

## **Hierarchy of Responsible Consumption: How Families can Inspire Members to Consume Responsibly**

**Kanu, C. C.**

Department of Business Education,  
University of Nigeria Nsukka

### **Abstract**

There is sufficient evidence that consumers' current consumption pattern is fast-degrading the environment on which their survival, as well as the survival of future generations depend. There is also empirical evidence that there is increased recognition of the need to consume responsibly but individuals are not taking required actions due to lack of practical support and advice. This paper recognises that the dispositions of all consumers towards responsible consumption are not the same due to differences in personality characteristics, background and experiences. Accordingly, the paper presented a 4-level hierarchy of responsible consumption, a practical framework that families, campaigners and the media can follow to mobilize responsible consumption among consumers. The Framework guides individuals to understand how consumers at each level can be inspired up to the highest level of responsibility and the roles that families can play in the process. It encourages families and organizations change their styles according to the level of the consumer.

**Keywords:** Responsible Consumption, Family, Consumer, Ignorant, Classical, Effective, Dependable.

### **Introduction**

The need for consumers to adopt responsible consumption patterns is becoming an urgent one. Indeed, the decade of 2020 is estimated to be the last chance for consumers to make changes that will address sustainability challenges or begin to face more serious consequences of unsustainable consumption patterns. Studies conducted by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2018) finds that global warming, which is increasing at

between 0.1°C and 0.3°C per decade, may reach 1.5°C in 2030. At 1.5°C, the temperature will be higher, there will be drought and some ecosystems will be lost (IPCC, 2018). These consequences will get worse if global warming exceeds 1.5°C in 2030 (IPCC, 2018; World Meteorological Organization [WMO], 2020). Also, Gonzalez (2019) notes that, by September 2019, consumption expenditure represented 60% of global GDP. Yet in every year, one-third (the equivalent of 1.3 billion tons worth \$1trillion) of food produced

is wasted, while almost 2 billion people go hungry or undernourished (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2020). Besides food, this kind of worrisome statistics exists for water and energy categories (UNDP, 2020). The United Nations set a target to substantially reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse by 2030 as it estimates that if the global population reaches 9.6 billion by 2050, the equivalent of almost three planets could be required to provide the natural resources needed to sustain current lifestyles.

Based on the foregoing, it is clear that the need for people to consume responsibly is real and pressing. Responsible consumption is consuming in manners that have a less negative impact or more positive impact on the environment, society, the self, and the other beings (Ulusoy, 2016). The concept is better promoted within the framework of the family because most consumers live in families. Moreover, the family is the basic consumption unit for consumer goods in the Nigerian society, hence major consumer items such as food, housing, furniture, automobiles and electrical appliances are consumed more by family units than by individuals.

A family is a group of persons united by ties of marriage, blood or adoption and often characterized by common residence and economic cooperation (Chandrasekar, 2013; Anyakoha, 2015). The family is the locus of relationships, meanings, and values (Stacey, 1990) and thus, has a strong influence on choices of what and how

their members consume (Hawkins, Coney & Best, 1980; Chandrasekar, 2013; Jaime, do Prado & Malta, 2017). Indeed, the consumption patterns of individual family members are hardly independent of other family members (Hawkins, *et al.*, 1980) because family consumption begins with consulting individual members so that products that satisfy the common wants of all or several of its members can be obtained. The stages in the family consumption process include problem recognition, information acquisition, alternative evaluation, purchase, utilization, disposition and evaluation (Hawkins, *et al.*, 1980). The concept of family consumption, therefore, includes everything the family does to satisfy her needs and wants.

Meeting family needs and wants responsibly is basic to the sustainable survival of families and their environments. In this paper, sustainable family survival is construed as the continued existence of a family in a way that guarantees the continued existence of its coming generations. Consuming responsibly could help families meet their own needs, improve product quality, minimize waste and reserve some resources for her coming generations. However, studies have confirmed that individuals and families need to be supported with research-based practical advice to enable them to take required actions. Already, there are several technical reports on environmental sustainability (IPCC, 2018; WMO, 2020) as well as studies determining consumers' willingness to consume responsibly (Winston, 2011; IKEA, 2019). However, there is need for

studies that yield more practical ways to promote responsible consumption. This gap is apparent as IKEA (2019) in a study of 31,000 consumers in 30 countries finds that while more people are recognizing the need to change their consumption patterns, action has stagnated due to perceived lack of support and practical advice. This paper provides a framework that could guide families in helping their members consume responsibly and motivate researchers to engage in a deeper investigation about the realities of promoting responsible consumption.

