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**UMI**



(CONSUME)<sup>RED</sup> SOCIETY:  
THE RISE OF CHARITABLE CONSUMPTION  
AND ITS SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

By Nancy Jarnevic

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through Communication Studies  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts at the  
University of Windsor

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## Abstract

We find ourselves living in a consumer society that seeks and creates meaning in the consumption of commodities, so much so that consumers are turning to consumerism as a form of expressing their political and social statements and activities. Over the past decade, and prominently in its latter half, a new social development of consumerism has emerged: the pairing of commodities with charities, or what I am terming *charitable consumption*. Using Foucauldian discursive analysis, I examine (Product)<sup>RED</sup> as a case study of charitable consumption to uncover how the contradictory concepts of charity and consumption are reconciled and equated within the discourse. I also analyze the role that celebrity personas play in the proliferation of this new meaning of individual consumption and the equation of consumption to an act of charity, social activism and social justice.



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## Chapter 1: (Red)y, Set, Shop!

“The same historical development that turned the citizen into a client transformed the worker from a producer into a consumer” (Lasch 235).

We find ourselves living in a consumer culture where we seek and create meaning in the consumption of commodities, so much so that consumers are turning to consumerism as a form of expressing their political and social statements and activities. Whether it is food, clothing, houses, cars, jewelry or the latest techno-gadget, the products that we consume speak volumes about how we see ourselves, as well as how we want to be seen by others, albeit superficially. Over the past decade, and prominently in its latter half, a new social development of consumerism has emerged: the pairing of commodities with charities, or what I am terming *charitable consumption*. Through the discourses surrounding charitable consumption, the purchase of a Gap T-shirt becomes more than a symbol of the consumer’s personal style; it becomes a social statement for the fight against AIDS in Africa, and a symbol of ‘active’ support of this cause on the part of the consumer. Juliet Schor argues in her book, *The Overspent American*, that “the identity-consumption relationship is a two-way street [that] not only affects what we buy ... [but] also affects who we become” (57). Advertising generates the many hyperbolic meanings and values that are embodied by commodities and brands, and it is often these meanings and values that are purchased and consumed by consumers as much as, or even more so, than the products themselves.

Individuals use commodities as status symbols to denote their place within the hierarchy of society and as identity markers. Scholars have noted that as early as the

sixteenth century, conspicuous consumption of commodities was used not only to denote a person's level of wealth and class, but their personality and individuality as well—a process that continues today (Veblen; Schor). What is interesting is how the use of status items evolved over time, changing with the increasingly industrialized and commercialized throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and, especially, twentieth centuries. One key development was the introduction of cheaply available and mass-produced products that created an impression of wealth, equality and democracy for the nineteenth century consumer, though real inequalities of class remained (Williams, 98-99, 104). Another key shift occurred in the mid-to-late nineteenth century with the creation of brands as entities beyond a mere product, and the new associations made connecting brands to specific ideologies and values (McClintock). Branding allows for essentially identical products to be differentiated and valued more or less in comparison to another brand's product based on consumer perceptions of value. Naomi Klein's research targets the 'brand' as an entity, revealing the ways that 'brand culture' has overtaken all areas of public and private life.

### **Appropriating Charity Through Charitable Consumption**

In more recent years, evidence is emerging that indicates a new social development within consumerism in the union of commodities with charities in the form of charitable consumption. In some ways, the purchase of a product or service by way of a charitable donation does not seem new at all—the 1970s and 80s saw the rise in popularity of benefit concerts, such as *The Concert for Bangladesh* in 1971 or *LiveAid* in 1985, and these types of concerts remain popular today. Although evidence can be found depicting benefit concerts and charity dinners in existence throughout the past two

centuries, in recent years the pairing of charity and consumption is being undertaken in a new, 'consumer-friendly' way.

I argue that, when considering the social implications, there are distinctly different social meanings created when a consumer-citizen supports a charity or cause through the purchase and conspicuous use of a T-shirt. There are two concepts that are critical to the examination of charitable consumption as a social phenomenon: ideology and discourse. Marxist tradition argues that ideology is a process where the ruling class masks the 'truths' of social organization from the worker class by creating a 'false consciousness' that masks the exploitation of the worker. Foucault criticized the Marxist conception of ideology precisely because of this tendency "to reduce all [of] the relations between knowledge and power to a question of *class* power and *class* interests" (Hall, *Representation* 48). Foucault conceded that class relations do exist, however, he argued that power relations "go right down to the depth of society" and are evidenced in all social relations, both public and private (Foucault, *Discipline* 27). Moreover, Foucault believed that "each society has its regime of truth, it's 'general politics' of truth" so that there is no 'absolute' truth that transcends time, only 'truths' that are valid in a specific historical context (Foucault, *Power* 131). This focus on the historical context of knowledge and meaning brings Foucault's conception of ideology more closely in line with that of Gramsci than with Marx. According to Gramsci's theory of hegemony, "'unity' of classes is necessarily complex and has to be *produced*" so that one ideology, or worldview, can become dominant at a particular time within a society (Hall, 'Gramsci' 14). However, Foucault prefers the term 'discourse' over that of ideology. Discourse is similar to ideology in that it is a "system of representation," but it goes farther because it

“is about the production of knowledge through language ... [and] since all social practices entail *meaning*, and meanings shape and influence what we do—our conduct—all practices have a discursive aspect (Hall, *Representation* 44; Hall, *The West* 291). And so discourse, like ideology, is a system of meaning and knowledge, but unlike ideology, Foucault argues that discourse is also about how that knowledge and power are put into practice by members of society in a historical context.

