



# Consumerism Revealed

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English 315

*“Consumption becomes problematic, from a social and environmental standpoint, when it becomes conspicuous, motivated more by a need for belonging, social acceptance and status than survival.”*

Nelson Harvey, *What’s So Bad About Consumerism?*

In highly developed countries, people long to fulfill every passing need and desire. Many go to school seeking the high paying job that will provide the big house, fancy car, electronic toys, and anything else in between. However people tend to blur the lines between necessity and luxury. They become engrossed in acquiring more and more. This habit eventually turns into an addiction, one that fuels the consumerist economy in the United States.

Many of the products we consume are produced at the expense of less affluent countries. As we walk through shopping malls, consume fast food, and continuously fill our gas tanks, people from around the world slave to fulfill a quota employed by large corporations. This quota serves the consumerist nations like the U.S., but are priced by the low pay and unhealthy work conditions of employees working in those international third-party contracts. Yet this is only a small reflection of the numerous problems that continue to plague the world.

The fast pace of our modernized society obsession with acquiring more, and the complexities of our personal lives seem to blind most from the global issues that wreak havoc on lesser nations. Mainstream media fuels this behavior; constant advertisements keep our eyes dilated and pocketbooks open. By analyzing the components of visual rhetoric expressed in modern media, we can understand why and how our core human emotions can be evoked. Furthermore, our understanding of it can expand our awareness to the point where we might reevaluate how we think about consumerism and its effects.

“There at Every Turn” focuses on families creating happy memories. This creates an assumption that you not only need a car, but also Citgo’s fuel to get you there. Figure 1 depicts a smiling father and son in the foreground, fishing gear in tow. The RV in the background is out of focus; evidently Citgo has taken care of the necessities so your focus can shift to more important aspects of life. Additionally, the RV is made a part of the background of the natural environment. Indeed, the



Fig. 1. Gasol

fuel needed from this vehicle comes from nature. A unity is thus created between the manmade machine and the natural environment. However, informed readers know that because of the way fuel is processed for vehicles and in turn how the vehicle burns the fuel it uses, ill-effects are imposed upon the planet. There is no harmony at all.

The tiny triangles trickling down at the top of the picture to fill it in may symbolize the steps to getting to this moment in time, or “every turn” as stated in the campaign slogan. Beneath the picture there is a small paragraph that promotes Citgo as a reliable source of fuel; the company continues to strengthen the ad’s theme of dependability.

Two modes of persuasion are at work here. Citgo’s ethos appeal resides in their mentioning that each station is locally owned and independently operated; the consumer does not need to deal with the complicated structure of a big business hierarchy. Citgo claims to be a “dependable source of energy” in the paragraph ensuring the company’s validity. The pathos appeal works off familial connection through an American pastime. Both the father and son are grinning in delight, and the young boy is captured mid-air; he soars with delight in anticipation of the day ahead.

The primary audience for such an ad can be anyone with a family. The secondary audience may include anyone who owns a vehicle. In either case, observers will respond to the ad differently. Some might react in the way the ad intended: they feel comfort in knowing the product can meet their

family's needs. Others may find the ad appalling and interpret it as another maneuver of a capitalistic society obsessed with consumption. People with a more economic approach might ridicule the ad for its promotion as a reliable source of fuel given there is no guarantee how much of the resource is left. They will regard the notion that gas companies can help one "pursue their dreams" as far-fetched considering the price of a gallon. Readers with a more ecocentric outlook may criticize Citgo and fuel companies alike since burning fossil fuels has been proven detrimental to the environment. Others still will feel apathetic toward the ad. Those people are perhaps numb to the continuous advertisements imposed upon them. Although the Citgo ad is simply selling gas, there is a complex mechanism reflecting the larger consumerist market at work. Breaking down the ad into its parts, helps one to look past the surface reality the promotion tries to create and into the deeper issues that affect the economy.

While advertisers for the Citgo ad sell the ideal of a secure future, the visual rhetoric of the Haitian photo attempts to expose how consumerism can debase human lives in less powerful, more vulnerable countries. In the photo, a young, skinny girl stands at the foreground of a trash covered land. The building seems to be decomposing and there is a thick smoke in the background. There is a corresponding article discussing soil degradation in Haiti. It explains how Haiti's soil lacks fertility because other countries have exploited Haitian forests and goods for years. Deforestation has caused a significant loss in trees and soil, and the process continues as the fuel-wood-charcoal industry dominates Haitian lands still today. Thus, Haitians go hungry because they lack healthy soil for their own agriculture. Furthermore, any income the Haitians receive does not afford them the high prices of imported goods.

The elements of this photograph coalesce to create a tone



Fig. 2. Tyler Hicks, Haitian Soil

of disorder and desolation in the scene. Trash is scattered on the ground from left to right of the entire frame. Poverty hunger and pollution abound. This sends the message that human-created debris is an endless part of the tiny country's landscape. Empty, used, destructive, fleeting, lacerated, dirty, and entropic forces weigh heavily upon the land from one end to the next. It is a place devoid of human life- except for a young girl in a pink dress.

The little girl appears to parallel the deprived soil; she is small, and her expression conveys a sense of profound anguish and despair. This is intensified by the chaotic heap she stands upon. In the background, wind and overcast skies indicate an approaching storm. The air behind is a smoky haze. She stands alone. She is abandoned, as is the land.

