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BUYING A BETTER WORLD: COLLEGE STUDENTS AS CONSCIOUS CONSUMERS

Sean Murray

“The worship of the ancient golden calf has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose. The worldwide crisis affecting finance and the economy lays bare their imbalances and, above all, their lack of real concern for human beings; man is reduced to one of his needs alone: consumption.” Pope Francis

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, I have become more mindful of how my dollar impacts the world: I wake up with a cup of Fair Trade coffee, do my best to dress in ethically made clothing, and go about my day in a fuel-efficient hybrid car. However, lest I sound holier than thou, I must admit that most of my years have been lived in blissful ignorance. That is, up until my 30s, I walked zombie-like through life as a decidedly *unconscious* consumer. My mindlessness was particularly marked during childhood, as many of my memories are stamped with the signs of consumer culture: for instance, my parents’ kitchen table was permanently etched with the names of various plastic toys and gadgets, as I had penned a Christmas list to Santa Claus on said table without protecting it. Besides the table, I was also oblivious to who made the products, where they were made, or how they might have made their way to a spot under our Christmas tree.

Fast-forward a few decades, my awakening to consumer issues happened while teaching a college preparatory course. One day, I was being observed by an administrator eager to join the class discussion. While I cannot recall the main topic of discussion, I remember he pointedly asked the class if they made conscious decisions about the products they buy. That question has stayed with me a long time, probably because my own gut answer was an emphatic “no.” I am sure that I thought about price, and occasionally my own health when it came to purchasing food, but the thinking stopped there.

However, that administrator’s question did start me on my journey to becoming a more conscious consumer, and that journey has made inroads into my pedagogy.

For the better part of the past decade, I have been teaching a Conscious Consumer project as the cornerstone of my First Year Writing courses¹. The project essentially asks students to choose an issue related to the ethical implications of consumerism (e.g., Is it right to purchase sweatshop apparel? Or, What is the environmental impact of our mass consumption? Or, How does our industrialized food system treat animals?) and develop a research-based, argument-driven academic paper.

In the following article, after providing context on consumerism and conscious consumption, I discuss a number of students’ Conscious Consumer projects as well as student responses to a questionnaire about Conscious Consumer issues. In this discussion, I focus on students who chose to write on consumer issues tied to ethical questions about labor (i.e., workers’ pay and conditions). By choosing labor issues, these students are living out St. John’s University’s mission:

...to devote our intellectual and physical resources to search out the causes of poverty and social injustice and to encourage solutions that are adaptable, effective, and concrete. In the Vincentian tradition, we seek to foster a world view and to further efforts toward global harmony and development by creating an atmosphere in which all may imbibe and

embody the spirit of compassionate concern for others so characteristic of Vincent. (St. John's University, n.d.)

I offer this discussion in the spirit of pedagogical lessons learned as well as wider, curricular possibilities. My hope is that by critically reflecting on my Conscious Consumer Project and related student work, I will spark other educators to embark upon or revisit their own consumption-related course projects.

CONSUMPTION IN CONTEXT

Before examining students' thoughts on consumption and labor, it is important to get a sense of the historical context surrounding consumer culture. Without this background, it is tempting to see the consumer way of life as natural and normal— or, as George Orwell called it, “the air we breathe” (Schor & Holt, 2000, p. vii). However, unlike oxygen, consumer culture has not always been around – in the grand scheme of things, it is a relatively recent phenomenon that is driven by human decisions and policies. Moreover, if we understand consumer culture as human-made, we can also envision reforms and other ways of being. To get a sense of the historical context, it is key to differentiate consumption from a consumer-centric society. Frank Ackerman (1997) explains that while *consumption* has existed throughout history, a “*consumer society*” [emphasis mine] is one “in which ever-growing consumption becomes the principal aspiration, source of identity, and leisure activity for more and more of the population” (p. 109). In other words, in a consumer-driven society, purchasing and acquiring goods evolves into part of who we are; additionally, shopping as a pastime is open to the masses, not only the elite.