The traditional conception of a ‘good’ citizen who is active in society is related to a knowledge of and involvement in civic affairs through attendance at town hall meetings, voting in elections or referendums, and other similar activities. Through the discourses and practices of consumption, the ‘good’ citizen is reconfigured as a ‘proactive’ consumer who supports, through their consumption patterns, companies and businesses who are socially conscious—i.e. those who are perceived to support charitable and social causes, and are environmentally and socially conscious in their business. Gap Inc.’s involvement with the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign is a clear example of this new form of charitable consumption where the consumption of a commodity stands in for active citizen involvement in community and world at large.

In order to identify and examine the social implications of charitable consumption, I am conducting a case study of the partnerships within the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign. Through an investigation of marketing messages on Gap Inc. and the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> websites, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*’s “Oprah and Bono Paint the Town ‘Red’” episode, as well as a special (RED) issue of *Vanity Fair*, I will seek to answer one of my main research questions: **How is the charitable consumption of products made to seem as a viable method of enacting social change? And what are the potential**

**consequences of this discourse?** I will answer these questions through an analysis of key discursive sites for the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign, and identifying the various systems of meaning that are drawn on. Underlining the development of charitable consumption in society is the evolution of system of meaning based on a neoliberal capitalist ideology and a trend towards the purchase of products and services that are socially or politically conscious.

### **A ‘Brand’ New Status Category: Introducing (Product)<sup>RED</sup>**

The characteristics that define the status item are undergoing an evolution towards a more politically and socially-conscious mentality and image. What first began with the AIDS/HIV signature Red Ribbon campaign (popularised in the early 1990s by celebrities at the Oscars), and yellow Cancer bracelets endorsed by Lance Armstrong, has now evolved into the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> partnership and OmniPeace. These new campaigns, most notably (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, are creating a strong correlation in the mind of the consumer between charity and consumption, so strong that the act of consumption is becoming synonymous with acts of charity and the more radical idea of saving lives.

(Product)<sup>RED</sup> is an “economic initiative” and a “branding mechanism” that aims to raise money for the Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis, and Malaria [Global Fund]<sup>1</sup>, while at the same time generating profit for the corporate partners involved ((Product)<sup>RED</sup>). (Product)<sup>RED</sup> first launched in the United Kingdom in the spring of 2006, and then in North America six months later. It has been reported by *Advertising Age* that

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<sup>1</sup> Note: the scope and breadth of the Global Fund’s purpose, fundraising and grant disbursement far exceeds the parameters of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>. Much of the Global Fund’s financial resources come from international governments, in addition to donations from Non-Governmental Organizations and the private sector. The Global Fund does not implement programs directly; instead it distributes the collected funds to local organizations and governments that run programs for the prevention and treatment of AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria in over 100 countries, including but not limited to the continent of Africa.

since the launch of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, upwards of \$100 million dollars has been spent on the marketing of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> while only \$18 million has actually been raised for the Global Fund, although these numbers are disputed by spokespeople of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> (Newsweek Business online). It is interesting to find that so little money has been raised through the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> initiative in comparison to the large amount that has been spent on the advertising and marketing of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> by corporations. The disparity is especially interesting because the marketing itself stresses the critical need to raise money through (Product)<sup>RED</sup> sales. More interesting is the fact that the companies involved, such as the Gap, will not release the exact figures of the revenues earned from (Product)<sup>RED</sup> sales or given to Global Fund. Instead, the companies often choose to release figures that represent ‘approximately’ how much Antiretroviral [ARV] medication has been purchased through the Global Fund. At best, we are able to learn how much money from the sale of a particular (Product)<sup>RED</sup> commodity is intended for the Global Fund, although no figure can be found regarding how many of those items are sold. Furthermore, we are given no sense of how costly or inexpensive the medication is to purchase, in neither the press releases nor promotional materials. This omission makes it impossible for the consumer to objectively evaluate the effect of their charitable purchases, and whether the effect is ‘worth’ the cost.

OmniPeace is similar in concept to (Product)<sup>RED</sup> in that they both market and sell merchandise using the formula of charitable consumption, but OmniPeace is considerably smaller thus far in size and scope. OmniPeace, launched in Los Angeles in June 2007, sells OmniPeace branded clothing almost solely online, with the exception of two physical stores, one in Los Angeles and another in the United Kingdom. OmniPeace



donates half of their proceeds to Millennium Promise, “a non-profit organization founded by economist and global anti-poverty crusader, Dr. Jeffrey Sachs” that hopes to eliminate “extreme poverty by 2025” (OmniPeace). An interesting overlap between (Product)<sup>RED</sup> and OmniPeace is the involvement of Dr. Sachs, who is identified by Lisa Anne Richey and Stefano Ponte as being a key player within the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> initiative (15-16). There are no figures currently available that document the amount of money raised or donated to Millennium Promise. A notable difference between (Product)<sup>RED</sup> and OmniPeace is that, while the only way for a consumer to support (Product)<sup>RED</sup> is through the purchase of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> items, OmniPeace does provide a link on their website that allows a person to donate money directly to Millennium Promise without making an OmniPeace purchase.

