

# “We want your soul”: re-imagining marketing education through the arts

Re-imagining  
marketing  
education

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study is to examine the potential of integrating material from the arts into postgraduate curricula to deepen students’ engagement with marketing phenomena. The authors assess the use of arts-based activities, within a broader critical pedagogy, for encouraging imaginative and analytical thinking.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The authors devised two learning activities and an interpretive method for studying their value. The activities were an individual essay connecting themes in song lyrics to marketing, and a group photography project. These were applied, within a broader, critical approach, in postgraduate modules on sustainability, ethics and critical marketing. Data collection comprised diaries kept by the teachers, open-ended feedback from students and students’ assignments.

**Findings** – Students showed high levels of engagement, reflexivity and depth of thought, in felt experiences of learning. Their ability to make connections not explicitly in the materials, and requiring imaginative jumps, was notable. Several reported lasting changes to their behaviour. Some found the tasks initially intimidating or, once they were more engaged, stressful or saddening.

**Research limitations/implications** – This adds to scholarship on management education by showing the usefulness of an arts-based approach towards a transformative agenda.

**Practical implications** – It offers a template of how to draw from the arts to strengthen critical engagement upon which marketing teachers can build. It also contains practical advice on the challenges and benefits of doing so.

**Social implications** – The authors provide evidence that this approach can enhance sensitivity and reflexivity in students, potentially producing more ethical and sustainable decisions in future.

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**Originality/value** – The pedagogical interventions are novel and of value to lecturers seeking to enhance critical engagement with theory. An empirical study of an attempt to integrate arts into teaching marketing represents a promising direction, given the discipline's creative nature.

**Keywords** Sustainability, Arts, Transformative, Marketing education, Critical pedagogy

**Paper type** Research paper

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## Introduction

In this article we discuss the transformative potential of learning activities that we implemented for postgraduate students in marketing, which were grounded in the creative arts. This can be thought of as reconnecting with the origins of the discipline.

Marketing is deeply entwined with the arts. Decorative artists had a central place in its development. For example, Josiah Wedgwood, an 18th-Century Staffordshire potter and a prominent figure in Enlightenment, abolitionist and scientific circles, is credited with pioneering many modern marketing techniques (McKendrick, 1960), such as celebrity (specifically royal) endorsement of his brand (Koehn, 2001; Herman, 2003). Later, marketing's becoming a recognised branch of management required integrating an array of crafts involving creative and aesthetic elements – used by writers, illustrators and musicians in advertising and designers of products, packaging and retail spaces, amongst others – under the umbrella of a unified discipline.

Apart from obviously applicable, decorative arts, marketing practice also takes much from fine art (Schroeder, 2002). This can be done directly, lifting elements from art works for their visual impact, such as surrealist iconography in Madison Avenue advertisement (Fuller, 2004) or quotations of recognisable images like *The Mona Lisa*, *The Scream* or Warhol's screen prints. On the other hand, as Drummond (2006) explains in the case of the Baroque-era painter Caravaggio, commodification can occur via a long path of quotation and cultural repackaging, as with fashion spreads using imagery that can be traced back to Caravaggio's works, and which pick up traces of the many meanings that have been attributed both to the paintings and their creator. The connotations of an artist's name can even be commercialised for products unconnected to their work, such as "Caravaggio" branded wine (Drummond, 2006). Conversely, Drummond (2006), also discusses how figures in the art industry embrace this commodification and adopt techniques from marketing to reach audiences. Some theorists, like Adorno (1991) view this melding of art and commerce as robbing the former of its potential to offer a way out of the logic of the market. Others see it as potentially emancipatory (Baugh, 1990), allowing identities to be built and negotiated through choices about consumption of aesthetic products (Venkatesh and Meamber, 2006).

Scholars have also derived valuable insights into marketing from the arts, with marketing journals being amongst the most cited papers linking the arts and management more generally (Ferreira, 2018). These include Holbrook's (2015) comparison of marketers differentiating similar offers with jazz musicians improvising on a well-known theme, and Fillis (2009) discussion of how the arts can reshape perceptions of marketing. The marketing of art and artists, by the artists or their managers, has been a particular rich source of insight for researchers. For example, the personal branding of contemporary (Rodner and Kerrigan, 2014) and 20th-century (Muñiz *et al.*, 2014) visual artists served as case studies into how brands acquire symbolic meanings. Likewise, Preece *et al.* (2016) looked at value co-creation, and Fillis (2011) at entrepreneurial marketing, through the lens of arts marketing. Critical marketing scholarship, specifically, can benefit from ideas originating in the arts (Fillis, 2009) and in arts marketing since an industry of creative people attempting simultaneously to express something about the world and to sell their work is a productive site for the generation of new viewpoints on market phenomena (Larsen and Kerrigan, 2019).

It is ironic, then, that mainstream scholarship and education in marketing has still largely overlooked the artistic aspects of their discipline, to focus on quantification and claims to be scientific. As [Brown \(1997\)](#) notes, since [Converse's \(1945\) \*The Development of the Science of Marketing\*](#), debate on the discipline's status has been between those who triumphantly proclaim it a science and those who sadly accept it must remain an art, with very few *aspiring* to artistic status. [Holbrook \(2002, p. 196\)](#), commenting on the same art-or-science debate, wisely notes that the assumption that "if it's not one, it must be the other" is fallacious, which in the context of education can be considered to indicate that artistic and scientific learning activities can coexist peacefully.

This pose of scientific objectivity has drawn attention away not only from the creative content of marketing but also from its contested role in society. For [Pedersen \(2021\)](#), this harms marketers' ability to apply empathy. Importantly, obscuring moral and social issues can cause considerable harm in a world facing overlapping crises, for which marketing is both a considerable part of the cause, and, potentially, an important tool to effect solutions. This quest for a more creative and sensitive side to marketing seems particularly relevant to business schools, which are deeply implicated in current sustainability challenges and under growing pressure to show transformation. Arts-based learning activities have been applied as a tool in helping to respond to these challenges both in the business school ([Flamand et al., 2022](#)) and in professional development ([Adler, 2006; Carlucci and Schiuma, 2018a](#)).

In this article, we answer this call. We discuss the use of learning techniques based on students creating artistic works and considering existing ones, to encourage both sensitivity to the moral issues around marketing and creative thinking regarding what the discipline's place in society could be. Imagination and creativity have been identified as necessary by critical theorists for developing better relationships to consumption ([Murray and Ozanne, 1991](#)) and generating social change ([Kerrigan et al., 2009](#)), and by scientists for seeking solutions to climate change ([Rose, 2021](#)) and other threats to sustainability. However, marketing is often presented to students together with self-legitimising rhetoric ([Hackley, 2003](#)) or in "overly rosy terms" ([Tadajewski, 2016a, p. 1522](#)) that downplay the need to reimagine the discipline. Material on *sustainable marketing, greening the marketing mix* or other forms of "positive marketing" ([Tadajewski, 2016a](#)) can add to this effect by suggesting that any concerns about the impact of marketing can be fixed by managerial measures from within marketing rather than requiring radical rethinking. Counteracting this requires pedagogical approaches that denaturalise mainstream representations of "happy marketing" ([Brownlie, 2006, p. 510](#)) and uncover alternatives to the reality of management practice, in the spirit of critical management studies ([Murray and Ozanne, 1991; Alvesson, 1994](#)). We propose to contribute to this agenda by using the arts to link critical pedagogy with marketing education. We argue here that techniques from the arts are well suited to aiding this type of reimagining and inspiring the kind of fully participatory learning encouraged by [Freire \(1970/2000\)](#), whilst giving students a platform from which to engage imaginatively and freely with marketing phenomena.

We used artistic elements in both learning and assessment, which were imagined, devised and refined over several years, by the lead author. Following the methodology used by [Śliwa et al. \(2015\)](#), we analysed data from two sources: our reflective accounts of the teaching and learning experiences, and students' assignments. Additionally, to gain a fuller perspective of the outcomes of this approach, we collected accounts from students about their experiences of learning. We use aggregated data from three postgraduate modules: Critical Marketing (MSc), Marketing and Sustainability (MSc) and Business and Marketing Ethics (PhD); all taught in English, the first in the UK (pre-Covid) and the remainder in Portugal (during the pandemic).

