

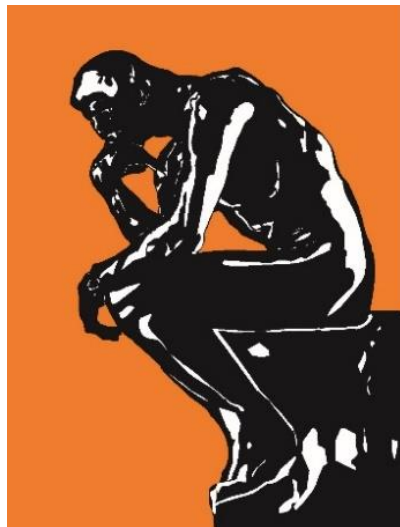
Spreading the environmental-healing values: Exemplary motivations from the lifestyles of silver screen celebrities

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“[...] the virtue of sacrifice is critical to shaping a daring and fearless leader of the bird village.

From “The Virtue of Sacrifice”; *The Kingfisher Story Collection* (2022)

Abstract

The issue of climate change poses an important problem that requires immediate collaboration from everyone, including individuals, governments, and businesses. While consumption culture constitutes a significant proportion of greenhouse gas emissions, most of these emissions are caused by the consumption of the wealthiest. In this article, we will explore the challenges that consumer culture has exacerbated regarding climate change and propose that transitioning to a simpler and more sustainable lifestyle could be an effective solution in the fight against climate change. Such transitions can be leveraged through the inspiration of celebrities (e.g., Keanu Reeves, Chow Yun-fat, Kristen Bell, Leonardo DiCaprio) that pursue simple, non-glamorous lifestyles that do not promote excessive consumerism.

Keywords: consumerism; consumer culture; humanistic value; climate inequality; eco-surplus culture; climate change; celebrities

1. Impact of Consumerism on Climate Change

Consumer culture plays a significant role in the increasingly severe issue of climate change. In affluent societies, resource usage often becomes wasteful, leading to the release of massive amounts of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. This impact primarily stems from greenhouse gas emissions in the production, consumption, and disposal of consumer goods. Behaviors such as frequent shopping for new electronic devices, upgrading products, and following fast fashion trends all contribute to generating a much larger carbon footprint than necessary. It is not surprising that human activities, especially in developed countries like the United States, contribute significantly to greenhouse gas emissions. Furthermore, recent studies have clearly shown that the wealthiest 1% of the world's population contributes to over 30% of these emissions (Khalfan et al., 2023).

A study published in the *Journal of Industrial Ecology* revealed that consumer products, ranging from food to a variety of household items, contribute up to 60% of the total global greenhouse gas emissions from human activities (Ivanova et al., 2016). Interestingly, the environmental impact of these products not only originates from direct behaviors such as car usage or prolonged water consumption but also arises from other sources in the product supply chain, such as production and distribution processes. The study particularly emphasizes the significant role of household consumption in environmental impact and suggests that changing shopping habits could significantly reduce our environmental footprint.

Environmental impacts from consumerism vary depending on income levels. There is at least a tenfold difference in carbon emissions between low-income and high-income households (Starr, Nicolson, Ash, Markowitz, & Moran, 2023). While the top 10% of the wealthiest individuals own 85% of the global household wealth, the bottom half collectively owns only 1%. These are findings from a study on household wealth distribution conducted for the

UNUWIDER project on Personal Assets from a Global Perspective (Davies, Sandstrom, Shorrocks, & Wolff, 2006). Meanwhile, a study across 86 countries conducted by researchers at the University of Leeds showed that the top 10% of the wealthiest individuals consume significantly more energy than the bottom 10% of the poorest individuals. This disparity is particularly evident in the transportation sector, where the top 10% of consumers use energy from vehicle fuels over 187 times more than the bottom 10% (Oswald, Owen, & Steinberger, 2020).

In affluent countries, consumerism is particularly prevalent and has a significantly larger environmental impact compared to poorer countries. For example, the United States is identified as the country with the highest per capita emissions, followed by nations like Luxembourg and Australia. This difference underscores the greater responsibility of wealthy nations in addressing the environmental impacts of their consumption patterns (Ivanova et al., 2016).

These findings indicate that most human activity emissions do not stem from basic needs. The inequality in energy use and related emissions plays a crucial role in discussions on climate policies and the need for interventions to address this disparity. Studies have shown that reducing energy demand, especially among high-income brackets, plays a crucial role in transitioning to carbon-neutral energy usage (Oswald et al., 2020).

