HUMAN RIGHTS AND CONSUMER EDUCATION FOR BETTER QUALITY OF LIFE

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Abstract

In today's world, knowing our rights as humans and consumers are critical in order to enhance our quality of life and sustain it. Ignorance of our human and consumer rights can subject us to all kinds of continuous exploitations and persecutions. This article tries to make a case on human rights and consumer education as an essential part of the national education curriculum. The article argues that human rights and consumer educations should not be confined to schools but be part of a life-long learning process. Further, it should not be for the ordinary citizens only but also for those in authority, like enforcement officers and managers in the corporate sectors. By everyone understanding human rights and consumer rights it is hope that the world can be a better place, not only through good governance but also justice in the market-place. This is based on the philosophy that the best form of protection is self-protection.

Keywords: Consumers, communication, education, environment, governments, humans and rights.

Abstrak

Dalam dunia hari ini, pengetahuan tentang hak-hak kita sebagai manusia dan pengguna adalah kritikal dalam usaha untuk meningkatkan kualiti hidup dan kelestariannya. Kejahilan tentang hak asasi manusia dan kepenggunaan menjadikan kita sebagai subjek eksploitasi dan penganiayaan yang berterusan. Artikel ini cuba mengkaji kes mengenai hak-hak asasi manusia dan pendidikan pengguna sebagai bahagian yang penting dalam kurikulum pendidikan negara. Artikel ini menghujahkan bahawa hak asasi manusia dan pendidikan pengguna tidak harus terhad kepada sekolah-sekolah tetapi menjadi sebahagian daripada proses pembelajaran sepanjang hayat. Selain

itu, ia tidak hanya penting kepada rakyat biasa sahaja tetapi juga untuk pihak yang berkuasa seperti pegawai-pegawai penguat kuasa dan pengurus di sektor korporat. Apabila semua orang memahami tentang hak asasi manusia dan hak-hak pengguna, adalah menjadi harapan bahawa dunia ini boleh menjadi tempat yang lebih baik, bukan hanya melalui tadbir urus yang baik tetapi juga keadilan dalam pasaran tempat. Hal ini adalah berdasarkan kepada falsafah bahawa perisai paling baik ialah melindungi diri sendiri.

Kata kunci: *Pengguna, komunikasi, pendidikan, alam sekitar, kerajaan, manusia dan hak.*

Introduction

Increasingly globalised and sophisticated communication practices plus the world becoming more human rights and consumer oriented requires human rights and consumer education to be mandatory in the communicators' professional training and education. This requirement is based on the current world development that is increasingly emphasising more on human rights and consumer protection. Additionally, the people are increasingly becoming more aware of their rights as citizen and consumer, including their human rights. With higher and better education, they are increasingly demanding their rights that are deem as rightly theirs in a modern state.

Furthermore, the media especially the social media are perceived to be increasingly perpetuating crisis or chaos, even violence. Terrorism seems to be the order of the day, whether physically or economically. The United Nations (UN) is also increasingly promoting human rights to create a more humane and better world. Certain advanced nations have also taken it upon themselves to be the "police of the world", in particular, the European Union (EU) and the United States of America (USA).

Generally, they do so with the excuses of promoting democracies and/or defending human rights. In reality, they are often perceived by their "beneficiaries" as trying to serve their self-interest, especially with regard to their imperial intentions, especially for commercial gains. Consequently, our world has become an unsafe and unstable place.

To worsen matters, our environment is increasingly being jeopardised. This can be because of either greed or ignorance or even both. Today, it is more often because of greed. Certain super nations preached about the importance of protecting the environment, yet they are among the main contributors to pollutions and are not even signatories to major conventions aimed at preserving our environment. For example, the USA claim itself to champion human rights and saving the environment, but it does signed minimal conventions or treaties to that effect.

However, now invaded are nations perceived for disrespecting and more so abusing human rights. In Syria, the existing government of the Assad Regime is being treated like "pariah" with the western governments like USA and the EU helping the various rebel groups in ousting it. Russia is accused of supporting the Assad Regime. This has created a massive human tragedy creating thousands of refugees fleeing to the West for a better life. However, these refugees are generally unwelcome and certain EU states consider them problematic and potential human "time bomb."

Further, at the very least, countries perceived to abuse human rights will perpetually have a negative image. The USA and its allies thus invaded Afghanistan and Iraq. Their excuses were that those governments were abusing human rights. Those "abusive" leaders were thus deposed because human rights violations. As for Afghanistan, the UN not only gave its blessing but also was involved in the ousting of the Taliban government deemed be constantly violating human rights. China before hosting the best ever Olympic was continuously threatened to have it taken away from them because of their bad human rights record.

Many studies have shown that governments abusing human rights cannot expect too many investors to come and set shops or businesses in their countries. Additionally, studies have shown that more investors will not only shy away from such nations but existing ones have the tendency to exit and invest in countries with better or seen as trying to improve their human rights records.