Scholars point to several key periods in which consumption develops into a defining characteristic of society, including the early modern era, the Industrial Revolution, and the

years after World War II. Ackerman (1997), summarizing the work of a number of scholars, asserts that even before the Industrial Revolution, the seeds of consumerism were being sown in the early modern era (p. 111). Regina Lee Blaszczyk (2009) elaborates further, explaining, “In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, consumerist impulses emerged in regions with commercial economies and access to international trade, which introduced exotic products like sugar, coffee, tea, silk, and porcelain” (pp. 10-11). She argues that the three factors of “industrialism, colonialism, and world trade” converged to make “the world’s first true consumer society” – Britain in the eighteenth century (p. 11). In essence, there seems to have been a synergistic relationship between global trade and industrialization that

brought about a society in which consumption assumed a central role in people’s lives.

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Leaping forward to more recent history, scholars see post-World War II America as another milestone in the evolution of consumer society. Elizabeth Cohen (2007) calls the society that emerged during this period “the Consumers’ Republic,” in which the political concept of democracy is linked to “mass consumption” (p. 11). She sees

citizen and consumer identities meshing in the years that lead up to the Second World War, and then consolidating around the notion of “purchaser as citizen”: “the consumer satisfying personal material wants actually served the national interest, since economic recovery after a decade and a half of depression and war depended on a dynamic mass consumption economy” (pp. 8-9). In essence, Cohen understands the concepts of citizen and consumer as not mutually exclusive, but rather forming a hybrid identity in which buying not only fulfills individual desires, but bolsters the nation’s socioeconomic system. From here it is possible to see how consumerism becomes imbricated with capitalistic ideology. Charles Clark argues (2017), “The desire for more

wealth is ancient; what makes capitalism different is the reorientation of social, political and religious life to support and be subordinate to this goal” (p. 5). I would add that under our consumer-centric capitalist system, the overarching desire is for more *things*, and that all aspects of life are subsumed into that drive.

And yet, the drive to consume can also be channeled into for a force for good – that is, people can consciously purchase products and patronize companies that have a positive impact on society and the planet. Margaret Willis and Juliet Schor (2012) define this “conscious consumption,” as:

...any choice about products or services made as a way to express values of sustainability, social justice, corporate responsibility, or workers’ rights and that takes into account the larger context of production, distribution, or impacts of goods and services. Conscious consumption choices may include forgoing or reducing consumption or choosing products that are organic, eco-friendly, fair trade, local, or cruelty-free. (p. 162)

Furthermore, they conclude that “people who do more conscious consumption...are more engaged in activism in a variety of forms” (Willis & Schor, 2012, p. 179). So, consuming need not be construed as simply the mindless, soulless activity of a shopaholic – it can be done consciously as one strategy in a politically active, engaged citizen’s repertoire. Conscious consumers boycott companies holding values that contradict their own, as well as buycott “from companies that have expressed beliefs that fit with their own” (McGregor, 2018, March 4, para. 4).

This notion of companies holding beliefs leads us to what Whole Foods CEO John Mackey (Mackey & Sisodia, 2014) calls “conscious capitalism.” In his book *Conscious Capitalism: Liberating the Heroic Spirit of Business* with co-author Raj Sisodia, Mackey contends that the drive for profit actually enables businesses to do right for people and the planet. They envision:

...businesses galvanized by higher purposes that serve and align the interests of all major stakeholders; businesses with conscious leaders who exist in service to the company’s purpose, the people it touches, and the planet; and businesses with resilient, caring cultures that make working there a source of great joy and fulfillment. (Mackey & Sisodia, 2014, pp. 8-9)²

Similar to conscious *consumers* who care about more than their own wants and wallets, conscious *business leaders* run companies that are about more than just making money. Such companies have a triple bottom line: “profit, people, and planet” (The Economist, 2009, November 17). Scholars too, like Economics Professor Kris Principe (2017), think that consumers and companies in our capitalist system can embody a higher moral purpose. Writing about capitalism and Catholicism, she states:

I believe that consumer sovereignty and corporate governance, carried out in accordance with the three pillars of Catholic Social Justice of human dignity, solidarity and subsidiarity, can fulfill the pope’s [Francis] mandate in *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) that “The dignity of each human person and the pursuit of the common good are concerns which ought to shape all economic policies” (para. 203). (p. 63)