The explosive growth of social networks like Facebook and TikTok has been shown to influence consumer behavior. Studies have suggested that social media can influence people's beliefs and behaviors in various ways, including their consumption patterns. Some studies have indicated that social media can encourage people to overspend to showcase themselves to their followers (Stroebe & Kuchler, 2021).

Even in consumption at environmental conferences, unnecessary waste is evident. According to a report by News18, more than 70,000 people were expected to attend the 28th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP28) in Dubai, held from November 30 to December 12, 2023. The report also stated that "70-80% of conference emissions" originate from travel. The question arises as to whether such large-scale participation is truly necessary (Alam, 2023) (see Figure 1). The fact that UK Prime Minister Sunak, Foreign Secretary Cameron, and Prince Charles each use a separate plane to attend COP28 also raises questions about consumer culture in the context of climate change (Forrest & Dalton, 2023).

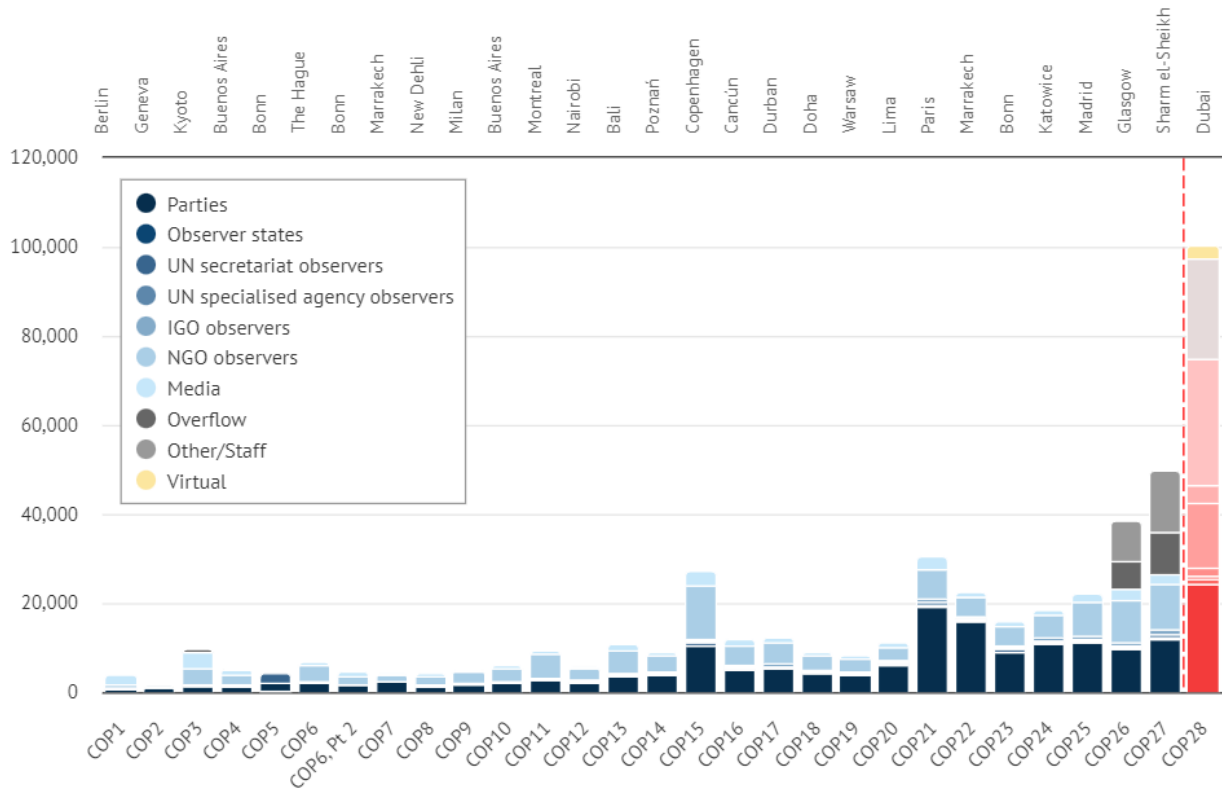


Figure 1: The number of participants in the annual COP conference (Source: UNFCCC & Carbon Brief (Mcsweeney, 2023))

It can be seen that consumer culture, especially in affluent countries, plays a significant role in the climate change caused by high greenhouse gas emissions associated with the production and consumption of goods. The shift towards more sustainable and conscious consumption habits, supported by policy changes, can make a significant difference in reducing the impact of climate change.