### **Concept of Responsible Consumption**

From an economic perspective, consumption has been defined as the purchase and use of goods and services to satisfy needs and wants (Amer & Amer, 1977; Hill, 2003). Although some authors argue that consumption is the use of goods and services by households and not about purchasing (Corporate Finance Institute, 2020; Carol, 2020). However, in the context of consumer responsibility, consumption is an extensive concept that begins even before an actual purchase is made and continues after the product is disposed of. It involves understanding, acknowledging and consenting to the product's behind-the-scenes practices; purchasing the products; using the products for their entire lifetime; eventually disposing of or transforming the products (Gonzalez, 2019) and giving feedback on the products. On the other hand, the term 'responsible' has multiple meanings but in the context of this paper, it is defined from three perspectives - good

judgement, right act (Cambridge Dictionaries Online, 2020), and dependability (Hornby, 2015). Good judgement is a piece of evidence that points to the right choice (Likierman, 2020) while right and reliable behaviors are those that are consistently just and honourable.

Thus, responsible consumption is about consistently choosing, using and disposing of or transforming products in ways that are decent and fair to the self, other beings and the environment. Rationality and decency are important components of discussions on responsible consumption as responsible consumption has long been conceptualized as rational and efficient use of resources (Balderjahn, 1988; Hobson, 2002; Marchand and Walker, 2008; Ulusoy, 2016). Consistency in these behaviours is what brings about dependability. Describing these behaviours in specific terms, United Nations (2016) indicates that responsible consumers reduce waste; make informed purchases, choose sustainable options when possible and pressurise businesses to adopt sustainable practices. In addition, some countries have defined consumer responsibilities in line with the United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection. For example, the Federal Competition and Consumer Protection Commission in Nigeria (2020) and the Consumer Affairs Commission, Jamaica (2020) state that consumer responsibilities include: gathering information and facts about available products to make informed decisions; being alert to quality and safety of products; thinking independently;

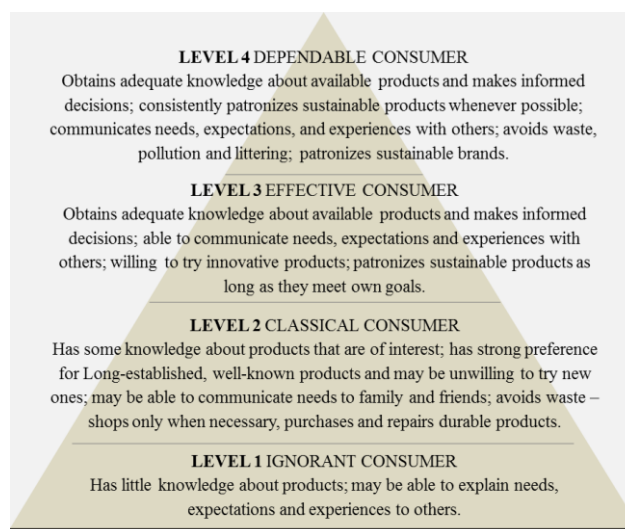
speaking out; being ethical; complaining when necessary; sharing product experiences with other consumers; and respecting the environment. From the above, it is obvious that responsible consumption is not only about preserving the environment for future generations but also about enabling a better future for one's self, other consumers, companies, ecological systems, economy and the society at large. Indeed, responsible consumption is a broad concept that includes various kinds of consumption practices such as sustainable consumption, ethical consumption, socially responsible consumption, consumer citizenship and green consumption (Ulusoy, 2016).