She sees pedagogy as playing a part in developing conscious business leaders: “business faculty in Catholic colleges and universities, need to do a better job of infusing the principles of Catholic social justice into our courses to help facilitate this necessary cultural change in our graduates” (Principe, 2017, p. 63). While I am not a business professor, I do see my First Year Writing classes as spaces to spark discussion and debate about possibilities for consciousness and conscience when it comes to buying and business leadership. These discussions happen during the Conscious Consumer phase in my courses, and I now turn to students’ writing and reflections on that project.

STUDENT WRITING AND REFLECTIONS

It is interesting to note that when I have talked to classes about the ideological undertones of the Conscious Consumer project, students have held contrasting interpretations. At least one student interpreted the project as espousing communism – the idea being that anything critical of our current system must be advocating some kind of Marxist revolution. Others have assumed the assignment is pro consumer capitalism – that is, the assignment implies that effective change can be achieved by consumers alone making informed decisions. This interpretation is quite understandable, given the name of the project. However, as I read their drafts, I often challenge the assumption that better informed consumers are all that is necessary to remedy a problem. I pose questions about whether deeper, systemic changes are needed, such as greater corporate responsibility and/or stricter enforcement of government laws. I raise these questions to spark critical thinking, not to compel students to adopt any political agenda.³ When I teach the Conscious Consumer Project in the future, I hope to have a more formal discussion of the assignment’s possible ideological implications, as most of the discussions in the past have been spontaneous and brief. I want to make clear to students that the project is open-ended, and that all political stances are welcome, as long as the research and reasoning are solid.

Freedom to develop their own topics and positions is an important feature of the project, as a number of my students have pointed out. One student, Cathleen⁴, remarked, “Though it [the assignment] was challenging, writing about a topic I was passionate about kept me enthusiastic.” Similarly, another student named Lena stated, “It [the course] did not focus on just one aspect of conscious consuming. We discussed topics ranging from Nike to coffee to technology. This variety allowed all the students in the class to find something they can relate to and give themselves an area of consumerism to focus on in their own lives.” Dana, another former student, commented that she was able to build on an issue of interest she learned about in a prior course:

...In my first theology course my class read sections of the book *Tomatoland* and we watched the documentary *Food Chains*. We were then asked to write our thoughts about the common issue that the book and documentary discussed: maltreatment of farmworkers in the United States. We then had discussions in class about our reactions and our thoughts about social justice pertaining to this issue. This activity in class interested me because it is not a popular topic of discussion. I had never even heard of this issue before taking that class. I realized the importance of this issue. After discussing this issue in class, my practices as a consumer were changed. I stopped buying food from certain corporations due to their practices. I also continued to choose organic food over non-organic food.

Here, Dana explains that she was able to connect with her chosen topic on a personal level.

This connecting of the personal to the political has become one of my pedagogical goals for this project, partly inspired by the feminist slogan, “The personal is political.” Carol Hanisch (2006, January), author of the 1969 feminist text “The Personal is Political,” explains that she used “political...in the broad sense of the word as having to do with power relationships, not the narrow sense of electoral politics.” In the case of my Conscious Consumer Project, the idea is that the choices we make as consumers not only affect us as individuals, but send ripples out into the world around us, potentially impacting workers, animals, and/or the environment. For instance, Dana’s decision to boycott corporations that mistreat workers and boycott organic products amounts to voting for change to the current power structure of agricultural labor. Helping students link the personal to the political can be challenging, as we seem to be wired and/or conditioned to think our personal choices are made in a vacuum. I noticed this especially when I visited a class taught by an instructor who incorporates my Conscious Consumer Project into his teaching. Wisely, he begins the project by asking the class what it means to be a conscious

consumer – (something I plan to start doing too!). Initially, students responded with comments about conscious consumers keeping their personal budgets in mind when shopping. It took time for members of the class to tie consumer choices to issues such as worker treatment/pay and the environment.