2. The Power of Cultural Change and Behavior

In the fight against climate change, the necessity of changes in culture and behavior is becoming increasingly urgent. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has emphasized the importance of human behavior in mitigating the impact of climate change (Editorial, 2022). This includes a range of actions, from individual decisions to collective movements and responses from politicians. The fact that high-income individuals generate significantly more greenhouse gas emissions than low-income individuals only underscores that current human emissions exceed basic and essential needs (Goldstein, Gounaridis, & Newell, 2020).

Although emissions in the production of goods can be reduced rapidly if we reduce or cease production, this is not always the optimal solution if societal consumer culture remains unchanged. Restrictions or making supply scarce can lead to increased costs and product prices. Consumer behavior may be influenced by the Veblen effect, where individuals are

willing to pay higher prices for products and services deemed luxurious regardless of their environmental impacts (Bagwell & Bernheim, 1996).

Efforts to adopt new technologies, transition to renewable energy, or even “phase out” fossil fuel products are environmental policies that humanity is focusing on. However, it can be observed that these policies face many risks and challenges because they may conflict with human consumption needs. A new technology may take many years to be deployed and require high costs, only to reduce a small amount of greenhouse gas emissions (International Energy Agency, 2020). For example, in the case of electric cars, a study by MIT compared different types of vehicles, from gasoline cars like the Toyota Camry and Honda Clarity to hybrid cars, plug-in hybrids, electric cars, and hydrogen fuel cell cars in the United States. The results showed that gasoline cars emit over 350 grams of CO₂ per mile, while hybrid and plug-in hybrid cars emit about 260 grams of CO₂/mile, and electric cars emit only 200 grams of CO₂/mile (Green et al., 2019). However, the low emissions of electric cars can only be achieved if electricity is used from “clean” sources and does not account for all the environmental impacts of battery production, such as deforestation.

Meanwhile, for those with high incomes, even restricting or making only minor changes in their consumption behavior can have a significant impact. This clearly demonstrates the powerful influence of human culture and consumption behavior on greenhouse gas emissions.

Therefore, environmental protection can entirely originate from humans through lifestyle changes to reduce environmental impact. The approach to environmental protection and climate change mitigation is not new, as it has been discussed in previous environmental theories such as Deep Ecology. According to this theory, we should not overly focus on the special position of humans in nature but instead pay more attention to all components of nature on an equal basis because the natural order holds far greater intrinsic value than human value. Buddhist Philosophy influences this theory, reflected in promoting a lifestyle that minimizes harm to the environment and other species. This requires us to shift from consumption and material focus to a simpler and more sustainable lifestyle (Naess, 1973; Sessions, 1995).

3. Challenges, Opportunities, and Hollywood Models

On average, in the Ipsos survey across 29 countries in September and October 2021, more than half (56%) of the participants stated that they had adjusted consumer behavior in recent years due to concerns about climate change. This figure decreased from the average of 69% in January 2020, when a similar question was asked in most of the 29 countries. This suggests that while consumers worldwide have had to change daily habits to protect themselves and others from COVID-19, they seem less concerned about the environmental impact of their behavior. Globally, less than a fifth (17%) of the participants reported making significant changes, two-fifths (39%) made some changes, and three-tenths (31%) made no changes (Long, Jackson, Skinner, & Garrett, 2021).

One of the significant challenges in changing culture and behavior is the diversity of human experiences and values (Vuong & Napier, 2015; Vuong, Nguyen, & La, 2022). People's connection to the environment, identity, and community plays a crucial role in addressing climate change. Understanding these cultural aspects is essential for adapting to and mitigating climate change effectively.

For a long time, the human factor in climate research, especially in climate modeling, has been overlooked. This lack of observation has led to gaps in understanding the full impact of human behavior on climate change. Recent advancements have recognized that human behavior is complex, and it is essential to integrate this understanding into climate models and forecasts.

The complexity of human psychology is an important factor in addressing climate change. Despite scientific consensus, there is still a range of reactions, from low assessment of the impact of climate change to outright denial (Dunlap & McCright, 2010). Understanding the psychological origins of such beliefs and attitudes is crucial in building communication strategies and fostering consensus.

To effectively limit global warming, behavior needs to change at both systemic and individual levels. Many interventions have been proposed to promote environmentally friendly behavior. These include designing interventions aimed at connecting various actions with the determinants of each individual's environmental behavior (Arslan, Haapanen, Hurmelinna-Laukkanen, Tarba, & Alon, 2021; Beattie & McGuire, 2016).

The scalability of interventions is crucial for systemic-level change. Understanding public awareness and behavior is key to designing effective climate policies. Deep insights from behavioral science are increasingly being used to inform policy-making in areas such as natural disaster insurance markets, carbon taxation, and emissions management in supply chains.

