consumption as per one’s preferences and principles. To that degree, the consumer’s mindset directs and moulds the behaviour in making sustainable consumption choices.

In mindful consumption, customer’s mindset and behaviour both are described by a respective core characteristic. *Mindful mindset* is characterized by a sense of caring (for oneself, people and planet) regarding the outcomes and effects of an individual’s consumption. *Mindful behaviour* is characterized by temperance in an individual’s consumption; this temperance or moderation is required in three kinds of consumption behaviour (repetitive, acquisitive, and aspirational). *Awareness* (of oneself, people and planet) denotes an individual’s mental faculty to understand his/her emotions, others’ feelings and motivations, as well as the consciousness of marketing stimuli that are being employed to mould customers’ beliefs and values. In other words, it is the mental ability to comprehend one’s own ‘self’ as well as being wakeful of the interest of people and planet. This is depicted in Figure 1 (Sheth et al., 2011; Gupta and Sheth, 2023).

Care for oneself implies paying attention to an individual’s personal wellbeing both in the eudemonic and economic sense. More happiness does not happen by expending more on conspicuous consumption. Hedonism is at loggerheads with happiness and personal satisfaction. Besides, over-consumption hits the economic wellbeing of consumers who may buy beyond their means and fall in the debt trap. *Care for people/community* implies looking into the collective wellbeing of society. Excessive consumption hampers common good by undermining human relations, aggravating ecological degradation, and fall in support for common goods/services like public parks, public transport and so on. *Care for planet/nature/environment* implies responsibility to preserve the environment for the sake of it; to conserve it in order that it remains useful to humanity due to its natural endowments; and to value it for its aesthetic beauty and calmness – mountains, wilderness, rivers, deserts provide recreation, spiritual rejuvenation and sanctuary to many. Care for oneself, people and planet will inspire an individual towards exhibiting temperance in consumption (Sheth et al., 2011).

Temperance is the means for imbibing mindful behaviour. Temperance intends to optimize consumption with the idea of bringing about an individual’s wellbeing; and aligns it with an individual’s values and principles. It does not connote dismissing consumption as such. It needs to be applied in three kinds of behavioural actions that are frequently linked with excess consumption, viz. repetitive, acquisitive and aspirational; that may overlap at times and may also mutually reinforce each other. *Acquisitive consumption* implies over-consumption that is characterized by possessing objects to an extent that is beyond an individual’s requirement or even beyond his/her scope of consumption. Because of acquisitive behaviour, consumers feel exceedingly overwhelmed by their possessions and their storage also becomes burdensome. *Repetitive consumption* implies over-consumption by way of purchasing, discarding and purchasing again. This pattern of repeated purchasing is seen in case of products that are either disposable in nature or prone to quick obsolescence. *Aspirational consumption* implies over-consumption linked with the intent of conspicuous consumption that was earlier generally seen amongst the super-rich but has now trickled down to the common people; it is aptly summarized by the adage “luxury goes mainstream”. It expresses in the form of deluxe automobiles, more luxurious homes, latest gadgets, expensive designer wear, costly vacations and so on. Temperance must be exercised in all types of consumer behaviour viz. acquisitive, repetitive and aspirational, in order to bring about sustainable consumption. This behavioural transformation that happens to be gratifying for the consumer is inspired by a caring mindset. Thus, “mindful consumption connotes temperance in acquisitive, repetitive and aspirational consumption at the behavior level, ensuing from and reinforced by a mindset that reflects a sense of caring toward self, community, and nature” (Sheth et al., 2011).

MINDFUL MARKETING FOR MINDFUL CONSUMPTION

Mindful consumption can be effected when marketing takes on a novel orientation viz. mindful marketing. The fundamental aim of mindful marketing is to promote mindful consumption via effectively- and ethically-implemented marketing functions, while also thoughtfully synchronizing the interests of marketers as well as customers (by extension society) thus creating a win-win solution for people, planet and profits (Sheth and Sisodia, 2006; Sheth et al., 2011; Malhotra et al., 2012). In markets smitten by excessive consumption and where mindful consumption is sought, marketers must adopt mindful marketing that calls for revisiting the entire spectrum of marketing by offering a mindfully-designed product, an appropriate price after factoring in socio-environmental costs, availability at convenient place/locations and promotion of sustainable ways of living. More explicitly, mindful marketing must perform twin roles of *firstly*, “facilitating mindful consumption” and *secondly*, “advancing mindful consumption by encouraging and reinforcing it” (Sheth et al., 2011).

