



Photo: Dave Adamson via Unsplash

Like millions of others around the world, I spent Sunday eating fried foods, drinking sugary beverages, and enjoying the company of my friends while watching the opposite of a nail-biter of a game. As a fan of the Seattle Seahawks and a hater of the New England Patriots, I'll admit that I was delighted with the outcome of the big game. Even when your team isn't playing, there is a lot to love about Superbowl Sunday, especially in a time where collective joy can feel hard to come by. But no event that so intensely celebrates capitalism comes without consequences, and this year's Superbowl was no different. Between the sheer amount of waste generated by the big game, NFL's greenwashing practices, and the proliferation of Artificial Intelligence ads, I would argue that consumers and the environment suffered at least as hard of a loss as the Patriots did on Sunday.

The NFL launched "[NFL Green](#)" in 1993 to "mitigate the environmental impact of the NFL's major events and create a 'green' legacy" in the communities that host the Superbowl or other large NFL events. Through the program, the NFL donates leftover food, beverages, and clothing to local food banks or nonprofits, plants trees in the community, promotes recycling, and purchases renewable energy certificates

to offset its emissions. Although these efforts are better than nothing, any positive impact from this initiative is a mere drop in the unimaginably-large-bucket of environmental harm from the Superbowl.

For example, let's first look at the NFL's donation of clothing and other textile materials (tablecloths, event banners, etc.) following the big game. Have you ever wondered how members of the winning team are able to don "Superbowl Champions" shirts, hats, and jackets mere seconds after the clock runs out? It's because the NFL and its partnering companies [print championship products for both teams](#) prior to the event, so fans will be able to purchase the winning team's gear immediately. The NFL brags that it partners with Good360 to donate the losing team's merchandise to countries abroad (typically in Eastern Europe and the Global South), but underneath any goodwill on the NFL's part is a practice that is almost as quintessentially American as the big game itself: making our environmentally reckless decisions another country's problem. Some of these items do end up in the hands of individuals in need, but many still end up in landfills, [overburdening](#) another country [just so retailers can pocket the greatest profit from the post-game surge in demand](#).

Some of you might be thinking, "but isn't charity a good thing?" Obviously, the answer is yes—but it's more complicated than that. In a common practice known as "[greenwashing](#)," corporations will highlight a specific "environmentally conscious" decision or activity to distract from their much greater environmental harms. That is precisely what happened at Superbowl LX. Sure, donating the losing team's gear is better than sending it straight to a landfill—but an infinitely better alternative would be to simply not manufacture the gear in the first place.

Similarly, [PepsiCo touted its partnership](#) with the San Francisco 49ers to provide "more than 4,000 fans in select seating areas" ([Levi's Stadium seats approximately 70,000 fans](#)) with reusable cups for fountain drinks. Again, while the move to reusable cups instead of single-use plastic cups is a positive change for Pepsi and Levi's Stadium, it means little when we remember that Pepsi produces approximately [2.3 million tons of plastic every year](#) and [recently abandoned its plastic reduction targets altogether](#).

Unfortunately, corporate distraction tactics weren't even confined to the walls of Levi's stadium—they bled into the Superbowl's much-anticipated commercials as well. In particular, two farming-centric commercials stood out to me: [one by OpenAI](#) and [one by Frito-Lay](#) (a wholly-owned subsidiary of PepsiCo). In both

commercials, we see a father preparing to pass the family farm down to his daughter, and to be honest, I enjoyed the Lay's commercial when I first watched it. The premise of both commercials seems innocent enough, but both are guilty of trying to make consumers *feel* rather than *think*, and specifically, they both take advantage of the average consumer's [desire to see small family businesses thrive](#). This is particularly ironic given that [OpenAI became the world's most valuable private company last year](#), and [PepsiCo is the second largest food and beverages company in the world](#).

ChatGPT may be able to help large-scale farmers keep track of their crops, and [Lay's does source its potatoes from over 160 family-owned farms across North America](#). But these feel-good commercials conveniently fail to mention that the [AI data centers popping up throughout rural America place a significant strain on the communities'—including farmers'—land and resources](#). They also fail to mention that many of the Lay's-associated farms, although technically “family-run,” are [large-scale operations](#) that span thousands or [even tens-of-thousands of acres](#). In short, the images these commercials paint, even if not outright false, are not the full picture.

The underlying truths amongst all of these practices, from the NFL's greenwashing to PepsiCo's warm and fuzzy commercials, are: (1) corporations will pursue profit by any means necessary, [even by capitalizing on your emotions](#), and (2) the concept of a “[climate-friendly](#)” Superbowl, or a sustainable supply chain for a multinational food and beverage producer, is a myth. [Capitalism, and massive celebrations thereof are inherently unsustainable](#)—no matter how much we greenwash them. This is not to say that we can never have another Superbowl, but instead, that we should work on imagining national sports as having a primary purpose beyond generating capital. It is difficult to imagine the Superbowl without the elaborate halftime show, shots of celebrities in their gameday outfits, or excessive amounts of food primarily composed of meat and dairy, but we must. We must be able to imagine a world where America's cultural touchstones are not synonymous with making billionaires richer. As Angela Davis has said, “You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time.”