Q: Discuss the idea that ‘overconsumption in the modern world is a serious threat to true sustainability’.

It can be said that a growing trend of overconsumption, particularly in Western industrialised nations is rising considerably. This phenomena extends to a wide range of goods and products which at one time were built to be repaired and reused, but now deemed too expensive to do so, are simply tossed aside to make way for a brand new version of themselves. Also, it can be said that in these same developed nations especially, individuals consume and purchase far too many products, which are all too quickly consumed and not re-used, repaired nor recycled and after their usefulness has passed, are simply discarded or sent to landfill refuse sites. The overconsumption of goods and products therefore is seen as one of many common problems arising in the 21st Century and will continue to be ever more problematic until action is taken. As populations rise and become more affluent and developed, the consumption of goods and natural resources generally tend to grow exponentially and in many cases unsustainably leading to serious consequences. This essay will therefore discuss some of the main reasons for why overconsumption has become a worrying issue and a detrimental trend in the modern world. Also, possible strategies in which to reduce this growing epidemic in the future will be outlined and explored.

The reasons for overconsumption in modern developed societies could be said to be somewhat complex and not only linked to many countries’ greater affluence but also to satisfy individuals’ personal needs. Bourdieu (1984) states that in modern society, consumer patterns and buying behaviour represent an individual’s way of expressing the particular group to which they identify with in society. However, it could be stated that the main reasons for this increasing trend tend to be linked to industrially developed and developing societies of nations generally becoming more affluent; as well as the rise of modern machinery which can produce goods cheaper and more efficiently than ever before. A further factor could also be outlined in that a globalised economy is helping to buy and exchange goods on an immense international scale; which is further enhanced through global internet trading and increased economies of scale in modern manufacturing. Consequently, it can be deduced that it is mainly these phenomena which are driving the over consumption
of goods in modern day society. Pape et al. (2011, p. 26) state that ‘overconsumption in industrialised countries still presents major challenges to achieving sustainable development goals’ and it is vital that governments begin to recognise this. The authors go on to state that increased household consumption in these nations has been identified as a ‘key’ contributing factor to global problems...such as climate change, depletion of energy resources and biodiversity loss’ (Pape et al. 2011, p. 27). It should also be stated that this practice of overconsumption cannot be sustained into the long term future and that the consumption of natural resources and fossil fuels for manufacturing at this present rate cannot continue long term either. It is clear then that action and ‘mindfulness’ regarding this trend of rapid consumption needs to be undertaken; as well as ensuring that emerging developing countries and the increasing middle classes which inhabit them do not also follow similar unsustainable consumer practices that western countries display.

There are several ways that society at large could attempt to reduce individuals’ consumption of too many products. Firstly perhaps, the importance of developing ‘behavioural change’ along with a possible return to the previous generations’ days of fixing and repairing faulty or damaged goods would be one way of reducing the amount of electrical goods (so called e-waste) that are often discarded (Gilleard & Higgs 2009; Pape et al. 2011). Further, to increase and actively promote full recycling (as well as the government legislation) to endorse it within the home/organisation; so as to more effectively reduce paper and energy misuse would be of immense added benefit. Schafer, Jaeger-Erben and dos Santos (2011) and SERI (2009) both state that society needs to understand the dangers of producing and over utilising too many precious resources in the needless overproduction of goods; and the potential devastating environmental effects that will subsequently occur. This is further complemented by the idea from Mason (2004) who argues that:

The consumerist lifestyle feeds itself through a spiralling desire for material gratification that can never be sated and that attention should turn to opposing today’s excessive consumerism by focusing on the benefits of a lifestyle of moderation and self-restraint. This should be of key focus to all. (Mason 2004, p. 52).

Comment [PoB10]: Here a direct quote is used from an external source. As it is a ‘direct quote’, the reference must also show a page number. Because there are more than 3 authors we abbreviate all but the first to ‘et al’.

Comment [PoB11]: Again the writer is using a direct quote here so a page number is also given.

Comment [PoB12]: The paragraph ends with a ‘concluding sentence’ which is trying to summarise the main points raised in the paragraph. It also ‘rounds’ the paragraph off nicely.

Comment [PoB13]: Again, paragraphs need to start with a topic sentence which will outline and inform the reader what the paragraph will talk about.

Comment [PoB14]: Supporting sentences follow, which build on the idea outlined in the topic sentence. This is where the writer builds their argument through giving opinions, making points, using references and reliable sources of information etc.

Comment [PoB15]: Here the writer is using 2 references together as they share the same opinion (there is an alternative way of doing this at the end of the previous sentence). This is good to show you have critically reflected on your background reading/sources. The original information has been paraphrased into the writer’s own words. (Note that: most references need to be paraphrased in your writing and try to keep ‘direct quotes’ to a minimum in your work as a general rule.

Comment [PoB16]: Here a longer quote (over 30 words) has been used. When using longer direct quotes – the writer must indent in a separate paragraph in a smaller font and also provide the reference along with a page number. Quote marks are not required.
This may be an idealist's viewpoint, however its key message has some significant merit and certainly to address this problem a change in human behaviour and attitude must first be realised.

In conclusion therefore, the issue of overconsumption is one which needs much debate, behavioural change coupled with government action. This essay has discussed some of the main reasons for over consumption in the 21st century and as such unless action is taken, the effects on natural resources will take a devastating toll. Although the reasons for this trend this can be described as somewhat complex, they are generally classified and linked to the development of richer, faster growing societies with more disposable income to buy cheaper mass produced items. Therefore, in terms of trying to trying to reduce consumption rates within this faster growing worldwide population, it is strongly recommended that society in general moves towards buying less, recycling more, increased repair of damaged/faulty goods and a general and significant move away from ‘fast manufacturing-fast consumption’ types of behaviour/products. This is no mean feat to achieve of course and will take a significant change of thinking and action from every individual but to fail to do so, will be ultimately devastating and have significant negative effects upon Earth’s precious natural resources and cause widespread problems for the generations that follow.
Reference List:


This sample essay is intended as an illustrative guide only as to the possible structure and format of an academic essay for university purposes it is not prescriptive and is intended as an educational guide only.