This manuscript offers an example of how making and reacting to artistic works can help to send marketing students into their careers with a more critical, reflective and conscientious

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mindset. It makes the following principal contributions. Firstly, it demonstrates the transformational potential of using the arts to stimulate students' critical imagination and deep engagement with marketing. In doing so, it makes a case for pedagogy in marketing that interweaves affective and cognitive experiences. Secondly, it offers a reflective account of practical examples of using arts-based activities to teach critical perspectives on marketing, which can serve as a template for teachers considering enacting similar projects. This also adds to scholarship on critical management education by articulating the usefulness of an arts-based approach enabling students to be "struck" with understanding and to develop reflexivity. Finally, we hope to correct a tendency to view *impactful research* in business studies narrowly as that which produces straightforward instructions for practitioners or policymakers, rather than considering the importance of helping develop more imaginative ways of solving problems, including amongst students.

This article proceeds as follows. We begin by briefly positioning our study relative to current business-school practice and the pressures that shape it. Following this, we situate the arts within the context of critical pedagogy and argue for the use of arts in stimulating a more reflexive and sensitive approach to learning marketing. We then outline our pedagogic intervention and the methodology used to analyse its potential. Following this, we identify key themes in our data and reflect upon their implications for transformative marketing education.

### **Business education in Europe: "gold against the soul" [1]?**

In recent decades, European universities have faced pressures of marketisation and managerialism requiring them to show fast, measurable and narrowly defined benefits to the economy. Business schools have acted as drivers of this, and unsurprisingly have been ahead of the curve, "showing other academic departments a likely image of their future" (McCann *et al.*, 2020, p. 433), focused on efficiency, profit and growth (Purg and Sutherland, 2017). In this "marketised context", courses become "products" and students "consumers" (Parker, 2021a, p. 1113). These pressures have created a "tendency to produce and sell knowledge which is supportive of market managerialism" (Parker, 2021a, p. 1113) and a "speedy pedagogy", with compressed timeframes and slimmed-down content (Hartman and Darab, 2012, p. 56). Such fast pedagogies (Payne and Wattchow, 2009) leave little mental space for higher-order, abstract thinking. The trends are often judged to represent the dominance of an American model of management education (Juusola *et al.*, 2015). They can also be seen as reflecting a predominantly neoliberal, epistemic paradigm in Western – USA and European – universities, which informs marketing's knowledge towards pro-business, pro-capitalist and uncritical directions whilst under-valuing other viewpoints (Kravets and Varman, 2022; Varman and Saha, 2009).

Management education in the countries where this research was conducted, the UK and Portugal, has been subject to these pressures. This is due in part to standardisation programmes instituted by international bodies (Arriazu Muñoz, 2015), such as those of European Higher Education Area (EHEA), of which both are members. However, the convergence of European business schools on the American model has never been complete (Üsdiken, 2004; Juusola *et al.*, 2015) and as such, some difference between the two systems, reflecting their history. Notably, this history includes Portugal's head of government, the Marquis of Pombal, opening the world's first dedicated business school, the *Aula do Comércio* of 1759 (Schlegelmilch, 2020), specifically to transfer the mercantile practices that he had seen in Great Britain while ambassador (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2004). Amongst the differences are the systems of departmental administration. British universities have gone especially far in adopting corporate-style management (Mahony and Weiner, 2019), while a measure of Humboldtian, collegial decision making persists in Portugal (Diogo and Carvalho, 2022). Nonetheless, business schools in the two countries are more alike than

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different, with both broadly following the Americanised model described by [Juusola et al. \(2015\)](#).

The models described above are held to have created a narrow focus on competition, measurable outcomes and training professionals at the expense of more critical or transformative forms of education ([Arriazu Muñoz, 2015](#)). Both countries allow (and even require) students in the final years of secondary education to specialise in a relatively small number of (usually related) subjects. This focus becomes still narrower at undergraduate level, so students, at least the “home” students, on business degrees, in both countries rarely have much education in creative arts.

An awareness that this focus is not producing adequate responses to the challenges facing society has driven calls for greater space for criticality, creativity and ethical considerations in education ([Sutherland, 2013](#); [Hühn, 2014](#); [Nonet et al., 2016](#); [Lee et al., 2018](#)). At an institutional level, the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) and other accreditation agendas for business schools, further encourage a broader view of organisations and their engagement with society. Business schools have responded with loudly publicised reforms to curricula, policies and practices. Although there is evidence of progress in education for sustainability ([Davies et al., 2020](#)), changes have been slow or insufficient at best and merely cosmetic at worst ([Baden and Higgs, 2015](#)). Business schools often fail to encourage critical reflection upon the prevailing ideology of neoliberalism that informs their teaching ([Fotaki and Prasad, 2015](#)), and tend to neglect related structural problems, such as inequality and climate change ([Parker, 2021a](#)).

### Critical pedagogy and marketing

Critical pedagogy can aid with these challenges by creating a learning space for reflecting upon currently dominant ideologies in society and considering the power structures and relations that shape the marketplace ([Alvesson and Willmott, 1992](#); [Dehler et al., 2001](#); [Tadajewski, 2022](#)). Such an approach makes explicit the connection between pedagogic practice and social change ([Giroux, 2020](#)), and aims at transformation ([Brookfield, 2003](#)). In this sense, critical pedagogy can broaden students’ perspectives, and loosen the social, institutional and psychological barriers that constrain both their understanding of the world and their behaviour ([Murray and Ozanne, 1991](#)). Rather than imparting knowledge to passive and compliant students, critical pedagogues aim to nurture students’ ability to raise questions, transform knowledge and, ultimately, become responsible and “civically engaged citizens” ([Giroux, 2019](#), p. 509).

Such a critical approach seems especially important within marketing. Aligned with the dictates of the “neoliberal university”, conventional marketing education celebrates market logic ([Gordon and Zainuddin, 2020](#), p. 705) and indeed was developed, with support from private philanthropy, to export the understanding of markets favoured by the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, American business class ([Tadajewski, 2020](#)). While legitimising marketing ([Hackley, 2003](#); [Tadajewski, 2019](#)), this pedagogy often leaves little room to consider its wider implications. It reproduces the silence regarding both the interests of the under-privileged and the corporate exploitation that prevails in the discipline’s hierarchies of knowledge ([Kravets and Varman, 2022](#); [Hutton and Cappellini, 2022](#)). In the meantime, more inquisitive students are placated with ready-made responses in the form of *green marketing*, *societal marketing* and the like.

Against this, a critical pedagogy can grow students’ appreciation of the inequities in the marketplace, the macro effects of marketing and the contradictions inherent within consumers’ freedom of choice and *win-win* representations of the discipline ([Tadajewski, 2016b](#); [2022](#)). This also offers an opportunity for marketing lecturers to acknowledge their

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influence and responsibility for their impact upon practice, and to sensitise future practitioners to such issues (Giroux, 2020). However, critical approaches can be met with resistance (Burton, 2001; Tadajewski, 2022). Thus, embracing critical forms of pedagogy requires imagination from educators to fashion pedagogical practices capable of winning students' commitment (Heath *et al.*, 2019), whilst "avoid[ing] the gaze" (Tadajewski, 2022) of those faculty members wary of the critical-theory bogeyman. Critical approaches to teaching can raise additional challenges in classes with a high proportion of students who have previously studied in systems that are more teacher-centred than even a traditional "sage on the stage", European lecture hall. Zhang (2021) noted that the students from China studying in the UK (like many of the first cohort in this study) experience considerable learning shock because facts and the authority of the teacher are valued so much more in Chinese than in British higher education, and independent thought correspondingly less. These challenges require creative application of pedagogical methods that normalise critique and make transformative pedagogies easier to grasp.

Towards this, we draw on scholarship in management (Starkey and Tempest, 2009; Ippolito and Adler, 2018), marketing (Holbrook, 1989; Tadajewski and Hamilton, 2014), and the arts themselves (Green, 2011) that suggest the potential of the arts and humanities to complement the standardised, instrumental, acritical training that often constitutes mainstream education. This further builds on a previous learning intervention that the authors developed for another module that focused on care and incorporated a few elements from the arts within lectures (Heath *et al.*, 2019).

