

Consumer contagion renders us vulnerable

SIT INTO your car, you become a motorist. Step on to the road, you're a pedestrian. Hop on a bike, you're a cyclist. Clearly, each of these terms simply describes your action at a particular moment, not who you actually are.

All except one. Whether you're in the supermarket or sound asleep in your bed, you're still a consumer. The term "consumer" has seeped into our collective consciousness to describe who we are. After all, whoever heard of a national pedestrian agency, or the office of cyclists' affairs?

Yet so deeply entrenched has consumption become in our understanding of who we are that we barely notice, let alone complain, when our politicians, trade unions, business and media refer to us collectively as consumers. This contagion is everywhere. The HSE, for example, has a "head of consumer affairs". Even when we're ill, we're still labelled as consumers. And this label is loaded with meaning.

The Constitution uses the term "citizen" 30 times and "public" 34 times to describe us. I failed to find a single mention of the word "consumer". It clearly was not what our founding fathers had in mind for our hard-won new Republic.

Then again, consumption as a concept is relatively new. In the US in the early 1950s, the modern "consumer society" was invented as a means of creating new markets for industry, which had become so productive during the war years it was turning out far more goods than anyone needed.

This was a challenge that was to be brilliantly solved by a combined assault of marketing and psychology on the public that in a generation transformed citizens into consumers eagerly awaiting the shiny new baubles of industry and technology.

One of the midwives at the birth of this rapacious new creature was retail analyst Victor Lebow. He wrote in 1955: "Our enormously productive economy . . . demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption."

In order to keep the wheels of



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OPINION

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refugees working for a pittance. This is how hand-sewn sequined fashion tops can end up selling in Irish shops for, well, pennies.

More revealing than the investigation was the filmed reaction of shoppers. None had stopped to really consider how their trendy gear was so cheap. All were genuinely appalled. Most tellingly, one young woman described how a typical trip to Penneys involved buying not one or two garments, but an entire bagful. Clothing is so cheap it's now often worn just once.

This consumptive nihilism is at one level a triumph of marketing. Who cares if nobody actually needs the end-product of all this production? What does it matter if the price of dirt-cheap goods is exploitation and environmental collapse in countries we know little and care less about?

But we should care, if only for the selfish reason that our own survival also depends on it. According to the United Nations: "The world is facing a growing scarcity of renewable resources essential to sustain the ecosystem and for human survival – from deforestation, soil erosion, water, declining fish stocks, and lost biodiversity."

Apply sufficient pressure to any complex system and it will eventually collapse. We are on a trajectory towards widescale system failure. The notion that humanity has somehow evolved to a point where we are no longer beholden to the natural environment is a conceit that's as foolish as it is widely held.

Our burgeoning population and spiralling consumption of non-renewable natural resources mean we have in fact never been more vulnerable, and that's before you factor in the effect of emissions in disrupting our climate systems.

Still, at least our increased wealth and frenzy of consumption are making us happier, right? Well, not exactly. Above a certain moderate level, additional income rarely increases happiness.

One place to start is to rein in advertising, since it relentlessly peddles the destructive chimera of material consumption as the path to happiness.

If this were to happen, argues psychologist Clive Hamilton, "over time, people would simply consume less, a process that must begin sooner rather than later if there is to be any hope of sustaining the material basis of human existence on Earth". Failing that, the phrase "shop till you drop" may soon take on an entirely new meaning.

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industry rolling, Lebow added: "We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced and discarded at an ever increasing rate." Known today as planned obsolescence, this clever time bomb is built into the marketing of every new gadget or garment. The constant cycle of anticipation and disappointment is a marketing merry-go-round upon which Western consumerism revolves.

A recent BBC *Panorama* investigation into how Penneys/Primark manages to sell its clothing for ridiculously low prices uncovered an unsurprising trail of child labour and desperate