

# The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Nate Hagens:** I live in the USA. I'm a citizen. Yes. but from an economic perspective, according to what I hear in the news, I'm also considered a consumer. We have been referring to ourselves as consumers for so long that this label now sounds normal. It has become a neutral descriptor, almost scientific like we're describing a person's role in an economy.

[00:00:25] The way you might describe how the top hat or the little dog pieces move in a monopoly game. But if you reflect on this word, it's not only kind of weird, but also quite narrow way to label a person. Yes. A consumer is also an ecological term, autotrophs, heterotrophs, producers, consumers, and the like. But economically, a consumer is explicitly a mouth, an appetite, something to feed.

[00:00:58] It's a word that describes a human being primarily is sort of a, an appetite with a wallet. And I believe this framing has quietly shaped the last many decades of Western culture. It turns our lives into some kind of a shopping buffet, and then indirectly our vibrant blue-green planet into a warehouse.

[00:01:23] So in this episode, I want to take the word consumption and unpack it into something more precise and perhaps useful ahead of The Great Simplification. I plan to explain a simple diagram, which I'll label here, the consumption pyramid. It delineates the many different connotations consumption has. In our lives from keeping bodies alive, to keeping life running, to keeping relationships intact, and sometimes honestly just to effectively numb our stresses, in this hell crazy world.

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[00:02:02] And the reason I think this matters is not only from an ecological perspective, it's also personal. And practical. I think we're entering a period where the world is gonna feel less stable, more volatile, and. For most of us, more expensive in ways that are hard to predict other than maybe directionally, and if you buy this premise or, even the possibility of this premise, then being able to move lower down this pyramid by choice.

[00:02:34] Becomes a form of sovereignty or resilience.

[00:02:51] So I'm gonna build out this pyramid first and then speculate about what it means. There's seven layers. At the bottom are the foundations, and as we move up the pyramid, we'll find things that are less about survival and more about mood and identity and escape. Also an important note before I start. Most of us do not live on one rung of this pyramid.

[00:03:16] We move around. I can be grounded in one part of my life and compulsive in another, and I am, one can be minimalist about status and still stuck in a stimulation loop. when you become tired or stressed and you can have super discipline for three months straight and then slide upward in this pyramid during a stressful week, that's me too.

[00:03:45] So, as you follow, please don't take any of this as, any sort of moral purity ranking, but maybe more like a weather map, a way to notice where you are in a consumption reality and, why. Okay. Layer one. Obviously is, survival needs. this is the obvious one. Calories from food, water, basic shelter in some climates, heating or cooling, not as comfort, but as a survival necessity.

[00:04:13] Sleep, essential medicines, the thing your body and immediate safety require for homeostasis. And if a human life is really on the borderline here, then everything else is downstream. Of crisis. it's hard for someone to talk about

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self-actualization when you're worried about being evicted. So this first layer is completely physical.

[00:04:42] Layer two is stability and function. This is a layer that keeps a human life bending and not breaking. Basically things like, reliable utilities, basic transportation, the tools used for your work, childcare basics, repairs, basically the boring infrastructure that supports a functional life that most of us.

[00:05:07] In the west, take for granted. For a lot of people, the repayment of debt actually falls in this layer as well, even if it shouldn't. 'cause if your monthly obligations are high enough, then this stability becomes something you are actually renting from the future. The contents in this layer probably differ widely in different regions of the world, and in modern western economies.

[00:05:31] The drivers in this layer may be more psychological than physical. It's the stress of a life that has too many points of failure, and not enough buffers. Okay, layer three is care and belonging. This is where consumption gets more interesting because it stops being about objects we require and starts being about what defines us as human and even keeps us being human.

[00:05:59] Time and the related financial spending that maintains relationships and health. shared meals and community obligations, therapy, exercise, travel to see your family, and a modest or extravagant hobby that fulfills you. This layer is often missed in conversations about consumerism. 'cause on the surface, it doesn't look much like shopping, but it is real.

[00:06:28] humans require social glue. We require the feeling of being held inside a web of human and non-human. I look at Frank, relationships. Said differently. We can have the heat on and the bills paid, but still be metaphorically starving if we lack things in this layer. Okay. Layer four is comfort and convenience deliveries of.

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[00:07:00] Coconut water and garbage bags, subscriptions for Netflix and Writ Box, in my case. upgrades for our devices and nicer versions of the basic services. A bigger living space. I wanna say clearly that this layer is not evil. Well, none of the layers here are, evil. a lot of the choices in this category are completely sane.

[00:07:25] They provide relief and they're legit. In a ways for us to buy back our time in a high pressure life in a society that is to use this quote to, frankly, is in a row, slowly slouching toward Bethlehem. But there's a catch. Convenience often quietly creates dependency. It can atrophy you out of skills you used to have, can make you less tolerant of friction.

