Compassionate Consumption: Branding Africa Through Product RED

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This critical case study of Product RED interrogates the socio-cultural and political economic implications of cause related marketing (CRM) which uses the sale of commodity goods to raise money for a social cause. Through the lens of commodity fetishism this research reveals how RED's brand-within-brand experience strategically positions Africa as a branded symbol and promotes individualism as a philanthropic value, mystifying the larger political economic issues of production and consumption embedded in commercially-driven philanthropy. This research argues that RED is consistent with the larger neo-liberal project that relies on an ethos of individualism and personal responsibility to address social reform which in the end renders a market-based approach to charity as paradoxical and problematic. Despite the campaign's philanthropic goals, this research rejects RED as a counter-hegemonic solution to pressing social and political issues.

In 2006, international rock star Bono co-founded "Product RED" with philanthropist Bobby Shriver to raise money and awareness for the fight against HIV and AIDS in Africa. As a charitable business model, Product RED is a partnership amongst some of the world's most "iconic brands." High-profile corporate partners like Gap, Motorola, Apple, Dell, and Armani license the "RED" logo under individually negotiated agreements and then donate a portion of profits to The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria – a charitable organization that provides assistance to women and children suffering from HIV and AIDS in Africa. As a brand-within-brand experience, RED has successfully expanded its market model of corporate philanthropy to encompass a myriad of non-competitive consumer goods and industries.

While corporate social responsibility is in part a response to increasing public demand for corporate accountability, programs like RED are now generally regarded as standard business practice (Bronn and Vrioni 2001). As a popular marketing and public relations tool, CRM has grown exponentially over the past thirty years. By one estimate, cause-related marketing (CRM) grew 23 percent between 2005 and 2006 alone to a $1.4 billion industry, with a projected increase to $1.57 billion by 2009 (IEG Sponsorship Report 2009). A 2004 report also found that 86

percent of surveyed U.S. consumers would willingly switch to a competing brand if it associated with a charitable cause (Eikenberry 2009). Yet despite the considerable attention going to these corporate-nonprofit relationships, comparatively little scholarship has been paid to the social, political or cultural implications of CRM campaigns from a critical perspective. While a few notable exceptions exist (e.g. King 2006; Littler 2009; Nickel and Eikenberry 2009; Stole 2008; Wirgau, Webb Farley, and Jensen 2010), most CRM research to date focuses on campaign strategies, risks and benefits, profit maximization, and consumer behavior – all of which are based on the unquestioned assumption that corporate-charitable partnerships are beneficial to all. In one of the first comprehensive overviews of CRM from a critical media scholar, Stole (2008, 35) calls for more reflection on whether or not "commercially-driven philanthropy [is] the most rational way for society to address fundamental social issues." This research thereby aims to address some of the larger social, cultural and political ramifications of CRM in which corporations promote the sale of consumer goods as a solution to global issues.

As one of the most financially successful CRM campaigns in history, Product RED makes a good case study for understanding the implications of market-based philanthropy in a society that increasingly values private solutions to public problems. Within the contemporary context of neoliberal reform, RED's platform is consistent with the larger political economic project that relies on an ethos of individual and personal responsibility over collective forms of social action. Although RED has been critically analyzed in the context of neoliberal governance, the "colonization of philanthropy by market discourse" and its depoliticizing effects, these arguments have not situated RED within the framework of contemporary brand culture (Eikenberry 2009; Nickel and Eikenberry 2009; Wirgau, Webb Farley, and Jensen 2010). While Banet-Weiser and Lapsansky's theorization of RED (2008) does discuss the brand's implications for the constitution of neoliberal consumer citizenship, their analysis only scratches the surface in addressing some of the larger social policy issues tied to marketized philanthropy. Stole's (2008) overview of CRM, on the other hand, references RED in this context but does not discuss the campaign at the level of the brand in any great detail. Littler (2009) perhaps does the best job bridging brand culture with [global] consumer citizenship, neoliberalism, and its broader social implications in her analysis of Product RED as a form of "cosmopolitan caring consumption." However, Littler mainly limits her analysis to the campaign's American Express affiliation and does not fully consider the depth and scope of RED's "compassionate" brand logic within the contemporary political economy.

A major goal of this research, therefore, is to better understand how brands assist in the discursive construction of corporate social responsibility. After contextualizing CRM at the intersection of neoliberal citizenship, branding, and consumer culture, this research deconstructs the dominant and problematic frames employed by RED to sell commodity goods for a social cause. Through the lens of commodity fetishism this research reveals how RED's brand-within-brand experience employs commodity racism to strategically position Africa as a branded symbol and promotes individualism as a philanthropic value. Revealing RED's rhetorical strategies allows for a deeper understanding of how the brand becomes a cultural space

that blurs the line between consumer and citizen within the contemporary context of neoliberal governance and the politics of individualization. Further, it demystifies the larger political economic issues of production and consumption embedded in commercially-driven philanthropy that render a market-based approach to charity paradoxical and problematic.