One way to encourage students to see how the personal and political are intertwined is to lead an exercise in personal anecdote writing. In the past, some students included personal stories in their essays as a way to engage readers and tap into the pathos of their topics. For example, in her essay “Money, Manipulation, and Manicures: The Hazardous and Corrupt Nature of Nail Salons,” Tara connects something personal, in this case, her ritual of getting her nails done with her mother, to the larger political issue of salon worker treatment. She begins her essay with the following anecdote:

“Get in the car, honey. It’s a manicure and pedicure day.” These are words that come out of my mother’s mouth at least once a month. Because I have gotten manicures and pedicures often, I have been to many different salons around my hometown. The average cost for a manicure and pedicure is around \$45. However, my mom and I have recently been getting our nails done at a “discount salon”. This salon provides a manicure and pedicure for the price of \$20.

“We have to try this new place...My friends have gone and they said it’s really cheap for a decent manicure and pedicure,” my mom said...

My mom and I were pleasantly surprised at how low these prices were. My mom and I exchanged a look that silently spoke, “We have found a deal”...

...But is that deal worth it?

From this anecdote and question, Tara goes on to examine how low prices often mean low pay and unhealthy conditions for salon workers. In essence, she traces her dollar to the rampant problems in the salon industry. Reflecting on what she learned while researching her essay, she states that she has changed her consumer behavior: “Now I go to nail salons where the rights of the employees are posted in the salon, employees are wearing face masks, and the employees seem to have a general happy attitude towards their work.” In addition to this personal change, Tara advocates deeper, systemic change:

One action we can take is to contact local elected officials and express our concern. By expressing concern to the government, the government may pay more attention to

this issue and start to implement more programs to ignite change. For example, the government can increase the number of inspectors for nail salons and how often they do their inspections.

In the future, I plan to share Tara’s work as a springboard for personal anecdote writing and reflecting upon how the personal may be intertwined with the political.

Another student who tied personal shopping habits to the wider political issue of labor is Teresa, who wrote an essay entitled “Mindless Consumption: The Effects of an Unconscious Consumer Population.” In her essay’s conclusion, she writes:

I’ve been thinking of my influence through my consumer habits on the world. I know that I sometimes spend subconsciously and buy items in the spur of the moment that I don’t intend to wear or use more than once which contributes to the wasteful habit of the American society as a whole. All from my bad spending habits, I am contributing to the depletion of the world’s natural resources

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and causing more strenuous work for less-fortunate children, women and men working in sweatshops to manufacture the items I yearn [to] buy. Realizing this, I am motivated to educate others on the harmful impacts of over-consumption and subconscious spending. I am also motivated to persuade others to be fully present when shopping and aware of every effect they could have on the world as a consumer.

Interestingly, she links her own personal habits to deeper systemic change, arguing that the United States as a society needs to save more and consume less.

A key part of Teresa's essay explores the debate over how much good versus harm sweatshops are doing for workers in developing nations. She uses *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof's (2009, January 14) op-ed "Where Sweatshops Are a Dream" as a jumping off point for this discussion. Summarizing his defense of sweatshops, she writes, "He acknowledges that there are jobs much better and safer in the world but, 'in the hierarchy of jobs in poor countries, sweltering at a sewing machine isn't the bottom'" (Kristof, 2009, January 14, para. 9). But she then challenges Kristof's position, arguing, "Though Kristof makes valid arguments using logos and ethos to prove that mass-production and over-consumption can be beneficial, the drawback of such processes are far more gruesome and have greater impacts than the good that is said to come from them." To support her case, she sources the popular online video, "The Story of Stuff (2007, December)," and asserts that young women working in these factories "are exposed to 'reproductive toxins, carcinogens, and more.'" So, in her essay, Teresa suggests that the dangers of sweatshop factories make up one reason why overconsumption, especially in the U.S., carries negative consequences.