Based on the foregoing, this paper identifies three major responsible acts that can deliver the benefits of responsible consumption: 1) Obtain information about available products, analyse them and use the result to choose sustainable alternatives. 2) Communicating with others, sharing

needs, expectations and experiences of products with relevant people including other consumers, companies, regulators; and 3) Adopting environmental sustainability practices- avoiding waste, littering and pollution by preventing, reducing, reusing and recycling and disposing appropriately.

### **Hierarchy of Responsible Consumption**

A 4-level hierarchy of responsible consumption is presented in this section. The framework was developed based on three factors - 1) insights from reviewing research in consumer behaviour, social psychology and environmental sustainability; 2) theories in psychology and marketing; and 3) the expectations of a responsible consumer based on United Nations guideline for consumer protection. Synthesising the insights, four levels of consumer responsibility were identified namely: ignorant consumer, classical consumer, effective consumer and dependable consumer.



*Figure 1: Hierarchy of Responsible Consumption*

At the top of the hierarchy is the level 4 – the dependable consumer. The three categories beneath level 4 were arranged based on ease of moving from the current level to the topmost. Consumers do not need to proceed sequentially through each level of the hierarchy to reach level 4. However, level 4 reflects wholistic responsibility, where a consumer is not interested in specific dimensions of responsible consumption but in all. Thus, level 4 possesses the responsible behaviours of consumers at the lower levels plus the special characteristics of level 4 – earth and future mindedness that is driven by selflessness and self-control. The framework can be used by individuals to inspire themselves to the highest level of responsibility. It can also be used by families and organisations that wish to promote responsible consumption to understand why consumers are where they are and what can be done to help them reach the highest level of responsibility. The framework is described more elaborately.

#### **Level 1: The Ignorant Consumer**

Consumers at this level are unaware of most or all of their rights and responsibilities. They do not have adequate information and knowledge about safety and quality of products that are available in the market either because they are unable to gather and process the information due to lack of resources, skill and/or time or because they do not care to do so. An ignorant consumer's purchase decision is easily influenced by other people as they can take instructions or advise to consume

without asking necessary questions and without much thoughts.

The term ignorance refers to lack of understanding, knowledge and information about something (Widdows, 1986; Scott and Plickert, 2008; Nikolaj, 2015) or intentional disregard of important information and facts. Three types of ignorance, according to Nikolaj (2015) are factual ignorance (absence of knowledge of some facts); object ignorance (unacquaintance with some objects); and technical ignorance (absence of knowledge of how to do something). These three types of ignorance are applicable in the context of responsible consumption. They reflect, for example, in situations when people do not know their consumer rights and responsibilities and when they have limited or no information on sustainability issues such as climate change; when people have never been exposed to any discussion about climate change; and when they do not know how to take required actions such as information gathering and analysis. Ignorant consumers experience losses in transactions due to lack of knowledge and conduct themselves carelessly in the marketplace (Preston, 1973). Their consumption patterns sometimes reflect what Featherstone (1995) described as the old meaning of consumption that is about destroying, spending and/or wasting resources. Although unintentional, sometimes, the foolishness of the behaviours of ignorant consumers leave negative footprints on the planet.

### **Inspiring ignorant consumers towards a more responsible consumption pattern**

Given that ignorance is a state of lack of knowledge and information, helping ignorant people consume responsibly requires that they receive comprehensive consumer education that equips them with knowledge about responsible consumption as well as the skill to continue to learn about the changing nature of products. Consumer education needs to be both inclusive and extensive so that relevant educational contents can be accessible to various categories of consumers. Even though there is an overwhelming volume of information about products and companies in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, many consumers are unable to gather the data/information, process them and use the outcomes to support decision making for several reasons including inadequate or lack of money, time and skill to search. Studies such as Ozkan and Tolon (2015) confirm that information overload can lead to confusion and render the consumer even more ignorant.

#### **The role of the family**

The family can play important roles in eliminating ignorance in family members. Parents or children who are capable should:

1. teach family members about their consumer rights and responsibilities as well as how best to exercise them.
2. educate family members on the need to obtain and process important information such as information about product quality and safety - contents, expiry, guarantees, warranties,

packaging, durability, reliability and serviceability - as well as the practical skills of gathering information, analyzing them and using the results to support consumption choices.

