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The Human Footprint of Our Daily Consumption: Defetishizing Commodities Through New Media

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

Have you ever wondered under what social conditions a product was manufactured? Who labored to make it? How much were they paid for their labor? Were they paid at all? Did they have a safe work environment? The answers to these questions are not always at the consumer's fingertips. Over the course of the last two centuries and with the development of capitalist conditions of commodity production (who makes what where and under what conditions), many people have come to experience a true disconnect from the production of commodities we purchase. That's because the majority of people living on the planet no longer make the clothes they wear, the food they eat, or the technological devices they interact with in their everyday lives. This disconnection allows a commodity to conceal much of the information about its production from the consumer (Baron, 2013).

By concealing the conditions of its own capitalist production, a commodity is able to hide from us such things like labor exploitation, environmental degradation, and hazardous working conditions. Only under certain circumstances such as alternative or fair trade do people attempt to illuminate the process and the social relations of a commodity's production to the consumer (Hudson & Hudson, 2003). A consequence of this separation from production is what Karl Marx called commodity fetishism (Marx, 1887). Marx was referring to the act of people viewing a product's characteristics in the final stage of production without any knowledge of the relationships among people and between people and things involved in its creation (Marx, 1887). It is through this fetishism that we are unable to relate to one another directly as human beings, instead relating to each other through the myriad of products we encounter (Harvey, 2010). The act of fetishizing a commodity (commodity being any good or service which meets a human want, need, or desire (Marx, 1887)) contributes to negative phenomena like sweatshops and

environmental ruin (Wyatt, 2011). Marx's analysis is clearly relevant today in North America, where we are surrounded by an excessive amount of commodities on a daily basis, yet we cannot readily tell exactly how they were produced.

A capitalist consumer society, like the one we have today in North America, always wants to expand its capital by growing profits. In order to achieve this and compete in the global market, many high-profile retailers increase production and lower wages by establishing their production facilities where labor is not organized in unions, there is little governmental oversight or regulation of work conditions, working classes are most repressed, and, consequently, the cost of labor is cheapest (Ross, 2004). This relentless pursuit of profits comes at a disregard for workers while increasing the wealth of corporations and their boards of directors and major shareholders (Wolff, 2014).

According to Marx (1887), capitalism is a mode of production that is based on private ownership of the means of production (i.e. factories, raw materials, tools). Capitalists produce commodities for market while obtaining the most labor at the lowest possible cost. By acquiring cheap labor and selling the commodity at a higher cost than the labor, the capitalist is creating a profit. Marx (1887) believed that the actions of capitalism create an "accumulation of wealth at one pole…" while at the same time create an "accumulation of misery, agony of toil slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation at the opposite pole" (p.445). By applying Marx's critique of capitalist political economy, this paper explores the question: How can new media defetishize commodities and address the exploitative labor practices of the global economy?

In order to explore this question I created an interactive site, *The Human Footprint of Our Daily Consumption*. The aim of the site is not to judge or blame the consumer but to encourage people to think about the social conditions involved in the creation of a commodity. The

interactive website will enable individuals to recognize their role in the social relations and of the possible exploitative labor conditions of workers who produced said commodity. Although consumers have many reasons for making purchases, it is important to give them resources that allow for contemplation on purchases made with regard to the conditions under which commodities are produced. My goal is for the website to assist in defetishizing commodities by providing a broader understanding of the lives affected by the production of the things we consume, and in doing so, help close the distance between consumer and the means of commodity production.

CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

> A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. This is the reason why the products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses (Marx, 1887, p. 46).

Although Karl Marx's *Capital Volume 1* was written in 1867, much of it applies to the global conditions of commodity production and consumption we are experiencing today. Whether we are talking about environmental ruin, social inequality, or diminishing labor rights, all have one thing in common: they are, to a great extent, the consequences of a globalized system of capitalist production. Much of Karl Marx's work involves a critical analysis of capitalism and class struggle. Through his critique in *Capital Volume 1*, Marx (1887) argued that conditions of a capitalist mode of production are of exploitation and alienation of workers. Marx (1887) claimed that in a capitalist market, wages fall and working conditions deteriorate. According to Marx (1887), a commodity, which is something that meets a human want, need, or desire, may differ in qualities, but the one thing all commodities share is that they are the products of the expenditure of human labor. The market system of capitalism operates behind our backs and conceals much information about the commodities that it produces (Harvey, 2010). One ramification is that it is increasingly difficult to know the conditions of labor of the people who produced our commodity.

Being a Consumer

There are many things to consider when making trips to a local store or mall for our food, clothing, or the latest technological gadget. We may first ask ourselves where we are going to make our purchase; some places are more visually appealing or have better customer service. We may ask ourselves if we can afford the product or if it can be found at a lower cost (Micheletti, 2003). But do we ever ask where the product was manufactured or whose labor created it? How were the workers who created, sewed, or assembled it treated? Many of us do not even consider the possible social or ethical issues surrounding the manufacturing of a product. Maybe we just assume that a manufactured product was created within our own ethical standards. Or maybe we are just overpowered by the amount of goods that surround us. There is such an exhaustive variety of goods produced today that it is easy to overlook something as basic as the "social characteristics of production" (Leiss & Botterill, 2005, p. 256). Because of this, we as consumers know very little about where the goods we consume come from and under what conditions they were created (Lewis & Potter, 2011). Marx's term "commodity fetishism" can be easily applied to this type of disconnection.

What is Commodity Fetishism?

To explain commodity fetishism, it is helpful to look at the terms *fetish* and *commodity*. A fetish is created through the worship of an inanimate object that is regarded as having some magical properties or powers. The object has the capacity to influence the lives and actions of its human worshippers (Dant, 1996). By attributing properties to the object that are not solely of the object's making, the object, according to Marx, becomes fetishized. Marx used this term to describe the hidden social relations and conditions under which goods are produced (Jhally,

1987; Wyatt, 2011). By reconstructing the social character of an object into a natural character, the object will have a false appearance.

In Marx's (1887) critique, a commodity is any good or service which meets a human want, need, or desire. Marx believed that, in a capitalist society, commodities are assigned qualities as if they exist naturally, when in fact, only people can possess them. The real value of a commodity, for Marx, was the amount of labor that went into the production of a commodity (Dant, 1996). Once the commodity loses all connection to the labor involved, commodity fetishism is created.

It is important to keep in mind that commodity fetishism can only take place when the people who make commodities find themselves in the condition of being what Marx (1961) called alienated from the means of production. This means that the people who make commodities do not own the land, machines, animals, or raw materials used in the production process and all they have to contribute is their body's ability to work. The worker's alienation from production is also something that is established when, in fact, it has not always been a condition of the world. Alienation from the means of production has taken place in a number of ways, especially since the 16th-century era of colonial expansion. One of these ways is what Marx (1887) called "primitive accumulation," that is, violent situations which involved people being dispossessed from their lands and resources by war, invasion, or colonization.

Under pre-capitalist conditions this was not the case. For example, a craftsperson would own her own shop, create her own product, and control the means of production. Alienation occurs under capitalist conditions where the worker has no control over their work. The creative reward of the labor and the satisfaction of knowing that your skills created a particular product to fill a need does not exist (Hudson & Hudson, 2003). In capitalist production, the laborer will

have no direct contact with the consumer – thus the former will have little concern for the latter, and vice versa. As a result, the consumer will have little concern for the way in which the object she purchases is produced (Hudson & Hudson, 2003).

In the U.S., commodity fetishism is prevalent. A majority of the goods that we purchase are manufactured outside of the U.S. For instance, in 2012, 97.5 percent of the apparel and 98 percent of the footwear sold in the U.S. was produced internationally (We Wear the Facts, n.d.). Corporations move their factories overseas to developing countries to access the readily abundant cheap labor. The result of cheap labor is a lower cost of production. Cheaper labor and cheaper costs of production equals high volume of goods, which then equals more consumption and more sales. This type of cycle of consumption leaves very little room for contemplating the commodity chain of production (the path from which a good travels from producer to consumer). Ultimately we are left with very little information regarding where our commodities are produced and under what conditions (unless the commodity has a label – and even then that states little more than the country where the commodity was manufactured). Furthermore, labels themselves can become fetishized, as they do not show the social relations and conditions of production in themselves, but are a false representation of those relations and conditions created by manufacturing companies, which, by definition, have a conflict of interest.

Because most of the production of our goods is so physically remote, we are unable to easily access information regarding the conditions of the commodities that are produced or the treatment of the people creating these commodities. This gives rise to an out-of-sight, out-of-mind way of being. When commodities are presented to consumers in a way where the human labor used to produce them is ignored, it becomes difficult for consumers to make ethical purchasing decisions. If we are unable to make a connection between the commodity and the

people involved in the production of that commodity, we are unable to truly see the possible social injustice in the manufacturing of the products. In other words, commodity fetishism begins.