Cause Related Marketing and Neoliberalism

By definition, CRM programs aim to create a mutually beneficial association between corporations and charitable organizations; the goal is to promote a company's product or service while raising money and awareness for a selected charity (Ewing 2001). In recent years, CRM has helped re-image companies hurt by corporate scandals, ad clutter, globalization, and new technologies (Adler 2006). As a "public relations tool-of-choice," CRM is an appealing offensive corporate strategy because it supports *laissez-faire* regulation and free market principles (Stole 2008, 21). Few critics disagree that the growth of corporate philanthropy at this particular socio-historical juncture is indicative of the broader turn towards a neoliberal mode of governance that diffuses "free market" rationality into various aspects of everyday life (Banet-Weiser and Lapsansky 2008; Johnston 2008; Stole 2008; Littler 2009). At its base, neoliberalism is premised on the belief that individual freedom, liberty and progress are best met through unfettered capitalism and the liberalization of markets. Cause related marketing thus acts as a form of "marketized philanthropy" (Nickel & Eikenberry 2009), or the application of neoliberal rationality to welfare reform, which has emerged alongside the systematic dismantling of state-funded social services over the past several decades.

In many ways, the financial success of CRM's private-public partnerships serves as "proof" that market-based platforms are indeed more economical and efficient than the public administration of social services. From a critical perspective, however, the fact that corporations use CRM as a way of "giving back" implicitly suggests that they have taken something away (Littler 2009; Nickel and Eikenberry 2009). As CRM campaigns reinforce the position of "markets and consumers as primary guardians of the public good" (Johnston 2008, 263), they often serve to deflect attention from the role business plays in the perpetuation of many social, political and environmental ills (Featherstone 2007; Eikenberry 2009; Nickel and Eikenberry 2009). Additionally, CRM also gives corporations control over discourse about what social problems are in need of alleviation and worthy of attention, allowing companies to set campaign standards in a way that best fits their own bottom-line needs (Littler 2009).

A bottom-line focus, of course, is precisely what drives the efficiency and productivity that proponents of neoliberal policies complain the public sector lacks. The privatization of social services thereby aims to redress the fiscally wasteful dependencies of "big government" that limit "individual freedom, personal choice, self-fulfillment and initiative" (Ouellette and Hay 2008, 36). In line with the privatization of public services, neoliberal policies promote personal responsibility and consumer choice as a way of transforming individuals "into more responsible, ac-

countable and enterprising managers of themselves" (24). As Stole notes (2008, 22), "neo-liberal theory is disdainful of government assistance as interference in people's private lives. People, the argument goes, should devote their attention to self-improvement through the market instead of depending upon the government." In other words, the most important obligation for the neoliberal citizen is to empower the self privately through personal responsibility rather than dependence on the state, and to draw upon the benefits provided by the marketplace in the self-actualization process. As a model of citizenship, neoliberalism interpellates the individual as an economic entrepreneur where self-care is a wholly private activity. As it applies to CRM, neoliberal policies presume that individuals should not be "forced" to support tax-funded social services but should be empowered through a responsibility to the self and to those in their "community." The neoliberal citizen thus manages the self through the exercise of consumer choice – by personally deciding how to best spend his or her money.

In a market of unprecedented consumer choice, therefore, the citizen – always acting as a consumer – must manage on their own the risks and insecurities of everyday life that public social services once existed to ameliorate or at least anticipate. This highly individualized state of being is theorized by Bauman (2001) as conditional to late modernity where the options for self-improvement, responsibility and empowerment are always readily available for one to successfully "make do." Failing to succeed indicates one's failure to make the right choices; this "lifestyle of survivalism" is thus an individual, rather than institutional, systemic or social, problem (Lury 2004, 253). Even as socially [re]produced risks emerge, the responsibility for dealing and coping with them must be shouldered individually.

This highly individualized form of governance has been similarly discussed in critical theories of consumer culture as symptomatic of post-Fordist diversification, flexible accumulation and market-based individualism (Arvidsson 2006; Littler 2009). Emerging from this shift is a marketing paradigm based on the segmentation of consumers into niche groups exemplified by the fragmentation of individuals into psychographic (rather than strictly demographic) details (Arvidsson 2006). The rise of lifestyle marketing speaks to a heightened individualization whereby consumers increasingly locate their identities through branded goods. Cause related marketing campaigns become another means by which individuals can construct particular social, political and civic subjectivities consistent with the neoliberal ethos of personal responsibility; they provide a space where self-interested consumers who "generally have little impetus to consider 'the public' or 'the public good' in their transactions" can simultaneously fulfill their own material needs and desires in a socially responsible way (Eikenberry 2009, 52). Cause marketing thus allows the brand to govern by empowering consumers to act as "world citizens" through the management of responsible shopping behavior.