There is some optimism amid all this doom and gloom however. The pink colors in the girl's sandals and dress are cheery and bright. Additionally, there is lace on her sleeve and floral print on her skirt. While certainly sad in expression, her health seems to be intact. She does not appear to be sick. Her dress flows in the wind, further contributing to the passing quality of the scene. All of these may serve as threads of hope to contrast the mess around her.

If so, the message becomes, "Please don't give up on me. Despite all of this I am still here." It encourages the reader that it is not too late to make right something even though it has gone so incredibly wrong. Perhaps like the youth that is sure to fade from her, eventually the state of this little girl's land will too. This would mean that the most fertile days are yet to come.

The primary audience for the article could be anyone interested in educational literature. The picture offers a powerful message; it shows the reality of many places in the world and garners sympathy from the reader while simultaneously suggesting that there is still hope for tomorrow. Indeed, the visual rhetoric will at least force the reader to ask, "What kind of future we are leaving for our children?"

Consumerism not only affects people in poverty-ridden countries such as Haiti, it also impacts people who live in the heart of a consumerist economy. From transportation, waste management, and home construction, to industrial businesses of mass production, each of the sectors of urban life contribute to the overall degradation of the quality in the abiotic environment. That is to say, the processes of economic development and sustainability use toxic chemicals that emit poisonous gases, carcinogens, and other dangerous substances into the air and water. Los Angeles, Mexico City and Hong Kong are just a few of the many cities that contribute copious amounts of pollutants into the environment everyday.

As the photo from greenpeace.org of the masked Chinese suggests, some places have such high levels of pollutants in the air that people must take extra measures in order to simply



Fig. 3. Leo Chan, Smog in Hong Kong

breathe. This photo warns against the air toxicity in Hong Kong. The prominent haze engulfs the city and its inhabitants, indicating that the city is the main producer of the smog. Additionally the natural landscape of the mountains and bay water surrounding the city suggests that humans are not the only species affected by such harsh conditions. The young people depicted in the photo reflect the notion that this is the reality the future will have to bear and that the larger part of their lives will be spent combating the effects of “progress” achieved by older generations. The unnatural looking masks on their faces leaves the eyes of the three young adults exposed. They use them to collectively confront the camera’s lens, thus conveying the severity of the matter.

This photo aims for individuals looking to become aware of the environmental problems today. Fear, guilt, shame, and possibly a sense of responsibility can overcome the reader. This may inspire people to seek ways to fix these ecological problems.

Consumerism and its effects demonstrated in the Citgo ad and the Haitian and Chinese photos are only a short mention of the changes happening on earth due to our ever-increasing consumption rate. “The 11<sup>th</sup> Hour” advertisement suggests consumerism is affecting the planet on a larger scale. This poster promotes its documentary *The 11<sup>th</sup> Hour* a movie cautioning against the overall effects of consumerism and the direction over- exploitation of resources is leading us.

The visual rhetoric of the movie poster has a dramatic tone to it. It shows earth, the home of all life as we know it, beginning to crack. The poster reads “CONSUME LESS, LIVE MORE.” The capital letters emphasize the power and significance of this message. The words “consume less” indicate

that consumerism is responsible for the destruction of our planet. The black background suggests the earth is fading into darkness; a dark age is imminent. Black also symbolizes the grim permanence of death, or worse- extinction.

Who or what is responsible for the deconstruction of the planet? The answer is people, as the big human footprint in the poster suggests. The footprint is not the imprint of an actual bare skin foot, however. It is one dressed in a shoe, which indicates a separation from nature and the mark of consumerism. The shoe is also the unmistakable bottom of a military style boot. This suggests the assertion of power. This symbol of power represents human inclination to overrun the planet. Interestingly the poster centers the footprint over the United States. Not only is the U.S. responsible for the eco-crisis, but because of its powerful position in the world, it can vanguard the movement for other nations to make a change.

This primary intended audience for this ad is everyone. The movie targets all people because as humans, we are the ones responsible to clean up our mess. For those who know anything about the ecological crises, they may feel angry we have allowed the earth to get to this point. This might overwhelm some. “I am just one person out of billions; what difference could I make?” one might ask. The ad also could evoke a sense of duty or empowerment to defend life. The ad is provocative; it entices one to want to see the movie and learn what it is all about.

The pieces of visual rhetoric used in this analysis have a significant amount of parallelism. They powerfully relate to one another because they revolve around the environmental issues that humans face today. These pieces are effective because they convince people to act (or at least react). Either they consume more as the Citgo Company wants them to, or they rethink the concept of consumerism and its effects like the others convey. The product of this analysis ultimately makes way for awareness of the environmental problems of the world today. It elevates our personal relationship with the planet to elicit consciousness of our own ecological footprint.

Environmental issues such as global warming, hunger and sustainability are prominent concerns of mine. I chose to center my analysis around this theme because these are grave issues that need to be dealt with more responsibly especially

by powerful nations such as the United States. As we continue to demand more resources, use up the planet’s supplies, and consume extravagantly creating awareness and motivation for radical change is evermore important. Every week I encounter some information concerning these issues and my cognizance of the earth’s environment and economical conditions grow.



Fig. 4. Borja Fernandez, The 11<sup>th</sup> Hour

I think of the future and what I can do to ensure a safe and healthy environment for all life on this planet. I start with taking responsibility for my own impact. I can further educate myself and hopefully others.

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