CHAPTER 3 - CASE STUDIES - THE HUMAN COSTS

Rubber. Commodity fetishism is nothing new. In the early 20th century, when England and Europe were developing an increasing demand for rubber, English rubber companies contracted *mestizo* (a term used to denote people of indigenous and European ancestry) traders in Colombia and Peru to procure the desired commodity. These rubber traders used violent means to force indigenous residents of the Amazon to collect the much-needed rubber. Rubber company camps were set up throughout the region, where the indigenous people were lashed, kept in chains, and even burnt alive – terror being used to force them to engage in a kind of labor they otherwise had no interest in. Across the Atlantic, English rubber companies had no idea about (and also little curiosity for) the conditions involved in the production of the rubber they were purchasing. When news stories finally called attention to the violence involved in rubber production, the English rubber companies pleaded innocent. They had paid the *mestizo* traders for the rubber, so how could anything have gone wrong (Taussig, 1987)?

Footwear. Many consumers do not question a company's ethical market behavior. Since the mid 1990s, companies have been exposed in the media for exploitative production practices such as poor working conditions, low wages, and even the deaths of some workers. For example, in 1997, *The New York Times* published an article accusing Nike, the American multinational corporation, of unsafe working conditions at one of its shoe manufacturing plants in Vietnam. The article cited from an inspection report that the Nike workers were being exposed to carcinogens that exceeded the legal standards by 177 times (Greenhouse, 1997). According to the International Labour Organization, about two million people are killed on the job worldwide every year and more than 160 million people suffer from work-related ailment and diseases ("28 April, World Day for Safety," n.d., para. 3). Many of the deaths and injuries are preventable

ibid., para. 6). Most of the human costs of our commodities are in developing countries, where the poorest and least protected workers are found. Corporations flock to these areas because of the low wages, absence of labor unions, and frequently lax oversight and regulations. Most importantly, the ability of companies to seek out and exploit these kinds of labor are possible because, since the 1970s, U.S. lawmakers have established trade agreements that allow such a global system of capitalist production which is based on privatization, deregulation, and free trade – a system that Harvey (2007) and others have called neoliberalism.

Apparel. On April 23, 2013 more than 1,100 workers in Rana Plaza, a Bangladesh factory, died when an eight-story building collapsed. This incident happened just after a Bangladesh garment factory fire killed over 100 employees in November 2012 ("Health and Safety," n.d., para. 2). Workers in the factory of the Rana Plaza noticed cracks in the building. Other managers in the building noticed them too, closing their businesses and ordering their workers to go home – and to stay home the following day. But the garment workers were ordered to return to work or lose one month's pay. On Wednesday morning, more than 1,100 workers were crushed to death when the building collapsed. The workers were producing clothing for many U.S., Canadian, and European clothing labels and retailers such as Benetton, H&M, Walmart, and JCPenney (ibid.). These incidents, along with many other garment factory tragedies, have brought to the forefront the human cost of the fast fashion industry, which is known for getting the latest fashion trends to the masses quickly and cheaply (Sneed, 2014). According to Elizabeth Cline, author of *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion*, many retailers do not have direct day-to-day contact with these factories producing their garments. At times many major retailers do not even work with the factories directly,

instead relying on a middle person for communication. In other words, the buyer does not even know who is producing the product for market (Sneed, 2014).

Flowers. Another major exploitive business found in impoverished areas is the floral industry. Colombia is the second largest exporter of flowers after Holland (Watkins, 2001). In the Bogota Savanna region of Colombia, there are very few alternatives but to work for a farm and factory cutting, trimming, and arranging flowers for export to the U.S. Working in this industry is dangerous: flowers need special care to protect them against disease and pests, and to get these flowers to market requires highly toxic pesticides and fungicides be sprayed on them as they grow. Workers often suffer from rashes, headaches, and impaired vision as a result of the toxicity of the chemicals used. Women, who make up about 70 percent of the cut flower work force, report birth defects and miscarriages related to pesticide exposure (Zelenko, 2014). During peak flower arrangement seasons (Valentine's and Mother's Day) workers are at the plantations by dawn and put in a workday of 16-20 hours. These long hours result in a monthly salary of a little over $300. Americans purchase over $2 billion worth of flowers for Mother's Day and about 80 percent of these flowers come from Colombia (Zelenko, 2014).

Electronics. Many U.S. consumers have never heard of the company Foxconn, despite the fact that at some point throughout the day we have some interaction with one of their products. Foxconn is an electronics manufacturer in Shenzhen, China, which operates out of 15 multi-story buildings. It employs over 800,000 people to assemble products for Apple, Dell, HP, Nintendo, and Sony. Newly hired employees are paid a minimum wage of 900 Yuan, which is equivalent to $130 a month. Employees live and work at the factory. They share dormitory style rooms, which they pay rent for, with as many as nine other workers. Workers are assigned to day and night shifts on assembly lines, which run on a 24-hour, non-stop basis. Usually the

employees work twelve-hour days with one day off every second week ("Suicides at Foxconn," 2010).

Workers' operations are planned and measured. Technicians use stopwatches and other devices to test workers' speed on the assembly line. If a worker is unable to meet the quota then the quota is increased and the worker is not allowed breaks. Even workers' sitting and standing posture is monitored for efficiency. In an assembly line, each worker will specialize in one particular task and perform that same daily task at high speed for hours and even months on end (Chan, 2013). This type of production system "removes feelings of freshness, accomplishment or initiative toward work" (Chan, 2013, para. 31). To add to their exhaustion, workers are on rotating day and night shifts. With a constantly changing work schedule, many workers feel lonely and find it difficult to form social relationships with co-workers. Due to these feelings of social isolation and harsh working conditions, throughout 2010, 18 young workers attempted suicide by leaping from the top of the company's building. Fourteen died and the other four survived with crippling injuries. In response to the suicides, Foxconn placed safety nets around the buildings to prevent workers from jumping to their deaths. Also as a precaution, it now requires workers to sign a no-suicide letter to limit its liability.

Minerals. Consumer demand for electronic commodities has been fueling mass human violence for decades in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. A majority of the Congo's natural mineral resources such as tin, tantalum, and tungsten can be found in our cell phones, gaming devices, and computers. The Congo produces an estimated 6 to 8 percent of the world's tin and between 20-50 percent of the world's production of tantalum (Mims, 2013). The current state of the Congo region is a result of a long history of foreign troops and rebel invasions that exploit the area's resources and people. Trade for these minerals finances multiple armed groups

and funds extreme levels of violence against the Congolese people (Torres-Spelliscy, 2013). The armed groups earn hundreds of millions every year by trading these minerals (Enough Project, 2009). These groups control the mines in the area and force miners to work in dangerous conditions while paying an average wage of $1 per day (ibid.). The mining is mostly done by hand, with basic tools. Militia groups and government troops fight to control the mines, often at the expense of working civilians (ibid.).

Seafood. The fishing industry is big business for Thailand (Slavery and the Shrimp on Your Plate, 2014). According to *The New York Times,* Thailand's fishing industry employs over 650,000 people and produces more than $7 billion annually on exportation; shrimp has become an increasing popular export, with the average American consuming nearly 5 pounds of shrimp per year. (ibid.; Environmental Justice Foundation, 2015). The fishing industry in Thailand was once an industry dominated by artisanal fishers, but rapid industrialization of fishing fleets during the 20th century caused a shift, resulting in too many shipping vessels using destructive fishing methods. Governments have failed to control this industry, and what is considered illegal in other countries is permissible in Thailand. Western consumers' demands for cheap seafood have become the driving force for this industry to maximize the volume of seafood caught, at the expense of the environment and human labor. According to the Environmental Justice Foundation (2015), overfishing bodies of water exhausts the fish stock, which means ships are at sea longer, are going out farther, and are returning with less. The longer a ship is at sea, the more it costs to operate. In order to lower this cost, many captains use human trafficking to recruit their crews. The people exploited by human trafficking are forced to work for little to no money for years. Captains use debt bondage, violence, and sometimes murder to "keep crews in line and cheap seafood on supermarket shelves" (ibid., p.5).

Yet deadly incidents like the ones previously mentioned often occur without our ever becoming fully aware of them. For instance, *The Huffington Post* conducted an online poll and interviewed New York shoppers two weeks after the deadly factory collapse in Rana Plaza. Shoppers were interviewed at stores whose garments were manufactured at the Rana factory. Of the dozen shoppers interviewed, not one had heard about the factory collapse that killed so many workers. The poll conducted had slightly different results, with only 17 percent of U.S. shoppers saying they had heard a great deal about the collapse, 48 percent saying they had heard a little, and 35 percent saying they had heard nothing at all (Swanson & Bhasin, 2013). Information regarding such atrocities needs to be available to us so as not to contribute to our disconnection from production.