Cause Related Marketing and Brand Culture

Critical scholars generally understand consumption in late modernity as a means by which one can symbolically construct, organize and negotiate social, cultural and

political identities (Lury 2004; Featherstone 2007; Banet-Weiser and Lapsansky 2008). As brands occupy an increasingly ubiquitous space in the daily lives of twenty-first century consumers, corporate philanthropy becomes a component of brand marketing that serves a social function beyond the classical economic goal of product differentiation (Bronn and Vrioni 2001; Adler 2006). As Klein notes (2002), modern corporations no longer produce or sell physical goods so much as they sell an immaterial brand experience. Brands offer consumers a space to experience or establish identities and communities "lost in the modernization process" via loyalty and affiliation to the brand itself (Arvidsson 2006, 5). Bauman (2001) theorizes the loss of identity and community as a condition of late modernity; due in part to the "flexibility" afforded by a contemporary disengagement of capital from labor, the fragmentation of society has thus dismantled common means and institutions of identification. Accordingly, he argues that this "present-day uncertainty is a powerful individualizing force" that divides rather than unites individuals who suffer alone in a period of weak social ties and fleeting associations (24). In the resulting atmosphere of instability looms a future that is largely unpredictable and unstable. Within this "political economy of uncertainty" (52), advertising exploits the existential insecurities of late modernity (e.g. the depreciation of traditional social structures) and positions commodity goods as the central means by which individuals produce their own subjectivities; as a result, brands come to make up an increasingly important part of everyday life (Arvidsson 2006). As individual "difference" offers "a sense of unity amid a world increasingly devoid of any substantive discourse of community and solidarity," direct notions of a social "public" are systematically left out of promotional discourse (Giroux 1994, 6).

The power of the brand thus connects individuals with particular experiences, feelings, and lifestyles. As a means of "rationalizing" irrational tastes and preferences, brands offer individuals a way to emotionally invest in the non-tangible aspects of goods that neither the good nor brand inherently possesses. This process is central not only to brand culture but to CRM, as well. As "hegemonic brandscapes" write specific lifestyles into the consumption process, branded CRM campaigns function as spaces for consumers to act, think, and feel through (Wilson 2009, 127). In this sense, campaigns like Product RED contribute to the brand's social function by creating another means through which individuals can interact with, or appropriate, a civic or social consciousness (Arvidsson 2006; Jenkins 2006).

Brand Culture and Commodity Fetishism

From a Marxian perspective, the fetishism of commodities has long explained how a good's use and exchange value mystifies the ability for consumers to conceptualize that good as "the embodiment of international division of labor that stratifies productive relations among class, gender, national, and spatial dimensions" (Mosco 1996, 144). Through the process of what Mosco calls "double mystification," advertising and marketing help further mystify the social relations of [global] production in goods by giving goods a life of their own. Williams (1999) describes the social life attributed to commodity goods as a "magic system," whereby values,

beliefs and other ideals are attributed to products as if they are inherent to the good itself. By separating processes of production from consumption, advertising promotes a consumption-oriented discourse focused on the sale of larger social values (e.g. status, love, a social conscience) that material goods deliver while erasing the system of exploitation embedded in the process of production. In the case of brands, however, this magic system is not produced so much by marketers and advertisements as by consumers themselves (Arvidsson 2006). Via interaction within the brand's pre-structured space, the production of meaning moves "out of the factory and into society at large, where affect, intellect, and knowledge are put to work in the form of social labour power for the purpose of capital accumulation" (Cohen 2008, 18). While this type of interaction allows consumers to produce their own meanings and relationships to brands rather than having those meanings imposed upon them, it directly implicates the consumer in the mystification process.[1]

The fetishism of [branded] commodities thus provides a useful basis for understanding the social function of brands within contemporary marketing. As the affective and experiential appeal of brand marketing abstracts consumers from a product's use-value more than ever before, material goods likewise enter an entirely new, or highly intensified, realm of signification. As Banet-Weiser and Lapsansky explain (2008, 1249), "Brand culture invests in a kind of heightened commodity fetishism; it is not simply that specific products are filled with new meaning, but brand names – Apple, Chevy, Coca-Cola – signify whole environments of meaning." In brand culture, what one can do or become with the brand is now central to the consumer experience. Not only does commodity fetishism help explain how a good's use-value is made subordinate to the social or personal meanings its consumption guarantees in the realm of exchange, it also demonstrates the means by which brands themselves organize the identities, affiliations, actions, and lifeworlds of individual consumers.

Commodity fetishism is useful in understanding how CRM campaigns like Product RED can reconcile the tensions between capitalism and social activism, two historically separate, if not oppositional, spheres (Banet-Weiser and Lapsansky 2008). While neoliberal policies might promote a "raw market approach" to social action (1255), brands help intensify commodity fetishism by not only ensuring that the conditions of labor and social relations of production are forgotten but by working to erase the commodity itself. In other words, CRM campaigns are effective not because they offer new or better products but because they infuse the brand with new qualities and experiences that consumers appropriate into the assemblage of their own identities. In the same sense that advertising reconstitutes populations from social classes into consumption classes as a primary mode of identification, brands further re-define social organization by offering a space of shared values, beliefs, and experiences around which consumers can organize their social, political, and civic lives (Jhally 1987, 89; Arvidsson 2006). Particularly, CRM campaigns like Product RED offer a participatory space for the constitution of consumer citizenship which politicizes everyday life by bridging the public and private realms of civic and consumer identities (Banet-Weiser and Lapsansky 2008, 1248).