The consumer and human rights movements in the 21st century will be increasingly stronger and vocal at all levels, i.e. local, national and global

levels. Civil society will also be the order of the day, with more citizens demanding to participate in public affairs and for governments to practice good governance. A more democratic practice universally will further empower the citizens. Governments can no longer afford to ignore their citizens' aspirations. Every nations and governments must honour the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights or popularly known as the UDHR with its many covenants and treaties or instruments. Any government ignoring or neglecting it, do so at its own peril. One of the more significant reasons for the North African and Middle East revolutions are their governments disregard for human rights as well as its economic woes.

Today, no governments or any organisations can sit pretty and ignore human rights abuses or consumer issues. In fact, citizens today do not tolerate to any kind of violations occurring in their societies or nations. To enhance and sustain any governments or organisations, they must be very sensitive to any happenings around them that are deeming to violate human rights. They must be able to defend human rights and advice their employers against abusing human rights and consumer interest or in any forms of violations.

Human rights and consumer studies will be increasingly indispensable for inculcating good, effective, and ethical good governance that can contribute to peace and prosperity at the local, national, and global levels. Ignoring it will invite problems or crisis and even their downfall. Advantages of having human rights and consumer education can include the following eight outcomes:

1. Civil servants and citizens will have more respect for human dignity.
2. Civil servants and citizens will be more prone to be pro-human and justice.
3. Civil servants and citizens will be more sensitive to injustices among fellow humans and in the market place.
4. Civil servants and citizens will have more tendencies to be pro-democracy.
5. Civil servants and citizens will have more respect for freedom of speech.
6. Civil servants and citizens will have more respect for media freedom.
7. Civil servants and citizens will be more environments friendly.
8. Civil servants and citizens will be able to handle human rights and consumers' complaints more effectively and sincerely.

It is essential that governments will take it compulsory for civil servants, relevant bodies and citizens to undertake human rights and consumer education with the above eights as the desired objectives.

Comprehending Human Rights

Generally, human rights refer to the "basic rights and freedoms to which all humans are entitled." Rights and freedoms, for instance are often referred as human rights. It includes civil and political rights. Further, it includes the right to life and liberty, free speech or freedom of expression, equality before the law, social, cultural and economic rights. Also, it incorporates the right to food, the right to work, the right to education the right to participate in culture.

The UDHR preamble declares it "as the recognition of our inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family to freedom, justice, and peace in the world. It states that disregard and contempt of human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people."

Further, it emphasise that, "It is essential that if man is not to be compelled to have recourse as a last resort to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, those human rights should be protected by the rule of law."

The UDHR's Preamble also emphasized, "The essential of promoting friendly relations between nations." I fervently believe that by understanding and practicing human rights we can build, enhance and sustain relationship at all levels, between citizens and across nations. This means that we can become competent at local and national levels but also globally.

This year the UDHR is 67 years old. It has won worldwide acceptance. The UN reported that, "When representatives of the world's 48 nations signed the UDHR on 10 December 1948, these principles and ideals were unknown to many people. Today, there are few places in the world where people do not have an opinion on human rights. Either, they have a general idea of it, if not particular knowledge of specific rights. They also demand their human rights."

Of the 30 UDHR articles listed, one of the most essential should be, "Article 19, the right to freedom of opinion and expression. Without the right to speak out, protecting the other basic human rights can be extremely difficult if not hazardous." Most citizens believe that the spirit of the media is embodied in "Article 19: it is their voice, their expression of one of the most basic human rights – the freedom to state one's opinion. As democratic nation's citizens, we must ensure that the media are free to perform their tasks with responsibilities. Non-governmental organizations must make all the effort to safeguard media freedom."

Thus, the believe that if we as part of the education and communication professionals are to play our role effectively in informing our public or citizens about the world around them, it is essential that we understand the concepts and language of human rights and the systems established – initially via the UN – to protect and promote those rights. Additionally, it is most crucial that we be not seen as part of the government or corporate interest that only wants to use the media to serve their own ends and not the national and public interest.

We should never overestimate the significance of education and effective plus interactive communication in human life. It may be a truism. Nevertheless, it is so true. Any society ignoring education can cease to exist, much less to prosper. Clearly, education and interactive effective communication is a fundamental and vital process to develop and progress sustainably.

Author believes that modern life conditions increasingly necessitate the needs for the free flow of communication and lifelong education. Increasingly, more scholars feel that. "Growing secularisation has meant more areas of life are open to opinion rather than divine law and to communication rather than revelation." Author believes that educations and effective interactive communication become a must to develop a modern and progressive society.

The fast advancing industrialisation has increased literacy. It extended technical facilities for mass communication and universal education. Also, rapid urbanisations unite large audiences. It clearly manifested the need for effective communication and education. Also, it generated the need for

education and communication within and between audiences, and among the many different social groups. These increasingly make social media very powerful. It empowers the people and increasingly become a major source of information and education.