[00:07:54] Or intermittent access to dopamine and oxytocin. It can convert small hardships into real emergencies because your life no longer has any experience or tolerance at being even slightly inconvenienced. And it can also be expensive in a way that's not obvious at first because the cost is measured in fragility and a lack of buffer as opposed to dollars or euros.

[00:08:24] Okay, layer five is status and signaling. This category is consumption as social language brands and flexing, and the purchase that says, I'm the kind of person who, the product that implies that you have taste or success or fitness or intelligence or ideological purity or belonging. And I think some portion of this consumption is harmless human self-expression.

[00:08:57] Humans have always adorned themselves in some way or another from hair shirts to tattoos. We've always used objects as symbols. This is very human and is playful and benign, but some of it is also social armor for both offense and defense, with a conscious or unconscious objective of trying to secure or increase, one's status and position in a tribe.

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[00:09:26] And the key point is consumption in this layer is not really about the object. That is purchased. It's about the message from the object. a side note here, the status layer is usually expensive because it only works if other people can see it and if the signal is somewhat scarce in our society.

[00:09:48] Okay, moving up to layer six. This is novelty and stimulation. This is restless discomfort that is temporarily ased by. Consuming stuff. Usually technology, impulse purchases, endless content to avoid distraction. This restless sense there might be something better, just one click away. This layer's less about identity and more about feeling.

[00:10:14] You're not trying to become someone else, you're just trying to shift your internal state directionally away from. Where it is at the moment, and I believe this is where a lot of modern life, at least western modern life on the up slope of the carbon pulse sits by default because boredom has become intolerable in our society.

[00:10:36] And as we've discussed here with many guys and many Frank's, that when novelty is always available, the ordinary, even if that. Would be the extraordinary for most of our ancestors feels dull. We require more and more input to feel the same amount of aliveness. AKA, the wanting shouts louder than the having.

[00:11:04] Alright, layer seven is escape and dopamine sinks. This is when consumption becomes a form of anesthesia compulsion. Disassociation where the ghost of dopamine passed starts fully calling the shots and getting us into patterns that do not restore us. They just remove our authentic selves for a while, gambling and similar dynamics, doom scrolling, binge shopping, drugs and alcohol porn.

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[00:11:33] All these at a time when electronic algorithmic feeds have been engineered to keep us just slightly unsatisfied and still clicking. I wanna be careful here 'cause it's easy to talk about this residing here as some sort of a moral failure. I don't think it is, at least most of the time. As Anna Lemke said earlier this month, on a podcast, which I highly recommend you watch, a prehistoric man dropped into Times Square today, would've gotten addicted right quick.

[00:12:06] But I do think consumption at this level seven and truly it is ecologically turning billions of barrels of ancient sunlight into microliters of dopamine is what we get in a culture when chronic stress meets engineered technological temptation, it'll be one thing of consumption of all these things made us happier, healthier, but I increasingly think a large percentage of what society labels pleasure.

[00:12:34] In our lives is not pleasure. It's actually more like relief from pain and in my experienced opinion, from our knowledge of what we're missing in our lives and what we are losing in the natural world. So that's the pyramid. Survival, inputs, stability, and function. Care and belonging, comfort and convenience, status and signaling, novelty and stimulation, and escape and dopamine sinks.

[00:13:09] The boundaries in this pyramid aren't rigid, especially in the middle because consumption is often doing more than one job at once, so the pyramid isn't fixed. The same physical thing can reside on different layers of the pyramid for different people. A smartphone might be a status object for one person, but a functional necessity for another 'cause.

[00:13:31] It's how they work and bank and access public services. An increasingly relevant example, air conditioning could mean comfort in one climate and survival, in. Another, even something like convenience is relative. a meal delivery service can be frivolous in one context, but a lifeline in another, especially with someone dealing with disability or, caregiving.

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[00:14:03] I'm a bit embarrassed to share where I got the idea for this, frankly. About two and a half weeks ago today, during my overnight hospital stay for my knee surgery, I was daydreaming about the Indian restaurant on the way home. I always stop there when I'm passing through and I called ahead to order.

[00:14:22] There was no answer. I got there, the entire plaza was locked and, gated, and then it dawned on me, this was around the time of the ice activity in Minneapolis. I don't actually know what happened there, but I do know ICE was staging in the hotel next door and it hit me. I was worried about garlic, non, and the people who might have cooked it for me could have been worried about deportation, probably maybe not, but the broader point still holds how many of these simultaneous mutual inconveniences with massively different stakes are happening in our world all the time.