Fetishizing Product RED

As a form of marketized philanthropy, Product RED does not try to hide its economic imperatives and is explicit about the fact that its corporate partners profit from each transaction. RED organizers insist that the campaign is not a charity but a sustainable "business model" that encourages consumers to "upgrade their choices" by selecting RED over other brands (Product RED 2007). RED justifies profiting from charity by arguing that it is a more efficient and sustainable model than traditional corporate philanthropy because it extends one-time donations into a reliable, steady flow of income for the Global Fund (Vallely 2007). In fact, the campaign does not accept donations but encourages shoppers to "Do the RED Thing" when deciding what to buy; it involves consumers in the global fight against AIDS by doing things they already do (shopping) instead of fitting political activism into a daily schedule. It is not so much about the product's use-value, therefore, that incites consumers to buy RED but the act of consuming itself. In other words, RED products are not better or different but rather legitimize consumption as a good deed. No time or lifestyle changes are sacrificed since "buying RED" is enough to save lives.

The RED campaign is exemplary of how brands operate in a postmodern consumer society; in this case, activism is a brand-within-brand experience that allows consumers to "try on" socially-conscious identities while doing good for others. RED frames its brand experience by relying emotional and affective rhetorical appeals through celebrity endorsers. Unlike past controversial marketing campaigns by companies like Benetton or Kenneth Cole that have used social issues to sell products, Product RED is comparatively tame; it does not rely on "shockvertising," disturbing images or contentious slogans to draw attention to its mission. In fact, the recipients of the RED donations – Africans with HIV/AIDS – are not visible in the campaign with the exception of occasional news articles on RED's website. Instead, by branding "Africa" as a consumable symbol and positioning individualism as a philanthropic value, RED works hard to avoid any controversy that might redirect philanthropy to anything other than a consumption-oriented discourse.

Africa as Branded Symbol

While it would be probable for a CRM campaign to donate money to a particular cause without turning the beneficiaries of that cause into a commodity itself, Product RED situates Africa directly into the symbolic order of consumption. This process of commodification occurs in several ways, but most commonly by creating an arbitrary association between RED products and the continent of Africa. For example, an early advertisement by American Express RED features Brazilian supermodel Gisele Bundchen posing next to a traditionally dressed Maasai Warrior from Kenya with the tagline, "My Card, My Life" (Product RED 2006). There is no explanation of who the warrior is or his purpose in the RED campaign. In another example, Gap writes Africa into its RED t-shirts: "Wear the where: 100% authentic

African cotton, made in Africa with an organic look and feel to reflect the conti-
nent's land and spirit" (Gap RED 2006). Another is described as: "An organic
touch: inspired by the African land and spirit, cracked flocking is reminiscent of
dried African mud;" similarly, Converse RED boasts a line of Chuck Taylor shoes
made from "African mudcloth."

Advertising scholars have long pointed out that the transference between image
and text is a way by which advertisers work to create meaning (Williamson 1978;
Goldman 1992). Thus, these shirts and shoes signify not only "Africa," but
"African land and spirit." By bridging the qualities of "organic touch" or "look and
feel" with something distinctly *African*, one signifier is transferred to the other (i.e.
the shirt/shoes to the continent) – making both commodity goods and notions of
Africa interchangeable. By purchasing RED products consumers not only "help"
Africa but *wear* Africa (e.g. "Wear the where"). This is further exemplified by a
RED t-shirt design "inspired by the architecture and culture of Ghana" that without
any artistic credit or regional tribute arbitrarily collapses the relationship between
Ghana, architecture and culture. Collectively, RED products come to mean
"Africa" which elicits problematic implications for how consumers view them-
selves not only as possessor of the commodity sign, but as participants in the RED
brand experience.

Another way Africa appears as a branded symbol is in the general aesthetic of
RED goods. Here, the common trope of African poverty is embedded directly into
the products themselves. Gap RED's first apparel line all featured a "distressed"
aesthetic, as none of the goods looked new. T-shirts had "exposed seams, unfin-
ished edges" (Gap RED 2006); fabrics for scarves, bags, and other accessories were
similarly faded and frayed. In the overall context of Gap's campaign, the tattered
aesthetic seemed to symbolize popular representations of Africa as fragile, unsta-
ble, impoverished. Consumers also continue to pay a premium for these well-worn
goods as most Gap RED products are priced comparatively high to their traditional
clothing line. For example, a RED tank-top with ragged straps and neckline retails
at $28; amateurishly hand-woven bracelets retail at $20. The signature 100% Afri-
can cotton RED t-shirt is thin and faded; it is also one of the only products made in
Africa despite Gap's use of textile factories in Lesotho for other non-RED apparel.
However, Gap's "classic" non-RED t-shirts sell for $14 while their classic RED,
Lesotho-made t-shirt retails at $28.