CHAPTER 4 - COMMODITIES AND CONSUMPTION

Presently, consumption is the driving force for our economy (Goodman & Cohen, 2004). But how did consumption become such a central part of our existence? Before the 18th century, a majority of the population in the U.S. lived in rural areas. Those rural towns had shops that were usually an extension of a craftperson's workspace. What a person consumed was for the most part created by someone him- or herself or by someone with whom the consumer had a personal connection. These small-scale craftspeople were responsible for all aspects of production and most goods were produced not only locally and by hand, but also in limited quantity (Leiss & Botterill, 2005). But once the shift from handmade production to machine-aided production began, production was broken down into smaller tasks. These smaller tasks were divided among workers who then perform one specialized function (ibid.). The emergence of this type of factory system, where one person performed the same act over and over, became known as an assembly line. The repetitive task of a person working the assembly line quickened the pace of production. Ultimately, as a result, the craftsperson is replaced and massive amounts of production begin.

The increase in machine production of goods meant the surplus of goods had to be sold somewhere. As a result, the development of general stores selling ready-made goods began to appear by the end of the 18th century (Goodman & Cohen, 2004). To offer more commodities for purchase, shops began to expand in size. By mid-19th century, they could no longer be thought of as general stores, but "something very different – department stores" (Goodman & Cohen, 2004, p. 14). Before the department store "people only went shopping when they needed or wanted something in particular" (Friese, 2000, p.12). Customers could not just walk around looking at merchandise, but had to rely on a shopkeeper to remove the goods from a cupboard and display them on a counter (Friese, 2000). Now with the department store, customers were

allowed to browse freely and experience the atmosphere without having any purchasing intentions. The department store became a place of leisure and entertainment (ibid.). To encourage consumption, department stores incorporated the use of glass showcases and window displays. The presentation of commodities in this way not only highlighted their features but also created a desire for them. In addition to merchandising displays, department stores introduced fixed prices and buying on credit. This meant shoppers no longer had to barter on prices with shopkeepers, and previously unobtainable commodities could now be purchased in installments. According to Goodman (2004), the department store showed the middle class how to dress, how to furnish their homes, and how to spend their leisure time. It did this by "lowering prices to a level that allowed middle-class commodities to become mass-consumed items" (Goodman & Cohen, 2004, p.19).

Why We Buy – Advertisements Contribution to Commodity Fetishism

In a capitalist society, manufacturers must make sure that what is produced is consumed, and it is through advertising and the cultivation of desire that manufacturers are able to create a market for their product (Jhally, 1987). By building on a product's brand, advertisements help consumers make distinctions among the mass produced commodities. In doing so, less focus is placed on the actual attributes of the product and more on the brand. This begins to introduce the idea of consumption from "a function of need to a function of fantasy" (Goodman & Cohen, 2004, p. 21). As a way to gain and retain customers, we are told, through advertising, that only a life via the accumulation of goods will allow greater happiness and fulfillment. This creates a belief that commodities are no longer just objects to be purchased, but that they define who we are and become part of our identity (Jhally, 1987). Consumers who constantly receive messages telling them of their wants and desires become a population more concerned with how their

purchases will improve their lives and less about the conditions under which that commodity was produced.

For this reason, when a consumer wanders through a store or online, she sees the characteristics of the commodities in the form of packaging, the lifestyle associated with the object, and the price (Hudson & Hudson, 2003). When we take in all of these characteristics, we become completely separated from the process used to create the product. The commodity has a new life, one that is void of any production in which people have worked to create it. As a result, the commodity fails to communicate any information regarding the process of the product, the conditions of workers, or the benefits or wages of the workers. If the information stated previously were available to the consumer it would affect their interaction with the products. Therefore, promotional materials rarely discuss the details of a commodity's production, thus maintaining the disconnection between the production and the consumer (Papathanassopoulos, 2011).

Distance Between Consumers and Producers

In addition to marketing, long-distance trade has created a further separation of the end product from the process by which it was produced (Hudson & Hudson, 2003). In a global trading system, long-distance trade puts a great physical barrier between the consumer and the production of commodities. This physical distance makes it difficult to trace the commodity chain of production; we may not be able to tell where the raw materials come from, where the product is manufactured, or by whom (Micheletti, 2003). This distance can make hiding any social or environmental consequences of the production of the commodity easy. As a result, it becomes natural for us to ignore any injustice when it occurs thousands of miles away (Papathanassopoulos, 2011).

Do we, as consumers in affluent countries like the U.S., have an obligation to try and improve the working conditions and wages of workers in other parts of the world who produce the items that we purchase (Young, 2004)? According to Young (2004), yes we are responsible for the working conditions of far away workers. She proposes a "social connection model of responsibility" which states that all agents who contribute, by their actions, to the processes that produce any injustice have responsibilities to remedy those injustices. Her social connection model takes a global approach to social responsibility and identifies a large circle of people who have participated in exploitative processes. For example, the action of buying a shirt connects us to the process that transformed the materials into clothes and brought them to our local store (Young, 2004). Ultimately the social connection model signifies shared responsibility. Because of our consumer actions we are connected to all the people involved in the production of any commodity and have an obligation to ensure they are treated justly by their employers – and one way we can do that is by choosing socially responsible products.

CHAPTER 5 - PROJECT DISCUSSION

Using the Aesthetics of Capitalism

Since my target audience is consumers of mass-produced commodities, I decided to create a project that uses the language that is understandable to them, the language of advertising. By using the tools and techniques of advertising such as typography, color, and imagery, I am able to relay facts to an audience whose information processing skills have been honed by the global culture of mass consumption. This audience's understanding and literacy skills are learned in a context where everyday life is saturated with advertisements, a cultural background that, in turn, shapes the way they perceive, absorb, and interpret information. Advertisements are not just a mechanism to move merchandise off of shelves but an "integral part of modern culture" (Leiss & Botterill, 2005, p. 5). The images in an ad not only get the viewer's attention, but also elicit emotion toward whatever the advertisement is about (Messaris, 1997). According to Jhally (2000), the ideology behind advertisements is that the way to happiness is through the consumption of commodities. Advertisements create desire and push us towards consumer goods to satisfy those wants and needs. Since the aesthetics and techniques of advertising are effective at driving a capitalist consumer culture, I wanted to explore the possibility of using them to make consumers think critically about their consumption, therefore turning capitalism on itself and countering power with its own techniques and momentum.

Conceptual artists Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer have used the graphic language of advertising in their work. The work of both artists relies heavily on the use of bold typographical phrases to communicate their messages. In doing so, their work explores the notions of consumer culture, political economy, and social issues.

Kruger, who has a background in graphic design, employs black-and-white photographic images found in print media with superimposed phrases set in Futura Bold Oblique typeface against a black, white, or red text box. Her work focuses on feminist issues, consumption, and commodification and explores the role that mass media plays in these areas.

Figure 1. ***Kruger, B. (1987).*** *Untitled (I shop therefore I am) [Online image]. Retrieved from http://www.maryboonegallery.com/artist_info/pages/kruger/detail1.html*

Figure 2. ***Kruger, B. (1984).*** *Untitled (Buy me, I'll change your life) [Online image]. Retrieved from http://www.skarstedt.com/exhibitions/2003-11-10_barbara-kruger/#/images/3/*

Using similar techniques as Kruger, Jenny Holzer's work consists of bold typographical statements that read clearly from a distance. Instead of using print, she incorporates the media of billboards, electronic signs, and LED signs. Holzer's messages tend to explore the ideas of consumerism, oppression, and feminism.

Figure 3. ***Holzer, J. (2006).*** *Money Creates Taste [Online image]. Retrieved from http://www.jennyholzer.com/Projections/site/Providence2006/*

Figure 4. ***Holzer, J. (1984).*** *Truisms [Online image]. Retrieved from http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/holzer-truisms-t03959*

CHAPTER 6 - METHODS

Creating the Human Footprint Website

This research project consists of a research paper and an interactive website titled *The Human Footprint of Our Daily Consumption*. The research paper reviews Marxist theories of commodity fetishism, the consequences of our disconnection to production, examples of exploitation of labor, and practices that contribute to our desire to consume. As a supplement to the paper, the interactive website (See Appendix) was created to encourage viewers to think about the working conditions and quality of life of the people who manufacture the commodities we use on a daily basis. Through the use of parallax scrolling and infographics, the website creates an interactive storytelling experience for visitors. The user's experience begins on the home page, where a series of slides present statements that directly relate to the previously mentioned case studies in earlier chapters and Marx's theory of commodity fetishism.