However, after completing her essay, she notes that she may have ultimately changed her mind about the sweatshop debate: "I still lack when it comes to buying fair trade items and boycotting goods from

factories in which working conditions are poor and labor is more or less exploited. Part of my reason, however, for not taking more initiative in that way are the articles that highlighted the pros of factories and sweatshops for the impoverished in third world countries." There are a number of reasons why Teresa may have changed her stance after submitting her essay. It is possible that my own position on the issue influenced her initial research and writing. While discussing sweatshops in class before students started their essays, I brought up the 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh, and commented that I did not want to buy clothing made in an unsafe – in this case, lethal – workplace. Teresa's eventual shift from anti-sweatshop to pro-sweatshop makes me wonder if I inadvertently color students' initial views as they start their research. If so, it might make more sense for me to stay out of the fray while the class members are figuring out their own values and stances. Another possibility is that her consumer behavior does not align with her academic position – in other words, it is one thing to make a case against sweatshops on paper, but it is another thing to 'put your money where your mouth is,' as the expression goes. In any case, I plan to have students do more reflecting on their Conscious Consumer projects in the future, especially on the extent to which their academic research actually impacts their real world choices.

Another student, Carmen, who also wrote about sweatshops, suggested I need to place more emphasis on the importance of incorporating opposing views into the Conscious Consumer projects: "I would provide or at least encourage students to search articles about their 'conscious consumer' topic and find writings with conflicting arguments so they can see exactly why people are doing what they're doing and from there, pick the side they agree with the most. For example, I researched sweatshop labor and I found articles supporting them and discouraging them." While I do have opposing views listed on the rubric, her point is well taken that addressing counterarguments is essential and needs to be stressed in the assignment's guidelines. In addition,

I would like to have students reflect on how they developed their positions after reading clashing views. Did they come to the project with an established leaning? If so, did reading different opinions confirm or change that leaning? If they started the project without any preconceived views, what compelled them to adopt a certain position?

To make some of these pedagogical changes, it might be necessary to expand the Conscious Consumer Project, or even devote an entire course to this theme, as my student Lena recommended:

I wish we could dedicate an entire course to analyzing and exploring the consumer culture from start to finish. Different college courses touch upon the issues of our consuming, whether it is from a business standpoint or an ethical one, but generally the topic is only discussed for a few days or a week. If we want students to take what they learn and implicate it into their own lives, we have to keep the topic active in their minds longer in order for it to become cemented. Research gives various numbers on how long it takes to form a habit; some say it happens as quickly as 21 days, others say it takes two months. If students had an entire semester to solely learn about the consuming culture and form their own decisions about how they can contribute or better it, surely it would turn them into active, lasting, conscious consumers.

She makes an interesting point about how a deeper dive, as would be possible in a course focused solely on conscious consumer issues, might leave a lasting impression on students' consumption habits. From my own standpoint, a semester-long conscious consumer themed course is also promising in terms of helping students back up and see the big picture implications of our consumer culture. For instance, a book like Juliet Schor's *True Wealth: How and Why Millions of Americans Are Creating a Time-Rich, Ecologically Light, Small Scale, High Satisfaction Economy* (2011) could encourage students to contrast our current, work/spend lifestyle to

what the author sees as more sustainable ways of living and building communities. Also, in terms of examining specific topics – like sweatshops, for example – students would have the time in a semester-long course to deeply immerse themselves in the material, rather than just experience the kinds of brief conversations I have moderated in the past. Instead of only taking a peek at the debate, students could analyze the contrasting arguments in books such as Sarah Adler-Milstein and John Kline's *Sewing Hope: How One Factory Challenges the Apparel Industry's Sweatshops* (2017) and Benjamin Powell's *Out of Poverty: Sweatshops in the Global Economy* (2014).⁵ Another option would be to use a documentary like *The True Cost* as a launching pad to investigate facts and claims about labor and environmental problems in the clothing industry.

In her reflection on her Conscious Consumer essay, Lena also reminds me that during one semester, I experimented with making the assignment a group project, which she found both challenging and rewarding:

...writing a paper with two other individuals was one of the hardest tasks I have had to do in college. It made me realize that I had a unique voice in my writing, and that in order to put something together as a group you had to know your strengths and weaknesses and utilize them. The way this assignment strengthened my writing the most was that it made me not only analyze my own writing, but showed me how I can improve by comparing it to my classmates. When I say I compare I don't mean it in a negative way, but more of as an opportunity to be introduced to new phrasing styles and a list of new words to add to my vocabulary. It was writing together as a group that pushed me to the next level of my writing.