Turning Africa into a branded symbol is problematic for a number of reasons.
For one, it reinforces the common trope of Africa as a culturally homogenous, un-
derdeveloped continent. While it is indeed the poorest continent globally, Product
RED ignores the considerable variation of wealth within and across African na-
tions; in fact, Africa's disparity of wealth raises serious questions about the politi-
cal economy of global healthcare that campaigns like RED can not even begin to
address. Instead, relegating Africa as a poor but spirited place mystifies Africa's
economic conditions to prevent a closer, structural examination of these conditions.
Further, the continent's diversity of language, religion, traditions, and economic
systems of production, distribution, and consumption are equally devalued and ig-
nored. Ultimately, "wearing the where" reduces a diverse continent to a false set of
assumptions which implies a shared culture that consumers can be a part of if they

consume the right products.

Commodity Racism

Collectively, RED's endorsers are diverse in sex, age, and ethnicity; this represen-
tation of global (yet local) heritages and identities rings of the postmodern celebra-
tion of difference. As Giroux notes (1994, 6), advertising often situates
"individualism and difference as central elements of the marketplace" while ab-
stracting notions of solidarity, social, and viable democratic public cultures from
their messages. In particular, Gap RED's first ad campaign complicates the idea of
individual difference across racial lines. When collectively comparing the first set
of twelve advertisements released by Gap it is difficult not to notice that the three
African-American celebrity portraits of Chris Rock, Don Cheadle, and Mary J.
Blige are framed much differently than their non-Black counterparts. With the ex-
ception of Apolo Ohno, the young half-Japanese Olympian skater, the emotional
tone in most of the photographs is discernibly somber. (Ohno's smiling portrait, in
this case, is dismissible as youthful naïveté or even embarrassment on the grounds
that he is the only celebrity photographed who appears not to be wearing any
clothes). It is difficult to read the emotional tone of comedian Chris Rock's portrait,
however, because he is photographed with his mouth wide open as if caught in the
middle of yelling (often featuring the overlay text, "Uncenso(RED)"). The emo-
tional tone of Black actor Don Cheadle's photograph is similarly indeterminable;
while his own bicep obstructs his mouth, it does not hide the laugh lines visible
around his eyes. Furthermore, Mary J. Blige is the only celebrity who does not
"break the fourth wall" by staring back into the camera; while she appears in two
different portraits, both shoot her singing with closed eyes.

In the context of RED's branding of Africa, it is unsettling that the Gap cam-
paign's three African-American celebrities – Blige, Rock and Cheadle – are the
only celebrity portraits in this series who do not return the gaze or portray the same
degree of seriousness as the non-black celebrities. As Ouellette and Hay note
(2008), popular and political discourse of welfare recipients have long promoted an
"overtly racist and sexist characterization of welfare 'cheats' and 'freeloaders'" that
has disproportionately targeted black Americans over other social groups. If mar-
ketized philanthropy is indeed the neoliberal replacement for the Welfare State then
the formal differences across these ads appear to reinscribe the same stereotypes
into the RED campaign.

Additionally, the aesthetic differences across these ads resonate with a colonial-
ist discourse created by the branding of "Africa" as a symbolic, consumable value –
a rhetorical strategy that is also laced with historically problematic associations
(Said 1978, 1993). Generally, such discourse empowered white patriarchal capital-
ists (the colonizers) to control the representations of and about Africans (the colo-
nized) in ways far beneficial to the former. As a form of commodity racism, or
white fetishization of black culture, (McClintock 1995), the positioning of RED
goods as inherently exotic, primitive and spiritual reifies Africa through a distinctly
"Othering" discourse (hooks 1992). RED's co-founder Bono explicitly reinforces

this point (as well as a form of imperialist nostalgia) in his claim: "Africa is sexy, and people need to know that" (Carr 2007). The brand experience that RED guarantees is one premised on racially problematic and exploitative grounds, where black or African culture is fetishized as something organic, spiritual, sexy, and thus different. By theorizing the brand logic of Product RED through the lens of commodity fetishism it becomes possible to see how RED attempts to reify "Africa" through the commodity sign; by branding RED with African traits consumers do, essentially, buy and consume Africa with their purchases. At the same time, the use of African imagery to sell products to a predominately Western (and presumably white) audience is reflective of a longstanding and problematic history of commodity racism.

The racial and imperial fetishization of RED depoliticizes social action by contributing to the celebratory nature of consumerism that links race and nationality to the pleasurable experiences of consumption as self-expression. The campaign does not explicitly address politics, historical relations or structures of power that contribute to AIDS in Africa, offering no opportunities beyond shopping to engage in the responsibilities of citizenship. Instead, RED limits discourse better suited to neoliberal objects with its colonialist interpretation of "Africa" as a branded commodity form.