Beyond the economics of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> and OmniPeace, it is the former initiative’s social dimension and use of modern communication systems to reformulate social practices that strikes me as both significant and fascinating. (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, with its big brand partners and big brand marketing budgets, is advocating a form of consumerism that I have termed *charitable consumption*. Charitable consumption involves a goodwill aspect within the act of consumption—i.e. by participating in the consumption of these products, the consumer is allowed, and even encouraged, to consume endlessly and guilt-free with the assurance that ‘a portion of the proceeds’ go to charity. The consumer is assured that they are contributing positively to society by consuming these endorsed products, and that, furthermore, their purchase is an essential part of social aid. This pairing of products with charitable donations is not a particularly new idea in the world of retail; however, (Product)<sup>RED</sup> is taking charitable consumption to

a new level of consumerism through its scope and the creation of a sense of urgency. Consumption moves from being a method to denote social status and individual identity, to consumption that is equated with an act of social justice and activism. The consumer is empowered by charitable consumption and told that they have the power to save the world—one purchase at a time. Through charitable consumption discourse, the meaning of our consumption moves away from conspicuous consumption based on excess and selfishness to social activism which is rooted in selflessness, giving, and social justice. Moreover, through the advertising campaign and the promotional material, the notion that charitable consumption is the best or only financially viable way to provide social assistance and charity in today's society is communicated to the consumer.

Lisa Anne Richey and Stefano Ponte also identified the phenomenon of charitable consumption in their examination of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, terming it 'compassionate consumption'. Richey and Ponte conclude that compassionate consumption and "Brand Aid create a world where it is possible to have as much as you want without depriving anyone else" and even help the disadvantaged within the community (22). There is a contradictory nature manifest in compassionate or charitable consumption—seen in the pairing of greed and generosity—and yet, the discourse suggests that the consumer is able to reconcile or accept this contradiction with relative ease. I hope to examine how the contradiction is reconciled and the significance of this action by analyzing the discourse and use of language and imagery within the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign.

It is evident that in today's social environment, consumption is an overwhelming part of a person's daily activities—consumption is a form of identity creation as well as affirmation of the individual and their 'coolness'. I believe that people's fixation on

personal consumption, when paired with a cause-marketing campaign such as (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, encourages the consumer to buy more material things with the illusion that this form of consumption is a self-less act, not a selfish one. Products endorsed by (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, OmniPeace and other similar campaigns are among the new status items that are infused with (superficially?) political or socially conscious values. These advertising campaigns are creating the belief that the consumption of these products is a viable solution to the world's problems and an authentic form of social-political activism. The reality is that the public relations and marketing campaigns for these 'new' status items are only succeeding in trivializing the magnitude of the issues at hand, as well as perpetuating the myth of capitalism as being fair and just. (Product)<sup>RED</sup> poses the question: Can a T-shirt really save the world? I would argue that it is not a question of *can* a T-shirt save the world, but ***why do we feel that buying a T-shirt is representative of being an active citizenry?***

### **Research Questions**

The thesis project does not hope to evaluate the 'effectiveness' or 'real value' of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> and similar examples of compassionate/charitable consumption. Instead, the goal is to examine the nature of this social phenomenon, to understand how the actors involved in the campaign utilize the modes of communication to shape new forms of social activity and social activism. The first step of my project will be to gain a historical understanding of the development of consumer culture and some of the key characteristics and themes that are present throughout its development in order to provide historical context for the current project. We cannot truly understand where we are today unless we have some understanding of how we came to be here in the first place.

Consumption, consumerism, marketing and advertising are all interconnected and each has a significant role in today's society. I argue that we are experiencing an evolution in the meaning associated with consumption through the rise of charitable consumption. In search of why consumption is shifting towards forms of charitable involvement I must ask: **How does charitable consumption and the actors involved speak to today's consumer-citizen?**

### **Theoretical Foundations**

Any discussion of consumer culture must at some point examine its underlying structure: capitalism. Karl Marx argues that capitalism is a system that is inherently exploitive in nature, and to understand this conclusion, we must examine some of the basic elements of the capitalist system (*Capitol* 1976). The most elementary, yet most complex, part of capitalism is the commodity. It is both the required building block of a capitalist system as well as the end result, or the 'product', of capitalism and production (Marx, *Capitol* 1976). All commodities have both a 'use-value' and an 'exchange-value' where the use-value refers simply to the "usefulness of a thing" (Marx, *Capitol* 1976 126). Exchange-value is a bit more elusive and is best understood abstractly as the mystical quality that distinguishes Brand X from Brand Y. For example, if Brand X and Brand Y each make identical products that have the same use-value and quality, then it is the perceived exchange-value of the brand name that determines whether Brand X's product is more or less valuable to a consumer than Brand Y's.