Lena's positive experience makes me eager to try the assignment as a group project again, but this time, I plan to immerse myself in the scholarship on team-based learning. My hope is to meet and provide feedback to the groups more regularly⁶

and integrate a formal process of self-reflection and self-assessment.⁷ Ideally, a more structured group project experience will build upon the positive aspects noted by Lena, and lead students to insights about their own learning, research process, and writing.

Another component of the Conscious Consumer project I aim to strengthen is the opportunity to do academic service-learning. For a number of years, students could opt to help with sales or inventory work at HandCrafting Justice, a Queens-based Fair Trade organization affiliated with the Sisters of the Good Shepherd that is unfortunately closed now. Currently, students can volunteer to help out with St. John's Fair Trade Fridays, a weekly sales event organized by Campus Ministries and Catholic Relief Service Ambassadors. However, I need to find a way to make this service opportunity attractive and feasible for more students. In the past, I have made this Fair Trade service an option for students writing about labor issues for their Conscious Consumer project; consequently, only a few students per semester have chosen to do it. Moving forward, I plan to open this opportunity for all, regardless of their topic, by tying the service to a reflective essay. Moreover, I can assure students they are not obligated to write a pro Fair Trade paper – if they desire, they can use their service as a springboard for questioning the effectiveness of Fair Trade. In any case, through this service, students could see how conscious consumer issues are not just theoretical, but can be linked to action.

On the topic of action, a number of my former students have gone on to become campus activists on the issue of Fair Trade. Thanks to funding from Fair Trade Campaigns⁸ and St. John's University's Vincentian Institute for Social Action, two students earned stipends for a semester by raising awareness about Fair Trade on campus. My former student Lena co-chaired St. John's for Fair Trade, a steering committee that strives to bring Fair Trade education and products to campus. Another student named Alice, who attended regional and national conferences organized by Fair Trade

Campaigns, promoted Fair Trade and conscious consumer issues on campus in a number of ways:

I was able to do a research project for Research Day [at] St. John's about Fair Trade, and it definitely opened my eyes to what that topic means...I also spoke about Fair Trade in my Speech class, to introduce this topic to my fellow classmates. Any time I have the chance, I try to bring up the topic. Whether it be during a Fair Trade committee event or an independent class assignment or an article [for] the school newspaper — consumerism is a topic that should be talked about more often.

In the future, I would like to connect more students to campus organizations and events related to conscious consumer issues of interest to them, whether that be Fair Trade, environmental sustainability, or another area of social justice.

I also hope to give students the chance to link conscious consumer matters to their faith and spirituality. In the past, I have emphasized the political dimensions of conscious consumption, but there need not be a wall between politics and religious teachings concerning social justice. Writing for *The Catholic National Reporter*, Tony Magliano (2017, February 28) argues that Catholic social teaching is not “a minor sub-topic of Catholicism. On the contrary, the social doctrine of the Catholic church is nonnegotiable. It is an extremely important, absolute central part of Catholic teaching” (para. 8). This concept of Catholic Social Teaching applies to “many different aspects of life, from the family to international development, how we think of those who are homeless to how we care for the environment, and from how we shop and consume to the rights of workers and the dignity of work” (Catholic Social Teaching.org, n.d., para. 2). Clearly then, Catholic Social Teaching frames consumption as being intertwined with ethical values and concern for the dignity of others. In the past, I have had only one student who connected the Conscious Consumer project to her beliefs. In

her case, she became active in Campus Ministries and Fair Trade Fridays. I hope to make this spiritual path open to more students in the future. Because I teach a diverse population coming from different cultures and faith backgrounds, I will need to ensure that students of all religions feel welcome to forge connections between social justice and spirituality, both in their writing and service opportunities.

