



## **B. Business Impact**

# **Mind the Self, then the world: A Discussion on the Dark Side of Mindfulness Practices**

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### **Abstract**

In recent years, mindfulness practices have been held up as potential solutions to encourage sustainable consumption. In this paper, we argue that there are boundary conditions that need to be fulfilled to ensure such a collective positive outcome. Focusing on the balance and compromises between individual and societal/environmental wellbeing, businesses' role as consumption enablers will be discussed.

Keywords: Mindfulness, Sustainable consumption

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# **Mind the Self, then the World: A Discussion on the Dark Side of Mindfulness Practices**

## **Mindfulness and Its Effects**

Can mindfulness practices lead to a better society? The general assumption seems to be that this is the case. The notion of mindfulness, the practice of being conscious and aware of the present moment, has gained popularity in recent years. There is substantial evidence in business management that being mindful can lead to positive consequences by changing people's behaviours. Mindful individuals are said to be more focused, make better decisions, have higher emotional intelligence, become thoughtful leaders, and enhance work performance. Most importantly, the practice promises to make us happy.

The positive effects of mindfulness practices have been expanded beyond individuals. For example, as a consumer, being mindful can result in higher levels of trust, satisfaction, loyalty, and appreciation of good quality of services (Ndubisi, 2014), which improves the efficiency of marketing activities. These are some of the reasons why companies are encouraged to facilitate the presence of more mindful consumers. Moreover, practising mindfulness in consumption decisions - mindful consumption - is often linked to ethical and sustainable product choices. Mindfulness has been posited to encourage more sustainable consumption (Sheth, Sethia, and Srinivas, 2011). However, while the positive effects on the individual are apparent, whether and to what extent the practices can benefit society as a whole is still unknown.

Recent research in organisation studies has challenged mindfulness practices, pointing to their possible negative impact in the corporate world (Qiu & Rooney, 2019). It argues that typical workplace mindfulness programmes place great emphasis on the "self." This self-centred intention to use the practice as a tool for personal gain to strengthen one's wellbeing can conflict with the needs of others. While having employees committed to self-care can result in long-term benefits for organisations through improved work efficiency and job satisfaction, the inward-looking tendency may encourage people in the workforce to prioritise their own happiness over others. Prior research posits that the issue is rooted in the distinct view of Eastern and Western versions of mindfulness. The former emphasises being self-less, whereas the latter promotes self-gain (Qiu & Rooney, 2019). We argue that commercial mindfulness practices often mix different philosophies. The distinction between cultural beliefs may not be sufficiently prominent. The critical factors that influence the consequences of mindfulness could be its orientation, the motivations for participation, and the processes of its practices. In this paper, we will focus on these elements to discuss the potential dark side of mindfulness practices in the context of consumer decisions.

## **Orientation of Mindfulness**

If you look up "mindfulness" in search engines, you can find multiple definitions and suggestions for techniques. For example, in the Oxford dictionary, it is defined as "the mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations, used as a therapeutic technique." It can also be defined as "the state of being conscious or aware of something." It is critical to note that the "something" is not clearly identified here. In practice, while people can freely decide what to focus on, most become more aware of themselves or the interactions between the Self and others, and very few place the emphasis purely on

others or the world. This aspect is significantly elevated when mindfulness is constantly promoted as a technique used by "successful people."<sup>1</sup>

The contrast between self-centred and other-centred mindsets has been the core of discussions on sustainability consumption. While self-centred people may engage in ethical consumption through self-benefit appeals, they are driven purely by egoistical motivations (Ryoo, Sung, & Chechelnytsak, 2020). This implies that when the outcome is contradictory to self-interest, they will inevitably prioritise their own. Indeed, prior research has found that self-focused people tend to make decisions that are more harmful to the environment, as they prioritise their personal benefits (Leung and Rice, 2002). When mindfulness practices invite people to focus on themselves, this can lead to unintentional negative consequences whereby they ignore or even create damaging impacts upon others and their surroundings. If we focus on what purchase would make us happy, we may not consider too much whether or not the product would lead to more pollution in the world.

There are consumers who care about social issues. Most consumers, when asked, would never voluntarily favour a product or service that knowingly harms the world. This has been evidenced by numerous recent social movements and the rise of brand activism. However, consumption decisions are complex, and people need to make constant trade-offs between values. The intention-behaviour gap in sustainable consumption can result directly from people turning a blind eye to social and environmental values. With self-perceived limited resources, it is inevitable that consumers will prioritise their own needs and own happiness before they think about the world. While mindfulness practices prompt individuals to be more conscious about the Self, people are bound to be more self-oriented at that moment of practice, the effect of which can be long-term.