3. assign information gathering roles to members who are more ignorant to enable them to learn by doing.
4. provide resources (money and time) for information search.

#### **Level 2: The Classical Consumer**

Consumers in this category have a conservative personality, with a strong preference for long-established and well-known products. They usually purchase durable products which they continue to reuse and repair. Classical consumers may know their rights and responsibilities and have some information about the products they consume. However, they do not know (and may not be willing to know) about other available options that are not of interest to them. These consumers find it difficult to switch from an existing brand that they are fond of to new and innovative brands as they generally avoid change due to their intolerance for uncertainty, ambiguity and chaos. Thus, classical consumers can be loyal to brands for a long time. They usually do not spend money on non-essential items and do not like to engage in conspicuous consumption. Classical consumers do not easily communicate their needs, expectations (if they have) and experiences.

To explain the reason classical consumers behave the way they do, the seminal works of Wilson (1973) as well as the works of Edelman and Crandall (2012), Duhacheck, Dahee and Tomala

(2014) and Van Tonder (2017) among others on conservative behaviour were consulted. These experts agreed that conservative people prefer the status quo and are not comfortable with ambiguity, uncertainty and chaos. They also agreed that conservative people adhere to established ways of doing things and therefore, prefer their safe and secure environment of tradition and order. Conservativeness impacts consumer behaviour (Duhacheck *et al.* 2014). For example, conservative consumers tend to be close-minded and will not engage in new product evaluations, but would rather remain loyal to a well-known brand to benefit from cognitive closure and greater certainty (Van Tonder, 2017). Also, Zhou, Wang, Zang&Mou (2013) suggest that conservative people may, due to their preference for long-established traditional order and their intolerance for uncertainty, prefer nostalgic products (i.e. products that have been long in existence). Patronizing long-established products provides a sense of order and security and makes conservative people feel less vulnerable (Zhou *et al.*, 2013). Davis (1979) finds that participants associated words such as "yearning," "old times," and "childhood," with nostalgia. Further, Van Tonder (2017) states that conservative consumers may prefer native products that contribute to job creation, the economy and the general welfare of the citizens of their home country to imported products which they perceive as inferior and may also be reluctant to purchase products for pure hedonic pleasure. Hedonic goods are consumed for experiential pleasure,

which implies that the sought-after consumption benefits occur more or less simultaneously with the act of consumption (Khan &Uzman, 2004). Thus, hedonic consumption involves the consumption of products that are entertaining, pleasant, exciting, spontaneous, and amusing (Teller, Reutterer, &Schnedlitz, 2008; Do Vale and Duarte 2013).

### **Inspiring classical consumers towards a more responsible consumption pattern**

Since classical consumers have very little tolerance for uncertainties, ambiguity and chaos, inspiring them to become more responsible require making consumer information unambiguous - clear, concise and orderly. In a series of lab and field studies, Fennis and Wiebenger (2015) found that when people have a chronic need for order, they are more attracted to clear, well-defined goals and motivated to attain them. Burdner (as cited in Van Tonder, 2017) argues that ambiguity is caused by novelty, complexity and insolubility and could make a classical consumer shun important information. Some information that scientists present about climate change are complex and, with a lot of scientific jargons, they could be insoluble to some consumers. It is important to understand that, although climate change is a scientific matter, it is everybody's business given that its solution requires everyone to take specific actions.

Besides, even though conservative consumers do not like change, they can change if the change process is

strategically structured for them. First, the change process should not be too complex and stressful. Ease, simplicity and clarity are key considerations in designing change for classical consumers due to their intolerance for ambiguity and stress. Furnham and Richester (1995) and Van Tonder (2017) discover that when individuals who have intolerance for ambiguity encounter stressful situations, they adopt readily available beliefs and take decisions without further investigation or search for an alternative. This behaviour is described as a need for cognitive closure (Kruglanski, Webster & Klem, 1993). Second, linking the change (desired behaviour) to an established traditional order which classical consumers feel safe with could make it easier for them to change since they do not want to deviate from tradition. The change process designed for classical consumers needs to be gradual because fast change may make the deviation from tradition obvious, chaotic and stressful. Messages that can reduce or eliminate classical consumers' feelings of uncertainty and insecurity towards the new behaviour should be embedded in the change process. It is the feeling of uncertainty and insecurity that make conservative people long for the status quo (Pickering & Keightley, 2006).