One final way I plan to improve the Conscious Consumer project is related to a short follow-up assignment students do near the end of the course. I ask students to choose one of their favorite essays from the course and adapt their argument for another medium or written genre. Options include political cartoons, letters to political representatives, short videos, Prezis, and more. Because the Conscious Consumer project is one of the major assignments of the course, many students opt to adapt their argument from this paper. However, rarely have I seen students attempt to transform their Conscious Consumer argument into a petition. Given the popularity of online petitions, this is a genre of writing I would like to work on with students. Fortunately, there are a number of conscious consumer related petitions to inspire students, including two sixth-graders who petitioned Starbucks to work on environmentally friendly cups (Change.org, n.d.a.) and two fifth-graders who petitioned Dunkin Donuts to cut back on straws (Change.org, n.d.). These examples demonstrate that writing holds the capacity to raise awareness and promote change. Additionally, condensing an academic paper into a concise, catchy petition could be an important lesson in writing for different audiences.

CONCLUSION

Ironically, because consumerism is all around us, from ubiquitous advertising and commercials to an endless sea of merchandise, it is easy to forget it is there. It is as if consumerism has become part of our natural landscape, and thus, we may end up voting unconsciously for certain business practices and values each time we step up to the cashier or click to purchase something

online. By reflecting on student work and paying attention to their feedback, my goal is to craft a project that raises students' consumer habits to consciousness and gives them opportunities to improve their writing and put their values into action. As I continue revising the Conscious Consumer Project, I also hope to strengthen relationships with faculty working on similar issues in different disciplines, such as business, philosophy, and theology, so that together we are helping students realize how their role as consumers is interconnected with the well-being of other people and the planet.

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NOTES

¹ See instructions and guidelines for Conscious Consumer Project.

² It should be noted that Mackey is a lightning rod for controversy. Despite some progressive tendencies, he is infamous for labeling Obamacare “fascist” and has been criticized for what many see as Whole Foods’ meager health insurance plan. In short, critics view Mackey’s own company as not particularly caring.

³ Of course, at the same time, I must always remember that “teacher authority can never

be neutral, nor can it be assessed in terms that are narrowly ideological. It is always broadly political and interventionist in terms of the knowledge-effects it produces, the classroom experiences it organizes, and the future it presupposes in the countless ways in which it addresses the world” (Giroux, 2007, p. 2).

⁴ Pseudonyms are used for students’ names.

⁵ *Sewing Hope* tells the story of Alta Gracia, an “anti-sweatshop” in the Dominican Republic that pays workers a living wage and provides safe working conditions. Out of Poverty argues that sweatshops are helping people in poor countries.

⁶ In Lena’s class, I met with each group once to discuss the drafts of their Conscious Consumer projects.

⁷ The student reflections included in this article were voluntary and completed after the course was finished.

⁸ Fair Trade Campaigns confers “Fair Trade designation” on schools, colleges and universities, congregations, and towns that have fulfilled a set of goals laid down by the organization.

INSTRUCTIONS AND GUIDELINES: CONSCIOUS CONSUMER PROJECT.

If you’ve lived in the United States for a while, chances are you’ve spent time shopping and collecting “stuff.” Maybe too much stuff?! Often though, many of us – myself included – don’t put much thought into how the product was made or the policies of the company that made it. For this assignment, you’ll research and write on a consumption-related issue of interest to you. Perhaps you’d like to look into how a specific corporation/brand treats its workers, the environment and/or animals; or, maybe you’d like to explore how healthy a certain product is for consumers. Whatever the case, have no fear—although this assignment has a general topic, you’ll be able to carve out a specific niche of interest to you, whether that be garment factory workers in Bangladesh, GMOs in our food, Fair Trade coffee, factory farms, music streaming companies

and royalties, the debate over private companies’ health insurance policies (regarding reproductive health), or something else.

Note: you’ll have the *option* of participating in Academic Service-Learning (AS-L). AS-L is a great way to connect our reading/writing to concrete experiences beyond the classroom. The main opportunity for AS-L in conjunction with this project is to help SJU’s burgeoning Fair Trade campaign with Fair Trade Friday sales. I’ll provide more details about this opportunity in class.

