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Stephie Plante discusses the rise of conscious consumerism but questions its effectiveness.

1 Boycotts are used worldwide. Tens of thousands of students in Hong Kong boycotted the first day of school to protest a proposed extradition bill. Globally, there were calls for football teams to boycott Qatar 2022. In both these instances, ordinary people have used boycotts as the easiest way to express their discontent about situations they have no control over. Beyond politics and sport, boycotting is also used by consumers to show their disapproval of a business and its practices – even though deep down they know that boycotting may not have any impact on what the business does. Regardless of its actual impact, this form of protest, also known as conscious consumerism, remains popular with consumers.

2 Broadly speaking, conscious consumerism is defined as buying with the social, environmental, ecological and political impact of one's purchase decision in mind. It is motivated by a desire to shop with a 'clear conscience' and thus involves buying or boycotting companies that align, or misalign, with one's ethical values and beliefs. For instance, American consumers boycotted companies linked to former President Donald Trump as they condemned these corporations for indirectly endorsing policies they vehemently disagreed with. These policies ranged from the inhumane treatment and targeting of detained migrants, to Trump's political inaction on climate change and his refusal to regulate guns despite unprecedented mass shootings. These consumers had turned outrage into action: a spreadsheet of companies linked to Trump explained why those companies were on the list and what they needed to do to get off it. Such boycott demonstrates a more aggressive form of conscious consumerism, though other times, consumers prefer a less confrontational approach of supporting companies through buying their products.

3 Between the two expressions of conscious consumerism, calls to boycott are a lot more visible on social media than rally cries to pledge brand support. Boycotts stem from anger, and anger spreads faster and further on social media than any other emotion. There are in fact many ongoing boycotts at any given time. Nonetheless, conscious consumerism in its milder form of brand support has become more prominent. More people are choosing to vote with their dollars by supporting companies that they perceive as ethical or socially just. People are starting to recognise that it is easier and more effective to support ethical brands than to boycott brands they consider unfair or unjust.

4 Whatever the form, conscious consumerism has become increasingly popular because of our desire to reduce the harm we cause as consumers. The result is the creation of a variety of marketing terms today, such that one can buy everything from 'cruelty-free' makeup to 'Fair Trade' food products. Conscious consumerism is today's catchall phrase to describe a lifestyle invested in a host of progressive values: worker rights, animal rights, low-carbon footprint, recycled and/or renewable materials, organic, local…

5 Conscious consumerism's popularity can also be linked to its elite nature. It is seen as a 'high-class thing to do' because of the cost of maintaining such a lifestyle, the resounding support it has from high-profile celebrities and its trendiness within the community. After all, one does need a fair amount of disposable income to afford ethical and sustainable options, the leisure time to research what to buy, the luxury not to choose products commonly available to the masses and, arguably, a post-graduate degree in chemistry to understand the true meaning behind ingredient labels.

In addition, there is a sense of self-righteousness driving conscious consumerism; people believing, even feeling smug, that they are doing what is right and thus morally superior to those who consume without thought. In a survey conducted by the University of Toronto, nearly

two-thirds of consumers agreed with the statement, 'shopping is a powerful force for social and
6 environmental change.' This suggests that not only do the majority of the public believe they can contribute and make a difference to their society and the environment with their shopping decisions, they also see themselves as morally better for doing so.

Despite its popularity, however, nobody thinks that conscious consumerism is the most effective – or even an effective – way to enact change. The main criticism is that individual product swaps (using metal straws instead of plastic straws for instance) do nothing to change legislation and corporate responsibility. Rather, it is an expensive distraction from the real work
7 at hand. Consumers can do a whole lot more by simply voting for politicians who actually care that the Earth is melting. In the United States, only 55 percent of voters aged 18-29 voted in 2020 but media research company Nielsen found that 90 percent of millennials (aged 21-34) are willing to pay more for eco-friendly and sustainable products. Imagine if the entirety of that 90 percent of conscious consumer millennials had turned up and voted how their dollar votes. What impact would that have on government policies regarding the environment?

Furthermore, green shopping in itself is ironic: conscious consumerism as a solution to our environmental woes contradicts the aims of conservation and sustainability. For sociologist Emily Kennedy, "The idea of 'shopping' your way to sustainability is fundamentally flawed. If we need to slow down growth to protect the environment, then we cannot rely on 'better' consumption. We also have to reduce consumption." Climate activist Greta Thunberg also
8 admonished world leaders at the UN's Climate Action Summit for their oft-repeated delusion that cutting emissions by 50 percent in 10 years will do the trick. The reality is that the persistent focus on economic growth, albeit via sustainable means of development, does little to protect the environment. It is in fact plain dangerous to do so.

Ultimately, almost every boycott fails to achieve its goal. Often, boycotts of big corporations do not really affect the bottom line of that corporation. An example is Amazon. Despite calls year after year to boycott Amazon Prime Day over inhumane factory working conditions, the retail giant repeatedly manages to improve its sales record year after year. There is also limited impact in token actions like swapping products for more environmentally-friendly ones. While
9 using phosphate-free dish detergent in place of the usual dish detergent used by the masses can curb water pollution, research shows that conscious consumers often continue to maintain very large carbon footprints themselves. After all, conscious consumers tend to be well-educated and well-educated people typically earn a good income – income that buys them nice cars and tickets on commercial planes and air conditioning units and so on.

Where and how we spend our money does matter. But how much it matters depends on what else we do with our money and what governments and corporations do with their (considerably larger) budget. At best, the rising popularity of conscious consumerism suggests that the public will at least spend their way to a healthier world; the big problem, though, is that individual monetary action — even when performed collectively — is only a drop in the ocean. "I cannot imagine that the world is worse off because of conscious consumerism," says Kennedy, "but I
10 doubt it will be enough to save the planet."