

# The relationship between consumerism and the climate crisis: Explained

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Growing up, I was often reminded not to waste food or discard things that could still be of use. At the time, these lessons seemed simple acts of gratitude passed down through generations. I never questioned them further. Little did I know, the world around me was moving in the opposite direction, encouraging the endless pursuit of more: more food, more clothes, more gadgets — most of which we do not *need*.

Over the past few decades, the world has undergone an upsurge in production and consumption rates. Consumer-driven systems have staggered unprecedented growth and transformed global economies, driven by industrial development and an insatiable appetite for goods and services. However, our desire for convenience and abundance remains in direct conflict with the planet's call for stability.

Modern consumerism thrives on an endless cycle of production, consumption, and disposal. The average person now encounters between 6,000 to 10,000 advertisements every single day, constantly nudging them towards the next purchase. With more than 1.7 billion people of the global population set to join the 'consumer class', the drive to acquire goods beyond basic necessities continues to grow.

To compete against relentless consumer demands, industries exploit natural resources at unsustainable rates, depleting forests, water reserves, and fossil fuels. The cycle exacerbates the waste crisis with non-biodegradable materials filling up landfills and polluting natural habitats. This, in turn, not only affects the environment but also disrupts the Earth's functional integrity.

Human activities are pushing the planet's natural systems beyond safe and sustainable limits. These limits, known as Earth-system boundaries (ESBs), are at critical thresholds that ensure the stability of the planet's life-support systems. In other words, they define a safe operating space for humanity that cannot be exceeded if rapid and catastrophic environmental change is to be avoided.

Alarmingly, seven of these eight planetary boundaries, including those related to climate, biodiversity, and freshwater use, have already been



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breached. According to statistics, the top 10 percent of global consumers are responsible for 31–67 percent of planetary boundary transgressions, with the top 20 percent accounting between 51–91 percent, spanning both developed and developing countries.

Recognising the outsized role of the world's wealthiest consumers in exceeding these limits, researchers have proposed six scenarios aimed at reducing environmental impact. One approach suggests that top percentage of global consumers align their consumption levels with those of the same percentile of the total global population. Another strategy emphasises improving efficiency by adopting the most environmentally friendly consumption practices already observed within their

group. A more comprehensive approach combines both strategies, urging affluent consumers to reduce overall consumption and promote sustainable consumption patterns.

These findings support the idea of a 'safe and just corridor' — a balance between environmental sustainability and social fairness. A safe system ensures the Earth remains stable, while a just system ensures resources are shared equitably, meeting essential needs like food, water, and energy. The corridor's upper limit is defined by the need to prevent ecological collapse, while its foundation ensures that no one is deprived of basic necessities.

However, simply staying within these boundaries is not enough, resources must also be fairly distributed to prevent

inequality and environmental harm. Achieving this requires procedural and substantive justice, ensuring fair decision-making and equitable access to sustainable opportunities.

A recent study by the Earth Commission estimates the resource access needs for the global population to thrive, along with their potential impacts on Earth's systems. Unfortunately, the results suggest that even if everyone in the world lives with only the bare minimum of resources required, the safe and just climate boundaries are likely to be overshot by 2050 without radical changes in energy and food systems.

This, in turn, heightens the likelihood of disease outbreaks, natural disasters, and even conflicts over scarce resources. Vulnerable populations in low-income regions bear the brunt of climate injustice, despite contributing the least to the climate crisis. Therefore, due to a profound imbalance in responsibility and exposure, the actions of leading nations and individuals disproportionately drive the degradation of shared natural systems.

To achieve a fair and sustainable future, transformative changes will be required in how societies function. Industries must shift towards renewable production methods, prioritising efficiency and reducing waste. Governments need to implement taxation on excessive consumption, regulate harmful practices, and ensure fair distribution of resources. Cities and businesses, as significant contributors to environmental impacts, can adopt science-based targets to reduce emissions and foster innovations that minimise their ecological footprints.

The path forward requires global cooperation and a shared commitment to protecting both the planet and its people. The evidence is clear: unless we address the unsustainable patterns of consumerism and resource exploitation, the planet's ability to support life will continue to decline. By redefining progress to prioritise sustainability and equity, we can build a future where humanity and the Earth's systems thrive together.

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