Clearly, the democratic processes progress and education has increased the public whose articulations matters. It has also enhanced social and political responsibilities of educationists and activists.

The communication free flow needs and education are essentials for freedom of expression, speech or even media. Its impact on the education quality, public opinion articulateness and life quality is not only apparent but significant. Clearly, mass media growth, literacy expansion, and popular franchise extension strengthened democratic institutions and lifelong education requirements.

Increasing free expression and level of articulation is usually link to improving the democratic system in the nation's concern. However, it requires three basic ingredients. Namely; (I) the right to transmit, (II) the right to receive and (III) lifelong learning. Now, factors like access to media, and communication resources to promote lifelong learning, participation and representation are considered necessary.

Generally, the concept of democratic communication to promote lifelong education is perceive as two fold. Firstly, it involves society and participation of the media. Secondly, as communication is equal to society itself, it is almost impossible to consider communication freedom without examining societal democratisation holistically including the role of education.

However, today itself, there are people who continue to question freedom of communication values. Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the UN lamented, "There are, however, those who still question the value of freedom of speech in their societies; those who argue that it threatens stability and endangers progress; those who still consider freedom of speech an imposition from abroad and not the indigenous expression of every people's demand for freedom. This argument is never made by the people,

but the Government; never by the powerless but by the powerful; never by the voiceless but by those whose voices are the only ones allowed to be heard."

Today, media freedom is believed to be essential in all society, especially for those nations claiming to be a democratic state. So today, media freedom is seen as part of the freedom of expression that is preserved in the national constitution. Therefore, not surprisingly democratic nation citizens see media freedom as a right, not a privilege. Thus, the constant battle between the people and the Government persist to ensure media freedom which is rightly equated with freedom of speech is not limited or trampled.

Communication professionals and educationists therefore must be the vanguard to safeguard and promote freedom of the media. This is especially critical in nations where the people are severely constrained by media freedom limitations. However, normal citizens are equally sadly impacted. This is due to critical knowledge essential to the people welfare are inadequately communicated to those who are badly in need of them.

Freedom of the media is required in contemporary mass society because all the communication channels perform a number of essential functions in today's living. It includes six of the following functions or roles: First, the free media or communication channels serve as an information or surveillance function. Second, the free media serve the function of agenda-setting and interpretation. Third, the free media assist the citizens to create and maintain connections with various groups in society. Fourth, the free media assist citizens to socialize and to educate themselves. Fifth, the free mass media persuade citizens to purchase certain items and accept or reject some certain ideas. Finally, in the sixth function, the free media inspires and entertains their audiences.

The amount of time the public spend on the media is amazing. This huge amount is not decreasing. It is only going to be forever booming. The number of people exposing themselves to the media is increasingly growing fast. Communication channels are also rapidly expanding, in pervasiveness and penetrations. New technologies like the internet have multiplied the information channels and programs available to the average person.

However, it's still the mass media, like radio, television, newspapers and magazines that provides most citizens with the data they need to play their role as productive members of their societies. Thus, for better or worse, we are inevitably and completely linked to the mass media. We must be fully aware that this media culture is becoming very pervasive and penetrative, making it very powerful when exploited. It is now more apparent with the social media. By it becoming very accessible, affordable and user friendly the number of people using it expanding rapidly and globally.

Realising the unbridle power of mass media and its impact on education, Part III of the International Covenant On Civil and Political Rights of its Article 20 states, "The exercise of the rights provided in paragraph 2 of this article carries with it special duties and responsibilities. Therefore, it may be subjected to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary:

i.   For respect of the rights or reputation of others.
ii.   For the protection of national security or of public order, or of public health or morals.
iii. Any propaganda for war shall be prohibited by law.
iv.   Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law."

It shall be the duty of all to adhere to these restrictions. Thus, it should be made as part of all code of communication practice. Anyone breaching it should be disciplined by appropriate laws.

Advocating Human Rights and the UDHR

In advocating human rights, the UDHR is the main instrument. Representatives from eight nations, comprising of China, Lebanon, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, United Kingdom, Australia, Chile, France and the United States drafted it. The UDHR was declared on 10th December 1948 at the United Nations General Assembly when representatives of 48 of the world's countries adopted it. The UDHR adoption is in response to the atrocities committed

during World War II. Till today, the UDHR is a non-binding resolution. However, it has now become part and parcel of the international customary law. National and other judiciaries would invoke it under appropriate or certain circumstances.

The UDHR urges member nations, "To promote a number of human, civil, economic and social rights, asserting these rights are part of the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world. The declaration was the first international legal effort to limit the behavior of states and press upon them duties to their citizens following the model of the rights-duty duality."

Clearly, the UDHR has enshrines universal rights as the drafters felt it should be. Thus, it applies to all humans equally, regardless of geographical region, nation, race or culture they belong.