Individualism as a Philanthropic Value

Individualism is a running theme across Product RED and is repeatedly used as a selling point to incite buyers into the act of compassionate consumption. The theme of individualism is embodied most explicitly in the sale of the book literally entitled, *Individuals: Portraits from the Gap Collection* (2006), which is a compilation of celebrity photographs featured in Gap advertisements over the last thirty years. While the book itself does not feature ads from the RED campaign, 100% of the book's sales are donated to the RED initiative. According to Gap President Cynthia Harriss, the book reinforces Gap's unique brand philosophy "that nothing is as important as individual spirit and that individual spirit is what influences great personal style." The book also features essays on individualism written by five celebrities, including supermodel Veronica Webb whose entry recalls with unintentional irony "how her own individual style was *influenced by others* while she was growing up" (italics mine) (Gap RED 2006).

Individualism is rhetorically tied to philanthropy by nearly all of the Product RED partners in some way. For example, Converse RED harnesses "singular creativity" to help fight AIDS by allowing consumers to customize their own RED shoe design; like RED, the Converse brand believes that "rebellion, individuality and creative energy are powerful vehicles for change" (Product RED 2009). Similarly, Dell RED states it will donate $20 to the Global Fund when consumers exercise their uniqueness by choosing from a selection of exclusively designed "personalized" laptop covers. Meanwhile, when consumers buy and send Hallmark RED cards, "that connection travels all the way to Africa. It's a personal way to show your commitment to fighting AIDS in Africa and saving lives." Windows

Vista's RED edition reflects these values as well in their "belief in the power and potential of the individual." Gap's signature designs are one-word "commanding emotions" placed within a parenthetical embrace (e.g. "Ado(RED)," "Desi(RED)," and "Empowe(RED)) that allow consumers to tailor their RED experience with individualized slogans that speak to their personal identity.

In addition to these rhetorical devices, the formal structures of the RED ads further emphasize a theme of individualism. One way in which this occurs is on a purely linguistic level. Little text appears in the advertisements themselves; where any slogan or text does appear, it is typically written in second-person direct address for a single spectator. For example, "Can an individual change the world? You can," and, "Can you send love to someone you've never met? Now you can." The emphasis on singular forms of identification, (e.g. you, someone, individual) is the primary linguistic strategy employed across the ad campaign.

Another example of how individualism is formally structured into RED is that most of the campaign's ads literally feature only one person – usually a celebrity – at a time; Gap in particular launched its initial ad blitz in 2006 as eleven individually photographed celebrities. The use of celebrities further reinforces RED's focus on individualism; as a rhetorical device frequently used in advertising, celebrity images have long been associated with the conception of individuality so central to ideologies of Western culture (Turner 2004). Interestingly, the RED campaign emerges within a cultural context where growing celebrity attention to Africa-centered philanthropic causes has brought a number of the continent's issues into popular consciousness. Famine, civil war, childcare, refugees and HIV/AIDS in Africa regularly serve as platforms for celebrity-driven fundraising events and organizations such as Live Aid, Live 8, the ONE campaign, and Save Darfur. Even UNICEF and UNESCO both use celebrity endorsers and employ a number of actors in international peacekeeping roles.[2]

As a brand-within-brand experience, Product RED articulates the politics of individualization theorized by Bauman (2001) and the consumer-citizen is interpellated into this process through several levels: at the level of the RED brand itself, where consumers are hailed to empower themselves and others through responsible shopping; at the level of brand affiliates, which appeal to different types of consumer identities and lifestyles (e.g. Apple consumers are not the same as Dell consumers); and at the level of the sign within each brand, where a range of choices offer individuals the opportunity to select products tailored to their own unique identity (e.g. personalized laptops, customized shoes, apparel slogans – are you Desi(RED) or Inspi(RED)?). While the focus on individualism and direct emotional appeal might not seem problematic in the context of an advertising campaign, it is decidedly inconsistent with the ideals that many might consider necessary for inciting the kind of social change that CRM aims to create. As Giroux notes (1994, 8), "Social consciousness and activism in this worldview are about purchasing merchandise, not changing oppressive relations of power." Product RED contributes to a neoliberal agenda that positions social change as a fundamentally individualistic action and personal, rather than collective, responsibility (Ouellette and Hay 2008). The brand's articulation of individualism as a philanthropic value sets a context for consumption that enables individual consumers to produce "enduring forms of im-

material use-values, like identity and community" through their purchases
(Arvidsson 2006, 35). In the sense that brands provide a space for the constitution
of identity, RED proffers a highly individualistic form of consumer-citizenship
consistent with the self-entrepreneurial mode of neoliberal governance (Ouellette
and Hay 2008). In the context of the privatization of social services and the system-
atic dismantling of public welfare programs, the act of managing the self becomes
an increasingly central and imperative part of contemporary citizenship; however,
this obligation of self-management occurs *not* through collective action but through
individual choices made privately in the spheres of lifestyle and consumption
(Bauman 2001; Ouellette and Hay 2008). This is part of a political rationality "that
values private over public, self-sufficiency over 'dependency,' and personal re-
sponsibility over collective or 'socialistic' conceptions of society" (Ouellette and
Hay 2008, 17-18). RED thereby serves "as a venue for middle-class consumer
choice and lifestyle maximization" that turns the vapid act of consumerism into an
expression of personal responsibility and self-fulfillment (56). A neoliberalized
form of self-empowerment thus becomes achievable through the exercise of con-
sumer-citizenship, but always in a way customizable to the individual's *habitus.*

