

1. Introduction

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The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.

Mark 13:22, NIV

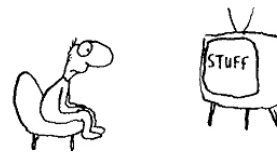
You can never get enough of what you don't really want.

Eric Holler

There is more stuff in the world than ever before.

Stuff you can touch.
Stuff you can think.
Stuff you can use and consume. Stuff you can know with all of your senses.

The growth of stuff is out of control. It is now being created by means of an unstoppable, exponential CHAIN REACTION.



Stuff has become a major threat to freedom and happiness. It destroys nature and peace. It steals time and space. It fouls beauty.

It is relentless, virulent, invasive and addictive. Stuff makes us exhausted and mad. There is too much stuff

The following common statements can be taken VERY seriously:—

"I'm stuffed."
and,

"The world is stuffed."



Leunig

used with permission

It is no insight to say with Leunig that "There is too much stuff". Indeed, 80% of Australians reckon their compatriots consume too much. That does not stop us wasting millions on goods we don't use, services we never needed and consumer products that, on the morning after, leave us unsatisfied. We still yearn for something with more depth, for a story that would give us something to live for, rather than something to buy.

Young people are particularly susceptible to the seductive abuse of consumerism, only having known a world where ads are ever-present, where brands signify acceptance or rejection and where banks fall over themselves to lend you the cash to participate in this divine ritual.

The Christian church is only just coming to terms with this rival for the hearts and minds of young people. Preoccupied with other foes, it has been blind-sided because, for the most part, the church has bought into the consumer circus holus-bolus.

This edition of Revolve seeks to sketch the contours of Australian consumerism and suggest a few ways forward for those seeking to be work with young people in a Christ-like way.

2. Why Study Consumerism?

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What does a Revolve paper on Consumerism seek to achieve? Will it be a sermon telling people not to enjoy themselves, to stop shopping?

No. What it attempts to do is show the effect of consumerism on young people in Australia and the consequences for Christians who work with young people.

The habits, attitudes and practices of consumerism have woven themselves so intricately into the life of young Australians that it is extremely difficult to see what is wrong with it. Almost every aspect of young people's lives is commercialised, press-ganged into service for the profit of corporations and their shareholders. Their fashions, hairstyles, phones, desires, insecurities, clothes, language, rebellious instincts...all these and more are used by corporations to make money.

So, what's the problem? We all have free will, and we can choose not to shop if we wish, can't we? The key problem, among others, is that consumerism is idolatry, a worldview that has colonised the hearts and minds of young people. Consumerism brings habits and practices to faith that result in faith being weak, shallow, and individualistic.

By studying the extent of the consumer mindset in Australian society, I hope that we who work with young people can recognise the damage that this idol is doing to young people, their wellbeing and their relationship to Jesus.

3. What is Consumerism?

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Consumerism is not simply 'consuming'. We all consume food, goods, products, services. Humans have always done this, and it is not a negative characteristic. In fact, it is an extremely positive one. It encourages relationship, hospitality and communication.

I. Consumerism is a way of life

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Consumerism, like all 'isms', is a *way of life*. This is a way of life based on consuming, a way of life centred on consuming, a way of life directed towards consuming. Consumers use the bulk of their energies and resources to consume all types of goods - housing, foods, clothes, services, holidays, experiences and dreams. Whether conscious or not, the consumerist's goal in life is to own or consume a set of desirable goods and services.

II. Consumerism is an identity-forming worldview

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Furthermore, consumerism is a worldview that shapes our identity. What is this worldview? At the most primitive level, it is "To have is to be". The consumerist's identity is formed by having and desiring goods and services. The goods and services they consume convey a desirable meaning for the consumer. For example, at the simplest level, certain clothes will convey a sense of being 'cool', or of wealth, or sophistication, or even a rejection on these values. "If I *have* this pair of shoes, I will *be* liked/cool/athletic/accepted/sexy/attractive/superior/counter-cultural".