Another concept that is critical to the understanding of Marx's theory of capitalism is the exploitation of labour-power. In its natural state, Marx believes that labour is "the personal activity of man" where man is in control of the process from start

to finished product (Marx, *Capital* 1906 197-8). However, when a labourer sells his labour-power to a capitalist (employer), that labour is no longer his personal activity but a commodity to be bought and sold like any other, with use-value and exchange-value. Furthermore, the labourer is alienated from the product of his now commodified labour because both the product and the labour belong to the capitalist who purchased them (Marx, *Capital* 1906 206). There is no connection between the labourer and the product of his labours; his work is no longer his. Secondly, as capitalism progresses with industrialization, there is a division of labour that further alienates the labourer from both his work and the product of it. Instead of one labourer working to make a table, chair, or watch, several work on a different part of the product and none works on the same product from start to finish, creating more disconnect between the labourer and his work since he has no context in which to place either (Marx, *Capital* 1906 376). Today, we can go further to say that not only is the worker alienated from the product of his labour, i.e. the commodity, but also, and more importantly in the context of modern consumerism, the commodity is alienated from the labour that creates it. As Naomi Klein documents, in today's branded consumer world, big brand names are often hiding big brand secrets—in many cases the secrets are their exploitive labour practices in “Third World” countries.

Let us return to the commodity as an abstract concept. Another of Marx's ideas that is crucial to the understanding of capitalism and consumer culture is ‘commodity fetish.’ Commodity fetish refers to the mystical quality that a commodity possesses that is unrelated to its use-value (Marx, *Capital* 1906 82). In fact, the fetishizing of the commodity occurs in the abstraction and separation of the use-value of a commodity

from the exchange-value (Marx, *Capital* 1906 83). The fetishizing of commodities is a social process because exchange-value itself is a social perception or estimation of the labour-value embodied by an object and is unrelated to any natural quality or usefulness of the object itself (Marx, *Capital* 1906 94). I argue that (Product)<sup>RED</sup> is further fetishizing the commodity and separating more thoroughly than ever before the product and its consumption from the labour that creates it. The consumer becomes so enraptured with the idea of aiding Africa, one of the poorest regions of the Third World, through the purchase and consumption of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> items that he is oblivious to the fact that manufacturing processes of these very products exploits the Third World's labour and resources more often than not. The fetishization of the commodity also serves another function beyond disguising the merchandise's history of labour and production; it also shifts the focus away from the fundamental act of consumption and on to the mystical ability of saving lives.

In order to properly examine consumer culture and the new directions in which it is evolving, we must also turn in part to the domain of cultural studies and the work of Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci "emphasized that social order is maintained not just through coercion but also through active consent" or hegemony (Curran 132). Hegemony involves the acceptance by the majority of the dominant ideology, or set of values and beliefs, of a smaller, elite group. A key aspect of hegemony is that the consent is gained through the guidance and examples set by cultural figures or leaders, such as celebrity spokespersons that are at the centre of the advertising and marketing campaigns of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>. According to James Curran, the result is that most people view, evaluate and come to understand the workings of society and culture through the lens of the

dominant ideology (132). The concept of hegemony will provide an appropriate framework for understanding how the discourse attempts to reconcile the contradictions that seem inherent to charitable consumption, as well as the role of celebrities as public leaders in gaining popular consent.

Connecting the related models of ideology and hegemony is the concept of representation, which is a central part of my project: understanding how discourses create systems of representations that connect acts of consumption with acts of charity.

Hegemony ensures that most members of a culture will interpret and understand the world based on a shared set of meanings, or ideologies, that act as a “shared conceptual map” and are one system of representation (Hall, *Representation* 18). Language is another system of representation, both in the traditional understanding of language in the linguistic sense, but also in the broader sense of images and visual language (Hall, *Representation* 18). Representation, and by extension these two aforementioned systems of representation, are at the core of the social processes that create and communicate cultural meanings between members of a community (Hall, *Representation* 15, 19). Discourse is comprised of these social processes.

### **Literature Review: Examinations of Charity within Consumption**

Recently, there have been a few studies that begin to tackle some aspects of the pairing of charity and consumption. In “Pink!: Community, Contestation, and the Colour of Breast Cancer,” Charlene Elliot explores the meanings that are created within and around breast cancer and breast cancer campaigns through the language of colour. At the heart of Elliot’s inquiry is how colour “works as a public, politicized, and frequently contested communication ... [and] how public actors/groups and grass-roots

organizations sometimes codify colour to accentuate campaigns intended for public benefit” (522). She finds that the colour pink has been commodified, a process that occurs with the rise of cause-related marketing by corporations. The colour pink and the image of the ‘pink ribbon’ are appropriated by the brands/companies and are used as a fetishized image to promote a particular product. Partnering with a social cause or charity becomes about “adding value to one’s brand,” increasing both the brand’s public profile and profits at the same time (Elliot 528).

What is also intriguing about Elliot’s examination of use of the colour pink in the breast cancer campaign is that she is able to draw out the contradictory meanings that are manifest in its communication—the colour is simultaneously a symbol “of femininity and the badge of sisterhood ... [yet it] most certainly masks the horrors of the disease” (527). As she argues, in the context of social cause campaigns, colour is conventionally being used for “decorating and transforming public space; and this colour spectacle, too, can function as an ambiguous (and sometimes empty) political gesture” (Elliot 527). In our image-obsessed consumer culture, do our “pink-coloured glasses actually debilitate the movement”? (Elliot 530). My thesis can provide an interesting addition to Elliot’s examination of the use of colour in social causes and cause-related marketing by examining **how imagery, colour, and language merge together to create the discourses of charitable consumption.**