Towards a Political Economy of RED

To be suspicious of corporate CRM is best summarized by Goldman and Papson's
observation that (1996, 210) "The relationship of the spectacle to actual practice is
always suspect." Indeed there are a number of critical questions about corporate
practices obscured by RED's brand experience. Often criticized for its lack of
transparency, corporate philanthropy can mislead consumers into believing their
contributions are worth far more to the social cause then they are in actuality (Adler
2006; Stole 2008); RED is no exception. In remaining consistent with its individu-
alistic philosophy, each affiliate negotiates its donation rate on an individual basis.
Gap, for example, donates 50 percent of RED sales profits (but yet its RED goods
tend to cost exorbitantly more than its regular apparel). Similarly, Apple originally
donated $10 from the sale of every RED iPod but no longer discloses its donation
amount. Across the entire campaign, it is generally unclear just how much of each
purchase goes to charity at the point-of-sale.
As of 2010, RED reports having raised $140 million for the Global Fund but does
not state how much has been spent on marketing (Product RED 2009). This is
likely due in part to a controversial report on initial expenditures in 2007 that
claimed RED partners had spent $100 million in marketing while making only $18
million back in sales. Those figures were rebutted as "irresponsible journalism,"
however, and positioned marketing costs and profits at $50 and $25 million, respec-
tively (Vallely, 2007).[3] An updated breakdown of expenditures is not available, and
most affiliates do not report their individual contributions.
      The lack of transparency extends to the distribution process, as well. For one,
RED's attention to brand building veils the Global Fund's activities, offering little
insight as to how consumer transactions translate into AIDS-fighting drugs or re-
sources. Over twenty million people are infected with HIV and AIDS in Africa, the

continent's leading cause of death; however, RED does not advertise how much money it takes to sustain antiretroviral (ARVs) drug treatment or administer health programs over the long-term, or what happens to recipients in the event that RED sales suddenly decline. While certainly "every bit helps," the facts of the matter signify how irrelevant consumption is to the real problem at hand. Second, RED's promotional materials fail to make clear that the Global Fund is a financial instrument, not an ARV distributor (Global Fund 2007). Meaning, the Global Fund distributes money to secondary organizations but does not implement healthcare itself. When consumers buy RED a portion of profits go to the Global Fund; the Global Fund then reallocates the funds to local ARV distribution programs that disperse treatment as they deem appropriate. The entire "giving" process is mystified in a manner not unlike the alienation of labor in commodity fetishism. Just as the social relations of production are obfuscated by the arbitrary meanings assigned to commodity goods, relations are similarly masked within in the RED "giving" process. This fetishism of RED into a simplified dichotomy of "buy RED/save lives" exemplifies the general lack of transparency consistent across most CRM campaigns while reducing philanthropy to a little more than a transactional exchange.

RED's commodification of Africa extends to the Global Fund itself which RED has branded as a distinctly "African" charity. While Africa receives most of its donations, the Global Fund is a *global* organizational that provides a number of humanitarian services (beyond ARV distribution) across Latin America, Asia, and Europe (Global Fund 2007). The question begs to be asked: Why does Product RED limit its philanthropic association to Africa? This is not to suggest that Africa is undeserving of financial assistance, or even a bulk of it; however, within the larger context of the campaign it reinforces the colonialist discourse that brands Africa as a fashionable commodity. Even despite its multi-cultural celebrity campaign, RED redirects attention from HIV/AIDS as a global issue to an "African" issue.

In addition to the campaign's implicit racial stereotyping, the focus on HIV/AIDS as a distinctly African problem fails to ask what structural or systemic causes belie the inaccessibility to ARV drugs in the first place. Furthermore, it does not begin to address the historical legacy of systemic racism and patriarchy, Western imperialism, and the resulting Diaspora that has contributed to the intersections of poverty and disease in contemporary Africa. To critically analyze root causes of HIV/AIDS in Africa would involve acknowledging the relationship between global capitalism and poverty, and would implicate the consumer directly into this structure. As Nickel and Eikenberry argue (2009), marketized philanthropy actually depoliticizes philanthropy because its attention to profit subordinates critical questions about the problems CRM aims to ameliorate. The systematic tendency to ignore the root causes of social issues obscures the fact that CRM is addressing some of the problems that market conditions often cause.