However, cultural relativism proponents demand for acceptance of different cultures interpretations even though their interpretations or practices may be in conflict with human rights. The example often given is regarding female genital mutilation occurring in different regions and cultures in South America, African and Asia. In reality no religion mandated it. However, many cultures have instituted it and even believe it is their religions requirements. Today, most nations and the international community have considered it as women's and girls' rights violation. Thus, many nations have illegalized it.

Clearly, in human rights, universalism is not universally accepted. Some have even described it as cultural, economic or political imperialism. Hence, sadly the concept of human rights is often claimed to be heavily influenced by the politically liberal outlook of the West. Thus, although generally accepted in Europe, North America or Japan, human rights are rejected as standard or universal elsewhere. In 1981, for instance, Said Rajaie-Khoorasssani, the Iranian United Nations representative, announced his nation position regarding the UDHR by stating that it was "a secular understanding of the Judeo-Christian tradition which could not be implemented by Muslims without trespassing the Islamic law."

Additionally, in the 1990's, both the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir bin Mohamad and the ex-Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew claimed that Asian values were very different from western ones. Both asserted. "Asian values include the sense of loyalty, and foregoing personal freedoms for the sake of social stability and prosperity. Therefore, authoritarian government is more appropriate in Asia than democracy."

This view was countered by Mahathir's former deputy, Anwar Ibrahim who at that time was Malaysia's opposition head, "To say that freedom is Western or unAsian is to offend our traditions as well as our forefathers, who gave their lives in the struggle against tyranny and injustices."

Author suppose Anwar was referring to colonised or occupied nations fighting for their independence and after gaining freedom to uphold it for their citizens and the new leaders not behaving worse than the past colonial masters.

However, Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamad despite their authoritarian style that were much criticised, especially by Western leaders have brought much progress to their people and nations.

Until now, what actually are human rights? Hot debates, if not controversies on it persists. Some claim it lean too heavily to the Western rights. Not enough consideration to Eastern or Asian rights is given. Others say that it is too pro the advanced nations' values. Many developing nations' leaders have asked it to be revised to make it more relevant and contemporary. For example, as mentioned, a former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohammad argued, "That the nations that signed the UDHR 60 years ago did not understand the needs of developing countries. The priorities of poor countries are not so much of freedom but more on food supply and other resources."

Most developing countries leaders believe that development is a prerequisite for human rights promotion and protection. They consider the indifference of certain Western nations towards the crucial link between human rights and development as deliberate intention to maintain and perpetuate the North-South divide, a strategy to maintain their superiority.

Author believes that the international community must recognise the need for, "The interdependence and indivisibility of political, civil, economic, social, and cultural rights." It is often felt that the excessive pursuit of one set of rights to the exclusion of others is not helpful. It only builds up a confrontational atmosphere.

Further, it is unfair to conclude, like the Western controlled media and many in the developed West, that people in other parts of the world are indifferent or do not practice human rights. We must be aware that the world great civilizations and religions have expounded concepts of human rights. However, it is within the framework of a relationship between humans and God. Religious texts and treaties of great civilisations of the East also contain discussions on various aspects of human rights and human dignity. Therefore, we should never regard human rights as value imported from the West. Rather, that it is indigenous and has developed with the times and from within, one's own experiences and value systems. Also, that it is essential to provide every citizen with human rights education meeting the UDHR requirements plus with adequate considerations to local needs.

UDHR Modern Interpretation

In 1993, The World Conference on Human Rights adopted a modern interpretation to the original UDHR contentnimity level of these conventions, in terms of how many and which countries have ratified them varies were fully discussed. It includes the degree to which they are respected by various states. This was done to enhance a sense of ownership towards the UDHR.

Further, the World Summit in 2005 reasserted the international community's fidelity to the principle that, "The universal nature of human rights and freedoms is beyond question."

Additionally, the UN established a number of *treaty-based* bodies to monitor and study human rights practice and violations. It is headed by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) comprising of experts who can work independently. These experts monitor the implementations of the core international human rights treaties as created by the treaty they monitor.

Council for Human Rights

At the 2005 World Summit, The United Nations Human Rights Council, replace the United Nations Commissioners on Human Rights. It is mandated to investigate human rights abuses or violations. The Human Rights Council is the General Assembly subsidiary body reporting directly to it. It is placed under the Security Council, which has the last say for the United Nations Charter interpretation.

The council consist of 47 of the 191 member states. Members are elected by simple majority in a secret ballot of the United Nations General Assembly. They serve a period of not more than six years. However, their membership can be suspended or even revoked for gross human rights abuses.

Based in Geneva, the councils meet thrice annually. In case of urgent needs additional meeting can be convened. It maintained independent experts called rapporteurs. They investigate and probe alleged human rights infringement and reported to the council with their findings and recommendations.