The home page displays a large logo superimposed on a map of the world. The teal-colored logo is a traditional shopping cart icon with branches. The branches connect the shopping cart to three people icons: a woman, a child, and a man. Below the icons is curved type in orange. To the right of this vector graphic is a declarative sentence. Each graphic chosen directly relates to the text presented. For each proceeding slide, the theme of using a declarative statement paired with a graphic image (infographic) continues throughout the site. I chose to use infographics as a way to simplify the data, while allowing it to be visually engaging and easy to grasp. The site's color scheme is one that would be considered more muted than bright, with a trendy retro feel that pairs well with the tone and images of the project. This first page has a screened back image of two chevrons with the word "scroll" in all caps typed above to give the user guidance on how to navigate through the website (See Figure 5).

Figure 5. The Human Footprint first slide.

As the user scrolls past the introductory page, the parallax scrolling effect becomes active. As Figure 6 indicates, parallax scrolling gives the illusion of depth by allowing pages to overlap one another. So instead of the website displaying content on multiple pages, the parallax scrolling's pages become the background and foreground layers.

Figure 6. Parallax scrolling.

Once the user has scrolled through the three introduction pages, s/he will land on the final page, which has a solid brown background and white text displayed. A declarative sentence is centered in the middle of the page. Below this statement is a linked sentence that, when clicked on, will take the user to the first of four industry pages; the industry categories are apparel, flowers, seafood, and electronics (see Figure 7).

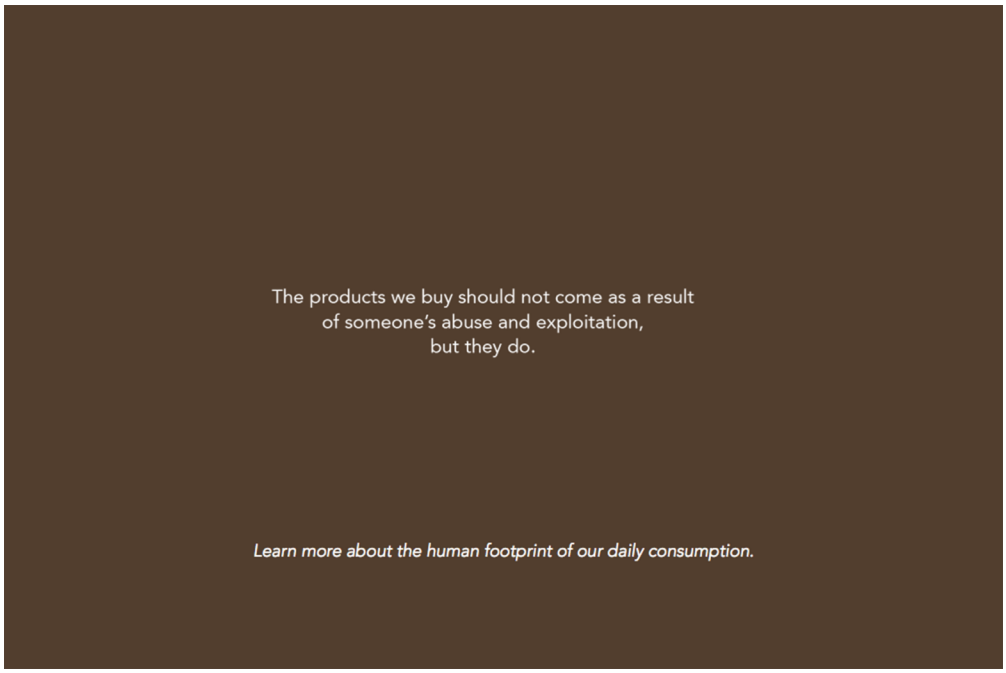

Figure 7. The Human Footprint last slide.

Within each of the four categories are several scrolling pages with pertinent information regarding that industry. These pages have the previously used logo screened back in the upper left corner. Next to the logo is the type of industry. Figure 8 illustrates how each page is comprises infographics and text that either gives critical information regarding commodity consumption and capitalism or highlights the abuse and exploitation of the laborers of that particular industry. The last slide of each section, illustrated in Figure 9, presents a statistic that is more personal and will be relatable to the user. The statement is paired with a simple graphic to reiterate that intended meaning and the tone of the statement. The words and graphics I chose

are intended to provoke emotion and reflection from the user. At the bottom of this page is a link that will take the user to the next commodity industry.

Figure 8. Apparel first slide.

Figure 9. Apparel last slide.

Once the user has visited all four industry pages, the final set of slides commands the user to take action. The slides suggest ways in which the user can take action either by asking manufacturers questions regarding production, or by doing research and choosing to buy from

companies that are having a positive impact on the lives of those involved in producing our commodities (See Figure 10). Figure 11 depicts the last slide of the website, which is an agreement the user can sign to be a responsible consumer and remain aware of the effects of commodity consumption.

Figure 10. Take Action first slide.

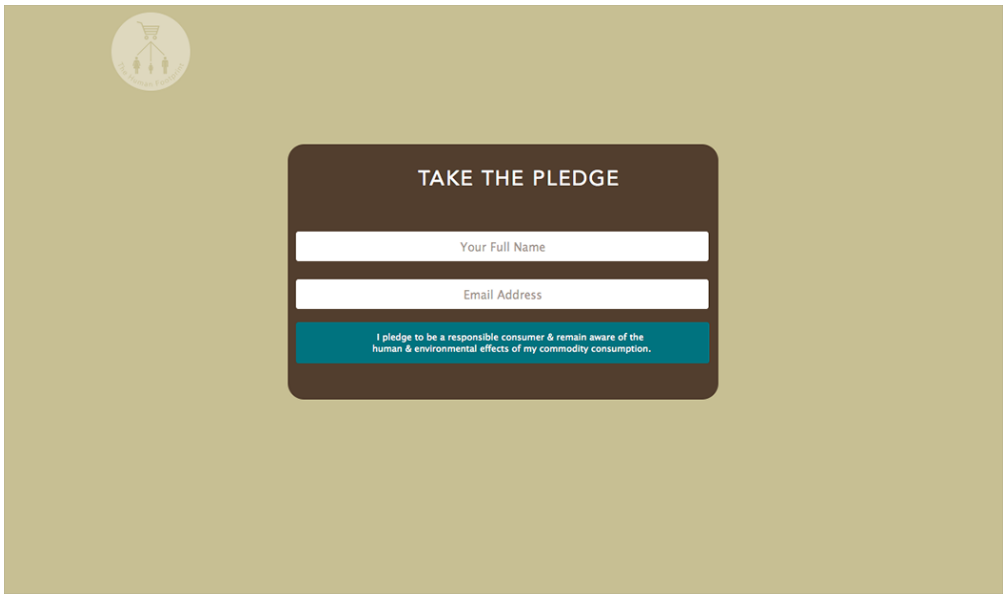

Figure 11. Take Action last slide.

CHAPTER 7 - CONCLUSION

Using New Media to Address Commodity Fetishism

During the last 500 years, our world has increasingly become organized around a global economy of commodity exchange and consumption. Most of the commodities we purchase travel through different parts of the world over the course of their production. At the same time, people continue to work under exploitative or health-threatening conditions of production and exchange, creating an ethical dilemma for those of us who live in mass consumption societies. Because of our consumption practices, we are connected to all the people involved in the production of any commodity. A Marxist perspective on this global political economy requires us to reflect on our obligation to ensure that the people who produce our commodities are treated justly (Young, 2004). Are profits more important than people? Is the immediate gratification of commodity consumption more valuable than a human life? These are the broader concerns I engage in throughout this research paper, concerns regarding issues we are implicated in on a daily basis. One of the questions that has concerned me thus far is, "How can new media conduct an intervention on commodity fetishization, making consumers reflect on the inequities and violence involved in the production of the things they buy, and how can it help move consumers to social action?" I conclude this paper by stating that in the end it is people (and not new media alone) who, through grassroots movements like the Occupy Movement and the Arab Spring movements, put new media to use in their organizing and awareness-raising practices. At the same time, new media does allow people to accomplish things they could not (or would have a harder time accomplishing) without it. New media allows grassroots organizers to connect with people all over the world, in ways that bypass major news media outlets (some of which serve the interests of capitalist manufacturers) to share information and enlighten others. While new

media alone cannot defetishize commodities, new media, in the hands of people committed to human labor rights and conditions, is a powerful and promising combination.

My interactive site, *The Human Footprint of Our Daily Consumption*, will arm the consumer with information regarding the lives that are affected through a commodity's production. By using the elements of advertising in the website's design, I want to relay information and explore the possibility of making the audience think critically about their consumption. My goal in creating the site is to help defetishize commodities by raising awareness of production practices that have negatively affected lives. The site should be viewed as an educational tool to encourage consumers to recognize and be made aware of our role in the possible oppression of workers who create products for our consumption.

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APPENDIX


The Human Footprint
Most of the products we use
& enjoy daily in the U.S.
are made by men,
women, & even children
from around the globe.
scroll

Figure 1


Unfortunately when making
our purchases, we often
don't think about
the person
behind the product.
SALE
SALE

Figure 2


Who labored to make it?
Under what conditions was it manufactured?

