



Policy brief

November 2020

Our material consumption is soaring, but the Earth cannot afford Black Friday

The COVID-19 crisis has led to major changes in Europeans' consumption habits. From the expansion of e-commerce and the predicted increase in car sales to the soaring consumption of coffee and hair colouring products – few, if any, sectors will remain the same in a post-pandemic world.

But our planet's resources are not infinite, and the way we consume them today – at a high rate and along a largely linear trajectory – is not sustainable. In the simplest terms, if everyone around the world consumed like Europeans, we would need three Earths' worth of natural resources to maintain our way of life.

The EU has made strong steps towards addressing unsustainable consumption – including with the action plan on circular

economy announced earlier this year. However, up to 60% of Europe's environmental footprint linked to consumption occurs outside the EU's borders, according to the European Environment Agency.

If current models of consumption do not change, the amount of materials needed to meet customer demands could triple by 2050 compared to 2000. On a per capita-basis, Europeans consume 14 tonnes of raw material each year¹, resulting in an "ecological footprint"² of 4.3 global hectares (gha) per person in the EU, compared with the global biocapacity of 1.7 gha per person³.

Concretely, for our consumption patterns to stay within planetary boundaries, each European would have to reduce by 80% the

Key messages

- Three-quarters of European consumers (76%) agree that we need to consume less to preserve the environment for future generations and most say that they would like to spend more time with family and friends (78%) or to spend more time in nature (74%) – activities that do not necessarily involve material consumption
- For our consumption patterns to stay within planetary boundaries, each European would have to reduce by 80% the amount of natural resources they currently use for nutrition, housing, mobility, and leisure
 - To promote a truly sustainable consumption, European policies must go well beyond green labelling and ensure that all products and services are safe for the consumers – and the planet. The focus should be on raising consumers' awareness regarding the impacts of overconsumption and enabling them to engage in more sustainable lifestyles
 - The regulation of advertising could help curb overconsumption while promoting a more sustainable consumption of goods and services

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This can be achieved through a combination of efficiency and sufficiency – efficiency to reduce the material footprint of everyday consumption, and sufficiency (i.e. reducing overall consumption) for those items whose footprint cannot be brought to an acceptable level by efficiency only.

UNLOCKING A TRULY SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

While reducing our overall consumption is necessary, much more needs to be done to encourage – and enable – people to spend more of their time and money on activities that do not involve material consumption.

A recent study by GlobeScan [shows that a significant proportion](#) of consumers in the EU would like to spend more time with family and friends (78%) or to spend more time in nature (74%). The French are particularly interested in spending more time with family and friends (80%), whereas Swedes (80%) and Germans (79%) are the keenest to spend more time in nature.

The study, conducted in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, found that three-quarters of EU citizens (76%) agree that we need to consume less to preserve the environment for future generations, but only around 53% say they would like to buy fewer things.

Enabling consumers

Policies, such as those in the European Green Deal, need to firstly *enable* consumers by providing them with access to alternative lifestyles. Such promotion of [low-carbon nutrition, mobility, housing, and lifestyles](#) would

help tackle both the volume of consumption and its composition.

The policies also need to address sustainability and equity challenges linked with luxury consumption, since today, the world's richest one per cent [are responsible](#) for more than twice as much carbon pollution as the poorest 3.1 billion people, and these deep inequalities [are observed](#) both between and within countries. In Europe, the level of material deprivation [varies](#) from 3% of the Swedish population to 47% of the Bulgarian population.

In Germany, the Ecologic Institute has [co-developed a database of activities](#) that can contribute to implementing the Sustainable Development Goal 12 on sustainable consumption and production patterns.

Once stay-at-home orders and lockdowns are eased, one example could entail creating urban and natural environments that allow people to spend recreation time on community-oriented participatory activities, like community musical and theatrical productions, or participation in sports teams and clubs.

It is here that local public institutions can also play a key role in stimulating such activities, for instance, by granting free access to museums and monuments and engaging in promotional activities to raise awareness of the effects of overconsumption on the environment.

This in turn would lead to a decline in material consumption since phenomena such as Black Friday encourage the overconsumption of non-essential goods – from fast fashion to electrical appliances and electronic goods. These products represent 21% of the material footprint of European consumers, yet are the least essential part of our consumption, compared to housing, mobility, or nutrition.

There are no EU-wide estimates on the quantity of consumer goods thrown away each year, but in France, the estimated value of consumer goods destroyed annually varies

from €630 to €800 million; in Germany, it is as much as [€7 billion](#).

Putting all the responsibility on consumers is far from the solution. European policies must go well beyond green labelling and ensure that all products and services are safe for the consumers – and the planet.

Regulation of advertising

The regulation of advertising [could help curb overconsumption](#) while promoting a more sustainable consumption of goods and services. Examples of such regulations already exist for the tobacco industry, but also in the new frameworks regarding marketing towards children. Proposals for other sectors are ample.

The New Weather Institute [has called for a ban](#) on advertising of sports utility vehicles due to the risk posed by the increasing sales of SUVs on achieving the UK climate goals. While an intense debate on the regulation of advertising is currently ongoing in France, four national chambers of commerce, representing thousands of companies from across sectors, [have called for a ban](#) on Black Friday.

Elsewhere, we have also seen the emergence of alternative actions to resist Black Friday, such as IKEA's [buy-back scheme](#). At the EU level, an occasion to start this debate might be created by the evaluation of the 'New Legislative Framework for Products' on a common framework for the marketing of products and the accreditation and CE marking provisions (REFIT). Another approach would be to challenge the marketing and advertising industry to make clear pledges as part of the climate pact.

The COVID-19 crisis has led to major changes in our consumption habits, including increasing our digital consumption of products and services. Digital technologies emit 4% of all greenhouse gas emissions, and their energy consumption [is increasing](#) by 9% annually. Data centres account for around 2% of global

greenhouse gas emissions – [equivalent](#) to all air traffic.

Digitalisation, however, can also be used as an opportunity to address drivers of overconsumption and explore what eco-efficiency – and eco-sufficiency – means for the digital economy. Initiatives such as [Nubo](#), a Belgian cooperative working for ethical online services and promoting digital sobriety, provide inspiration on how digitalisation and sufficiency can drive positive change.

The recent study by GlobeScan found that fewer than one in five (19%) Europeans claim they need a lot of material possessions to be happy and a significant proportion of those surveyed said they would be interested in new approaches that reduce consumption, such as renting items like furniture or clothing (68%), buying used products (49%), or even sharing products with others (37%).

This shows that Europeans are willing to adopt more sustainable consumption habits. It is now up to the policymakers and the private sector to ensure that the more sustainable and safer products and activities are the easier alternatives.

This briefing was produced in collaboration between IEEP and GlobeScan

Notes

1. Measured as annual global material footprint, or raw material consumption (RMC); from Eurostat (2019). Material flow accounts statistics - material footprints. Retrieved 16 September 2020; [URL](#).
2. The biologically productive area required to provide space for food growing, fibre production, timber regeneration, absorption of carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuel burning, and accommodating built infrastructure ([Global Footprint Network](#)).
3. European Environment Agency (2020). Ecological footprint of European countries. Retrieved 21 September 2020; [URL](#).

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CORRESPONDING AUTHORS

Bartosz Brzezinski (bbrzezinski@ieep.eu) and Jesus Urios (jurios@ieep.eu)



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