Lisa Ann Richely and Stefano Ponte examine (Product)<sup>RED</sup> within the context of development aid and also note that this campaign “marks the opening of a new frontier” where “the marriage of consumption and social causes has become one and indivisible” (1, 11). Two key terms that are critical to the authors’ investigation are *Brand Aid*, which



references the fact that this is commercially-driven development aid associated with specific brand names, and *compassionate consumption* (what I term charitable consumption), where the consumer's "consumption becomes the mechanism for compassion" and social goodwill (Richely and Ponte 2). Part of Richely and Ponte's argument is that AIDS in Africa is being presented as a 'problem' within capitalism that needs to be solved and that compassionate/charitable consumption and "Brand Aid is presented as the solution to African AIDS" (3). The idea that capitalism and the wealthy First World can 'rescue' the struggling Third World is not a new ideology and is, in fact, a clear depiction of the imperialist ideals that exist even within modern capitalist thought. However, what is different about Brand Aid and compassionate consumption, argue Richely and Ponte, is the emphasis on the "pivotal roles of the consumer as actor and the celebrity as mediator" (3). My project will contribute to the research begun by Richely and Ponte by examining the cultural aspects of charitable consumption in hopes of understanding how the concept of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> is explained and marketed to the consumer and how the consumer comes to understand their role and identity in this new context of consumption, particularly through the use of celebrities.

Another study of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> is undertaken by Zine Magubane, who examines the (Red) issue of *Vanity Fair* and the (Red) episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and identifies these as significant discursive moments within the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign. Magubane focuses much of her analysis on the contributions that Oprah Winfrey and Bono make to the discourse of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>—one of her central questions is to ask "when Oprah and Bono invoke their own connections to a history of colonial subjugation as an explanation for what motivates their philanthropy, can it be read as an attempt to

‘share in the other’s past’” (3). She draws on the ideology and historical patterns of imperialism to draw similarities between Christian missionaries and modern day celebrities’ philanthropic ventures. She asserts that “celebrities can be seen as modern day missionaries who are also engaged in a process of image building through philanthropy” (Magubane 4). It’s an interesting and astute comparison as she demonstrates that both the discourse associated with Christian missionaries and the discourse of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> both portray African culture as a backwards people in need of ‘saving’ and ‘civilizing’ by the forward-thinking, more refined Western society members (4-5, 10-13). My research will draw on some of the ideas that Magubane raises regarding imperialist ideology being an underlying message within the discourse of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>.

Katerina Jungar and Elaine Salo also investigate the discourse created by the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign in contrast to discourse that arises from a South African HIV-activist group, “Treatment Action Campaign,” a.k.a., TAC. Specifically, they look at the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> website and the (Red) *Vanity Fair* issue as discursive sites for analysis. One of the key differences that they argue separates the discourse of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> versus that of TAC is the way the Africans and AIDS/HIV are portrayed. The discourse of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> reduces the images and identities of Africans to the role of the victim, and “does not show Africans as agents for change” (Jungar and Salo 7). They also note, similar to Magubane’s observations, that (Product)<sup>RED</sup> tends to resort to binary representations of ‘us’ and ‘them’ and this is clearly evidenced in the marketing as well as in the ‘(Red) Manifesto’ (Jungar and Salo 6). Again, my research on (Product)<sup>RED</sup> will draw on many of the same ideas and arguments that arise from the work of Jungar and Salo, however, I will be examining a broader range of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> discursive sites

looking for patterns within the discourse that relate and expand the knowledge of charitable consumption as a social practice.

### **Methodology: Foucauldian Discursive Analysis of a Case Study**

An examination and analysis of charitable consumption will best be accomplished through a case study of an example of this phenomenon: the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> initiative. It is important to note that case study research is not sampling and the results are not presumably applicable to a generalized population, but it does allow for thorough, holistic knowledge about a specific case instance (Berg 284; Tellis 3). Case studies allow a researcher to uncover interrelations between details, circumstances, and conditions, which may have theoretical or practical implications. Part of the epistemological position of interpretivist case study research is the belief that social inquiry should examine and seek to uncover how social activity is made sense of by members of society, based on the assumption that social reality is interpreted and created by members (Travers 10; Neuman 51).

Instrumental case studies use the specific case to explain, expand, refine and/or clarify a larger theoretical topic, sometimes in order to make the theory more generalizable (Tellis 2; Berg 291; Philipsen 13). I hope to demonstrate through my study that (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, specifically, and charitable consumption, generally, further fetishize the commodity. The way that (Product)<sup>RED</sup> is constructed in various media forms is contradictory to the realities of capitalism—examination of media and corporate messages will show that capitalism and charitable consumption are presented as the ‘saving grace’ of those less fortunate. In reality, critical communication thought argues that capitalism, and by extension consumption, are the sources of, not solutions to many

social problems. Capitalism depends on the exploitation of the Third World; (Product)<sup>RED</sup> claims to provide a solution to Third World problems of poverty and disease through capitalist consumption. And so an objective of my thesis is to answer: **How does the language used by (Product)<sup>RED</sup> promoters reconcile this inherent contradiction?**

Within my case study, I will use Foucauldian discourse analysis as my method to examine the written and pictorial literature that embodies the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> initiative. For Foucault, discourse is a “system of representation” that includes not only language but also social practices and institutions, and these discourses produce meaning and knowledge (Hall, *Representation* 44, 51). A particular discourse generates ‘rules’ that govern the ways that knowledge of a topic is formulated, discussed, or put into practice, as well as the ways that knowledge is *not* permitted to be produced, discussed, etc. (Hall, *Representation* 44). A key aspect of Foucauldian discourse is its historical nature—all discourse is located in a historical context and it is only in that *precise* historical and cultural context that that particular knowledge, or way of knowing, exists (Hall, *Representation* 44, 46, 49; Holstein and Gubrium 490).