#### **The role of the family**

Families can do the following to inspire members who are classical to consume more responsibly.

1. Parents or any capable member could improve a classical member's ability and willingness to search for

and analyse information about innovative products by assigning information-related roles to this member and encouraging the person to perform the role. For example, such a member could be asked to search for information about alternatives to support family purchase decision or asked to share the family's experiences of products.

2. As children grow into adulthood, they should gradually and respectfully resist the pressure from parents to stick to traditions that do not embed sustainability. The children could make efforts to change their parents' consumption pattern as well as coach their siblings to embrace sustainability.
3. Parents should establish a sustainable consumption pattern as the family culture so that members can grow with it. The family also needs to ensure that members understand the idea that responsible consumption is a lifelong responsibility and that the family needs to continue to learn about the changing nature of the products and environment in order to keep making necessary changes.

#### **Level 3: The Effective Consumer**

Effective consumers are exploratory and goal-focused. They know their rights and responsibilities and have a lot of knowledge about products that are available in the market. Effective consumers usually like to learn of new offerings; try new products; compare quality and prices of options as well as read and share product experiences with others including consumers,



companies and regulators. These consumers are likely to be loyal to businesses that are innovative, responsive and trendy. They embrace environmental sustainability sometimes when it is in line with their consumption goals. This is not strange as studies have confirmed that people embrace sustainability because of perceived personal factors or benefits (Marchand & Walker, 2008). However, it is this selfish approach to sustainability that differentiates effective consumers from dependable consumers.

Across decades, consumer behaviour researchers including Nunnally and Lemond (1974) Raju (1980); Hirschman (1980) McAlister and Pessemier (1982); Baumgartner and Steenkamp (1996); and Dastidar (2016) commonly agree that the behaviours that have strong exploratory components are taking risks, being innovative, switching brands, information search, shopping, and communicating about product experiences among others. Some researchers argue that most times, consumers exhibit exploratory behaviours to gain satisfaction from the activity itself and not in any eventual outcome (Nunally&Lemond, 1974; O'Neil & Drillings, 1994). However, the exploratory activities of effective consumers such as information search and innovativeness are goal-driven. Effective consumers perform the activities to achieve concrete goals such as the purchase of a brand and not just for the fun of performing the activities. Researchers such as Hirschman (1980); Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1992);

Moe (2003); and Pfeiffer, Meibner, Prosiegel and Pfeiffer (2014) suggest that two broad motives underlie information seeking. According to the authors, the information could be sought as a means to some further end and information could also be sought out of curiosity, just to learn more about something. In the latter case, the acquisition of information is an end in itself. Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1992), based on their findings, stated that it is difficult to separate true curiosity-driven information seeking from goal-directed information seeking. However, more recent studies indicate that there is a clear distinction between the two. Thus, research by Moe (2003) suggests that goal-directed search and curiosity-driven search situations are linked to very different consumer motivations. Pfeiffer et. al. (2014) explain that in goal-directed situations, consumers need specific information such as product alternatives to find the alternative that best matches their individual preferences while in a curiosity-driven situation, a consumer will be primarily scanning and gathering general information about the available products.

### **Inspiring effective consumers towards a more responsible consumption pattern**

Nudging effective consumers to reach the highest level of responsible consumption involves positioning responsible consumption as a goal that is worth pursuing. Goals can be motivated by internal or external factors (Austin & Vancouver,1996) but what is important is that the individual makes a

personal decision to pursue the goals. Hence, consumers can be led through a deliberate goal-setting process by helping them understand the 'what', 'why', and 'how' of responsible consumption. That is, what responsible consumption is about, why they should consume responsibly and how they can consume responsibly. The 'what' and 'why' need to be convincing and the 'how' needs to be feasible for the consumer to see responsible consumption as desirable and feasible. If the 'what' and 'why' presented are not compelling enough, responsible consumption will remain mere wish or fantasy. Similarly, if the 'how' does not seem feasible, the consumer may not pursue the goal. Thus, according to Pieter and Baumgartner (2014), the general principle of expectancy-value theories is that the more desirable and feasible the goal, the higher the likelihood that it will be pursued. It is important to ensure that the goals are personally meaningful and valuable (Pfeiffer *et al.*, 2014) as well as attractive (Winell, 1987) to the pursuer.

