

# Consuming fashions

Sohail Inayatullah on the future of shopping

**T**O BUY or not to buy, she thinks. The carpet looks beautiful, but what were the conditions under which it was made? She takes out her mobile phone and uses it to access the Web. At [www.greenleftstandards.com](http://www.greenleftstandards.com), she finds out that the carpet was made in a village co-operative. Profits there are shared and the working conditions, while tough, are safe. A ranking from the world consumer union showed it to be an 80-star product. Good, but not a perfect 100 – even as a co-operative, most of the profits still go to the distributor.

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"Perhaps, instead, the Belgium ready-made carpet," she thinks. But the ratings on it are even lower. True, labour is not exploited, but chemical dyes are used – 70 stars. The shopper does another search of carpet companies, and finds none ranked above 80 stars. "I'll start on my own business," she thinks. "Totally Web-based, getting rid of the distributor, or would I still need a shopfront?" But she pauses: she is not ready to become a producer. Being an ethical consumer is more to her liking – and the money spent wisely might, if not save the world, at least pressure business to make it better.

Such a scenario is not far from becoming real. Two converging trends promise to change the nature and politics of consumerism. The first is rapid developments in computer and telecommunications that both create more information and enable easier access to it. Before too long, consumers may simply electronically scan a product to obtain an environmental or equity rating on it (through a global-rating organisation), or use the Web to search for product information. Along with these technological changes, trends in consumer behaviour suggest that not just price, but also social and environmental values will help to determine the success of many a product's future. While there will always be companies trying to "greenwash" consumers, using their hopes for a better world to pull a quick one, the flow of information on the Net could help shoppers use their dollars to create the future they want.

More information about products is already available, and is starting to influence production around the world. Already the Pakistani or Iranian carpet-maker has to consider the local middle-class-values-oriented shopper as well as Western buyers with concerns about human rights. Some of these producers are beginning to develop their own Web sites and start direct global selling.

A dramatic evolution of product standards is under way. Once, they were merely about functionality: does the product work? Then came issues of price and aesthetics (how good does it look?). Now many consumers care not so much about the product itself, but the identity it gives to the buyer – not, "Does the T-shirt keep me warm, or is the fit right, or the price?", but "What does it say on it, how does it represent me to others?" This last phase has two demographic groups buying. The first are baby boomers with unsettled identities; the second are big-city Third World youth, wanting to be seen as American, as globally hip, instead of locally poor.

But a new phase is starting – products whose sales depend on meeting the demands of the rights generation, those who have grown up amid UN declarations and conferences – the emerging global civil society. Their concerns include the environment, and the rights of women, children and labour. Now, therefore, not only does a product have to be effective, look good and have a competitive price, it also must be made in conditions in which child

workers are not exploited, the environment not ruined and the corporation not discriminate in its employment practices. The Pakistani carpet company that figures this out and markets through the Web will have a strong comparative advantage. International non-governmental organisations will jump to promote the ethical product and, slowly and surely, Pakistani carpet exports will expand, tourism will grow and the Pakistani economy and culture benefit.

Does this sound too idealistic, or at least premature? Perhaps, but take the case of Monsanto. In April last year, Monsanto chief Robert Shapiro proclaimed that genetically modified food would solve the world's food problems. A few weeks later GM food protests began in Europe; questions of side-effects entered the public discourse. Consumers voted with their dollars, rejecting not just products, but shares as well. The company's stock tumbled and, irrespective of the science involved, the dangers were seen as too great. Monsanto, as Shell did in the mid-'90s after it encountered massive public opposition to its operations in Nigeria and its attempt to sink an

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oil rig in the North Sea, accepted defeat and stopped trying to promote GM foods in Europe.

Shell has become so concerned about the impact of current policies on future generations that it keeps an empty seat at board meetings to represent the spirit of future generations. Since future generations cannot speak, the seat becomes the voice of the future. So even Shell, indirectly responsible for the tragedy of Nigeria, is seeking ways for others to speak.

But while the Nigerian villager still has to depend on others for her voice, consumers in OECD nations are information-rich. And technology is making them richer all the time, as the Net becomes increasingly a resource for an individual's specific needs. Eventually, the computer will disappear, as it becomes part of our phone, our house, our car, our clothes. As we move to always-on, wearable "computers" – ones that monitor not only our spending patterns but also our heart rate and kilojoule intake – we will enter a new relationship with our consumer selves. "Should I eat the extra chocolate bar?" This won't be just a question of conscience but will be informed by immediate data as to the chocolate's impact on my emotions, my weight and, critically for many consumers, where the chocolate bar was made. Already in Germany, fair-trade or social-justice stores stock sweets made by local cooperatives from South America where profits stay in the community and workers are the owners. They don't yet taste as good as

Cadbury, but the producers have understood that social conscience can be marketed.

Already a Web site exists that allows readers to estimate the environmental footprint – amount of land and other resources needed to sustain a particular lifestyle – they are leaving on the Earth ([www.lead.org/leadnet/footprint/intro.htm](http://www.lead.org/leadnet/footprint/intro.htm)). For now the footprints are aggregates – for example, an average Canadian needs 22 hectares of farmland, forest, mines and dumps to support his or her lifestyle while an Indian needs only two hectares. But with green Web-bots, as they might be called, one could know one's own footprint. Then we would immediately know the consequences our lives were having for our children. Would we change, or keep consuming in the same way? If the second, we could no longer blame others for the state of the Earth – the choice would be ours.

Even if we don't make such political decisions, instant computer feedback will confront us with the mismatch between our diet and behaviour and what we know is best. For example, a Harvard School of Public Health study showed that eating low-fat diets, exercising regularly and not smoking could cut the chances of developing heart disease by 82 per cent. Yet no more than 2 per cent of the 84,000 women studied – all nurses and other health professionals – followed such a healthy regime.

Among the main reasons for the mismatch is that people's daily health decisions – fried chips or fruit, full-fat ice-cream or the low-fat alternative, walk or take the car – have no immediate consequences. Would we still act against our best interest if we instantly knew the impact of our consumption on our heart?

Or take our driving. Passing the speed limit may not only provoke an alarm in the car to sound – as is available now – but also a voice message providing the latest data on accidents and fatalities caused by speeding (and perhaps a hologram depiction of one's own possible death). Or what about a computer telling us how many car emissions we are producing and their effect on the environment? Would that change our behaviour? Again, the choice will be ours.

This green Internet world may seem overly controlled, even eco-fascist to many, but more information might help us fund and use clean technologies. By making markets smarter, consumers will more likely, although not necessarily, make wiser choices. As the middle man recedes, and consumer choices become transparent and informed, smart markets may help us create an alternative future to the dominance of what American writer Edward Luttwak calls "turbocapitalism".

If so, the next phase of world capitalism may well be a worker's revolution – not fought on the streets, but on the Net, through perfect information, transparency, and our collective conscience. We might come to define ourselves not by the maxim of "I shop therefore I am", but by "I consume and produce wisely, thereby creating the future I want to see."

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