Self-oriented individuals are more likely to fixate on hedonic pleasure and impulsive consumption, leading to short-term content. Though prior research argues that being mindful can result in moderation of consumption (Lee & Ahn, 2016), the shifts of attention towards the Self can prioritise the short-term over the long-term benefits in consumption. Though the effect can be mitigated when people consciously guide their thought towards a certain self-image favouring ethical consumption (Lades, 2014), this assumes that their self-image favours ethical consumption. Not everyone's version of a better self involves a contribution to a better world. Mindfulness practices seem only to reinforce the ideas of who we are; more sustainable people would become more sustainable, while more materialistic people may continue to be so.

## **Mindfulness Techniques**

While the most common techniques to achieve a mindful state are meditation, the focus of the meditation and the steps taken to practice it diverge. There have also been many different mindfulness practices and programmes introduced in the commercial space in recent years. Some advise individuals to take a moment to breathe, to do one thing at a time, to take a long walk, to engage in freewriting, or to focus on the task at hand. While all practices have distinct processes, they seem to agree on two elements: awareness of the present moment and the goal of pursuing individual wellbeing. These two common grounds across techniques, we argue, are the main reasons why mindfulness practices can hinder sustainable practices in consumption.

An awareness of the present moment implies that one should pay attention to what is happening now. Prior research on happiness has confirmed that when individuals

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.intelligentchange.com/blogs/read/mindfulness-techniques-and-activities>

maximise the value of the present moment, they tend to be happier (Dunn et al., 2011). Focusing thoughts on the present moment (as opposed to the future) alters people's temporal perception. It helps individuals slow down the perceived passing of time and feel less rushed and stressed (Aaker, Rudd, & Mogilner, 2011). However, this hyper-attention to the present moment is in direct contradiction with sustainability approaches, which are long-term-oriented. The tendency to focus on short-term benefits and tangible outcomes has been the main challenge in increasing sustainable consumer choices.

Indeed, much depends on the context of the present moment. If a person engages in prosocial activities, such as volunteering, then focusing on the present moment of happy (volunteering) action may result in a better and more productive output (Aaker, Rudd, & Mogilner, 2011). Conversely, if one commits to a potentially non-sustainable behaviour, such as a shopping spree, the focus on the present joy of shopping may result in overconsumption. In our research on decluttering, we also found that if a person feels happiness through the act of disposing of possessions or focusing on the happiness a possession can bring about at the given moment, they may end up disregarding items that are still practical and functional, which lead to a less sustainable outcome.

Whether or not a short-term joy can transition into long-term happiness depends on the types of wellbeing under discussion. Consumer wellbeing has been extensively investigated in the past. Individuals may find happiness in materialistic consumption activities, as well as consumptions that contribute to the greater good. The critical distinction is that the former results in more hedonic wellbeing, while the latter focuses more on eudaimonic wellbeing (Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008). The development of eudaimonic wellbeing is key to translating individual wellbeing into collective societal and environmental wellbeing. While mindfulness practices often promise the growth of eudaimonic wellbeing, they are based on the assumption that people are thinking about others when they use these techniques. However, in reality, as discussed before, many techniques are focused on the Self. The joy of being productive, stress-free, and guilt-free is not necessarily aligned with the joy of others. This is problematic, especially when consumers are motivated to engage in mindfulness practices to pursue improved personal wellbeing. When one is thinking about being a happier person, that better version of the Self does not necessarily equate with being a better community member.

## **Conclusion**

To make mindfulness practices sustainable in consumption, individuals must first accept that mindfulness should be other-focused. Techniques should adapt the self-less concept and pursue societal and environmental wellbeing as part of the eudaimonic wellbeing consideration. Only when one's self-image is aligned with the sustainable goal can mindfulness practices result in a positive consequence for society. One should also embrace practices as daily routines instead of a spontaneous exercise at the moment of consumption. When one enjoys eudaimonic wellbeing in general, one's state of content will reduce the chances of impulsive and unsustainable consumption, overall. With this in mind, it is not easy to use mindfulness practices to manage or guide sustainable consumer decisions. While being more aware and conscious about our consumption decisions can lead to a positive output, our frame of mind plays a critical role in what we are conscious about. All consumption habits and patterns are formulated and accumulated through countless "present moments." Making all present moments socially and environmentally mindful would be the prerequisite to fundamentally changing people's behaviours alongside caring for personal wellbeing through mindfulness practices.

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