### Learning with the arts

A work of art holds one's attention (Perkins, 1994) and compels contemplation (Sutherland, 2013). This allows one to "slow down perception" (Eisner, 2002, p. 5) and look for details and explanations that are not obvious; e.g. what is the overall story being told in Pieter Breughel the Elder's "The Fight Between Carnival and Lent" and how do the many small scenes help to tell it? What may Rene Magritte be trying to convey in his famous painting "Ceci n'est pas une pipe"? More abstractly, what is the emotional effect of a Rothko canvas with apparently uniform blocks of colour and how do tiny changes in tone or brushstroke create this effect?

Raising awareness of what we normally "fail to notice" (and that there inevitably *are* things we fail to notice) paves the way to liberate our minds from the "habits of thought and prejudices" that shape our vision (Brownlie, 2006, p. 509). In other words, the arts help us to "learn to notice" and, in doing so, awaken us to the nuances of the world around us and to new ways of knowing (Eisner, 2002, p. 10).

Thus, the arts can inspire new ways of thinking and alter patterns of thought (Carlucci and Schiuma, 2018a; Carlucci and Schiuma, 2018b), increasing self-reflection (Camic, 2008), and engaging the brain more deeply than words alone could (Harper, 2002). In particular, the multiple meanings and interpretations (Paek, 2019) invited by the arts fosters dispositions to think critically (Lampert, 2006) and to appreciate that "practices, structures, and actions are never context-free" (Brookfield, 1987, p. 8). Indeed, studies, with children (Bowen *et al.*, 2014) and with adults (Lampert, 2006) reveal a positive effect of artistic interventions on critical thinking. Marketing students can particularly benefit from this critical mindset; for example, noting that works of art can simultaneously resist market domination and be market commodities (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Larsen and Kerrigan, 2019), can serve as useful mental training for interrogating other ideological tensions embedded within representations of marketing and the markets (e.g. green marketing's role in legitimising consumption).

Furthermore, engagement with arts can activate multiple sensory modalities, providing paths to (and even ways of) knowing not easily accessed by more conventionally

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“intellectual” means. This is exemplified by the embodied understanding of space and motion that [Barbour \(2004, 2012\)](#) reports in her auto-ethnographies as a professional dancer. Indeed, corporate training through arts-based activities has had great success in producing similar types of embodied understanding ([Taylor and Ladkin, 2009](#)).

Relatedly, art can convey affective knowledge, activating feelings and fostering moral sensibility ([Green, 2011](#)). Songs, in particular, have the ability to arouse unique cognitive and emotional responses, which guide moral judgement ([O’Mathúna, 2008](#)). They are a part of the “popular culture” discussed by [Murray et al. \(2019, p. 320\)](#), which carries opportunities to trigger emotions that inspire positive change and creative power by drawing attention to what is wrong. They can serve as virtual rallying points for popular movements, such as Martha Reeves and the Vandellas’ *Dancing in The Street* for Black American civil-rights protesters ([Shukaitis, 2008](#)), or Zeca Afonso’s *Grândola, Vila Morena* for opponents of the Portuguese dictatorship in the 1970s. [Hagberg \(2011\)](#) makes a compelling case that precise analysis of how the improvisations of jazz musicians aid and constrain the other members of the ensemble can shed considerable light on the ethics of social interactions. Such a connection between musical groups and more general interpersonal interactions is developed in the context of management learning by [O’Malley and Ryan \(2006\)](#), [Sutherland and Jelinek \(2015\)](#) and [Ippolito and Adler \(2018\)](#) who found that taking a role in making music with others helped students to develop emotional and social competences.

Indeed, as well as powerful and seductive ([Berger, 1972](#)), the emotional charge of artwork can aid moral behaviour. A visual representation, whether taken as “high” art, photojournalism or even social marketing, can poignantly arouse anger, an emotion that can facilitate the moral appreciation of wrongdoing ([Held, 2006](#)). Equally, it can “gently” raise awareness of personal responsibility for a problem (e.g. climate change) in ways that are perceived as less threatening than direct, verbal or written information would be ([Roosen et al., 2017](#)). A simple visual depiction of a distressed turtle, trapped in plastic waste can poignantly provoke reflection upon the excessive use of plastics in ways that are often more impactful than those afforded by “hard” facts. Likewise, when Adam [Freeland \(2003\)](#) sings: “We want your soul; Tell us your habits, your facts, your fears; Give us your address, your shoe size, your years; [ . . . ] Show us your children, your photos, your home”, he challenges us to reflect upon, and perhaps resist ubiquitous marketing practices, which may otherwise seem *normal*.

Finally, the specific failures of marketing courses to prepare graduates for marketing roles with SMEs and start-ups ([Cheng et al., 2016](#); [Amjad et al., 2020](#)) may also be lessened as a result of arts-based interventions. In such settings, where “subjectivist approaches to doing marketing far outweigh general, objective marketing practice”, an understanding based on the interactions between works of art, their creators and their audiences may reflect the relationships between firms and customers better than conventional styles of management can ([Fillis, 2011](#): p. 26).

### **Art-inspired pedagogic intervention: implementation**

This pedagogic approach was implemented in three postgraduate modules over more than one year: *Critical Marketing* (MSc) at a Russell Group university in the UK, *Marketing and Sustainability* (MSc) and *Business and Marketing Ethics* (PhD) at a large research university in Portugal. The latter two were mostly taught remotely due to Covid-19.

Throughout the lectures, we drew on the arts to provoke critical reflection upon marketing phenomena and engagement with theory. For example, we used Banksy’s *Woman Falling with a Shopping Trolley* and a local mural, facing fashionable, independent shops, of a llama “watching you to make sure you buy things” as starting points for

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discussions about the nature of marketing and consumption. We also encouraged students to develop habits of reflection regarding any piece of work (be it a painting or an academic article) and to remain open to different forms of expression. Thus, while we were discussing sustainability we encouraged some of these students to visit a local exhibit by the artist Daniel Steegmann Mangrané, which dealt with the pressures inflicted upon the Brazilian rainforest by human actions.

Master students' assessment involved an individual and a group coursework in which students were required to critically engage with consumption and marketing phenomena, anchoring their discussions to a designated song or image, respectively. For their individual assignments, students could choose from a list of topics (e.g. consumer sovereignty and manipulation, sustainable consumption), each of them associated with a song, including: *7 Rings* by Ariana Grande; *Is This the World We Created [...]?* by Queen; *Millennium* by Robbie Williams; *Grace Kelly* by Mika; and *We Want your Soul* by Adam Freeland. The group coursework for these modules included a participant-driven photo-elicitation of the type discussed by [Stavraki and Anninou \(2022\)](#). Students were required to take a photograph that communicated their succinct analysis of a contested issue in marketing, and to present their picture with a title and a brief explanatory description of it. They also had to write a critical and reflective paragraph about the photograph and justify their choice in the context of their assignment, followed by a discussion of the photograph in light of relevant literature. PhD students were set a similar group photo-elicitation task, with the additional constraint that the photograph speak to issues raised by an academic paper that they had critiqued in another assignment.

The exercise with the songs required analysis of what the artists were saying and how, but not at a high level of theoretical complexity. It was also intended to engage the students emotionally and fire their imaginations. The purpose of the photographic task was more focused on requiring them to express their analysis through an unfamiliar medium and to engage in an act of artist creation themselves (see also [Stavraki and Anninou, 2022](#)).

All these choices of assessment meant that there was no need for a final exam, a form of assessment that can, in our experience, produce a mode of thinking where having the facts at one's fingertips at one particular hour is the dominant focus of learning.

## Methodology

This study examines the use of the arts in teaching and assessment within a critical pedagogy, to increase engagement and encourage imaginative and analytic thinking. We followed an interpretive approach ([Hudson and Ozanne, 1988](#)), allowing themes to emerge from the data to understand and represent meanings in the *gestalt* ([Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy, 1988](#); [Spiggle, 1994](#)). This project received ethical approval under the auspices of the UK university and pseudonyms are used to preserve students' anonymity.