Cause marketing is thus inherently paradoxical when considering that markets and the neoliberal state reproduce some of the very conditions that create the need for philanthropy. Product RED is no exception to this paradox as some of its affiliates consistently contribute to the global inequalities of wealth that RED purportedly tries to redress. For example, a Lesotho factory that produces Gap clothing was recently charged with illegally dumping chemical waste into the local water

supply used by residents for domestic purposes (McDougall and Watts 2009). Further, despite Gap's efforts to repair its legacy of international labor violations, the company continues to be cited for child labor practices (McDougall 2007; Eikenberry 2009). In the United States, workers recently sued American Express for federal and state labor law violations, alleging the company failed to compensate employees for earned hours and overtime pay ("Workers Sue" 2009; Casacchia, 2010). In other words, RED affiliates like AmEx enter a philanthropic relationship with the Global Fund to assist the poor in obtaining resources they cannot otherwise afford while refusing to pay earned minimum wages to their own workers. Similarly, Gap boasts its Lesotho factories as part of its RED "quality of life" initiative while literally poisoning the well of its own ARV recipients. Paradoxically, it is the very logic of neoliberal markets that encourage global capitalism and sometimes result in the outsourcing of cheap labor to countries that regularly engage in child exploitation. These examples demonstrate that CRM campaigns like RED do not change the market system so much as they help *stabilize* it (Nickel and Eikenberry 2009). RED's individualistic market approach to eliminating poverty and HIV/AIDS in Africa is thus not a solution to global inequality but part of its cause.

Conclusion

Through a critical case study of Product RED this research demonstrates some of the socio-cultural and political economic implications of marketized philanthropy as a solution to global social issues. This research describes how RED remains consistent with the social politics of individualization (Bauman 2001) and a neoliberal approach to welfare that celebrates privatization, personal responsibility, and consumer choice. As a for-profit campaign, RED promotes confidence in the market to solve social ills; it also celebrates personal responsibility and consumer choice through a brand logic that interpellates the individual consumer as a compassionate, responsible citizen. In the appeal to the individual, however, RED employs a form of commodity racism that strategically positions Africa as a branded symbol. By adhering to the logic of the brand, RED implicitly reinforces some of the racist assumptions made about state-administered welfare programs of the past while selling an ethos of individualism and personal responsibility. The campaign reinforces the logic of entrepreneurial government by making citizenship easy, and strengthening the view that privatized welfare is more efficient and streamlined than bureaucratic state programs. The market logic of RED thus helps train the citizen-consumer to think about philanthropy in a way that rationalizes neoliberal ideology; as long as consumers exercise their responsibility as citizens and make the "right" consumption choices, the market will continue to operate as it should. RED thus encourages individual solutions to collective problems as a "best practice" for philanthropy and governance in a way that disarticulates citizenship from a collective or democratic public.

RED exemplifies the extension of "free market" rationality into all sectors of modern society – in this case, the public programs and social services that originated to address some of the consequences caused by *laissez-faire* capitalism

(Nickel and Eikenberry 2009). The campaign particularly demonstrates the way that brands link economy and culture in this context; as a function facilitated by conditions of post-Fordism and neo-liberal policies, brands have transformed the way consumers use and interact with commodity goods (Arvidsson 2006). The diversification of markets into political and social fragments has created a "cultural system driven by a bourgeois notion of individuality in which self-construction is understood as an outcome of consumption" (Goldman 1992, 200). As a for-profit campaign, RED is forced to operate under the constraints of capital in order to achieve its goals. As a result, RED prioritizes an immaterial brand experience through which consumers can construct political or civic subjectivities instead of asking critical questions about real social change. As demonstrated, the focus on the brand experience mystifies some of the larger political economic issues of production and consumption inherent to commercially-driven philanthropy that include issues of the Global Fund's distribution process, transparency, and corporate accountability. The brand experience also redirects discourse away from critical questions about East/West historical realities or structural relationships between global capitalism and global disparities of wealth; it obscures the paradox of relying on neoliberal markets to solve global problems aggravated *by* these very markets and policies. In the end, RED's promotion of compassionate consumption works to *stabilize* the neoliberal market system first and foremost while the possibility of "feeling good while doing good" is reconciled as a form of responsible and "empower(RED)" citizenship.

Notes

1. As a tool for producing sociality, brands ultimately come to provide a space where *life* is a source of value (i.e. capital); here the immaterial labor of consumers is both a form of, and intensification of, commodity fetishism.
2. Former actress Mia Farrow has authored several news editorials on the Darfur crises as a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador, offering in 2007 to trade her own freedom for the protection of a Sudanese rebel leader. Since 2000, Brad Pitt produced a documentary on the Lost Boys of Sudan; Oprah Winfrey built a girls' school in South Africa while Angelina Jolie and Madonna have both adopted children from some of Africa's poorest regions. In many ways, celebrities have provided some of the most consistent attention and exposure to the continent's more pressing social and economic crises.

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