

Linking the sociological imagination to the conscious consumer



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Response Paper #2: Linking the sociological imagination to the conscious consumerism Do you want to donate a dollar with your purchase and support this foundation? Did you know that if you purchase one of the clothing items from this product line today, we will be donating a portion of the funds to a great charity? Did you know that this product was made under the provision of high quality standards? All of these questions are valid and hold true to the idea that the issue of conscious or conscientious consumerism and informed donations is among the news as a “ hot” topic.

This topic has become a social movement that has taken into account, everyone. Everyone has one time or another come across the key question of whether we can shop or donate our way to doing good for society as a whole. Consumers are the target audience for the social movement and their act of purchasing donates power to support the values associated with conscious consumerism. The main focus that is addressed by the consumption with a conscience range from issues about the environment, worker exploitation, globalization, organic food, and concerns that affect one’s daily lifestyle.

This particular social movement is especially popular among the college student population and those of the younger generation like me. On the idea of college, the discussion of Samuel G. Freedman’s, “ A Fair Trade Approach to Licensed College Gear” should be reviewed. His article address college gear clothing and questioning whether or not, there is truth behind the fair trade standards during the production of these items.

For clothing factories abroad, there is a pressure from American apparel companies to cut prices, even at the expense of those who help operate the production of the said items by lowering wages as well as work conditions. Joe Falcone, the lead man on his own apparel company, Counter Sourcing agrees with the above statement and assures American consumers that the production does compile with labor and environment laws. However, fair trade in this situation can easily be debated. " Fair-trade apparel" for this college gear asks that college students make social change and do good by feeding into ideas such as Mr.

Falcone's. Students who have believed that the famers' markets and the use of renewable energy sources are behind the production of the clothing move this effort forward by pressuring the consumer environment with a heavy focus on corporations such as Nike to sell only licensed items that are produced without sweatshop labor. Working with corporations in the act of " fair-trade apparel" gets more publicity and gets individuals to think about conscientious consumerism and whether or not it has a real value in supporting social change.

In my opinion, I do not believe that there is any " true" value in purchasing and donating power to support social change because as Freedman quotes Scott Nova, the executive director of the consortium, " it's impossible for a single small customer to transform a factory into a fair-trade business. "

Everyone is always on an outlook for a company that can operate in an ethical way and everybody is against sweatshops but the question is how will you ever know the truth?

Naturally, it is easiest to pay a premium for items that we value deeply, whether it is based on social status, advertising, or our own perception of value, rationally understood or not. We, as a society look to use what we are comfortable with and/or are used to. So under that criterion, attaching a donation to something that may or may not be a social opportunity still comes with the likelihood of the consumer's willingness to continue with their routine purchases, disregarding any possibility of social change.

In addition, this sense of "truth" behind the acts of social change that many seek to believe may also be false because of ambiguous information to the consumer. This argument can relate to four of our class readings: Amy Stewart's "Pick Your Poison", Julia Moskin's "Helping the Third World One Banana at a Time", Ron Nixon's "Bottom Line for (Red)" and George Packer's "How Susie Bayer's T-shirt Ended Up on Yusuf Mama's Back." What "true" impact do our shopping and donating choices have on society, if any?

Stewart's article argues how an event as common as Mother's Day can be socially changed from the materialistic roots of the holiday, the flowers. Like any other son or daughter, one may think that flowers are used as a token of appreciation on a day where all mothers around the world are celebrated for all of their efforts to raise us. Yet, the question of where and how the flowers are harvested and issued to consumers never comes up.

Many serious labor and environmental problems have been associated with the floriculture especially south of the border in the Latin American countries where most of our flowers derive from through a tariff-free ship to the United

States. Health hazards are the bare minimum that is suffered by this floriculture society as a result of the pesticide/fertilizer runoff into fragile water resources in the community and the chemicals that are used to preserve the flowers are exposed to the women who work with them on a daily basis.

As a result, social change for the floriculture is needed. Social change has been looked into and there are alternatives such as the VeriFloral label that are either organic or use the most minimum amount of toxic materials which helps further the lives of these women who work in the field, every day and monitoring for compliance with local labor laws. It is the implementation and functionality of the alternatives that would be the social change but it is not common in floriculture as the industry is slow and risky.