The question arises: can we change behavior and adopt more environmentally friendly lifestyles? In fact, some individuals, despite having high incomes and being among the top 1%, are already doing so by practicing sustainable and frugal consumption. Famous figures like Keanu Reeves, Chow Yun-fat, Kristen Bell, and Leonardo DiCaprio are exemplary models when it comes to sustainable consumption and frugal attitudes. Their choices and lifestyles represent how influential individuals can positively impact changes in consumer behavior, encouraging sustainable and environmentally friendly living.

Keanu Reeves is a notable example of a modest lifestyle despite considerable wealth (see Figure 2). Despite earning \$144 million from "The Matrix" series, he chooses to live a simple life. Reeves resides in a modest apartment, drives a reliable Honda, and frequently uses public transportation such as city buses (Bhatia, 2019). His approach is not about accumulating material wealth but about sharing his fortune. He has donated a significant portion of his income to charitable activities, including building a charity organization to honor his sister (Jenkins, 2020).

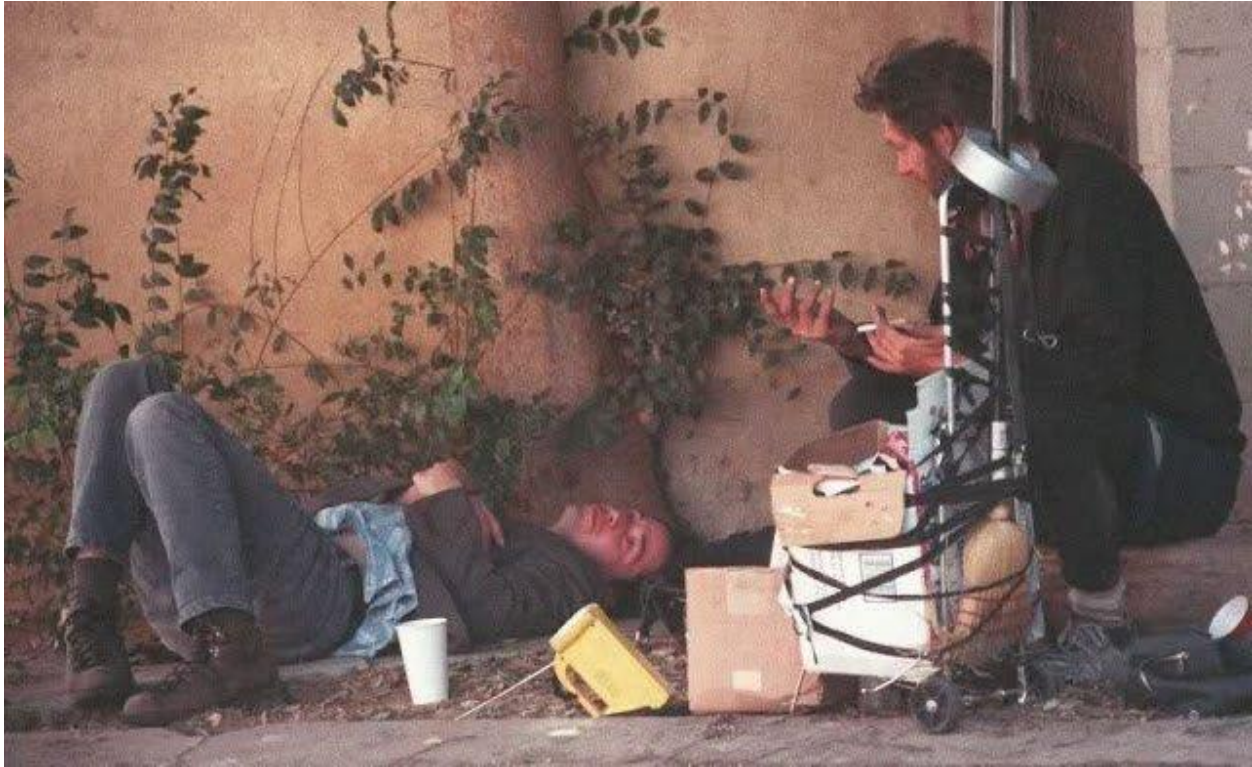


Figure 2: “John Wick” chats and shares a drink with a homeless person. (Source: Social media)

Chow Yun-fat, despite being an A-list star, only spends about 800 Hong Kong dollars (\$102 USD) per month on living expenses. He is known for using public transportation, eating at street food stalls, and shopping at discount clothing stores (Dry, 2018). Chow Yun-fat’s modest and simple lifestyle is an inspiration to many. He demonstrates that one can live a happy and fulfilled life without needing a lot of money or material possessions. He contributes a significant portion of his income to charitable activities. Chow Yun-fat has pledged to donate his entire fortune, estimated at 5.6 billion Hong Kong dollars (\$714 million USD), to charity after his passing (Dimsumdaily Hong Kong, 2023). He sets an example for both celebrities and ordinary people, proving that true wealth comes from within rather than from external sources (see Figure 3).