Figure 3


The products we buy should not come as a result
of someone's abuse and exploitation,
but they do.
Learn more about the human footprint of our daily consumption.

Figure 4

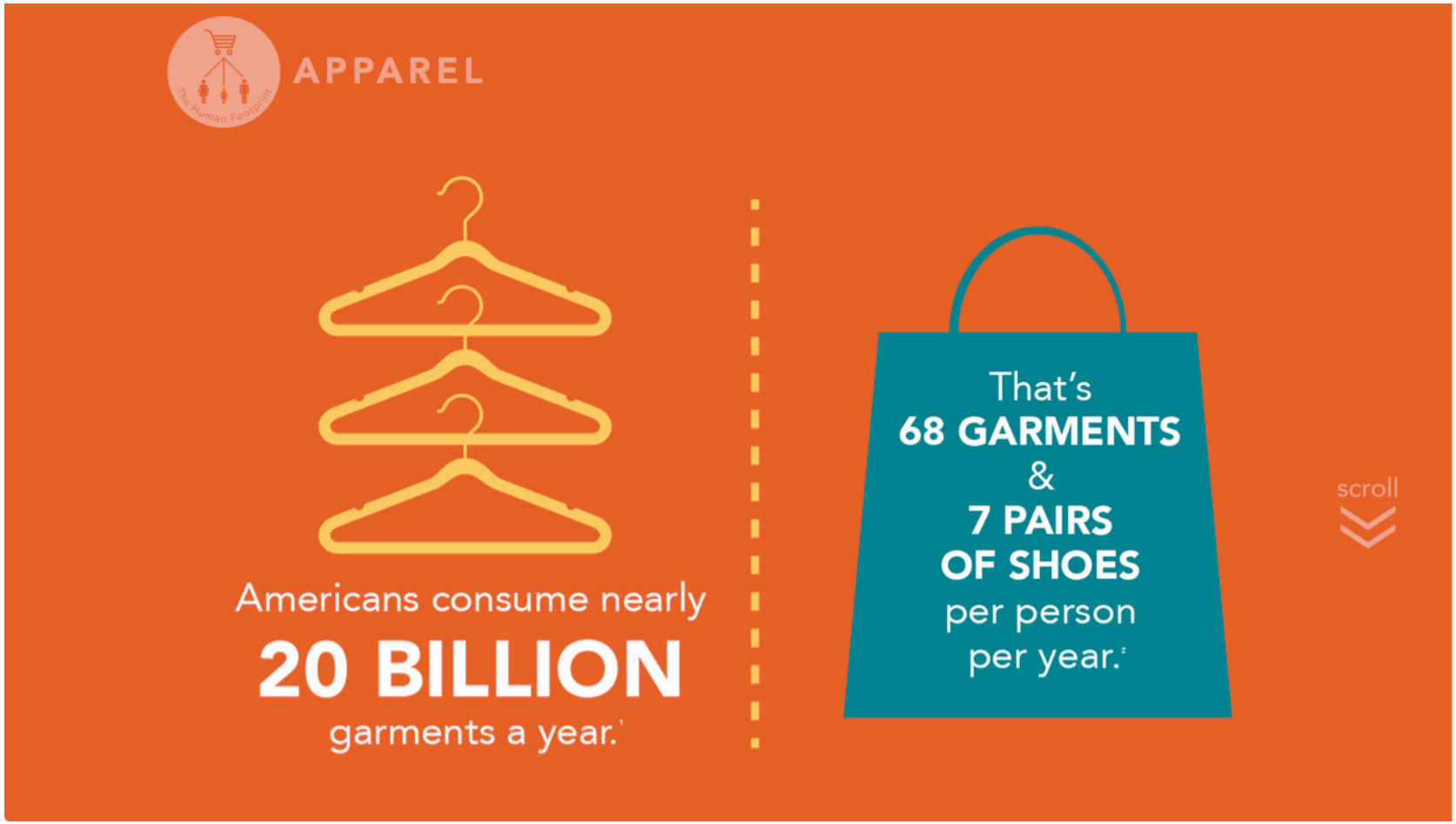
APPAREL
Americans consume nearly
20 BILLION
garments a year.[1]
That's
68 GARMENTS
&
7 PAIRS
OF SHOES
per person
per year.[2]
scroll

Figure 5

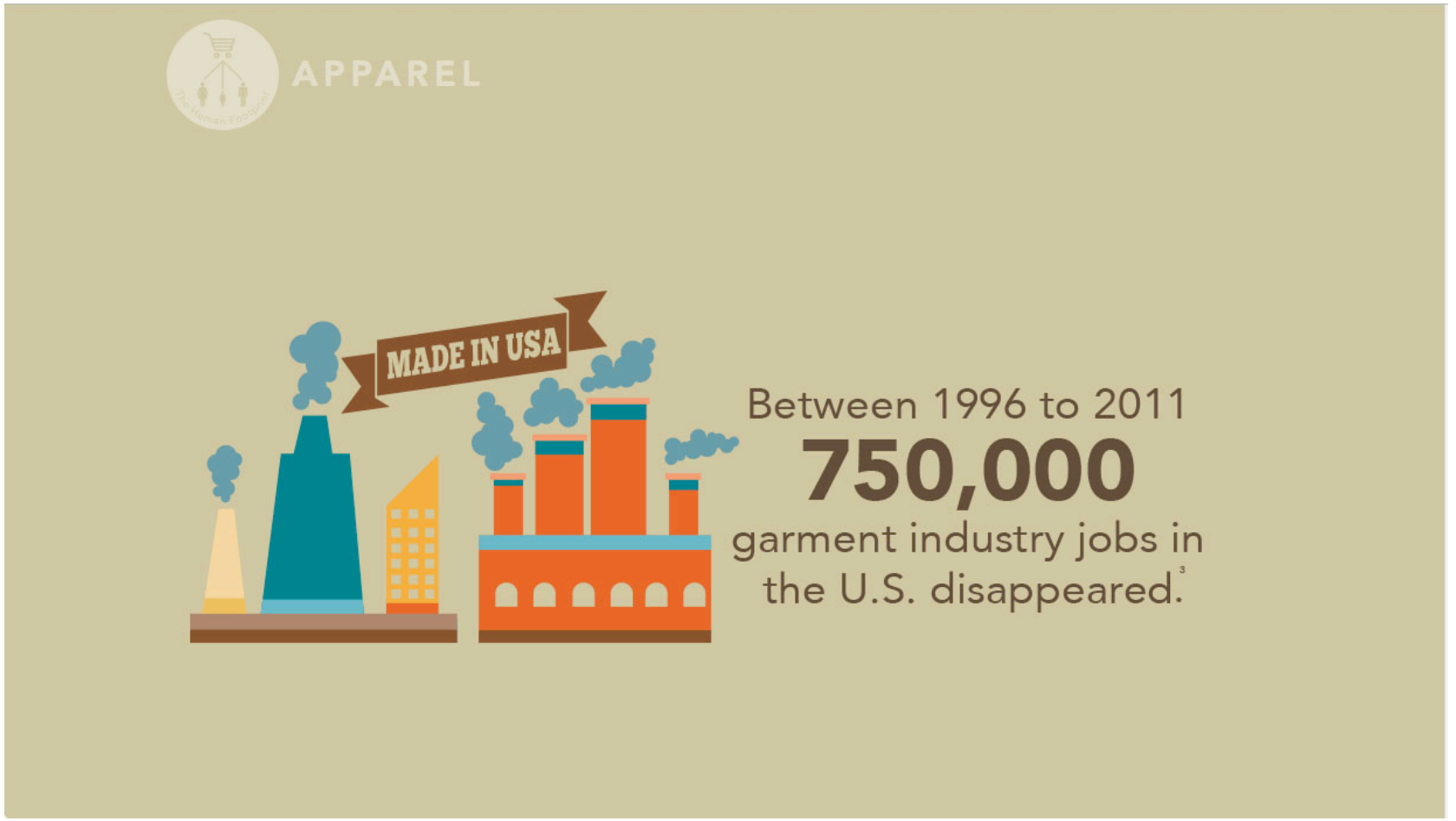
APPAREL
MADE IN USA
Between 1996 to 2011
750,000
garment industry jobs in
the U.S. disappeared.[3]