In addition, making consumer information about responsible consumption, climate change and sustainable products more visible and easily accessible is important so that consumers can get the information and use them in decision making. It requires making such information available and accessible from multiple sources, including sources where consumers can easily access them with little or no charges. It is also important to make them comprehensible so that consumers can understand and use them without special language or data

analysis and interpretation skills. Also, several studies have revealed that consumers usually perceive sustainable options as inferior, less aesthetically pleasing, and more expensive (Bonini & Openheim, 2008; White *et al.*, 2019). These conditions need to change for effective consumers who generally appreciate innovations to find sustainable products attractive.

### **The role of the family**

The family can help members who are effective consumers by doing the following:

1. Discuss responsible consumption at home with an emphasis on why the family should consume responsibly and how the family can consume responsibly so that family members could form goal intentions around responsible consumption
2. Parents or any capable member of the family could lead members through a goal-setting session by first thinking about the what, why and how and putting them in ways that will appeal to the different family members. The goals should be linked to domains and values that the family member(s) appreciate the most.
3. Parents should monitor the kind of products that interest their children and work with them towards a more responsible consumption pattern. Effective consumers in families could be assigned to search for information on sustainable product alternatives and choose sustainable options for the family.

#### **Level 4: The Dependable Consumer**

Dependable consumers know and exercise their rights and responsibilities. They gather, process and use information about products to support decision making. They communicate their needs, expectations and experiences with other consumers, companies and regulators. Thus, dependable consumers possess the communication skills of effective consumers but are different when it comes to environmental sustainability. Unlike effective consumers who embrace sustainability only when it is the best means to their goals, dependable consumers consistently set and pursue consumption goals that sustain them and others. Their choices of what and how to consume is not just influenced by the need to meet their own goals but also by the need not to prevent other beings from meeting their own goals. Thus, dependable consumers are selfless people who subjugate their own selfish goals to a greater ambition of a better world and better future for coming generations. Indeed, selflessness is a prominent characteristic of responsible consumers (Marchand & Walker, 2008; 2010; Ulusoy, 2016) and because they are consistently selfless, other consumers, companies, regulators, eco-systems and future generations can depend on the level 4 consumer for constructive communications and consumption behaviours that support their sustainable survival.

Level 4 consumers manifest strong loyalty for brands that embed sustainability. They nudge companies to

adopt sustainability practices by consistently patronising sustainable products; giving constructive feedback to companies and sharing product experiences with other consumers. Research shows that level 4 consumers are statistically rare (White, Hardisty & Habib, 2019; IKEA, 2019). People who are selfless and disciplined in thoughts and actions can reach level 4 easily but those who are selfish and lack self-control will have difficulty reaching level 4. The family is responsible for planting the seeds of level 4 (selflessness and self-control) in their members and coming generations.

#### **Conclusion**

Responsible consumption can help families enhance the quality of their lives and the lives of others as well as minimize waste and reserve some resources for coming generations. This paper provides a framework for understanding different kinds of consumers and how families can help each member consume responsibly.

#### **Recommendation**

1. The framework may be used in future sustainable consumption campaigns, education, consultation and research.
2. More research is required to comprehend consumer behaviour relating to responsible consumption.
3. There is an empirical test of the theoretical assumptions made in this article.
4. Exploration of how the change to more sustainable consumption patterns in families can be influenced from bottom-up.

5. Evolving practical ways children can influence parents to make the change that is required, especially children with conservative parents who have irresponsible consumption traditions. It is expected that knowledge of these issues raised in this paper may lead to a deeper understanding and more successful promotion of responsible consumption for sustainable family survival.

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