Following [Sliwa et al. \(2015\)](#), we analysed the outcomes of this pedagogical approach using data from varied sources, including students' assignments and our reflections upon their learning processes. Specifically, we recorded our observations in diaries ([Bolger et al., 2003](#)), which allowed for the contemporaneous recording of our reflections on the learning process and context ([Easterby-Smith et al., 2018](#)). Following the assessment and awarding of marks, we asked students from the various cohorts for permission to use their completed assignments for research. The three cohorts in question were chosen because the modules they were studying offered rich contexts for critical and imaginative engagement. The modules also shared broadly the same intended aims, against which we could judge the effects of our interventions, namely, broad and critical understanding of the discipline, the ability to situate marketing and business within wider social and environmental issues



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and soft skills of empathy and sensitivity. The split between two institutions reflects reasons of access and convenience, due to the lead author moving during the project. The study was not conceived of as cross-cultural research, especially given the similarities between business education in the two countries, as discussed earlier.

This study considers the assignments of 49 students, from whom we received consent, constituting approximately one third of all students. We deemed this sample adequate, as it included students receiving a wide range of final grades from the different cohorts and with an appropriate gender mix, and also broadly reflected the geographic and cultural diversity of the groups (Śliwa *et al.*, 2015), which in the case of the class in the UK consisted mostly of international students from Asia and in Portugal was mostly of Portuguese students.

Following this, and to obtain further insights into students' learning experiences, we contacted students again from the three classes and collected students' oral and written accounts, using semi-structured interviews and written feedback on their experiences with the module and the approach undertaken. Interviews were conducted via video conference and lasted around 25 minutes, the range being from 12 to 40. Although all classes, assessment and interactions with the lecturers were in English, interviews to Portuguese-speaking students were conducted in Portuguese. These data were translated into English by the first author who is fluent in both languages (and is a native speaker of Portuguese). These translations were then reviewed by a native speaker of English, who also speaks Portuguese. Written feedback was collected via email to capture more information from those we could not interview. Table 1, below, shows the list of these 44 participants. Again, this broadly corresponds to the ethnic makeup of the student cohorts across the three modules and includes a diverse range of final grades from the three cohorts. Many of these students had also given their consent for us to analyse their essays. Finally, we considered students' formal feedback and evaluation of our teaching.

Our approach to analysis of the data from these various sources is interpretive and prioritises understanding students' particular experiences over generalizability (Smythe *et al.*, 2008; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). The inferences we draw are abductive, and even imaginative in the manner described by Locke, Golden-Biddle and Feldman (2004). Hence, the standard we seek to satisfy, as per Hogg and Maclaran (2008) and Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993), is to convince the reader that the interpretations we abduce are justifiable. Specifically, this requires us to show evidence that our inferences exhibit: *authenticity*, that is that we, as researchers, have been close enough to the students' experience to credibly understand their experience and accurately reflect what we have experienced thereof; *plausibility*, meaning that inferences that we draw and theory we build should fit the data taken as a whole; and *criticality*, which is to say we have reflected on the role of our own biases and positions within our inferences and left space for differing possibilities to be considered (Hogg and Maclaran, 2008; Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993).

In our interpretive analysis, we aimed to illuminate substantive issues on our data whilst preserving their complexity and richness (Coule, 2018). We developed a reflexive analysis of the material, discussing it frequently between us (Śliwa *et al.*, 2015), and noting patterns of commonality and difference in our interpretations (Thompson *et al.*, 1990). Thus, particular ideas, concepts or expressions that stood out across the data were noted and grouped together (Rubin and Rubin, 1995), to allow deeper reflection and theorization.

Our process of analysis was conducted at multiple occasions, including directly after classes, following assessment of students' materials and throughout data collection and analysis. This was iterative, maturing over time, through cycles of rereading the different sources of data, interpreting them and negotiating meanings (Thompson *et al.*, 1990; Thompson, 1996). We took our time in conversing about our interpretations with a

Pseudonym	Gender	Region	Module, degree, country where module was delivered
Ai	Female	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Christopher	Male	South American	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Demi	Female	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Dong	Male	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Dongmei	Female	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Enlai	Male	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Jillian	Female	European	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Jia	Female	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Jiang	Female	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Jiao	Female	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Jilpa	Female	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Jin	Female	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Joseph	Male	European	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Jun	Female	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Katie	Female	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Lai	Female	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Li-Hua	Female	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Meng	Female	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Mey	Female	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Mingyu	Female	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Qiao	Female	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Quiang	Male	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Quyén	Female	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Roxana	Female	European	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Tung-mei	Female	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Wenling	Female	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Xin-jin	Female	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Yan	Female	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Yuxuan	Male	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Zena	Female	European	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Zhenzhen	Female	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Zihan	Male	Asian	Critical marketing, MSc, UK
Bella	Female	European	Marketing and sustainability, MSc, Portugal
Catarina	Female	European	Marketing and sustainability, MSc, Portugal
David	Male	European	Marketing and sustainability, MSc, Portugal
Felicidade	Female	European	Marketing and sustainability, MSc, Portugal
Fiona	Female	South American	Marketing and sustainability, MSc, Portugal
Paulina	Female	European	Marketing and sustainability, MSc, Portugal
Sofia	Female	South American	Marketing and sustainability, MSc, Portugal
Alice	Female	European	Business and marketing ethics, PhD, Portugal
Maria	Female	European	Business and marketing ethics, PhD, Portugal
Miguel	Male	European	Business and marketing ethics, PhD, Portugal
Pamela	Female	European	Business and marketing ethics, PhD, Portugal
Rui	Male	European	Business and marketing ethics, PhD, Portugal

**Table 1.**  
Table of participants  
(oral/written  
accounts)

**Source:** Authors' own work

commitment to preserve students' voices. We drew freely on combined decades of teaching experience to get a sense of whether the interventions had a real effect. This led us, in some cases, to revisit data and students in search for clarification and validation of our interpretations (Goulding, 2005). From a holistic understanding of materials, we condensed meanings into key themes (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015).

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## Findings

Our examination of students' assignments, together with an interpretive analysis of their written and oral accounts, and of the anecdotal notes we wrote after lecturers, foreshadow three main themes illustrative of our perception of students' learning journeys. Firstly, we articulate how our approach reframed learning and the relationship between the learner and the "sources" of knowledge. Then, we discuss examples of students' deep and higher-order level of thinking that indicate students' critical understandings of marketing phenomena. We finally look at students as reflexive and transformative agents, or what [Murray and Ozanne's \(2009, p. 835\)](#) termed "critical participant[s]". Throughout this section, we supplement students' accounts of their experiences with examples from their assignments and our observations, to produce a fuller picture of our students' learning experience.

### *Heightened engagement: reframing learning and the learners*

Our arts-based approach was typically received by students with surprise, curiosity and anxiety (seasoned with a little amusement). This occurred in all the modules, but was easiest to observe for *Critical Marketing*, where the module was taught in person (pre-Covid). Sofia, below, recounted her apprehension about the assignments in the *Marketing and Sustainability* module to a stronger degree than the module leader had realised through the online lessons:

At the start, when I saw the assignment scripts I was so scared. I thought: I will not make it! What do I do now? This was such a huge challenge! My God! What do I do now? I kept thinking about them and talking to people about what I could do. (Sofia, interview, Marketing and Sustainability)

These agitated reactions aligned with those of the students described in [Śliwa et al. \(2015\)](#), when asked to use fictional sources in an introductory management module. At the same time, students felt "excited", "wowed", "enthusiastic" or "passionate" about the assessment. Bella, like many others, welcomed the novelty, and also the freedom, provided by this approach:

[these assignments] gave us more freedom to use our critical sense in a different perspective beyond the theoretical one only [...] Suddenly, we were all [expression of surprise] [...] It took us by surprise! (Bella, interview, Marketing and Sustainability)

We further "de-routinise[d]" the classroom ([Sutherland, 2013: 31](#)), by playing the songs used in the individual assignments over the speaker in the *Critical Marketing* module, which seems to have particularly caught students' attention. At the same time that the songs transformed the classroom, the context of the classroom transformed the songs, many of which were so familiar as background music that, as with advertising images ([Berger, 1972, p. 130](#)), we "scarcely notice their total impact". Placing the same songs in an academic context encouraged close attention to the details that could easily be ignored in other settings. As students began to draw connections from their lyrics to the module contents, this seems to have initiated the beginning of what Freire's called "dialogical relations" (p. 79) between the teachers and students that open the possibility to reframe "student-teacher power relations" ([Cunliffe, 2002, p. 36](#)). Students' perceptions of us appeared to have shifted from "authoritative", "owners" of knowledge to "partners" ([Freire, 1970/2000, p. 80](#)) or "freely negotiating equals" ([Bizzell, 1991, p. 849](#)) – who wanted to relate to students' own frames of reference and experiences, and with whom students also wished to engage. This was evinced, for example, by students approaching us after class to recommend additional songs that we could use in future essay briefs. For Bella, the moment when the assessment briefs were introduced "changed the dynamic in the classroom and even the relationship

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with the teacher”, which became, in her view, more proximate. The authors’ reflective accounts of students’ initial responses to learning about the assignments (e.g. highlighting the “proximity”, “dialogue” and “overall positive atmosphere”) were also a testament to this transformation.