"The Human Rights Council may request that the Security Council take action when human rights violations occur. This action may be direct actions, may involve sanctions, and the Security Council may also refer cases to the International Criminal Court (ICC) even if the issue being referred is outside the normal jurisdiction of the ICC."

Human Rights Violations

Transgressions occur when any state or non-state actor violates any part of the UDHR treaty or other international human rights or humanitarian laws. Regarding human rights contravention of United Nations laws: "Article 39 of the United Nations Charter designates the UN Security Council (or an appointed authority) as the only tribunal that may determine UN human rights violations."

Human rights encroachments are monitored by UN committees, national institutions and governments. Further, many independent NGO's (non-governmental organizations), such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Freedom House, World Organisation Against Torture, International Freedom of Expression Exchange and Anti-Slavery International also monitors human rights abuses. These organisations collect evidences and documents human rights infractions to apply pressure for enforcing human rights laws.

According to human rights NGOs like the Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, only a very few nations do not commit significant human rights violations. Wide varieties of databases are available trying to measure, in a rigorous fashion, exactly what violations governments commit against those within their jurisdictions. Wars of aggression, war crimes and crimes against humanity, including genocide, are among the International humanitarian law serious breaches. They form human rights most heinous violations.

Enforcements of international human rights law is the Nation State responsibility. Each government primary responsibility is to make human rights a reality in their own country. Today, no international court enforcing human rights legislations existed. The International Criminal Court only enforced crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide. In Europe, the Council of Europe is responsible for the European Convention on Human Rights, while the European Court of Human Rights acts as a court of last appeal for human rights issues in member states.

In reality, many human rights violations are almost impossible to legally prosecute. This is because of the non-existence of consensus on the exercising of certain rights, the lack of relevant national laws or of bodies empowered to enforce them.

Raging Ongoing Debated Rights

Today, the status quo of human rights thinking is constantly being compromised or challenged. This arises from the rapid advances of human philosophy, technology and medicine. Now, unforeseen possibilities and

events occur frequently. They impacted existing rights which potentially require new approaches. Three of the most critical areas in my mind are water, environmental and consumer rights.

Water

"Currently, no universal human right to water, binding or not, is enshrined by the United Nations or any other multilateral body." In November 2002, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights issued a non-binding comment affirming that access to water was a human right *"… the human right to water is indispensable for leading a life in dignity. It is a prerequisite for the realisation of other human rights"* (United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights).

Environmental rights

"The onset of various environmental issues, especially climate change, has created potential conflicts between different human rights. Human rights ultimately require a working ecosystem and healthy environment, but the granting of certain rights to individuals may damage these. In the area of environmental rights, the responsibilities of multinational corporations, so far relatively unaddressed by human rights legislation, are of paramount consideration" (United Nations Environment Programme).

Consumption and the Environment

Today's over consumption tendencies is undermining our environmental resource base faster. This phenomenon is quickly worsening inequalities. It is rapidly exacerbating in-equities not only among rich and poor nations but also among people in the same countries.

The dynamics of the consumption-poverty-inequality-environment nexus persistently accelerate. If the trends prolong unchanged today's problems of consumption and human development will aggravate. Some maybe will be beyond redemption. Thus, we must act now and fast. For examples, to redistribute from high-income to low-income consumers,

transforming from polluting to cleaner products and production technologies, promoting goods empowering needy producers, changing priority from consumption for conspicuous vanity to basic needs fulfillment.

The real issue is not consumption in itself. It is more of its effects and patterns. Unbridled growth in consumption in the last half of the century is straining the environment as never been experience before. Today, we rapidly consume a variety of resources and products as a consequence of having moved beyond basic needs to include luxury items and technological innovations in our efforts to enhance efficiency. Such consumption beyond minimal and basic needs is not necessarily a bad thing in itself. Historically, we as humans and consumers have always desired to seek ways and means to make our lives and world a better place.

However, progressively, there are critical issues and questions around consumerism that we need to understand. For example:

1. How products and resources we use are really produced?
2. What are the affect of that production process on our environment, individual and society?
3. What are the affect of consumption certain forms on usage of our environment, individuals and society?
4. Which actors affect our consumption choices?
5. Which actors affect how and why things are produced or not?
6. What are basic needs and what are luxurious?
7. How do items demands affect the requirements placed upon our environment?
8. How do our consumption habits change as societies transform in the light that businesses and advertising are major engines in promoting our product consumption so that they may survive?
9. How much of what we consume is influenced by their needs versus our needs and that the culture of today in many countries, as well as the media and the political institutions themselves are becoming very influential?

10.   What is the impact on poorer nations and people on the demands of the wealthier nations and their consumers that are able to afford to consume more?