III. Consumerism is a confusion of 'needs' and 'wants'

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At a more complex level, consumerists can work to achieve a "standard of living", or a collection of goods and services that they perceive is "necessary" to be a normal person. If it is perceived to be normal to own a house, 2 cars, air conditioner, entertainment system, go on an annual vacation to Bali and eat out twice a week then the consumerist will desire these consumer goods and services in order to be "normal". In this sense, the goods and services are necessary.

However, most of what we buy is not strictly necessary, because we have lost any meaningful sense of what is necessary, and of what is superfluous. Those who do not possess certain goods are perceived to be deviant or to be pitied: imagine living without a telephone or car. These goods have only been available to most people for the last 100 years (at the most), but to intentionally lack them is to invite scorn, incomprehension and derision.

IV. Consumerism is a never-ending quest

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Consumerism extends beyond simply "having" a good, service or experience. It extends to the search, the quest, the journey for those goods, services and experiences. Having is not enough - there is always another consumer product or experience to be had. There is always a more satisfying toothbrush, shoe, diet, holiday experience, electric tool. The fact that this process is never-ending means that, the actual product is not as important as the ongoing search.

3. Marketing

We all have legitimate emotional and social needs: to belong, to have friends, to achieve, to experience happiness and pleasure, to be safe. Corporations use marketing to link these emotions with their product:

*One of the most powerful tools in the advertisers' armoury is the capacity to link margarine, soft drinks, jeans and cars with the kind of emotions most people like to feel.*³

In other words, to keep people buying stuff, companies create a need in the mind of the consumer. This is done through exploiting legitimate fears, insecurities and concerns that we all possess, and then presenting a product that will satisfy those fears, insecurities and concerns. The brutality of this method is unveiled when we realise that marketers are constantly promising satisfaction, but relying on our dissatisfaction so that we will never stop buying stuff.

4. Branding

This factor is related to marketing, but is more specific. Branding is about investing a logo with certain qualities and characteristics. If consumers can then be 'infected' with this logo and its associated qualities, then they will be more likely to buy the product.

For example, Diesel Jeans owner Renzo Rosso had this to say about the denim leg coverings he sells:

*We don't sell a product, we sell a style of life...The Diesel concept is everything. It's the way to live, it's the way to wear, it's the way to do something.*⁴

Corporations send out their brand in myriad ways. Television, radio and print advertising are only the most obvious and mundane. Concerts, political parties, product placement, billboards, mobile phone ring-tones, educational sponsorship, contributions to community projects, text messages, clothing, websites, graffiti, sponsorship of celebrities, sportspeople and political parties...all these are ways that the corporation sends out the virus of its brand into the world.

5. Individualism

This may be a "chicken or the egg" factor, but individualism is a major driver of consumerism. Our obsession with creating our own meaning and identity finds its economic partner in consumerism. Through consuming goods and services we can create an identity of our own choosing...if we have the disposable income to do so.

Therefore, consumerism is a way of creating identity that does not require deep soul-searching or self-understanding. Purchasing products replaces introspection and reflection.

6. Environmental factors

These are social and technological changes that play a role. These include:

Easy availability of credit

Increased opportunities to buy: shopping complexes, internet

Debt - Generation Ys have been accustomed to a world where debt is used, rather than savings, to finance non-necessary goods and services.⁵

Advances in communication technology (satellite, internet, mobile technology) which makes advertising more accessible to the consumer.

³ Hamilton & Dennis, 2005

⁴ Klein, 2001

⁵ Bakewell and Mitchell, 2003

5. Consumerism & Teenagers

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I. The Invasion of Commercialism

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As mentioned in the introduction, every aspect of young people's lives has been press-ganged into the service of profit. Romance, youthful rebellion, fashion statements, gossip, communication, education - all of these are fodder for corporations, who package young people's yearnings and sell it to them. Because of this, young people are prone to approaching most of life with a consumerist attitude.