The process of composing their photographs seems to have further contributed to shift some of the power over the learning process from the teachers to the students. Specifically, students felt empowered to decide what to address and how, and reflect upon the phenomena in light of their own experiences. In particular, when presenting their photographs and reflective accounts, students took the role of teacher (Freire, 1970/2000) and showed pride in sharing their productions and revealing their “hidden”, thoughtful details.

By moving “beyond a purely intellectual critique” to one where other meaningful “ways of sense making and learning” (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 36) were valued, we relinquished some authority and control and allowed students to reclaim a share of ownership over their learning process (Sliwa *et al.*, 2015). This was seen by some as “challenging” and seems to have developed a deeper engagement with the materials:

I’m a huge Queen fan [...] You have a relatable source to criticise things because the song, and I knew about this song [...] I immediately felt linked to it [“Is This the World we Created” by Queen] and it gave me an opportunity to think of this song that I knew before in a different way [...] now that I notice it, I was oh, let’s go a little bit more in depth. (Christopher, interview, Critical Marketing)

Because it was something we were familiar with [...] it helped a lot [...] it was applying something from our lives to the theoretical themes [...] it was something that we deal with in our daily lives. We all listen to music, we all take photographs [...] and I’m sure that in reading our works you saw many different points of view. (Bella, interview, Marketing and Sustainability)

The references, in each of these accounts, to students’ existing knowledge (of a specific song or of pop music and photography generally) speak to their understanding that what they brought to the classroom was a relevant part of their learning, as in the constructivist model of learning (Bada and Olusegun, 2015). As Berger (1972, p. 9) observes, what we see is affected by our knowledge and beliefs, so that “[w]e never look at just one thing” but rather at the “relation between things and ourselves”.

Zena explained that the art elements helped her relate the assignment to her experience in ways that “colder” theoretical content would not have permitted. For Enlai, this provided students with “a new understanding of marketing” because “music and photography are alive enough to explain many abstract concepts”. Jillian, below, talks passionately about her use of Queen’s song to develop her individual assignment in ways that were quite emotionally invested, which set the tone of her essay:

I did an extensive poetry module in my final year of my English degree which linked quite nicely into using lyrics to then explore themes of sustainability in marketing. So, coming from that background [...] I think I remember feeling quite passionately about how the lyrics could relate to the assignment. [...] I listened to the full song that I felt a connection with the lyrics that then inspired whatever was in the paper [...] it connects you to it in a uh, a level up from just seeing a question written down. (Jillian, interview, Critical Marketing)

Note again the constructivist-like focus on the knowledge she brings to the classroom. By using her own stories, feelings and actions as basis for learning (Cunliffe, 2002), Jillian’s learning experience became more humanised. The “felt knowledge” that she and other students assimilated added value to the more abstract, intellectual theorising (Taylor and Ladkin, 2009,

p. 58) of the discipline, making learning personally meaningful. As she later further articulates:

I really enjoy the merging of arts and science because I think that the emotive side of art [...] I can bring something to science that science can't necessarily do on its own. [...] it's the emotive feelings and it's the self-reflection and it's not just looking at it as something that's black and white because you bring your own perception into it more, I think. (Jillian, interview, Critical Marketing).

Another student, Miguel, reported feeling empowered by the module's approach to make more creative choice and "freedom to explore new ways of thinking". Tasked with critically analysing an academic paper, Miguel, a self-described "super-fan" of the Smiths, assessed [Shankar et al.'s \(2006\)](#) paper "Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now", named for a song by the band, and alluded to lyrics by a wide range of artists (from Gil Scott-Heron to Marilyn Monroe to Coldplay) prominently and effectively. He also expressed unusual levels of emotional engagement with what could easily have been a dry essay assignment. As articulated by David this "bringing of the subjects to a personal level" seems to have been an important part of learning.

Indeed, as suggested by our students, arts provided "intrinsic satisfaction" and immersion ([Eisner, 2002](#), p. 203) that catalysed emotions and engagement. There are meanings and experiences that only artistic and aesthetic frames can convey ([Eisner, 2002](#)), and this is illustrated by Rui, who saw this form of learning as more cognitively, emotionally and sensorially motivating than others. He describes how this engaged multiple senses, producing the sorts of benefits that [Barbour \(2004, 2012\)](#) and [Taylor and Ladkin \(2009\)](#) attribute to embodiment. Rui's reference to "different perspectives" also echoes [Stavraki and Anninou's \(2022, p. 5\)](#) and [Madden and Smith's \(2015\)](#) identification of "multiple framing of meaning" as a benefit of photo-elicitation:

The arts, in a certain way, drives us to think, it makes the brain more agile, looking at the phenomena from different perspectives [...] be it in sound, music, videos, photography, written, like a poem [...] and also, in ways that are much more seductive, more romantic way of looking at a certain topic than just having a scientific article talking [...] (Rui, interview, Business and Marketing Ethics)

Inspired by new possibilities to see and express themselves, these students invested feelings, experiences and creativity in their work and creatively wove artistic elements into the more abstract, theoretical material. This process reflected an enhanced and deeper engagement, which allowed other connections to be forged in their minds.

#### *Seeing deeper and forging connections: students' enhanced criticality towards marketing phenomena*

Although, naturally, levels of engagement and critical reasoning varied, many students' assignments offered deeper analysis than would be typical in more conventionally framed assignments, where students rarely move beyond description. For Pamela this was linked to her photographic composition:

In my case it did stimulate my search [...] how can I relate [...] it was that really, how can I relate the image to the theme? [...] it led me to find new ideas that were not present in the literature [...] by only reading Peattie and Peattie and the other articles, I wouldn't have arrived at that idea [...] but because I had to include the photograph, I drew new connections. (Pamela, interview, Business and Marketing Ethics)

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This capacity for identifying and reconciling information from different perspectives, which Pamela demonstrated in her work, is seen as a benefit of photographic methods (Madden and Smith, 2015). In this spirit, several students referred to the processes of composing their assignments (both individual and group ones) in terms of iteratively developing deeper levels of engagement. As Catarina explained, in relation to her group assignment, this was as a process of “creating, discussing, changing, repeating”, which moved them towards a shared understanding of precisely what they wished to express in the presentation. This aligns with Cunliffe’s (2002) understanding of learning as a complex, non-linear process, which often incorporates reflexive conversations towards sense making. Catarina’s group photograph featured a Monopoly game board and play money, on which the students placed a smiley Lego figure, representing a child, on a bicycle. This artistic composition provided a focus for students to forge new connections between what was being explicitly taught and their extant tacit knowledge (Cunliffe, 2002), and, thus, led them to develop understanding. As Catarina explains:

Having to take the picture helped us to think about the different angles of the topic, as we wanted the photograph to represent our assignment. It was also a means of tying everything together, from the various articles that we read, to the summaries we made and the presentation, because the photograph had to be able to say the same as the 10 minutes of presentation (and all of the preparation underlying it). In my opinion, it helped with thinking critically, in the sense that we had to choose a way of visually communicating our whole message [...] that is, every element of the image had a purpose and was carefully chosen and that required critical thought and the discussion of our different points of view. (Catarina, written account, Marketing and Sustainability)

This kind of development of a sense of how the parts of a work being created, and the relationships between those parts, “congregate as whole” to form an effect, is identified by Eisner (2002, p. 201) as a vital skill that engagement with arts fosters. At the same time, every detail of their “metaphorical composition” (Stavraki and Anninou, 2022, p. 6) suggests students’ critical engagement with marketing phenomena, even if they could have been more explicit in linking this to theory. Elements symbolise structures of dominance (Bradshaw and Firat, 2007) and unequal power relations (Tadajewski, 2019) pervasive in the marketplace that constrain autonomy and alienate people (Alvesson, 1994). Through these visuals, students situate marketing phenomena within wider societal issues, whilst challenging an ideology of consumerism which equates consumption and happiness (Shankar *et al.*, 2006), and opening space for divergent interpretations:

We chose the Monopoly scenario to represent the power marketing holds over children, and the Lego toy to represent the consumption side of the equation. However, you can also see it as representing children over a monopoly of consumption, and that is the special beauty of this image: the existing room for interpretation. If you look close enough, the fake money has some symbols embedded that are usually associated with kids and consumption, like a pacifier and a shopping cart. Also, the money is fake for a reason, and it is to settle the illusion of happiness that toys bring to children and, in the long run, the fake idea that material things mean happiness. (Catarina, Group presentation, Marketing and Sustainability)

Thus, the symbolism used by this project sharpened students’ critique. By recasting seemingly innocuous cultural symbols (e.g. a baby’s dummy, a children’s game), students re-interpreted their meanings and challenged what are often unnoticed structures of power in consumerist societies. Students’ judgement largely depended on “feel” and sensibility, and cannot be reduced to any “rule or recipe or formula or algorithm” (Eisner, 2002: 201). The senses and forms of thinking activated by this activity combined with those activated by

other, more conventional types of learning within the course to produce more meaningful learning than either could have provided alone.

However, it was in their individual essays that students entwined theory with the arts most deeply. For example, several students drew interesting links between Ariana Grande's *7 Rings* and issues of power, materialism and influence in marketing, for which they offered sound theoretical support. This, again, was an ongoing process; Paulina, recounted in her interview, how the lyrics and rhythm of this song ("I want it, I got it") stuck to her mind and drove her to intuitively identify connections between the song and theory all through the semester. Likewise, Christopher described going back and forth between the song "Is this the World we Created?" and literature to deepen his understanding and criticality, and to relate the different materials on sustainability. Jillian described this as a "cyclical" process of weaving through the literature, understanding the different relevant streams of research and deriving meaning from the song lyrics, whilst "telling a story" that ties everything together.

By drawing connections between the artistic and the theoretical materials, inter-relating and rearranging the information (Lewis and Smith, 1993) students were given the chance to cultivate higher-order thinking skills (Miri *et al.*, 2007) towards marketing phenomena. For example, Zhenzhen's individual essay connected Mika's lyrics about assuming different personas to a thoughtful discussion of what it means to choose an identity ("If we can be anyone, who are we?"), and the role consumption plays in this. She then provided a novel link to the then-popular "Falling Stars challenge" that involved composing a scene of one's most defining possessions, showing she was confident in bringing her knowledge from non-academic sources to the assignment. Several others, like Zena, actively strived to push themselves beyond descriptive writing:

You have to try and then relate it to the work in a relevant way. You know, you don't want it to be a weak link [...] or just, or just to have the artistic aspect there just for the novelty of it. So, it's actually trying to translate into something meaningful [...] construct an argument around it. (Zena, interview, Critical Marketing)

In this direction, a number of students brought in additional sources. For example, Zena completed her assignment on consumption and identity (associated with Mika's Grace Kelly) and used the book "The Art of Looking Sideways" by the graphic designer Alan Fletcher, which takes a novel view of modern life through visual awareness. Her argument was that taking a fresh view of contemporary life should be a skill attempted by all marketers. She brought music and literature together creatively by structuring the assignment using chapter headings from the book. This included identity as a research domain in Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) under the heading "Our identity is a tricky business", symbolism under the heading "Every status has its symbol" and group influence under a heading starting "No man is an island":

Mika is certainly not alone in the identity conflict he alludes to in his song Grace Kelly [...] With a growing understanding among researchers that identity is indeed a tricky business which plays a role in consumption, the topic of identity has emerged as one of the thematic research domains within CCT (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). (Zena, extract from individual essay, Critical Marketing)

The student then proceeded to draw useful connections between the lyrics and Belk's (1988) theory of the extended self. Likewise, considering Queen's song "Is this the World we Created [...]?", Roxana extended the argument to include music of other well-known artists. This was also placed in the context of Freddie Mercury's motivating experience and linked to broader issues of sustainability:

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Many artists played the sustainability topic into their songs: Beatles – “Mother Nature’s Son”; David Bowie – “Time Will Crawl”, Depeche Mode – “The Landscape Is Changing”. One of the reference songs, which present sustainability problems, is Queen-The World We Created. The lyrics were composed after Freddie Mercury, Queen Soloist, saw the news related to the poverty in Africa. The lyrics highlight some core insights regarding world problems: poverty in countries around the world, the discrepancy between rich and poor people, the degradation of the planet, loneliness and isolation. (Roxana, extract from individual assignment, Critical Marketing).

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Compelling analyses were also drawn from contextualising the song “We Want your Soul” relative to various practices of marketing and corporations that students came to identify as manipulative or alienating and in need of scrutiny. Some related the lyrics of this 2003 song to current issues arising from the power companies obtain from digital advancements in marketing. Qiao, below, concluded her essay reflecting upon the importance of education and scholarship in raising consumers’ consciousness. Her account strikingly chimes with those of critical scholars, in particular in relation to the potential of critical theory to empower consumers to become defiant (Ozanne and Murray, 1995):

“However, without appropriate protection, consumers are very likely to fall victim of marketing manipulation, just like the role created in the music video “We Want Your Soul” [. . .]. To avoid such a scene, much [sic] studies on concrete and applicable approaches to protecting consumers is needed in the future, like how to empower consumers against marketing manipulation or how to create a learning environment where consumers can examine their own perceptions and consciousness”. (Qiao, extract from individual assignment, Critical Marketing)

Another student, Jian focussed on the production techniques of the recording of this song, and how they connected to the theme of consumption in the lyrics and from there to theory that she had studied in class:

Additionally, it is spoken by a speech synthesiser which implies the protagonist as a consumer in modern society seems to be manipulated by the marketplace and loses his voice. A statement from Shankar *et al.* (2006:486) is a concise interpretation of the music video. People are disappointed with “vacuity and superficiality of contemporary consumer culture”. (Jian, extract from individual assignment, Critical Marketing)

Our observations also registered how the vast majority of the work students produced, including some of the weaker assignments, showed clear efforts from students to build narratives that were not merely descriptive. Thus, in line with the hallmarks of critical pedagogy, students forged relevant connections between the art materials, marketing phenomena and their wider effects in ways that recognized how economic systems shape demand and meanings (Tadajewski, 2019), and that challenged poorly contextualised representations of marketing (Tadajewski *et al.*, 2014) and the hegemonic ideology (Brookfield, 2003) underlying them. As learning became an unfolding process of critical inquiry (Dehler *et al.*, 2001), this opened up space for reflexivity and transformation.

#### *The student as a “critical participant”*

Students’ *post hoc* accounts provided considerable evidence that their engagement with the phenomena discussed had an ongoing impact in their wider lives, both as consumers and as professionals in the marketing field. This was also partly supported by the submitted work itself.

Almost all groups produced photographs that were meaningful, critical representations of the phenomena under study and used them proficiently to reflect upon these phenomena. In doing so, some reframed their understandings of taken-for-



granted representations of marketing and consumption. As an example, one group of students offered a photo of a young woman on a hospital bed, being fed luxury consumer items by a “nurse”, with the title “Modern Medicine” and a reflective paragraph about materialism (Figure 1). The text criticises the role of marketing in producing materialism. The relevance of this is highlighted by the fact that the luxury products shown were all owned by members of the group. It is telling that the team now visualised materialism as an illness with social consequences and portrayed it in a manner relevant to their cohort. The students linked the theoretical discussions in class to their reality in everyday consumption and developed a renewed understanding of consumption they had previously engaged in unthinkingly.