Kristen Bell, a leading figure in the entertainment industry, is known for her practical and frugal approach (Stieg, 2019). Despite her many successes, she still shops at everyday retail stores like Target and advocates for mental health awareness (Rice, 2021). Bell’s lifestyle reflects a conscious choice to live modestly and use her influence to make a positive impact on society. She is also a prominent face of the recycling program across the United States (<https://www.recycleacrossamerica.org/kristen-bell>).

Leonardo DiCaprio, widely recognized for his environmental activism, has extended this mission into his personal life (World Wide Fund for Nature, 2024). He is committed to living a low-carbon lifestyle, including using hybrid cars and living in a solar-powered home. DiCaprio

often uses commercial airlines instead of private jets, demonstrating his commitment to minimizing environmental impact. His efforts are not limited to his personal life; he also supports global environmental protection initiatives (United Nations, 2014).

These stars prove that fame and wealth do not necessarily have to lead to extravagant lifestyles. Instead, they use their influence and resources to promote sustainability, environmental responsibility, and thriftiness. Their choices and actions have the potential to inspire others to adopt more sustainable and mindful consumption habits, making a significant impact in the fight against environmental degradation and promoting a more sustainable future.

4. Message Building the Surplus Ecological Culture

The fight against climate change is a collective effort that demands broad-spectrum solutions. Minimizing climate change cannot be achieved without significant changes in the culture and consumer behavior of individuals and collectives. The complexity of human behavior poses challenges but also presents opportunities for creative solutions and actions. Understanding and harnessing this potential is crucial for effective climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies.

Through this article, we believe that to adapt to and mitigate climate change, building a culture of environmental stewardship stemming from cultural and artistic perspectives is an effective approach. It is a perspective from the lifestyle of a relatively small group, perhaps, nowadays, beloved figures by the general public through roles on the screen. They are often referred to in a very characteristic literary, journalistic way as “silver screen celebrities.”

These thoughts stem from the observed reality that sometimes what is called “peculiar” merely means not widely practiced by the majority. It does not necessarily mean it’s inherently wrong, illogical, or unethical. Conversely, what is widely practiced by the majority does not necessarily mean it’s right, logical, or ethical!

The rise of consumerism and the consequences of stimulating consumer greed are examples. Promoting excessive consumption and satisfying materialistic desires, regardless of environmental harm, can hardly be considered “humanistic values” or “positive living experiences” (Vuong & Nguyen, 2023). Meanwhile, the beloved figures often referred to as silver-screen celebrities have a powerful influence on lifestyles, attitudes, and consumer behavior, especially among the youth.

Clearly, if we cannot achieve positive influences for building a surplus ecological culture (Nguyen & Jones, 2022; Vuong, 2021, 2023) from beloved figures in cinema (we only mention an industry with high attraction as an example, not the only one), it would be a significant loss while resources for conserving and enhancing the living environment face immense challenges. Even assessing the limited effectiveness of cli-fi (climate fiction) in environmental messaging reflects the level of challenge even when invested with a clear purpose, not ambiguously hesitant (Schneider-Mayerson, 2018).

Being able to point out arguments about values as well as potential impacts and directions for building programs that can operate around silver-screen celebrities to promote efforts to develop clear knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors for environmental protection brings great potential and currently underutilized value.



Figure 3: Chow Yun-fat, a film actor who donated nearly 1 billion dollars to charity and lived a simple life. (Source: VnExpress)

The characters we aim for often have modest lifestyles, dedicated to their professions, living very “human” lives. Therefore, naturally, how they use abundant financial resources lend their personal fame without calculation of vanity for noble goals, as well as their simple, non-glamorous lifestyles that do not promote excessive consumerism, are rays of light for building an eco-surplus culture that the world desperately desires. Surely, they will never compromise or advocate for the kind of service-oriented consumption of “greenwashing” brands.

In short, it is these kind, heroic individuals who will write the story that the beauty industry, in the name of work, has to re-account for their “kind” capital behind the huge monetary benefits themselves.

The light of human love, the lives of beloved people on the screen, in a genuine way, from their natural and simple lifestyles, do not need to be fiercely dazzling like a lavish Gatsby (Fitzgerald, 1925) but still reach every fate and warmth.

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