The most obvious demonstration of this is a desire to be like "successful people": the rich, celebrities, and those corporations hold up as role models. In its extreme form, this can take the form of cosmetic surgery. Less harmful manifestations are seen in conformity in terms of clothing, accessories, language, hairstyle and leisure activities.

II. Decreased Wellbeing

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It is fairly clear that consumerism encourages a focus on attaining status and identity through the purchasing of goods and services. This is an "extrinsic" motivation. That is, something external to yourself is needed for satisfaction:

People for whom "extrinsic goals" such as fame, fortune and glamour are a priority in life tend to experience more anxiety and depression and lower overall wellbeing...than people oriented towards "intrinsic goals" of close relationships, personal growth and self-understanding, and contributing to the community. In short, the more materialistic people are, the poorer their quality of life.⁷

Why is this? Why shouldn't the consumption of material goods bring wellbeing? The answer is that if a person has no internal values, then their values will be determined by marketers, who are concerned not with the satisfaction of legitimate needs but with constantly dissatisfying consumers so that they will buy more products. Consumers must continually consume to meet their fears, ever reaching for new highs, new experiences and new products that will satisfy them.

Without an evolved framework of ethical values the pursuit of material acquisitions (and the status of these acquisitions) ultimately fails expectations.⁸

In addition, there are other, indirect stresses, on teenagers. Their families may experience high levels of debt and associated anxiety because of the pressure to "keep up with the Jones'". One example of this is "mortgage stress", where families feel under financial strain because of house repayments:

[Mortgage stress] is not due to mortgage rates increasing or decreasing incomes, but by families borrowing money to fund other pursuits which are seen as necessary for the "good life"...interstate or overseas holidays, a second car, expensive presents.⁹

III. An Abusive Story

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Consumerism encourages people to find belonging and meaning within a story whose elements are entirely arranged to convince us to buy a product. Such a story is thin at best, abusive at worst.

This is the most insidious effect of consumerism on young people, and one that has profound consequences for mission. We have said that consumerism is a worldview that shapes identity. Another way of saying this is that consumerism gives consumers the resources to tell a story about ourselves - this story drives our identity, and gives meaning to the events in our lives.

We all tell ourselves stories in order to give meaning to our lives. To tell these stories we need "fictive resources". As a novel has characters, locations and themes, so we need values, anecdotes, beliefs and past actions to create a story for ourselves. For Christians, these "fictive resources" primarily come from the Bible, our community of faith, the Holy Spirit and our reason. They will also come from our families, friends and the culture around us.

⁷ Eckersley et al, 2006

⁸ Hallam et al, 2006

⁹ Hamilton & Denniss, 2005

7. Consumerism & Christianity

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Your branding needs to reflect trust, it needs to sell a spirit and needs to reflect a bigger picture...Pokemon, Ninja Turtles and Harry Potter - they have all succeeded in such a way that they almost become a "mini-religion"...a belief the tweens could admire.

Marketing article

...the major threat to the viability of our faith is that of consumerism. This is a far more heinous and insidious challenge to the gospel because in so many ways it infects each and every one of us.

Alan Hirsch

The central concern about consumerism and Christianity is not that consuming goods and services is evil. It is that consumerism teaches us to approach *everything*, including faith, as an object to be consumed. The habits and attitudes of consumerism are applied to every sphere of life, including our faith.

What happens when the habits of consumerism are applied to faith?

I. Marketable faith

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The Christian media world often uses similar marketing techniques to the secular world. Buy this youth bible, WWJD wristband, Christian music CD, go to this conference, get the tapes of this speaker, run this packaged workshop at your church (eg. Drug-proof your kids; Alpha; Purpose-driven life). The underlying message is that by purchasing these products, the problems of our church will be solved.

While these products have some spiritual value, the church becomes a mirror image of the world. The content may be different (Christian lyrics vs. non-Christian lyrics) but the method of engagement is the same (buy product=improve life).