11.   How material values do influences our relationships with other people as human and consumers?

12.   What impacts do all the above questions have on our personal values and consumption patterns?

The lists and questions continue. Just from them, we can think of numerous others as well. It is now more apparent that consumerism and consumption are the core issues of many, if not most nations and societies. Consumerism impact, be it positive or negative are very critical not only to all aspects of our lives, but to our planet wellbeing as well. However, just as important to consider in discussing patterns of consumption is the underlying system that promotes certain forms of consumption and not other types. Unfortunately, latent in today's global economic system is our wasteful utilization of resources, labor and capital. These must be resolved urgently.

Even in 2005, the UN statistics are already hard hitting. The 2005 UN statistics highlighted one of the adverse effects caused by corporate led globalization today. It suggested, "Over population is usually blamed as the major cause of environmental degradation, but statistics strongly suggests otherwise. As we will see, consumption patterns today are not to meet everyone's needs. The system that drives these consumption patterns also contribute to inequality of consumption patterns too. Global inequality in consumption, while reducing, is still high."

According to the UN 2005 statistics, "The wealthiest 20% of the world accounted for 76.6% of total private consumption and the poorest fifth just 1.5%. The richest 20% of the world's people account for 80% of the world's total consumption; conversely, the other 80% of the world accounts for only 20% of total world consumption."

Further, according to the Commission on Development of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP), "Global consumption of goods and services has topped $24 trillion dollars, annually, but it is not even. A

thousand Germans consume about 10 times as much as 1000 Egyptians and produce that much more waste. A child born in North America or England will consume, waste and pollute more in a lifetime than as many as 50 children in a developing country" (Red & green, 1998).

Thus, the WCRP forewarns the people of the world to avoid consumption that hurt others well-being. They are advised to be, "Socially responsible and sustainable to future generations and the environment that support the world; that is, they are calling for fair and sustainable consumption in the global village."

Since consumption is the core business to many countries economies, even to the current globalization structures, it is unsurprising that its negative outcomes are increasingly vividly seen and felt the world over. How we consume, and for what reasons drive how we extract resources, create products and yield pollution and waste. Thus, consumption issues clearly affect environmental degradation, poverty and hunger. It even includes the rise in obesity that is now nearing proportions similar to the official global poverty levels.

Similarly, political and economic systems that are currently promoted globally in part to push consumption further lead to tragic poverty and exploitation. Most of the world cannot and do not consume like the wealthier in the world do. Indeed, the UN statistics highlight this so graphically. In fact, the inequality structured within the system is such that someone has to pay for the way the wealthier in the world consume. Generally, it's the poor. Thus, relatively and in reality the poor pays more and even subsidies the rich of the world.

Evidently, consumption is a concept with multitude meanings and interpretations. "From the 1300's to the late 1800's, the word *consume* had negative connotations, meaning to destroy, to use up, to waste and to exhaust. When the meaning of consume shifted, in the early 1900's, to encompass pleasure, enjoyment and freedom, consumption moved from a means to an end in its own right. Living life to the fullest, more and more be damned the consequences, has become synonymous with consumption, with many of

the negative consequences we see today (Bouchet, 1996; Goldsmith, 1996). "Veritably, according to Gabriel and Lang (1995, 26) "in the late twentieth century, the word 'consumer' is regaining its older, destructive connotations." In this early 21st, we should be trying to educate our consumers to practice a sustainable lifestyle and to make a strong point that rapid over consumption will lead to our own quick destruction via environmental degradation.

Again, author really feels strongly that the professional communicators and educators should be in the forefront of educating consumers to consume sustainably and to lead a sustainable lifestyle. As such, the contemporary communicators and educators can be seen as among the chief promoter if not perpetrator of the very unsustainable today's lifestyle. They must make amend to this so as to protect their reputation. They can do this by not only giving top priority to public interest but by being very involved in promoting human rights, viable consumption and sustainable lifestyle. They can work with the people's movement and in particular the consumer and environmental organizations to achieve their aim to be seen as very responsible and proactive professions.

Consumerism

Firstly, we must always remember that consumerism as a concept has divergent meanings to different people in various contexts. At least, five different approaches and interpretations are identified. The five are:

1. Consumerism is the essence of the good life and a vehicle for freedom, power and happiness. Here, consumers are seen as capable of making choices and enjoying goods and services, as well as nature.
2. Consumerism supplements politics, religion and work. It is seen as the key instrument by which distinction and social status are measured. It is believed that by showcasing all accumulated goods one gains prestige and envy. This support Thorstein Veblen ideology of conspicuous consumption.
3. Consumerism is usually seen as the continual chase for improving living standards so as to justify global development and capitalism via trade and marketplace internationalism.

4. Consumerism is a social movement to ensure consumer protection against business excesses and promoting consumer rights and responsibilities. It incorporate concerns for three values: namely value for money, value for people and value for the environment.
5. Consumerism today is increasingly seen as a political jig to gain power and influence. Many government are now shifting from the paternalistic mode of service provider and citizens' protector to privatization of services that can be easily purchased in the private marketplace.

