

## Teaching “The True Cost” of Apparel: Using Video to Enhance Business and Ethics Connections in a Fashion Marketing Class

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Introduction: Educators help to shape students’ critical thinking skills, thus potentially effecting change in students’ decision-making in the business world (Payne, 2018). One key area for student application of critical thinking is in ethics and sustainability (LeHew & Meyer, 2005; Rhee, 2016). Extant literature highlights the challenge of sparking critical thinking in the classroom (Birdsall, 2018; Rhee, 2016) and suggests that instructors adopt a neutral position when teaching CSR, thus fostering students’ freedom to think about multiple viewpoints (Birdsall, 2018). Flipped and blended learning environments are an excellent way to foster critical thinking and gain meaningful learning impacts (Mitra et al., 2010) and may include video content (Carmichael et al., 2018). Videos may “trigger problem solving, providing information about [a] topic, and presenting solutions to problems” (p. 7-8) and have been found to have the potential to change students’ attitudes towards topics (Taslibeyaz et al., 2017). The current study builds on Rhee’s (2016) research, in that it seeks to understand students’ perceptions of CSR business decisions made in the apparel industry and integration of previous coursework. Scaffolding Theory (Tehrani and Riede, 2008) was used to assess students’ application of material from business and apparel courses to the topic of CSR.

Method. This exercise occurred as part of an undergraduate Fashion Marketing Senior Capstone class module on sustainability and ethics. Sixteen (n=16) students were presented with a 30-minute lecture covering CSR concepts. Students consisted of 15 females and one (1) male, between 19 and 21 years of age. They were asked to make notes about their current feelings regarding the topic of business and CSR. After this, the students were shown the documentary *The True Cost* and asked to write a two-page paper detailing their feelings and experiences on the subject. In writing the paper, students were provided a neutral space to document their thoughts, in line with Birdsall’s (2018) recommendations. Students were asked not to include their names (referred to as Student A through P in this abstract) and they were not graded. The papers were coded and analyzed using Creswell’s (2007) recommendations. Emergent themes were compared to determine students’ viewpoints on CSR in the context of previous business coursework in marketing, supply chain, management, economics, and textiles & apparel.

Results. Major themes emerged relating to *Awareness, Marketing, Production & Consumption, Policy, and Professional Activism*. Surprisingly, students admitted that they were aware of ethical issues that were occurring in fast fashion, but noted they developed a greater *awareness* after watching *The True Cost*. Student C said they “knew that the majority of our clothes were being made in underdeveloped countries, but never really thought about it often or what the conditions actually were.” Another student (G) stated previously they realized “all the [supply chain] steps and hands the garments pass through,” and that the documentary “opened

[their] eyes on consumer behavior and how flawed [consumers'] habits are." Students connected the documentary to previous business coursework, realizing *Marketing, Production & Consumption* has an impact on those in marginalized communities overseas. Student E said "We are too focused on materialistic things, and we fall into the trap set to create a fantasy that we don't necessarily need [things]." Student L reflected on production safety issues in the manufacture of apparel: "Third world countries endure harsh and inhumane working conditions just to provide for their families." Student D connected marketing and supply chain, saying, "I [now] realize that consumer lifestyles add to the issues of cheap labor, unjust working conditions, and inhumane production processes." Student M noted the need for workplace safety and basic human rights: "People should not be getting killed for our clothes and treated as nothing." One emergent theme related to the *Policy* component of CSR. Students discussed what companies need to prioritize. In fact, one student (L) referred to CSR as part of the brand: "In my opinion, having good ethics within a company should be at the forefront of their brand efficacy." Another student highlighted the need for more uniform CSR policies: "There should be a standard that all companies must abide by which would establish a neutral ground. If all companies were held to the same standard in ethics behind outsourcing, catastrophes like these would not happen." Still, another student (B) suggested "more inspections, better regulations, and more legal monitoring of these international factories to ensure that these companies are treating their workers ethically." Student K placed blame for CSR issues squarely at the feet of companies: "[Businesses'] focus is on money making, and social responsibility is not considered. I believe the consumer is not to blame if the system is the one that is continuing to endorse this type of industry [abuse]." Students made comments about their renewed interest in *professional activism* to deal with the issues in the global apparel complex. Student P took ownership of their potential to make change and related back to the industry: "Essentially, as an individual who values and loves clothing, I must be a catalyst for change in the fashion industry. I must look at the bigger community scope." Another student (J) said that the industry must engage in corporate *activism*: "There must be a 'revolution of values' that has to take place in order for [companies] to realize that it is not about the profits that are made, but it is about the human lives." Student N suggested companies act as change agents and re-distribute profits: "This industry makes such a large profit, so in return why doesn't the industry give back to its workers and supply them with safer working conditions or even just support the millions of workers properly?"

Discussion. The exercise integrated CSR concepts with previous coursework, scaffolding (Tehrani and Riede, 2008) deeper connections of marketing practice, supply chain, consumerism, and ethics. Students seemed to engage in critical thinking by putting themselves into the role of an industry professional while thinking about the issues raised in the documentary. Findings support Mitra et al. (2010) and Carmichael et al. (2018) in terms of effectiveness of flipped approaches and video content, along with Birdsall's (2018) findings that critical thinking is facilitated by a neutral space to ideate. Rhee's (2016) study is expanded, where students thought critically about dimensions of CSR and business after watching *The True Cost*.

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