Figure 6

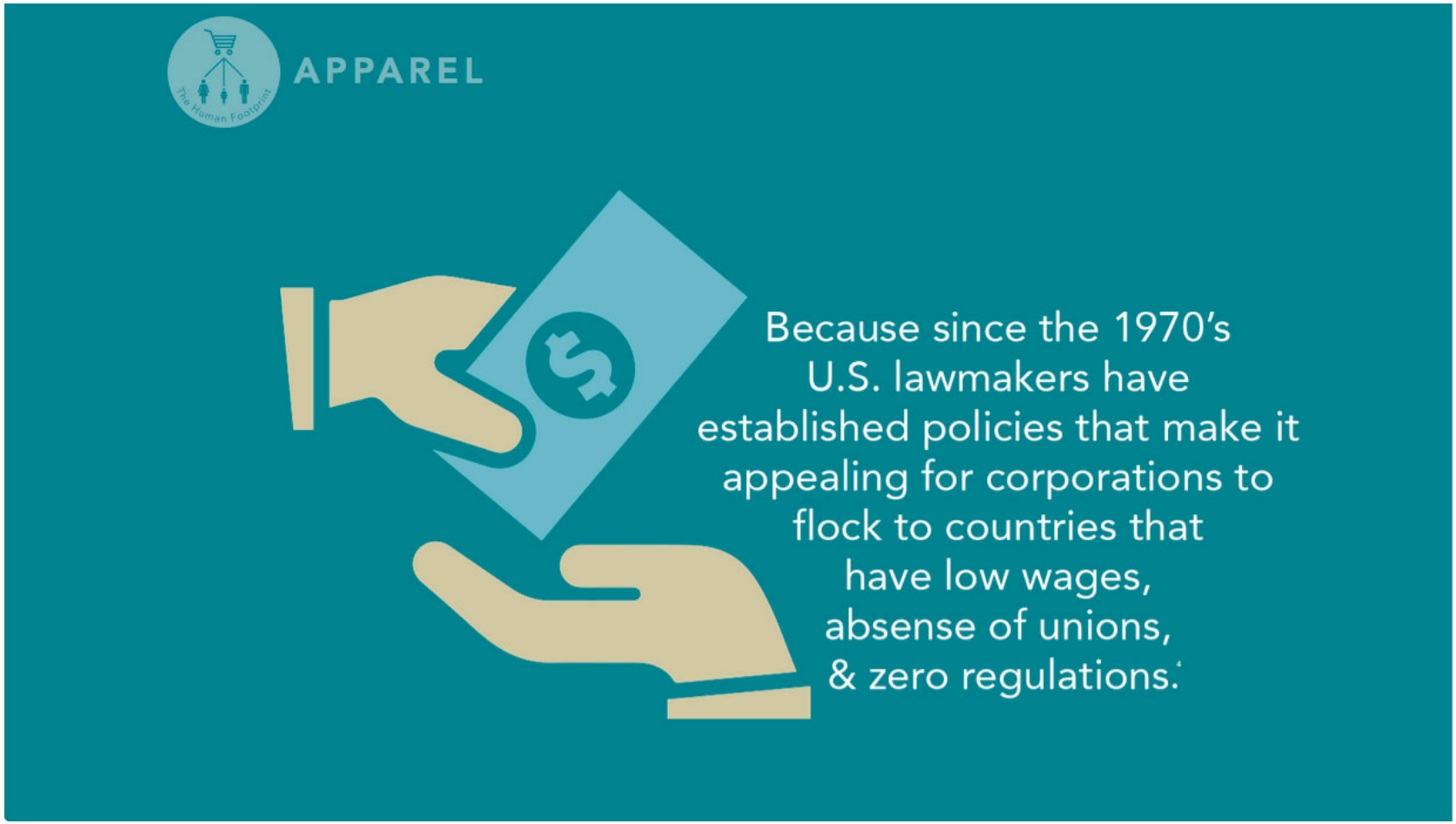
APPAREL
Because since the 1970's
U.S. lawmakers have
established policies that make it
appealing for corporations to
flock to countries that
have low wages,
absense of unions,
& zero regulations.

Figure 7

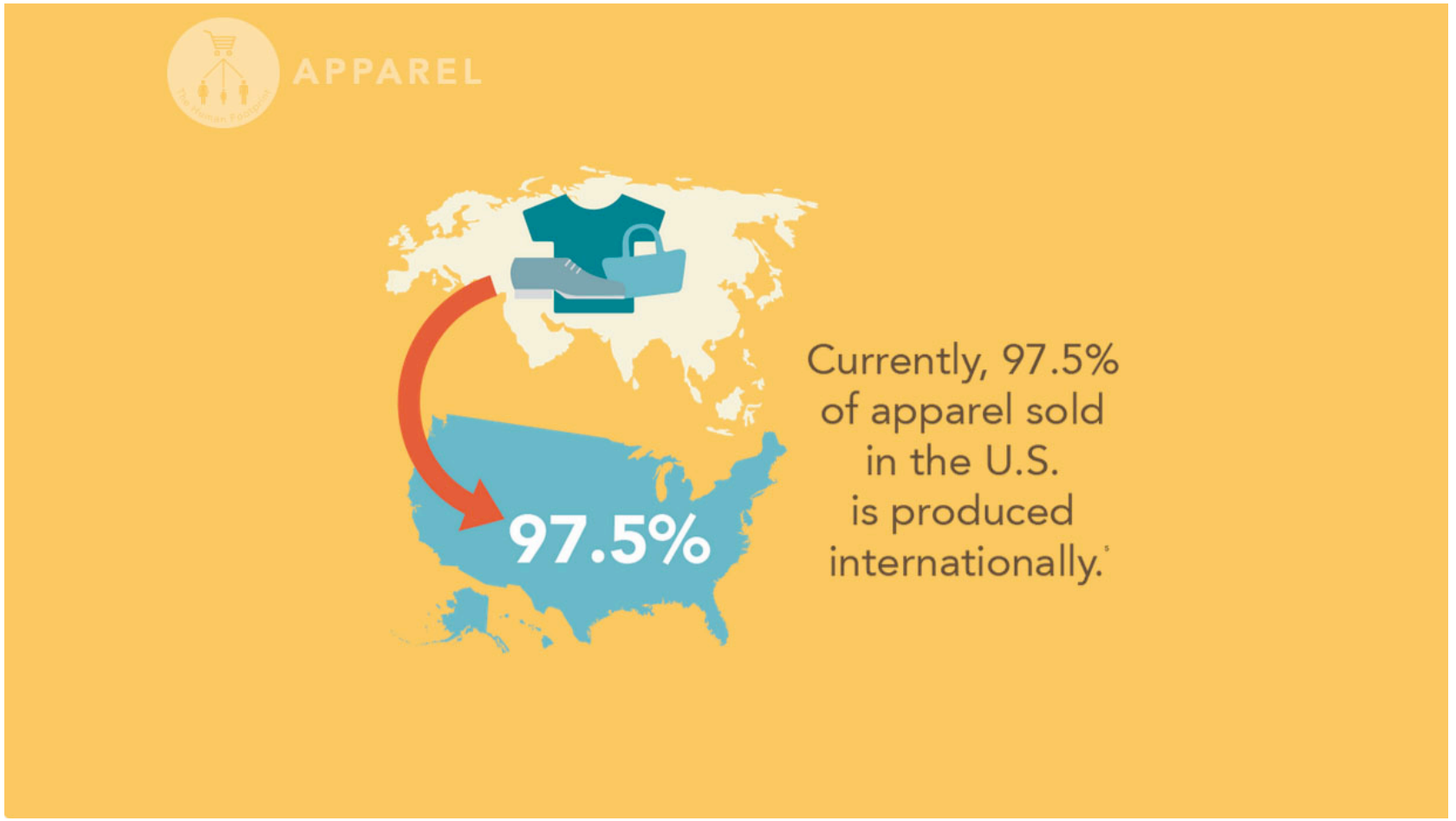
APPAREL
97.5%
Currently, 97.5%
of apparel sold
in the U.S.
is produced
internationally.[5]

Figure 8


APPAREL
In Bangladesh, a garment worker typically works
13 HOURS
per day.*

Figure 9

Figure 10


APPAREL
At these rates it would take you nearly
2 MONTHS OF WORK
to afford a pair of jeans from Banana Republic.
JAN
FEB
Continue for more info.