The dynamic of power and knowledge is critical to Foucauldian discourse analysis—the ways that discourse produces knowledge and meaning affects power structures and social interactions (Holstein and Gubrium 491). Specifically for my project, the communication of knowledge through the language, imagery and narrative of the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign will be examined to identify how it constitutes and maintains certain knowledge, meanings and power structures/systems already in place, and produces knowledge about charitable acts that are specifically tied to acts of consumption.

The primary sources that I will examine will largely consist of mediated forms of communication, specifically Gap Inc.'s two (Product)<sup>RED</sup>-related websites, (Product)<sup>RED</sup>'s website, *Vanity Fair*'s (RED) issue, as well as the transcript for *The Oprah Winfrey Show*'s episode entitled "Oprah and Bono Paint the Town Red". From time to time, I will also refer to and analyze other pertinent mediums such as press releases and print or online news articles that also contribute to the discourse of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>. Each primary source will be treated as a separate 'discursive event' or object that belongs to the larger 'discursive formation' of charitable consumption—each event is an identifiably distinct instance of discourse that contributes to a system of knowledge, meaning and power related to charitable consumption (Hall, *Representation* 44). My analysis will focus on discovering patterns of language, imagery, and narration that, collectively, create the system of privileged knowledge—based on the ideals of neoliberal capitalist—that supports charitable consumption. Additionally, my aim is to draw out the contradictions that exist in the conceptualization of charitable consumption and the discourses that surround it. There will be special attention paid to the role, significance and use of celebrity figures within the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign. My analysis will weigh and consider several factors: **what is the significance of *how* each actor communicates information; how does the *form* used influence what message is being communicated; and *why* is the use of celebrity central to charitable consumption?**

### **Mapping it Out: Thesis Outline**

The thesis will explore and examine the historical and theoretical conceptions of consumer culture in order to create a frame of reference for the study of the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> initiative. It is clear that companies have much to gain by creating and participating in

avenues of charitable consumption; charitable consumption is a winning equation for a corporation where selling charitable commodities = revenue profits + positive publicity + loyal, happy customers = more potential future revenues. I believe that specific examples of charitable consumption and their associated discourses are evidence of a larger trend within society—a trend that sees consumption (or capitalism) as a solution to all problems, whether these are social, economic, or personal in nature. This trend is a manifestation of capitalist ideology transforming social practice.

The goal of the thesis is to establish a better understanding of how discourses within consumer culture present charitable consumption as a viable solution to the inequalities of a capitalist system and other systems of inequality. A central argument of the thesis will be to demonstrate that the marketing campaign launched by (Product)<sup>RED</sup> and its partners to promote the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> line of products is an illustrative example of how passive charitable consumption is presented as active citizen involvement in global community.

The practical implications of this thesis will be the generation of discussion and awareness about the roots of consumer culture, as well as the negative affects it is generating on social relations. The thesis will map how discourses have emerged that market consumption as citizen action and contribute to a gap in the existing body of literature which has only begun to explore the social and political implications of the use of cause-marketing and charitable consumption projects by corporations and conglomerates. Currently, cause-marketing initiatives have mostly been examined from a pro-industry, marketing theory perspective, despite the fact that there are many serious

societal implications of this trend in marketing and consumerism (Hal Dean 91-103; Park *et al* 750-766).

The following chapter will give a historical overview of consumption and consumer culture in an effort to draw out important concepts and themes that reoccur throughout the history of consumerism leading up to present day. The historical development is significant because part of what I will be arguing is that we are in the midst of another profound shift in the nature and meanings of consumption with the advent of charitable consumption.

The third and fourth chapters will consist of the main corpus of my thesis. The first of the two corpus chapters will look at the websites hosted by Gap Inc. and (Product)<sup>RED</sup> in order to examine the discourse of the (Red) campaign and the idea of charitable consumption. When looking at these sites of discourse, I will be looking at how charitable consumption is conceptualized and framed for the consumer, what contradictions are evident, and how any contradictions are reconciled by and for the consumer.

The second corpus chapter will focus on the discourses that result from both the (RED) issue of *Vanity Fair*, and the transcript of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*'s episode that coincided with the North American launch of the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> project. In particular, I will examine the role that celebrities have in the dissemination of charitable consumption discourse, and the promotion of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> specifically. This chapter will also look for themes and patterns within the discourse that echo those found in the first corpus chapter.

The final chapter will summarize the case study and draw conclusions about how the discourses of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> contribute to the meanings of charitable consumption, and

impact social practices in respect to charity. The social significance of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> specifically and of the larger trend of charitable consumption will be discussed. The conclusions of the thesis will be connected to future avenues for potential interventions and social solutions.