GETTING STARTED

Consider beginning by reflecting on yourself – your consumer habits, where you shop, why you shop, what you buy, what you don’t buy, etc. When you brainstorm and freewrite, you could start with your stomach, move to what your wear, think about how you get around (public transportation? SUV?), examine where you bank, and reflect on the kinds of entertainment you “consume.” In other words, find an issue that intrigues, energizes, and/or infuriates you! Below are a number of concrete ideas to spark your own brainstorming process. (*Please do your best to create a topic that’s fresh and important to you.*)

TOPIC IDEAS

- You could situate yourself in a conversation about a particular movement (ex: Fair Trade, volunteer simplicity, organic foods, eating locally, anti-big box stores, anti-sweatshop, animal rights). If you like, you might even connect your writing and research to a short living experiment – that is, you could change a personal consumption habit for a week (ex: eat vegetarian meals, exclusively use public transportation, buy music – rather than download/stream for free).
- During the spring 2010 term, a student who worked as a barista used her experience and research to argue that a certain famous café chain is a model corporation.
- During the fall 2009 semester, a student combined her own personal experiment with research to recommend that we stop using shampoo because of its health consequences.

- Way back in 2005, a student wrote about problems with coltan, a key mineral used in many of our electronic products (e.g., laptops, smartphones, etc.). Many experts argue that the mining of coltan, like blood diamonds, funds crime and militia in places like Central Africa.
- Explore a topic that's related to *place*. For instance, it has been argued that poor and working-class neighborhoods have less access to healthy food than do middle- and upper-class areas (a problem often referred to as food deserts).
- Investigate an issue related to identity such as race, gender, or sexual orientation. For instance, Walmart has been involved in controversy related to alleged mistreatment of female employees. As another example, a former student of mine explored the issue of CEOs making public statements about same-sex marriage, and the resulting customer backlash.
- SJU controversies: In the 1990s, our school found itself embroiled in controversy when it inked a deal with Nike, a corporation that has come under fire for sweatshop labor. More recently, we have been working with Under Armor, but are reconsidering a new deal with Nike. Does this change signal a positive shift, or not? A few years ago, our Queens campus hosted a scholar who argued that sweatshops ultimately benefit workers in developing nations. Where do you stand in the debate? Why?
- How about a topic related to advertising and/or marketing (might be particularly interesting for business majors ;-)
- For further ideas, check out these websites:
 - ~ <http://slaveryfootprint.org/> (A “test” to see how you may be buying products that fuel slavery!)
 - ~ <https://www3.epa.gov/carbon-footprint-calculator/> (A carbon footprint calculator)
 - ~ <http://storyofstuff.org/movies/story-of-stuff/> (A short video that examines a variety of pressing problems related to our consumer-driven lifestyle)

GOALS

Over the course of this project, you'll demonstrate your ability to:

- ~ articulate a specific, debate-oriented question that frames your research and the essay
- ~ find relevant, credible sources from a variety of media (print, audio, visual) and perspectives (in other words, you'll want to find sources beyond those that support your initial leaning)
- ~ read/view/listen to your sources for solid comprehension
- ~ read/view/listen to your sources critically
- ~ create an interesting/engaging discussion
- ~ develop a clear position in the debate (note: clear does not mean you need to hold an all-or-nothing view)
- ~ argue your case persuasively
- ~ properly paraphrase sources
- ~ properly quote sources
- ~ use correct MLA format for in-text citations
- ~ use proper MLA format for Works Cited page
- ~ effectively revise your work based on your own critical thinking and, when appropriate, input from others
- ~ carefully proofread your revision for style (ex: word choice and sentence structure) and mechanical errors (ex: spelling, punctuation, and grammar)
- ~ reflect on the choices you made, evaluating what worked well and what needs work.

PROCESS/STAGES

Our research/writing process will include a Proposal/Annotated Bibliography, Draft, Peer Review, and Final Revision. Please see the syllabus schedule for length requirement and due dates. Midway through the process, I'll meet with each of you for another round of 1-on-1 appointments.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sean Murray teaches First Year Writing at St. John's University. His research interests focus on pedagogy related to consumer culture. He is a member of St. John's for Fair Trade, a committee that raises awareness about Fair Trade and helped the university achieve "Fair Trade designation" in 2017.