Figure 11

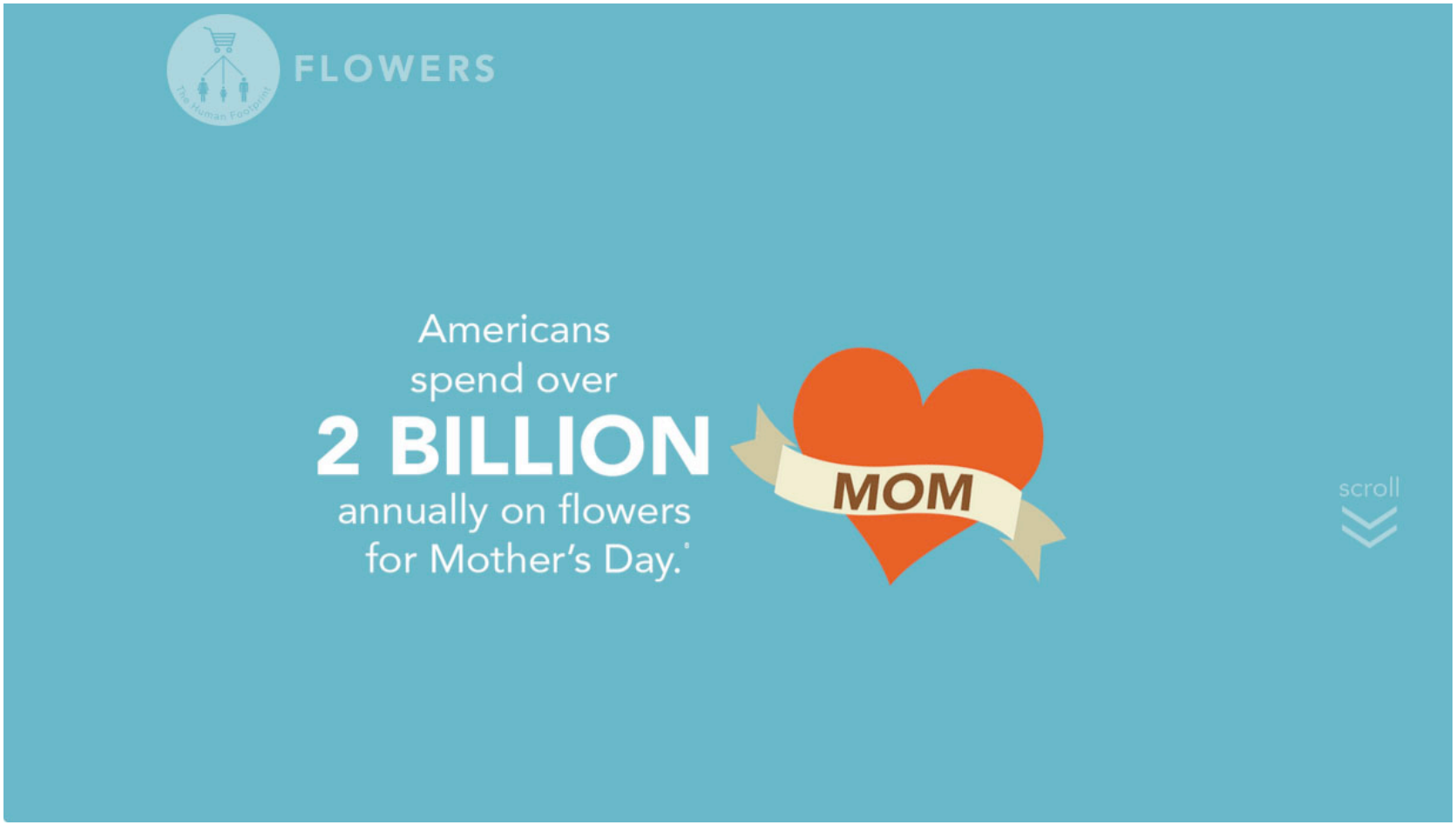
FLOWERS
Americans
spend over
2 BILLION
annually on flowers
for Mother's Day.
MOM
scroll

Figure 12


FLOWERS
80% of
the flowers
Americans purchase
come from Colombia.
80%

Figure 13


FLOWERS
A Colombian flower worker typically works
16 HOURS
per day.[10]

Figure 14


FLOWERS
And is exposed to cancer causing
pesticides, fungicides, & preservatives
so that consumers may have
a blemish-free flower.[11]

Figure 15

Figure 16


FLOWERS
All the money you earn would go to
CANCER TREATING DRUGS
which typically cost more than $10,000 a month.
Continue for more info.

Figure 17

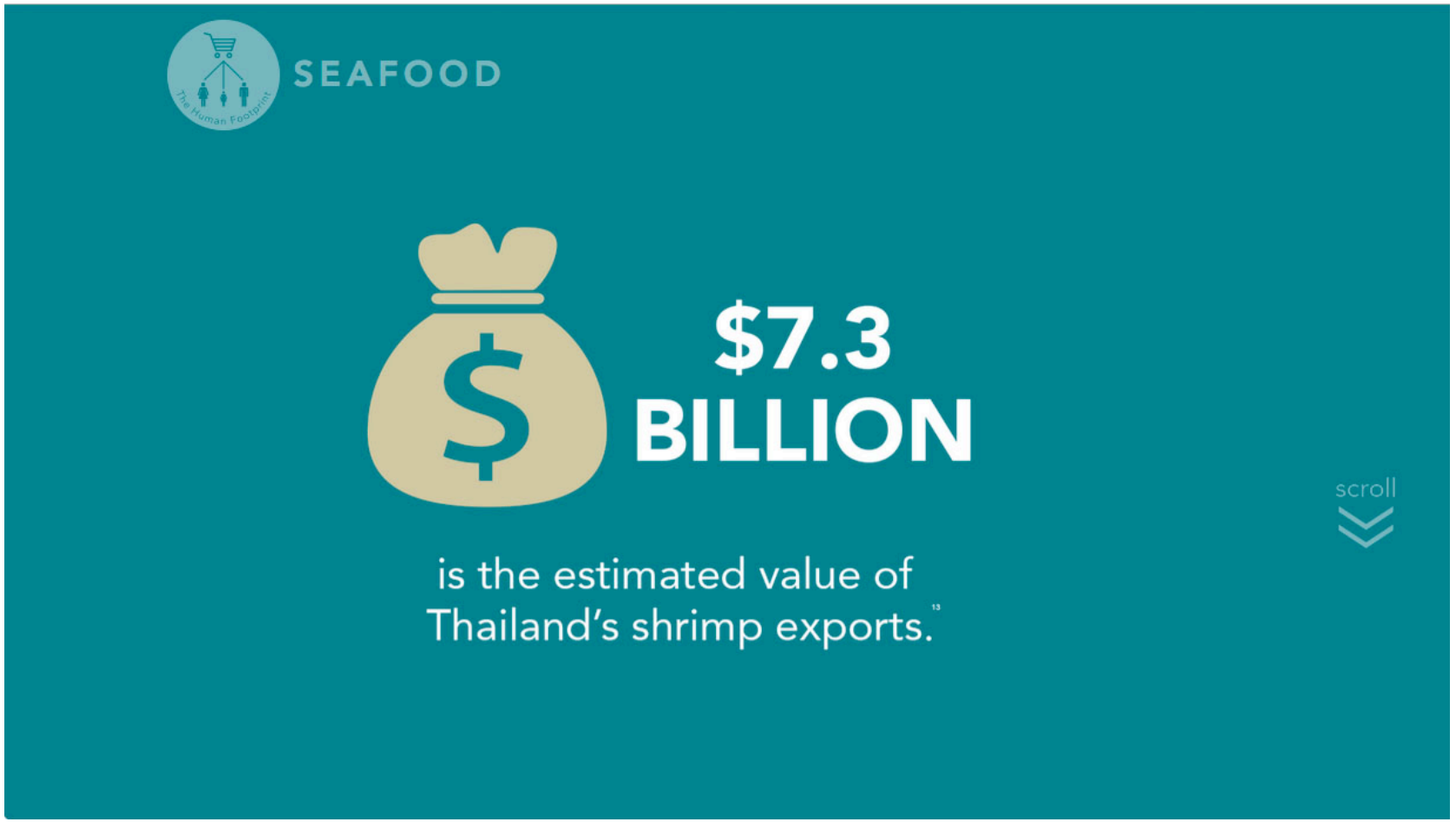
SEAFOOD
$7.3
BILLION
is the estimated value of
Thailand's shrimp exports.[13]
scroll

Figure 18


SEAFOOD
Thailand exports roughly
500,000 tons of shrimp yearly
with 10% going to U.S. & Europe.[14]

Figure 19


SEAFOOD
over
650,000
people work in the
Thai fishing industry.[15]

Figure 20


SEAFOOD
17+
HOURS
per day
Many workers are victims of human trafficking & get paid little to nothing for 17+ hours of work.[16]

Figure 21


SEAFOOD
Under these slave labor conditions, you wouldn't even be
FREE TO BUY
the commodities you produce.
Continue for more info.