II. Opiate of the masses

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Christianity is a religion of disruption and interruption of the "way things are". Jesus is continually overturning expectations, crossing boundaries and upsetting the influential. Predictably, many people reject his message.

When the habits of consumerism are applied to Christianity, all images and stories are emptied of anything offensive, so as to make them more attractive to the consumer. Think of how many people wear a cross. Parts of the gospel that are demanding are down-played or forgotten in order to make our "product" attractive to prospective "buyers". Who has ever heard an evangelistic message calling people to "take up their cross"?

When this happens, religion loses its transforming value, and is no threat to a life of consumerism. Instead:

It supplies the veneer of meaning and conviction of which modern existence so often deprives us, without disrupting the underlying form of our lives - our obligation to consume.

Vincent Miller

III. Individualistic and privatised

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Christianity is a story, in which each element of the story strengthens the others, and only makes sense in relation to the other elements. For example, the Cross only makes sense in relation to Jesus' life, and Jesus' life only makes sense in light of the Old Testament. Consumerism encourages people to choose what *they* consider attractive and desirable. But as we have discussed, our idea of what we need is shaped by the world of multi-billion dollar marketing campaigns.

Christianity is also a *communal* story, but consumer habits work against a collective faith, because they prioritise *individual* and *private* concerns. In my everyday life, I am used to buying what I want, without thinking of others. Why should I change that attitude when it comes to faith?

8. How do we do mission in a consumerist world?

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*Perhaps the greatest question
facing the emerging church
is how to integrate spiritual tourism
with the notion of redemptive community...*

*How do we create communities
that are open enough to welcome the tourist,
yet orthodox enough to remain grounded
in the triune God?*

Steve Taylor

The world of teenagers is saturated with images, symbols and messages that are all designed to seduce them into the idolatry of consumerism. Consumerism has become a religious quest: it is a search for satisfaction amongst things that can never satisfy. Despite that fact, most teenagers are sold-out to the message that consumerism broadcasts.

What does Christian work with young people look like in such an environment?

I. A selfless life

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Young people need to see an alternative to consumerism. Words are not enough, because the world of images and advertising is too seductive to be fought against using words. The most effective communication of an alternative is a selfless life.

The life of consumerism is deeply and profoundly self-centred, even when the content of consumption seems other-oriented. For example, I buy fair-trade coffee because I want to support justice for poor farmers in the Third World. However, as yet, I have not participated in any other action to ensure those farmers get a fair deal. My "political action" is limited to "buying stuff".

Because the life of consumerism is deeply self-centred, the only counter to it is a life that is self-less. A selfless life does not make sense in the world of consumerism. In order for young people to follow Jesus, rather than brands, they need to have models that they can follow.

II. Responsible consumerism

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It is obviously not possible to refuse *all* consumption in our world. However, it is possible to consume responsibly and ethically. By attempting to discover the "hidden story" of consumer products, we can begin to cut through the fog that corporations love us to be in.

III. Theological Re-Membering

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Consumerism only tells the parts of the story that are useful for making money, and this can happen to the biblical story as well. Challenging or demanding biblical passages can be left out in order to make faith more 'attractive' to those with a consumer mindset.

It is important that we find ways of "re-membering" the story of the Bible. By re-membering I mean the opposite of dismembering, which is to 'take apart.' Re-membering the Bible means reading it in such a way that each part is connected to the whole, and that challenging passages are not simply ignored.

Communication during evangelism and discipleship must not fail to connect different stories to each other, so that young people see that Christian faith is participation in a coherent story, and not about choosing attractive parts that suit their preferences.

IV. Spiritual Disciplines & Mentoring

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It is difficult for anyone, including young people, to resist the seductive call of consumerism. It is essential that young people are confident in their relationship to Jesus, rather than their loyalty to brands or styles. But, in order to sustain their relationship to Jesus, they need to engage in spiritual disciplines and be mentored.

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