## Chapter 2: The Evolution of Consumption

### The Nature of Consumption

What does it mean to consume in a consumer culture? Rosalind Williams explores the Latin roots of the word ‘consumption’—“‘to make sum’ [or conversely] ‘to take away with’ or ‘to use up entirely’” (5-6). She concludes that these contradictory Latin roots “suggest the ambiguity of consumption itself, its mingled nature as achievement and destruction” (Williams 7). Grant McCracken, on the other hand, puts forth a broadly framed definition of consumption in *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*. For McCracken, consumption “include[s] the processes by which consumer goods and services are created, bought, and used” (*Culture and Consumption I xi*). Although McCracken’s definition is broad, it is useful since it seeks to involve more than the mere act of consuming a product or service, but also the processes that are involved in consumption such as physical production, marketing, sale and social meaning-creation.

Likewise, Michael Wildt and Michel de Certeau also attempt to broaden the definition of consumption to include “not only quantifiable purchase, but also ‘production’ ... and the ‘production’ of cultural meaning” (Wildt 107). There is more, it seems, to ‘consumption’ than the purchase of objects and things; consumption is a cultural practice of creating social meaning through use as well. de Certeau, for instance, sees consumption as “*another* production” (emphasis in original) that corresponds to the traditional concept of production—the creation of products—however, consumption-production does not result in a physical product (260). According to de Certeau,

consumption as a form of production “is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, ... because it ... manifest[s] itself ... through its *ways of using* the products” (260).

Thus it is clear that when considering the nature and parameters of ‘consumption’ as a key term, one must look beyond the obvious acts of purchase and basic usage, and consider the broader systems of production involved in meaning-creation. For this purpose, Grant McCracken’s definition is the most useful guide for the understanding and analysis of consumer societies, keeping in mind Rosalind Williams’ assessment of the “ambiguity of consumption itself, its mingled nature as achievement and destruction” (Williams 7).

Standing distinctly apart from many authors who have examined consumer culture, Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace directly probes the concept of gender within the development of eighteenth century consumer culture. She contends that during the span of the eighteenth century, there was a “cultural struggle to define both the meaning of consumption and the practices of modern consumption” (Kowaleski-Wallace 5). In particular, Kowaleski-Wallace examines the shifts that occur within the context of shopping. Through her exploration of female gender roles, she discovers “an important shift in the concept of the commodity and in new consumer activities designed to circulate commodities, chief among them the pastime known as shopping” (Kowaleski-Wallace 74).

Kowaleski-Wallace delves into the linguistic history of the term ‘commodity’ and acquires a new understanding of the cultural changes that occur in the eighteenth century. She discovers that “the verb *to shop* ... [first] appears in 1764” whereas the noun form of ‘shop’ was commonly used pre-eighteenth century (Kowaleski-Wallace 75). The

significance of this linguistic development is the change in consumption patterns that it represents; by the eighteenth century, it became common *to shop*, i.e. ““visit a shop for the purpose of making a purchase, or examining the contents”” of the shop (Kowaleski-Wallace 75). Kowaleski-Wallace argues that the concept of shopping as an activity emerges from changes to the cultural meanings associated with ‘commodity’ and ‘luxury’ (75). The original meaning of ‘commodity’ refers to something that is ““advantageous, beneficial, profitable, of use”” and Kowaleski-Wallace asserts that this original meaning is lost in the shift “toward the more modern definition of the word: ... ‘an item of commerce, an object of trade’” (76). This results in a “tension between what is genuinely useful and what is, regardless of actual benefit, valuable for its exchange value” (Kowaleski-Wallace 76). Similarly, she claims that a tension remains between an older interpretation of ‘luxury’ that has a negative connotation, and a more modern “understanding [of] the word as ‘the habitual use of, or indulgence in what is choice or costly’” (Kowaleski-Wallace 76). This newer conceptualization of ‘luxury’ relates to the concept of exchange-value crafted by Karl Marx, while the older meaning associated with ‘commodity’ relates to his conception of use-value.

Kowaleski-Wallace believes that “shopping appears to have been born at the moment when commodity and luxury converge” (77). What is interesting about consumption in the context of shopping is that it emphasizes the “purchase of commodities that ... [are less useful, and] more indulgent” (Kowaleski-Wallace 77). Of course, the evolvement towards shopping as a pastime develops slowly during the eighteenth century. Kowaleski-Wallace hypothesizes that it begins with the “search ... [for] caffeine products (coffee and tea), tobacco, and sugar,” which were luxury items

imported to England (77). Once these luxury items became ingrained into the consumer's everyday routine, and shopping merely a routine activity, "the door was opened for other forms of consumer behaviour" (Kowaleski-Wallace 77).

Kowaleski-Wallace also remarks briefly on the effect on behaviour of the movement from outdoor markets to indoor shops in the latter half of the eighteenth century. "The close parameters of the shop dictated new forms of behaviour for all involved" and developed into a social ritual over time (Kowaleski-Wallace 81). There was a level of observation that occurred in the shop, both on the part of the shopper and of the shopkeeper that far exceeded what existed in an outdoor market setting. This new social practice of 'shopping' began and developed in conjunction with the development of shops. Shops, before the advent of the department store, would "[specialize] in one area of merchandising" whereas a department store would contain a "cornucopia of merchandise" (Spring 24). More than just a store where one could purchase commodities, "department stores were turned into palaces of consumption and made shopping a leisure time activity" (Spring 24). According to Joel Spring, "the department store turned urban strolling into window shopping" and by the end of the nineteenth century, we see greater evolution of shopping as a pastime (22).