Although it is an option, customers have not asked for the eco-labeled flowers and the organic flowers are sold alongside the conventional product which also takes away from the purpose of conscientious consumerism, confirming my stance that there is not any “ true” value in purchasing and donating power to support social change because it often goes unnoticed or is too small of an effort to make a big difference. Like Stewart mentions, “ it’s a vicious cycle, growers won’t participate in the program unless they see a market for certified flowers and retailer won’t stock them unless their customers demand them. The demand of which is currently none. Next article, “ Helping the Third World One Banana at a Time” addresses fair trade of commodities that are similar to the chocolate or coffee industry around the world. Fair trade and the correlation that it has to bananas is an

international effort to help first-world consumers improve the living
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standards of the farmers of the third world who grow of their food and most likely, these bananas.

Fair trade has now tried to reach the “ common” American supermarket shopper but as previously mentioned; I do not think conscientious consumerism will occur or increase in the banana industry strictly even if one were to know the back story behind the fruit. Fair Trade does have its’ perks such as higher prices for the farmers’ goods which helps them set up schools and health clinics since this operation deals directly with farmer cooperatives it helps organize. However, not everyone is greeting the Fair Trade label with open arms and Moskin addresses that.

If the idea of Fair Trade within the food industry is not accepted then there is no hope that the small population of consumers that do care about being a part of the social change movement will actually be effective in doing so. A few of flaws in the fair trade operation exist and that is why I will continue to stand by my opinion about conscientious consumerism. One, companies with only a small amount of fair trade purchases still have the opportunity to market with the Fair Trade logo.

Also, Fair Trade stands among many other options for consumer choices which make achieving the purpose of leading the social movement, more difficult. Fair Trade is an additional marketing tool and serves as social accountability but the label itself does not guarantee an organic product. The next subject, project RED is well advertised and more of a known social campaign to the consumer market. Nixon addresses issues with campaign that combined consumerism and altruism though.

The purpose of this effort like any other has the best intentions but there is a lack of transparency and that is an issue that the company faces as it is unclear how much the company and its partners make from Red products and whether they spend more money on Africa, where the money should be going or on advertising. At least if more money is spent on advertising then they should be of quality and addressing the social issue at hand that needs to be changed, instead, the ads to be more about promoting the companies and how good they are than the issue of AIDS.

Ineffectiveness of project RED's original mission is shown in the breakdown of numbers because as much as \$100 million is spent collectively on advertising and only \$18 million is raised. The issue may be that the RED campaign does not do any of its' own campaigning so how is this possible, you ask? Well, companies that carry RED pay the company a licensing fee and as a result, their products may then be labeled with this logo.

From those profits, the percentage that goes to the fund depends on the item and the company which comes to show the evidence of the company's lack of transparency. As a consumer, I am discouraged from donating or purchasing goods to be a part of the social change movement for project RED because objectives of the company are unclear. I hate to know that I could potentially be contributing to the idea that campaigns such as project RED who markets themselves as socially conscious but then, increase sales.

To confirm my stance of linking sociological imagination to conscious consumerism is the reasoning that " increased consumption in American can't be the only way to solve Africa's problems" which brings up the

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broadening concern that the idea of philanthropic relationship between the consumer and the company does not exist anymore. Simply, project RED is not a charity but instead, a business. In my eyes, most of their business operations are sketchy.

On top of all the valid arguments that have been addressed, the last of the articles, " How Susie Bayer's T-Shirt Ended Up on Yusuf Mama's Back" confirms the idea that American consumers are using their purchasing and donating power to support social values without knowing if there is legitimacy behind the efforts. The process that a single t-shirt can take to cover someone's back in a third world location is donation to salvaging/sorting to retail/sales, and ends at the use of the individual. Commodity however exists between salvage and retail which is an essential part to this campaign effort.

The long chain of charity and commerce binds the world together in accidental intimacy between the social classes as examined in the last section of study. Americans tend to think that they can buy happiness but that is not the case at all because " true" happiness comes from giving to others and that is a notion that George Packer, the author thoroughly enjoys by using thrift shops. Packer witnessed that his favorite, the thrift shops are a place where the runoff of American prosperity is stored and there is a struggle to keep direct flow to areas where that is needed and prevent it from backing up.

The idea of charity is questionable in the sense that people may no longer understand what that is anymore and the importance that it has on society.

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The issue of conscious or conscientious consumerism and informed donations will continue to be open for interpretation from one individual to another but to me, the lack of knowledge about a campaign other than donation percentages or co-sponsorships should be reason enough to think that there is no real value in supporting social change by participating in the efforts such as those exemplified in all of the articles above.