Putting aside the phenomena of social movement and state privatization, consumerism has been defined as the misplaced belief or even myth that consumption will gratify the individual. In this sense, according to Goodwin, Ackerman and Kiron (1997), "Consumerism is an acceptance of consumption as a way to self-development, self-realization and self-fulfillment. In such a consumer society, an individual's identity is tied to what s/he consumes. People buy more than they need for basic subsistence and are concerned for their self-interest rather than mutual, communal interest or ecological interest. Thus, in such consumer society whatever maximizes individual happiness is best, equated to accumulation of goods and use of services."

Consumerism, as designed, is "economically manifested in the chronic purchasing of goods and services, with little attention to their true need, durability, origin of the product or the environmental consequences of manufacture and disposal" (Verdant, 1997, web citation). Consumerism is normally linked to the Western world or the more advance nations. However, in reality consumerism is multi-cultural and non-geographical. For example, as seen today in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Taipei, Tel Aviv, Bahrain, New Delhi and Dubai, all known to have massive shopping complexes with huge followings.

Actually, consumerism, as in people buying goods or consuming materials beyond their basic needs, is as old as the first civilizations. For example, Ancient Egypt, Babylon, Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome were all renowned market centers. Clearly, consumerism is not a new phenomenon. However, it has become widespread or pervasive only over the late 20th century and especially in recent decades. This accelerated growth is believed

to be under the influence of neoliberal capitalism. This phenomenal negative development is seen as unrelenting in this early 21st century.

Consumer Movement

Hence, for this article author decided to concentrate on consumerism as a social movement to enhance consumer interest and protection including promotion of sustainable consumption and lifestyle, whether by governments or the people's organisation. In 1960, consumerism or more specifically the consumer movement formally emanate as a global force, through the birth of the International Organisation of Consumers Unions or better known as the IOCU. It was conceived in The Hague, Netherlands by five consumer groups from Holland, the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and Belgium. The IOCU was an independent, non-political foundation, non-profit making and non-commercial non-governmental organization. The IOCU subsists to promote worldwide co-operation in consumer information, education and the comparative testing of goods and services. The IOCU has consultative or liaison status with the UN and its specialised agencies. It represents the consumers at international meetings promoting the consumer interest in as diverse fields as food standards, the operation of monopolies and cartels, electrical safety regulations, energy conservation and the protection of the environment.

Now the IOCU is renamed the Consumers International or CI. The CI works together with it's over 220 members in 115 nations. It serves as the only independent and authoritative global voice for consumers and ensuring the eight basic rights of consumers are honoured. According to the CI, the consumers have eight basic rights, they are:

1. "The right to satisfaction of basic needs - to have access to basic, essential goods and services; adequate food, clothing, shelter, health care, education, public utilities, water and sanitation.
2. The right to safety - to be protected against products, production processes and services, which are hazardous to health or life.
3. The right to be informed - to be given the facts needed to make an informed choice, and to be protected against dishonest or misleading advertising and labelling.

4.   The right to choose - to be able to select from a range of products and services, offered at competitive prices with an assurance of satisfactory quality.

5.   The right to be heard - to have consumer interests represented in the making and execution of government policy, and in the development of products and services.

6.   The right to redress - to receive a fair settlement of just claims, including compensation for misrepresentation, shoddy goods or unsatisfactory services.

7.   The right to consumer education - to acquire knowledge and skills needed to make informed, confident choices about goods and services, while being aware of basic consumer rights and responsibilities and how to act on them.

8.   The right to a healthy environment -to live and work in an environment that is non-threatening to the well-being of present and future generations."

The CI is working to put the rights of consumers at the heart of decision-making. According the Anuar Fazal, a former president of CI and the first Asian to be so, the consumer movement is about five important things:

"First, the consumer movement is about people, people who care about society from a very special perspective, a perspective that concerns every single human being man, woman, and child. This perspective is about ourselves as consumers, buyers and users of goods and services, produced and provided both by commercial and government sectors. It is about the availability and often in the Third World the non-availability of these goods and services. It is not just about the *cost of living* but more often the cost of survival! It is not just about value for money but more so *value for people*."

"Secondly, the consumer is about power – the power of ordinary people to organise themselves collectively to serve as a countervailing force to promote and protect their interest as consumers and jointly act against those responsible for the violent, wasteful and manipulative actions against us. Power, also to change the structures that permit this violence, this waste, and this manipulation."

"Thirdly, the consumer movement is also about human rights – the right to a decent life with dignity, the right to *organise* ourselves to protect our interest. In particular, it is about seven consumer rights – the right to have our *basic needs* to survive met efficiently and equitably, our right to *safety*, our right to redress and compensation, our right to *representation*, our right to adequate *information*, our right to *consumer education*, and our right to a *healthy environment*."