Working with the arts can broaden students’ horizons through developing imagination and “refinement of the sensibilities” (Eisner, 2002, p.199). This, in turn, fosters the capacity to care (and empathise), which has been argued to be the prime driver of moral action (Held, 2006). For example, Felicidade, commented on how composing her group’s photograph about the impact of fast fashion on ecosystems and society “moved” her and “touched her consciousness” in ways that revealed a deep sensitivity about the suffering of workers and animals. As a consequence, she changed her own behaviour (e.g. stopped buying so impulsively). Several other students felt personal responsibility for effecting change in structures of domination (Gray, 2007) of which they, as professionals, consumers or citizens, saw themselves to be a direct part. Many of the written and oral accounts gathered from students long after concluding the module suggested that their raised consciousness favoured their reflexivity in ways that were impactful. As “conscious beings”, they felt they should, “change the world” (Murray and Ozanne, 1991, p. 135; Freire 1970/2000):

The challenge of translating the understanding of the theory with an image lead us, since the first instance, to exercise our critical thinking. What is this about? How does this affect me directly or indirectly? What’s my role in this specific topic [...] and what is my role in the world more generally? (Alice, interview, Business and Marketing Ethics)

Thus, concurring with Tadajewski and Hamilton (2014), we found that the deep engagement provided by the arts changed not only students’ views but also their behaviour. Several students commented on the “discomfort” caused by their increased



**Note:** Slide and picture produced by Ai, Mingyu, Quyen, Tung-Mei and Zhenzhen (pseudonyms), *Critical Marketing* (shared with permission)

**Figure 1.**  
Modern medicine

awareness and reflexivity. For Fiona, the main challenge was “translating, into a picture, a feeling”, that feeling being “uneasiness” arising from the heightened moral awareness that struck her, after photographing the waste produced by her household over a weekend (Figure 2).

In a similar incident of a student being deeply struck by the work, Paulina felt “shattered” by her deep reflection about ethics within fashion industry driven by her group’s photographic composition. Indeed, she declared that although the process was “eye opening” she “wished [she] did not know” about such issues, as she could not afford expensive, “ethical” brands and thinking about the problem of *fast fashion* now made her feel “uncomfortable”. Although, at a first glance, this seems to contrast with the emancipatory process described by critical theorists (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992), we may argue that Paulina’s realisation of how things are broken is a first stage of her journey towards becoming a critical participant (Murray and Ozanne, 2009) herself. Indeed, Paulina later said that as a result of this module, she curbed her own consumption of “little things [she] used to buy and hoard from “one-euro” shops”. Paulina was not alone. Others, like Bella, explained how working on these assignments changed her perceptions, impacted her behaviour and left a “mark” on her, which made her feel that she had “grown” as a consequence. For example, both in discussions in class and when interviewed a year later, she noted that influencers and vloggers that she used to like watching now made her feel “uneasy” and she stopped paying attention to that content. In a similar vein, David said that he is now much more reflective upon, and less “vain” about, his own consumption choices; he specifically linked this to the



**Figure 2.**  
A weekend urban  
“Trash”

**Note:** Picture produced by Fiona and Mauricio (pseudonyms), Marketing and Sustainability (shared with permission)

impact on him of considering Ariana Grande's "7 Rings" in light of his readings on voluntary simplicity.

Other students articulated how their perceptions changed in ways that enabled them to envision different futures. Much like the Marcusean estrangement (Marcuse, 1964/1982) that Tadajewski and Hamilton (2014) identified in documentary films, the photographic composition brought issues of wasteful consumption into clear focus for Sofia, creating a dramatic shift in her understanding. This change, in turn, prompted her to become an agent of change:

When I saw that on a single purchase, we had 14 bags, that shocked me! It really called my attention. [...] I felt like I was changing a parcel of the world [...] I am educating myself and educating others about the importance of bringing your own bags [...] It may be a little change but even so [...] Now my parents also take their reusable bags when they go shopping [...] I feel I am helping the world become more sustainable. (Sofia, interview, Marketing and Sustainability)

Students further engaged in "ontological denaturalization" (Fournier and Grey, 2000; Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008, p. 10; Tadajewski, 2019), challenging, for example, constructions of beauty by the fashion industry, which they saw as far removed from its effects on the planet, employees and consumers, the sustainability of some companies' "green" claims and the marketing's role in driving consumption in face of the challenges of sustainability. Likewise, the photograph of a group of PhD students entitled "Urban Garden" challenged the naturalness of existing spaces and celebrated the potential to create others. This photograph reveals a small allotment amongst concrete walls (a "green oasis"), which students linked meaningfully to their designated article (Peattie and Peattie, 2009). As well as trying to envision new paths towards sustainability as citizens and consumers, this sparked students' consciousness of their responsibility (as current or future professionals in the field) to reimagine the discipline and its practice:

[...] it met the current trend for people to make their own products, the make yourself [...] it was all to do with that [...] looking differently at how we think of consumption [...] It was [also] about: how can we [as researchers in the field] drive marketing towards something more sustainable, a lifestyle that is more sustainable? (Pamela, Interview, Business and Marketing Ethics)

For example, I am now working in the energy industry. While vigorously developing energy products, I am also thinking about how to make energy more environmentally friendly and sustainable. (Zihan, written account, Critical Marketing)

To sum up, our approach destabilised students' expectations but also made space for more proximate, personal and sensorial ways of learning to develop. Inspired by the opportunities to contribute their cultural understandings and artistic endeavours to scholarly conversations, many students deepened the level of reflection and reflexivity about marketing and consumption-related phenomena (including their own behaviour) in ways that were mindful of sustainability. Table 2 summarises these issues and sketches out the main benefits achieved with our approach in relation to the overall objectives we set for these modules.

## Discussion and conclusions

This study is built upon our commitment, as teachers in marketing, to let students grow as "critical participant[s]" (Murray and Ozanne, 2009, p. 835), capable of recognising injustices, of voicing concerns and of re-imagining marketing (and their role in marketing systems) in socially and environmentally positive directions. Equally, it is rooted in our belief in the

Overall aims	Outcomes
Enhanced engagement	Surprise, novelty and emotional arousal Making contents relatable Reframing teacher/student relationship
Ability to situate marketing/business within wider issues	Higher-order thinking Ability to make novel connections Integrating knowledge Re-contextualising understandings
Broad and critical understanding of marketing in transformative ways	Affective and cognitive learning Appreciating different interpretations Denaturalizing reality and imagining alternatives
Soft skills of empathy and sensitivity	Discomfort and moral awareness Reflexivity Transformative mindset

**Table 2.**  
Art learning  
outcomes

**Source:** Authors' own work

ability of the arts to guide students in this journey, by making education “more personally meaningful for students” (Willmott, 1994, p. 107) and “keeping alive possibilities” (Kompridis, 2005, p. 345).

Critical pedagogy involves challenging students (and ourselves) to examine assumptions and decisions not only in terms of efficiency and profit but also in other, humanistic ways (Cunliffe, 2009), even when this is uncomfortable or carries a certain degree of risk. This teaching can create resistance from students (Spicer *et al.*, 2009), who may perceive the exercise of questioning their long-established beliefs as disconcerting, threatening or unneeded (Reynolds, 1999; Cunliffe, 2009). At a broader level, critically-minded scholars often face “bold decisions about issues that are often easier to evade than to confront” (Hutton and Heath, 2020, p. 2701), and risk being marginalised or chastised for their epistemological orientations (Parker, 2021b).

Against this backdrop, we believe that teaching marketing as an “artful undertaking” (Eisner, 2002, xii) can go a long way to promote deep, imaginative and responsible, critical engagement with marketing phenomena in ways that can be practically defended. To begin with, students are given a “voice and role in their own learning” (Giroux, 2019, p. 509) and our students clearly enjoyed and thrived on this. In a setting where teaching scores are treated as a key performance indicator it is hard to restrict an approach that enthuses students. Likewise, we saw how artwork can aid understanding of complex theoretical material by making it more relatable to students and revealing broader forms of learning. With the arts, “imagination is given licence to fly” (Eisner, 2002, p. 198), sensibilities are aroused, and people are invited to see things “other than the way they are” (p. 199). Many of the data analysed speaks to this. With varied degrees of engagement, students trained their attention to notice details and to feel comfortable with ambiguity and subjectivity, particularly regarding opposing interpretations of the works of art presented. This, in turn, opened up avenues for seeing marketing phenomena and themselves anew.

Thus, students re-examined assumptions about marketing that they considered to be natural or commonsensical, and considered the ways in which concepts are constructed by contingent processes, and how they may have been constructed differently (Fournier and Grey, 2000). Understanding how things become normalised and then *denaturalizing* them form the basis of thinking habits that we hoped to establish in students' minds. This enabled

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them to see the subject (in this case marketing and its effects) in dramatically different terms to those they are usually presented with. As Felicidade aptly articulated, it made her *rediscover* marketing as something much more nuanced than she previously knew. This reflective distance also develops the skill of more limited criticism of the way a company is operating and the ideas shared within it, allowing managers to identify practices that may be harmful, or even simply ineffective (Alvesson, 2008), which is of value in students' later careers.