[00:15:01] So my intent is not for this framework to become a, way to judge other people who are consuming higher up the pyramid, the same category label means different things depending on baseline and context, and on a global level, this becomes even more obvious. In some countries and increasingly many countries, what we would call stability and function is still not guaranteed.

[00:15:27] Or is no longer guaranteed and others comfort and convenience has become so normal that it feels like a right, like the country I live in. Which brings me to why I am making this video now, and we're starting to realize the last few generations have lived through. To put it mildly, an extremely unusual period.

[00:15:51] We had cheap energy. We had expanding global supply chains. We had relatively stable institutions in many places. We had an economy built around abundance and speed, and we had, for the most part, a stable ecological backdrop in that world. It was easy. To drift upward in this pyramid and to want to even, it was easy for conveniences to become defaults like a true hedonic

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ratchet, cheap and abundant energy and available credit gave us to use a gulf metaphor, unlimited mulligans, for society.

[00:16:32] But if we're moving into a period of Simplification, whether that comes from energy constraints, geopolitical instability, inflation, climate impacts, or probably some combination, then these baselines are gonna change. In a less stable world, the top of the consumption pyramid does not shrink gracefully.

[00:16:52] It likely even probably snaps at some point, and the higher layers tend to be supplied to us via more global, more brittle, more independent, complex systems that need to run smoothly in order to be cheap and affordable. But the lower layers, while not always easy, tend to be more substitutable, more repairable, local and adaptable.

[00:17:18] And that's pretty much the heart of what I want to say here. For people who are aware that the world may become soon more intermittent, it can make sense to move down the consumption pyramid. Intentionally simplify first and beat the rush not to save the planet. Although that might be a a. Helpful externality.

[00:17:42] All right, with that overview, I'm gonna pose some context and related questions on this quite large topic. number one, comfort has a weird property, and once you get used to it, it stops feeling like comfort and starts to feel normal and then quietly it has become a requirement in your life. The risk is that you end up living at a throughput level that feels like.

[00:18:09] Just my life, even though it's historically quite an anomaly from a material three point standpoint, this is sometimes referred to as the hedonic treadmill. So here's the question. Where in your life has comfort quietly become a requirement? And what would it feel like to practice being okay without it before you have to?

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[00:18:34] Number two, relief, substitution. A lot of consumption is not really about wanting or consuming something. If we really think about it, it's more about not wanting to feel something, we reach for a purchase or a newsfeed or a snack or a Netflix show, not because it nourishes us, 'cause it quiets down something.

[00:18:54] We don't wanna feel something uncomfortable that was building. If only for a moment or a couple hours, relief can be appropriate. But when relief becomes our default strategy, it ends up keeping that deeper hunger intact. You are still tired, still lonely, still overloaded or whatever. I've been trying to notice this while I have been noticing it in my own life and reflecting on it.

[00:19:22] We just took the edge off for a bit and, I expect many listeners of this program will resonate with this. So question, what do you reach for when you're stressed or lonely? And can you guess what might be the underlying need that you're trying to meet? By the way, when making these questions, they were originally intended for myself in my little frankly diary, which is why they may sound a bit personalized.

[00:19:49] Said differently. I'm sharing with you what I'm exploring and wondering myself. Question three, dependency versus flexibility. One way to think about the pyramid is that the higher layers often require the world to remain stable and smooth. For you to feel okay. They depend on systems running on time, prices staying affordable, supply chains staying intact, and your attention being constantly fed.

[00:20:19] And when those conditions hold it, it feels like freedom. But if that world were to get more intermittent, those same patterns might become traps. Question, which parts of your lifestyle are genuinely giving you freedom? And which parts are making you dependent on the global Superorganism growing and remaining frictionless?

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[00:20:46] Lastly, This whole pyramid sits inside a larger question about identity as humans. Consumer is a role, but it's not the only role we have. There are other roles that modern life tends to minimize the importance of maker a neighbor and caretaker and collaborator, and citizen and friend, dog owner. If you stop thinking of yourself as a consumer, even for a minute, you might feel some of those roles come back into view.

[00:21:28] And I think that shift matters because perceived roles in turn change one's behavior, they change what feels rewarding, what you notice and what you reach for. And it might not be a credit card or a phone. So question. If you stop thinking of yourself as a consumer for a moment, which other role comes back first, and what would you do differently this week if you lived primarily from that role?

[00:22:01] John Merrick, the elephant man, famously said, I am not an animal. I am a human being. I will close with a rhyming appeal of my own. I am not a consumer. I am a human being. If this framework I just laid out is useful, don't just sit with this alone, share it with two or three friends, and make a Saturday coffee or, tea out of the questions.

[00:22:29] I have a feeling this one might land deeper, as, part of a conversation next week. The core drivers of the more than human predicament and human's, Jekyll and Hyde face shift. Talk to you soon.