"Fourthly, the consumer movement is also about the environment – about a sustainable earth. We not only must be concerned with serving and protecting the insides of our bodies, our "inner limits" but also to be concerned with the "outer limits" of mother earth – a powerful, complex and yet fragile and exploitable structure. This structure gives us the opportunity for a good life but it can also be destroyed not by peoples' needs but by peoples' greed, ignorance, and carelessness. Consumers must as much to be the conservers."

"Fifthly, the consumer movement is about the political, legal, and economic systems which are organised to bring about a just, fair and rational basis for living together."

These five pillars, Anuar Fazal believes, "Are the basis on which to judge the relevancy, competence and success of the consumer movement. Today these five pillars are very much an integral part of the work of the consumer movement – work that has taken them at the global level to deal with the power of transnational corporations, the possibilities that lie with international institutions, and the development of global citizens' networks."

The consumer movement vision as in CI's vision is a "world where everyone has access to safe and sustainable goods and services. That is, where the strength of the collective power is used for the good of consumers globally."

The CI is a founding signatory of the International NGO Accountability Charter and is fully committed to its principles of legitimacy, transparency, and accountability. These principles lie at the heart CI is governed and the way the organisation campaigns. Consumer International's values include:

1.   The highest standards of ethical conduct.
2.   Independence from business, government and party politics.
3.   Mutual solidarity and among CI members.
4.   Integrity, transparency and accountability.
5.   Inclusiveness.

The CI is a democratic organisation governed by a Council (board), elected by full members at CI World Congress, and held every three years. The Council consists of a President, elected directly, and 19 members. It in turn appoints an eight-member Executive who is delegated some responsibilities. Staff managed by the Director General, who reports to the Council, carries out CI's work.

Some Work of Consumer Organisation

Consumer organisations are advocacy groups. They seek to protect people from corporate abuses. Unsafe products, predatory lending, false advertising, astroturfing and pollution are all examples of corporate abuse. They may operate via protests, campaigning or lobbying and engage in single-issue advocacy or they may set themselves up as more general consumer protector. (Pix-Federation of Malaysia Consumer Assoc).

One common means of protecting consumers is providing them with useful information. This is usually done through their own publications and homepage. They may attempt to serve consumer interests by creating and/ or disseminating market information. Consumer organisations may create data by conducting independent comparative survey or test of products or services, involving different manufacturers or companies, and disseminating the findings to enable consumers to make the best choice.

Another arena where consumer organizations have operated is food safety. The needs for campaigning in this area are less easy to reconcile with their traditional methods, since the scientific dietary or medical evidence is normally more complex than in other arenas, such as the electric safety of white goods. The current standards on mandatory labeling, in developed countries, have in part been shaped by past lobbying by consumer groups.

Consumer organizations have also called for prohibiting specific acts or practices, or by promoting competitive forces in the markets which directly or indirectly affect consumers (such as transport, electricity, communications, etc.).

Consumer organisations have often urge government to legislate or amend laws to make it more current or comprehensive relating to better consumer protection.

In addition, consumer organisations are monitoring the relevant laws to ensure they are adequately enforced. By consistent monitoring the consumer organisations can more effectively ensure that the laws are adequately enforced and update.

Consumer organisations promote consumer education at all levels of societies. It encourages other groups, private, or government to offer consumer education. It believed that the best form of consumer protection is by consumer education.

Further, the aim of consumer organizations may be to establish and to attempt to enforce consumer rights. Effective work has also been done, simply by using the threat of bad publicity to keep companies' focus on the consumers' point of view.

Today, there is hardly a government which has not awakened and responded positively to human rights and consumer movement – a movement based on equity and justice for the ordinary citizen in securing a fair deal in the basic of all human existence – the cost of living and, for a vast majority the cost of sheer survival.

Conclusion

This paper is meant to justify the need of having human rights and consumer education as an essential ingredient in the promotion of our public relations profession. All of us believe in the importance of respecting and promoting human rights. The UDHR is a UN document accepted by all its members of which surely that we all come from a country that is a member to it. Despite

the fact that a number articles UDHR might not be appropriate for certain nations or cultures or even religions, its core when practice will surely make out trouble world a much better place.

It's the same with consumer education. We are all consumers. Not only from the "cradle to the grave" but more so from "womb to tomb." Author have given numerous reasons on the benefit of human rights and consumer education, so again author humbly appeal for it to be considered as part of the development for communicators and educationists.

Communicators and educationists can play the key or leading role in promoting human rights and consumer justice. We can do so by ensuring all our development programs contain elements of human rights and consumer education. Advising our employers and clients on the need to respect and practice human rights and treat their workers and consumers' fairly and well as it will sustain patronage and prosperity. Promoting human rights and consumer well-being in all our programs, including via the mass media and interpersonal communication plus the Internet. Ensuring all communication channels are open and free to report with full responsibility. Ensuring all our employers and clients' policies are consumer and environment friendly.

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