We note that a significant proportion of the feedback from students links their enjoyment with the module to the experience of learning through first being “struck” at a non-rational level that Cunliffe (2002) traced back through Wittgenstein to Goethe. This kind of destabilising, Damascene realisation that one's previous understanding needs re-examining has the capability to dramatically transform and enrich students' understanding. Wittgenstein (1953/2009) considers how people often fail to notice important aspects of things “because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one's eyes.) [. . .] Unless *that* fact has at some time struck them.” (p. 56e). By providing a novel experience of the topics studied, with which students could connect both affectively and cognitively, we made space for learning to be “reframed as an embodied process of being struck” (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 45). Indeed, we found evidence that the approach and materials resonated with students (Cunliffe, 2002), helping them in “seeing connections” (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, p. 54c). They were “startled” (Shotter, 2000) by “arresting moments” (Shotter, 1996, p. 294) into developing a “felt” impression of the material (Felicidade, *interview*), which enhanced engagement and reflexivity. This affective knowledge becomes part of learners' “ways of being” (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 45) and is available *tacitly* (Taylor and Ladkin, 2009), able to guide their choices even when they are not actively thinking of it. At the same time, the process of *being struck* meant that much of the knowledge that students *already* had tacitly, could become explicit (Cunliffe, 2002). This enabled this previously tacit knowledge to be consciously combined with other knowledge, including that taught in the class to generate new understandings.

This was transformative in that it moved some students to envision and enact positive change, and bestowed upon them a confidence to “educate” others. Many disclosed how they changed attitudes and behaviour, and some reported themselves spreading their new understanding about ethical and sustainable behaviour to friends, family members and colleagues with evangelical zeal. This is in keeping with Murray and Ozanne's (2009, p. 838) call for educators to promote “new visions of our students as social architects” with “tremendous power” to address challenges. However, this power came with responsibility (Lee and Ditko, 1962). This was also emotionally challenging and some students revealed the “unease”, “discomfort” and “emotional burden” that their heightened reflexivity caused. We note that this Wittgensteinian or Goethean view of understanding, in which it is gained through transformative incidents of being struck by a new way of seeing, could be as much a valuable theoretic tool for future research in consumer behaviour or advertising as it is in education.

At the heart of this approach was a desire to dare students to challenge their established ways of looking at marketing and embrace deeper forms of engagement. Insofar as our students seem to have done this, we feel encouraged and hopeful. They did not always reach the level of theoretical engagement we hoped for. However, they forged interesting connections between different contents and their own life experiences and were often able to situate the material within a broad context of environmental, ethical, societal and legal issues. Rather than “empty vessel[s] to be filled” (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 79), we saw students as “progressive agent[s] of change to guide our teaching” (Murray and Ozanne, 2009, p. 837)

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and “transform knowledge” (Giroux, 2019, p. 509). Indeed, some of the students’ constructive participation in the class enriched the learning experience to an extent that struck us as unusual.

Applying our own reflexivity, we must also acknowledge the limits within which this more reflexive and critical learning took place. Education is not neutral (Freire, 1970/2000), and there is always some attempt of educators to influence the types of knowledge produced (Giroux, 2020). Despite our desire for a dialogic classroom within which students and teachers would communicate as equals, the classes stayed largely on the tracks we, as teachers, planned. Thus, we cannot claim that the students became truly “reflexively defiant” (Ozanne and Murray, 1995, p. 521), able to recognise any attempt, from us or within the material, to steer them in a certain way and to judge thoughtfully how much or how little to accept. We do, however, believe that by encouraging a more problematized and complicated understanding of topics (Dehler *et al.*, 2001), we left the students more able to develop that kind of reflexivity than before the classes.

Towards this, we exposed contradictions between our own arguments and behaviour, sometimes using humour. For example, in a lecture of Critical Marketing where both authors were team teaching, one spontaneously interrupted the other’s argument on the topic of sustainable consumption:

You have noticed that [Teresa] argued very convincingly in defence of limiting excessive consumption for sustainability, with which I agree. I wonder if you have also noticed that, so far, she has worn a new dress to every one of our lectures?.

Another cause for some caution regarding this work is that having *enjoyed* the class, a halo effect (Leuthesser *et al.*, 1995) may have caused the students to overestimate its effectiveness. This same enjoyment may also have left them inclined to want to please us in their feedback. Students’ formal assessment of our teaching was indeed very generous from all three cohorts, and in the case of the latter two this was recognised by the school. In a similar way, it is possible that students’ engagement predisposed us to see their projects in a more positive light. Although we are confident that students did benefit in the ways described, a more structured comparative study would offer further insights about the depth and impact of this approach.

Similarly, having noted the discomfort that students often feel when required to think more critically, we expected that using elements from the arts would be of benefit by soothing this tension. However, students’ accounts reveal that by making harms more relatable the arts-based intervention could just as easily *intensify* discomfort, sometimes to a visceral, embodied degree. Furthermore, this was sometimes highly productive, creating memorable sensations and driving complex emotional engagement. This supports previous work that sees the transformative value in such emotional costs (Heath *et al.*, 2019; Tadjewski, 2022). Indeed, those who expressed the clearest intentions to behave differently often attributed it to such discomfort.

This manuscript contributes insights to literature on critical pedagogy of marketing by introducing a novel approach based on the arts and discussing its transformative potential. In particular, it elucidates how the sensorial and “felt” ways of learning afforded by the arts can first engage students’ attention and then create experiences of being “struck” that spark both passion and reasoning, and drive change. Therefore, at a theoretical level it establishes the *being struck*, as discussed more generally by Cunliffe (2002), as a powerful tool for explaining the function of arts-based learning activities. We hope scholars working on this topic in future can make use of this viewpoint.

This work also has implications for teaching practice. It provides a guide to some of the ways in which learning activities based on the arts can be used to overcome the personal and structural forces that limit critical and imaginative thought in the business-school classroom. The specific, mildly paradoxical, observation of discomfort in allowing such thought to flourish may be particularly useful. However, the benefits of discomfort for a student's development must be carefully balanced with a concern for their wellbeing (Zembylas and McGlynn, 2012).

More broadly, our study makes a case that teaching is a uniquely impactful tool academics have to shape future practice in the discipline and “reframe marketing priorities” in face of current challenges. Whether fairly or not, academic publications in marketing seem to be little read by practitioners, who may perceive us to be irrelevant (Brown *et al.*, 2005; Wieland *et al.*, 2021). Indeed, it may not be much of an exaggeration to suppose that much current marketing scholarship is downstream of practice, responding to trends, but not shaping them. On the other hand, a significant proportion of marketing practitioners will, at some point before or during their careers, be required to sit in a class or conference room and listen to a marketing academic speak. Hence, teaching and learning must play a significant role in any attempt from within the academy to reframe marketing priorities. In an academic environment that focuses so much on impact, we must not forget those upon whom we impact most directly. With this in mind, we hope to have nurtured in our students a lasting curiosity that lets them see beyond the surface of phenomena around them to appreciate the forces and processes that shaped these phenomena, and dare to imagine how they could be different.

Future studies could more formally compare the arts-based intervention suggested here with more conventional approaches within different cohorts. It would also be valuable to investigate the effects of a wider range of art-based interventions. For example, it would be of interest for a teacher with a suitable background to instruct students in some basic art theory and require them to use it in critiquing product design or advertising appeals. A study of this nature should also be useful at an undergraduate level at which the usually younger students may benefit in different ways, although the typical larger size of such cohorts would require adjustments in the assessments. Finally, the embodied nature of learning afforded by the arts and its longer-term effects merit investigation with suitable longitudinal methods.

With Gompertz (2015) we believe that a “creative economy needs independently minded individuals with the freedom and capacity to think imaginatively” (p. 196). The *unimageable* “new world” we live in today certainly requires this. Rather than downplaying marketing's imaginative and artistic aspects in a misguided effort to assert its scientific character, and instead of overlooking its ills to legitimise its power and place in society, might we let our students dream and flourish as agents of transformation?

## Note

1. Title from album from *Manic Street Preachers*.

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