Figure 22

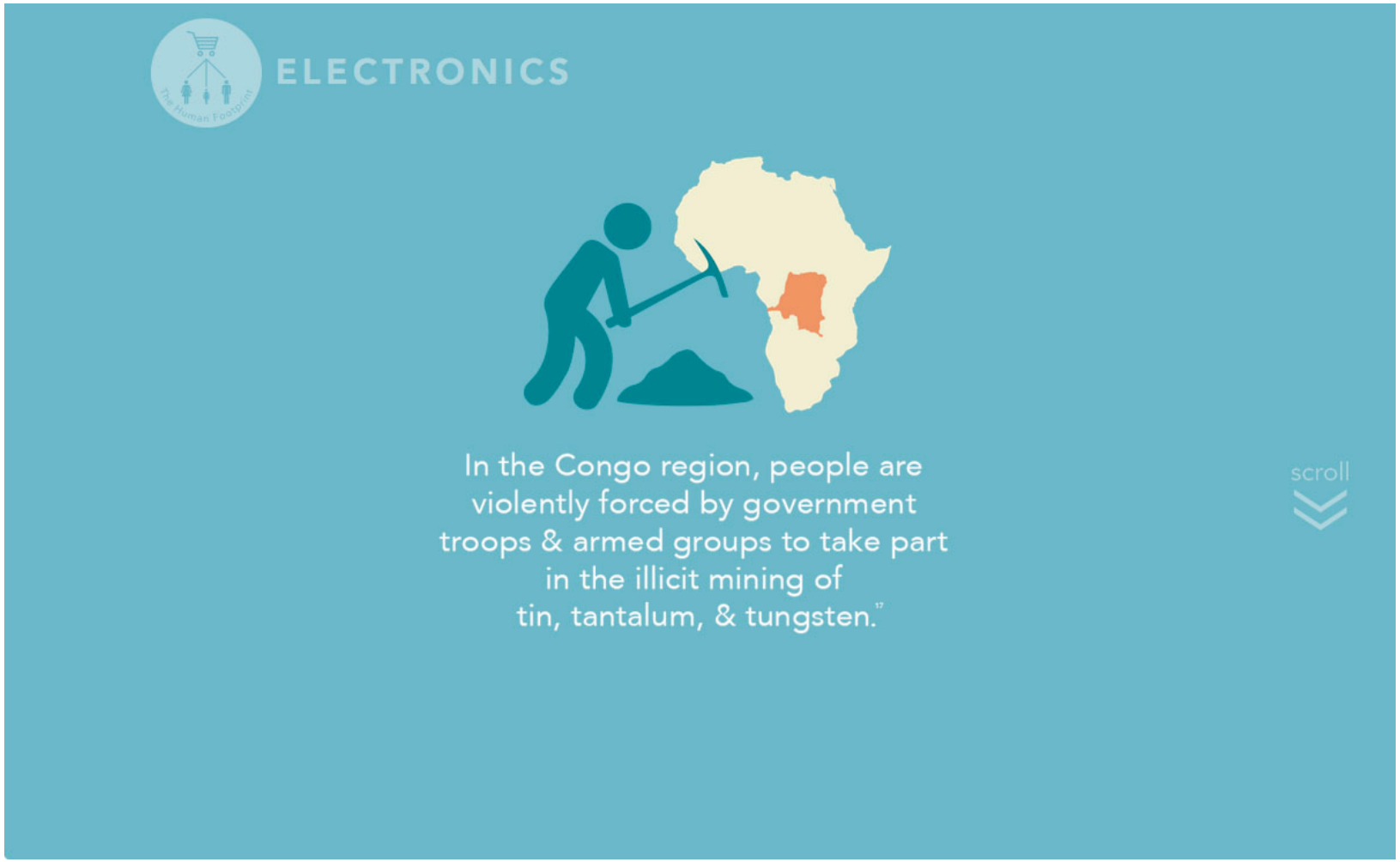
ELECTRONICS
In the Congo region, people are violently forced by government troops & armed groups to take part in the illicit mining of tin, tantalum, & tungsten.[17]
scroll

Figure 23


ELECTRONICS
Profits from these mines are used to purchase large numbers of weapons & assist in the continual violence against civilians.[18]

Figure 24


ELECTRONICS
These *conflict minerals* make their way to China & finally end up in our cell phones, computers, & gaming devices.[19]

Figure 25


ELECTRONICS
14
DEATHS
Conditions in China at Foxconn,
a manufacturer for Apple, Dell, HP,
Nintendo, & Sony, are so deplorable,
that in 2010, 14 workers killed themselves
by jumping from the building.[20]

Figure 26

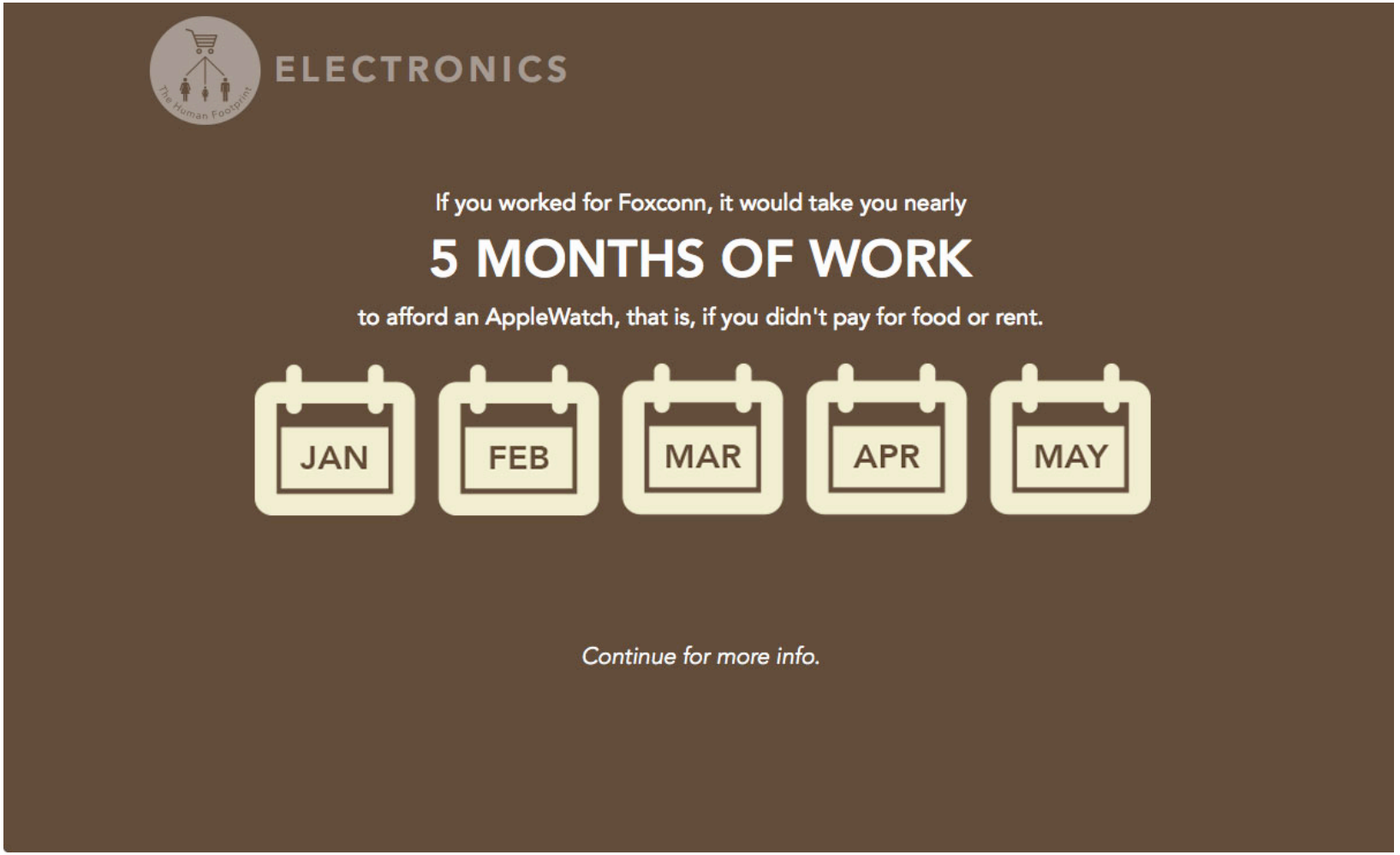
ELECTRONICS
If you worked for Foxconn, it would take you nearly
5 MONTHS OF WORK
to afford an AppleWatch, that is, if you didn't pay for food or rent.
JAN
FEB
MAR
APR
MAY
Continue for more info.

Figure 27


TAKE ACTION
Ultimately it is up to you, the consumer,
to consume differently.
Ask questions when it comes to making
purchases & educate yourself.
scroll

Figure 28


The Human Footprint
You can make a significant impact on consumption & the people involved.
You can also require businesses to be part of the solution: Do some research & choose whom to buy from & make sure your money goes to companies that are making a difference.

Figure 29


The Human Footprint
Ask the brands you buy from how their products are made—tweet at them or ask retailers when you are in stores about where, how, & who makes their products.
TAKE THE PLEDGE
Take the pledge to become a responsible consumer & educate yourself on the true cost of the human footprint of your consumption.

Figure 30


TAKE THE PLEDGE
Your Full Name
Email Address
I pledge to be a responsible consumer & remain aware of the human & environmental effects of my commodity consumption.
References

Figure 31

VITA

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Research Paper Title:
The Human Footprint of Our Daily Consumption: Defetishizing Commodities Through New Media

Major Professor: Robert Spahr