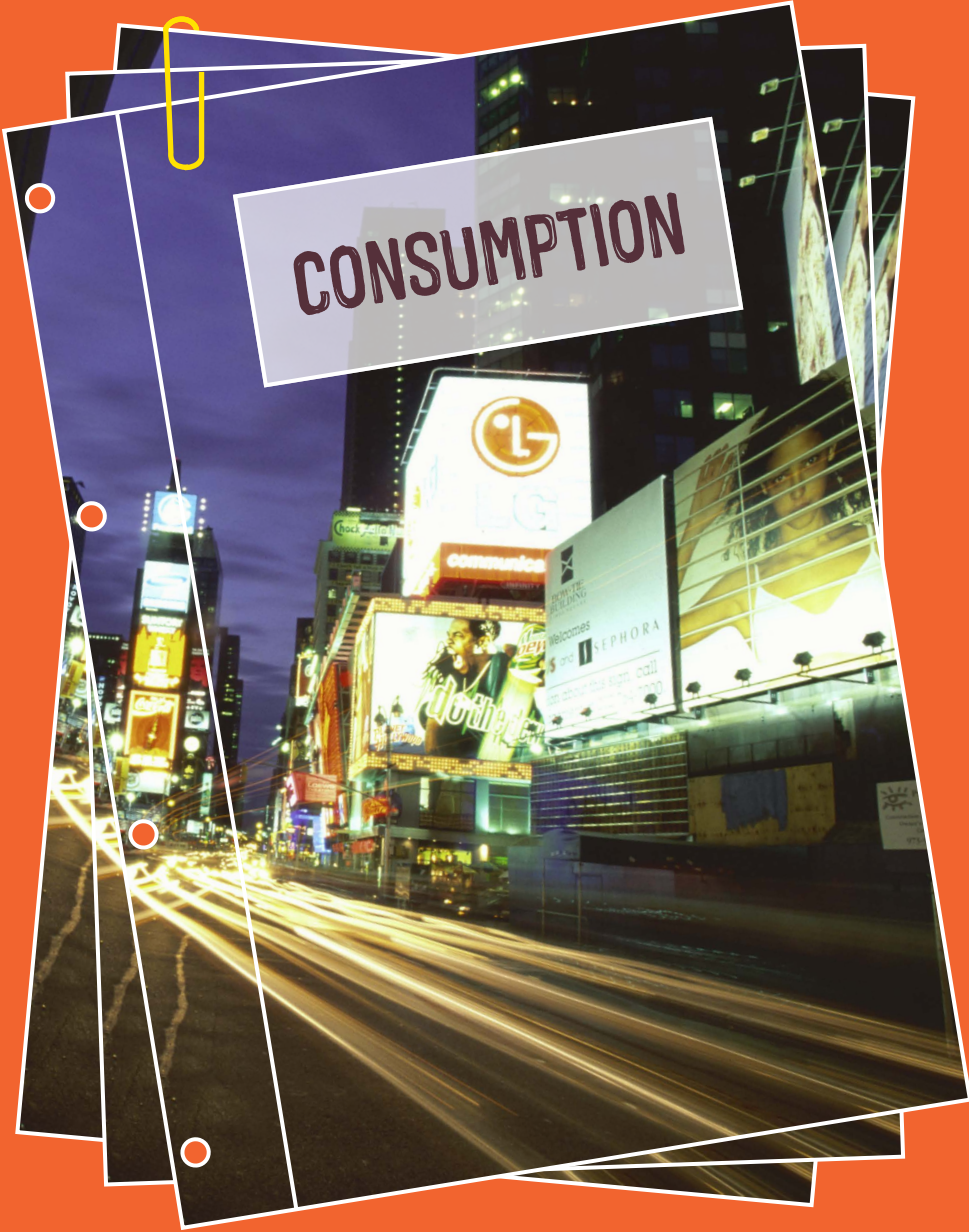


Our Position Paper on:

CONSUMPTION



IN A NUTSHELL

We often buy things not because we need them, but because it makes us feel good and expresses who we are. We do need to consume stuff to survive and enjoy life, but excessive consumption is damaging the environment and harming people. We need to reduce over-consumption by doing more with what we have (eg by sharing, making better products, developing a circular economy), changing how we market and advertise, increasing empathy towards others to encourage more careful consumption, and supporting ways of expressing who we are that don't involve excessive consumption (eg through sports).

THE FACTS

- 1** What we think of as modern consumerism in the UK dates back to the 18th century and the explosion in the number of businesses using what are now familiar marketing methods. By offering credit schemes and placing adverts in weekly newspapers, for example, shops began to attract and create new customers keen to move up the social ladder. The trend was closely linked to rapid population growth, social change, a need for better employment and a huge rise in urban populations.
- 2** From 1950, advertisers started to use television. They'd learnt from the propaganda tactics of World War II. Using psychological tools to create desire and drive consumption, advertisers began to appeal to more than our basic needs: "To ladies, don't sell shoes. Sell them sexy feet."
- 3** The EU could benefit by €1.8 trillion if it developed a circular economy that reuses and recycles resources, as opposed to the traditional linear economy of make, use, and dispose.



THE PROBLEM

History shows us that the reason humans consume and buy things has changed over the past 300 years. What we buy has become less about basic needs and more a symbol of status and wealth, to define who we are and to provide us with a sense of identity.

A strong identity is important to freedom of expression and self-worth and helps us form relationships with others. We need to consume to stay healthy and happy. But increasingly levels of consumption are going too far – and there are stark inequalities between those who can afford to consume and those who can't.

The way we consume to feel and look good – driven by celebrity culture, marketing and advertising – can leave poorer people behind, struggling with debt and low self-worth as they try but fail to compete. A culture of consumerism encourages us to buy more than we need, even when that harms our own health and happiness.

The damage to the environment that comes from consuming too much is threatening the freedom and rights of many people across the globe to lead healthy and safe lives. If the 8 billion or more people expected to inhabit the planet by 2050 are to enjoy wellbeing within safe environmental limits, we must reduce our reliance on material consumption to feel good.

WHAT WE THINK

Friends of the Earth has identified four key changes that could help reverse the destructive consumer habits we've adopted, while recognising that some consumption will always be necessary for our health and happiness. They are:

- Develop a circular economy - Products should be better made, and production processes based on reusing and recycling materials.
- Get a grip on advertising and marketing – These industries dominate every area of life and are largely responsible for spreading the idea that we need to buy more to be better people. Rules need to be made and lines drawn to prevent the environmental and psychological damage marketing and advertising cause. By making better use of the power of advertising, we could promote values that encourage respect for our environment and each other.
- Reform education to promote empathy and encourage careful consumption – Too much education is focussed on exams and not enough on understanding the world we live in. Education is a powerful tool and can help us all learn how to empathise with people of different nationalities and social, racial and cultural groups. We should learn more about how we depend on a healthy planet and about the other species and people we share it with. Through this learning we can explore the impact of our consumption on others and learn to be careful consumers.
- Support the development of creative community activity – In the past, being part of a group had a stronger impact on our feelings of identity and happiness. Group identities included religion, occupations, location, gender, race, etc. We have tended to replace identification with such groups with a sense of identity closely tied to consumption. We should support the rise of healthy group identities through the likes of sports clubs, digital social activities, arts and co-owned community enterprises.

USEFUL LINKS

www.foe.co.uk/bigideas/big_ideas_consumption_40253.html

www.foe.co.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/consumption-identity-18135.pdf

www.foe.co.uk/bigideas/think_piece_cities_sharing_41208.html

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