“Facilitating mindful consumption” – The foremost contribution of marketing in promoting mindful consumption is to reframe the fundamental four P’s viz. product, price, place and promotion. *Product*: may be developed with features that help in minimizing repetitive consumption. Products that are more durable and simple to upgrade/repair must be designed. Significant product innovations must characterize a new product launch rather than minor product changes. Product mix can be extended to embrace repeated-use products, shared-use products as well as service as an alternative to product. *Price*: is the most effective means for regulating demand and thereby consumption. Price hikes in petrol, durables and various other goods make the consumers cognizant of the cost effects of over-consumption. Prices reflecting full internalization of externality costs (or socio-environmental costs) are helpful in reducing the incidence of acquisitive and/or repetitive consumption. While developing product and pricing strategies, the focus must be on (high) quality and (utmost) value rather than (cheap) prices. *Promotion*: should be carefully planned in the wake of undue consumption in some markets in order to redirect consumption to sustainable levels. Marketers must refrain from aggressive advertising and hard selling tactics. Marketing communication notably advertising plays a pivotal role in re-channelizing surpluses in aspirational consumption and encouraging sustainable lifestyles. Marketing communication strategies including social advertising may also be applied for educating buyers to minimize wastefulness in acquisitive and repetitive consumption. *Place*: Marketing strategies must strive to develop simpler access to service and repairs as well as provision for reuse. Conveniently accessible locations and appealing facilities may be significant in development of markets for “Product Service Systems” as well as shared usage of products/services to minimize wasteful consumption (Sheth et al., 2011).

“Advancing Mindful Consumption” – In order to make sure that there exists a market for mindful consumption, marketers are required to bring about transformations in the marketplace. Figure 2 depicts four distinct consumers’ inclinations for mindful consumption on the basis of behavioural propensity to consume (excessive versus temperate) on the X-axis and attitude/mindset regarding consumption (caring versus non-caring) on the Y-axis. Different marketing strategies are needed to address different combinations of consumption attitude (mindset) and behaviour.

Figure 2: Advancing Mindful Consumption

		CONSUMPTION	
MINDSET	Caring	Incentives and Disincentives	Reinforcement
	Non-Caring	Mandates and Limits	Education
		Excessive	Temperate

[Source: Sheth et al., 2011]

1) *“Caring Mindset – Temperate Consumption (Reinforcement)”*: In order to maintain mindful consumption amongst customers having caring mindset and exercising temperance in consumption behaviour, marketers must provide reinforcement through extrinsic as well as intrinsic rewards. Extrinsic rewards constitute monetary or other tangible benefits given for lowered consumption such as rewards for carpooling or conservation of energy. Marketers may give intrinsic rewards by way of providing opportunities of becoming role models and proponents of mindful consumption. They may arrange for membership clubs or community action groups as well as facilitate use of social networks for this purpose.

2) *“Caring Mindset – Excessive Consumption (Incentives – Disincentives)”*: Customers possessing caring mindset but are not willing or able to moderate their consumption habits, require a blend of monetary/tangible rewards as well as disincentives in the

shape of demarketing wherein consumption offerings are either curtailed or access is restricted; consumption is advised against via different marketing communications.

3) “*Non-caring Mindset – Temperate Consumption (Education)*”: Marketers need to educate customers who although practise temperance in consumption, yet do not possess a caring mindset. They must expose the customers to appropriate information and typical exemplars in order to inculcate within them a sense of care for self, people and planet.

4) “*Non-caring Mindset – Excessive Consumption (Mandates/Limits)*”: Customers who not only indulge in excessive consumption but also do not care about the effects of their over-consumption on self, people and planet, certainly need to be forced to bring about the much-needed behavioural transformation in their consumption habits. Marketers may be necessitated to collaborate with regulating agencies and policymakers to mandate or prescribe limits on consumption. Demarketing is also a potent strategy here. Contractual agreements, as observed in the usage of credit cards as well as home mortgage loans, may also be used by marketers along with educational initiatives and campaigns that seek to transform customers’ attitudes and mindset.

An organization’s customer base may embrace groups of consumers who may be categorized into various classes discussed above. Herein, marketers may utilize the relevant strategy given in the cells of the above matrix for every unique consumer group as the target group (Sheth et al., 2011).

CONCLUSION

Sustainability has been an overarching global challenge of the present times. It requires concerted action on the part of government, policymakers, marketers, regulators, and environmentalists to tackle the serious sustainability concern. To address the issue of sustainability, much emphasis has been placed on striving to attain technological efficiency, use of environment-friendly materials, promotion of circular economy, regulations rendering disincentives for some practices while incentives for alternative ‘greener’ practices. However, it has come to be known that focusing on production processes and product redesigns (“top-down approach”) for attaining higher efficiency is only partial solution to the problem relative to the speed at which the sustainability issue is aggravating. Hence, to complete the story and more specifically, “to hit the nail on the head” it is imperative to address the consumption problem that is emanating from and identified with the end consumers (“bottom-up approach”). A new realization has dawned regarding the exorbitant price of unbridled consumption. Resultantly, earth’s natural endowments have been depleted beyond sustainable levels adversely affecting the future availability of natural resources as well as provision of safe living conditions for the present and forthcoming generations. Over-consumption by a few prosperous ones has far-reaching social costs and adverse influences on the wellbeing of the many. Ironically, it has come to be known that excessive consumption and materialism have proved to be illusory, even for those consumers who can afford, in so far as they turn out to be more of a source of perpetual stress, poor health and unhappiness rather than being a source of comfort and joy. Therefore, it becomes imperative on the part of consumers to behave responsibly and be mindful of their consumption choices, habits and patterns; so that we may be able to save our planet and leave a beautiful legacy of Nature for the forthcoming generations.

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