### **Conspicuous Consumption**

"Consumption was a reality well before the industrial and commercial revolution that began in the eighteenth century" (Roche 16) and Grant McCracken identifies a shift in the consumption patterns of sixteenth century England. He calls the shift a "spectacular consumer boom ... [where] the noblemen of Elizabethan England began to spend with a new enthusiasm, on a new scale" (McCracken, *Culture and Consumption I*

11). McCracken argues that there are two key changes in the social structures that contribute to the 'consumer boom': the use of consumption or "expenditure as an instrument of government" by Queen Elizabeth I, and "social competition" among the aristocracy (11-12). It is easy to extract a causal link between these two developments. It is Elizabeth I's demand on the members of her court to consume and "spend conspicuously on her behalf" that invariably leads to the nobleman's increased awareness of his precarious social position. As a result of this new awareness, the use of comparative or competitive consumption to measure a person's or family's social status and gain royal favour also becomes apparent to these noblemen (11-12).

Thorstein Veblen also notes that, particularly among the leisure class, consumption during the sixteenth century is used to denote class, wealth and reputability, and that vicarious consumption, performed by members of the household, is a reflection of the wealth and class of the master of that household (31). In the case of Elizabeth I, conspicuous consumption by the aristocracy was also vicarious consumption for the Queen's benefit, and it both reflected and reinforced the status and power of her royalty. Conspicuous consumption was also invariably "consumption in excess of the subsistence minimum," or in other words, beyond the base necessities of human sustenance, and the level of excess denotes the level of wealth and class achieved by the consumer (Veblen 34).

One distinction of conspicuous consumption raised by Veblen that is crucial to the discussion of consumer culture is the "element of waste" (40). For Veblen, conspicuous consumption is 'wasteful' "because it does not serve human life or human well-being on the whole" (46). Although there may be an element of usefulness to conspicuous

consumption, there is no benefit to the quality of a human life as a result, and so Veblen argues that, in this sense, conspicuous consumption is a 'waste'. For example, it is a basic human necessity to be clothed in order to protect oneself against the elements, but a lady or gentlemen's choice of silk instead of cotton does not make the garments more useful other than as a form of conspicuous consumption and a symbol of their affluence.

However, by using the concept of 'waste,' Veblen is not suggesting that the consumer believes that their conspicuous consumption is a "misdirection of effort or expenditure" (47). On the contrary, he argues that "frequently ... an element of the standard of living which set out being primarily wasteful, ends with becoming, in apprehension of the consumer, a necessity of life" (Veblen 45). Thus, it is important to note that elements of consumer culture, notably competitive, conspicuous and excessive consumption, become normal and essential aspects of everyday life well before the advancements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This pattern of excessive consumption merely continues to evolve and expand over time to include all levels of society beyond the leisure class.

### **Spectacle of Consumption**

Whereas Neil McKendrick identified the increased ability of more people to consume as a defining mark of eighteenth century consumerism, Rosalind Williams suggests that "the advent of mass consumption represents a pivotal historical moment" in the nineteenth century (Williams 3). Consumer culture, according to Williams' argument, personifies a "new and decisive conjunction between imaginative desires and material ones, between dream and commerce" (65). Williams contends that "the consumer revolution introduced a style of consumption" much different than the type

enjoyed by the leisure and middle classes of the previous centuries (11). One medium of consumption that Williams explores in depth is the Paris expositions.

Through the mid- to late-nineteenth century, Williams notes that the tone and purpose of the Paris expositions began with a focus on teaching visitors “the social benefit of this unprecedented material and intellectual progress” of the industrial revolution (58). As she illustrates, the emphasis shifted towards the end of the century “from instructing the visitor in the wonders of modern science and technology to entertaining him” (Williams 59). What enticed and attracted people to the expositions was no longer the technologies of production, instead, it was the products and commodities created by the technology (Williams 60). This shift in the motivating purpose behind the expositions is indicative of the general atmosphere surrounding nineteenth century consumer culture, where the amusement or exchange-value that a commodity offered was, in many ways, more important than its practical use-value. As Williams argues, the expositions are evidence of “the cultural changes working gradually and diffusely throughout society” (64).

Williams identifies two other trends within the Paris expositions that go on to play a prominent role in consumer culture are the organization of space and the use of exoticism. The expositions evolve towards entertainment hubs until their use of space has “no orderly arrangement or focal points” and is “a gaudy and incoherent jumble, ... a bazaar of climates, [and] architectural styles” (Williams 60-1). Just as the expositions blend together conflicting visuals of exotic images and objects, the emerging department stores of the late-nineteenth century echo the organization of space and the use of the exotic. Williams finds that the department stores that develop build on the “same growth

of prosperity and transformation of merchandising techniques that lay behind the international expositions” and use fantastic, spectacular displays to attract the public’s attention (66). Store displays, especially in storefront windows, were designed to “arouse in the observer the cupidity and longing to possess the goods” (Spring 22). Again, the trend that is first visible in the expositions of the time to organize visual displays as an “incoherent jumble” is also evident in the “disconnected assortment[s] of ‘exhibits’” of the department store (Williams 61, 69). Williams also observes that “repetition [of items] is often employed to numb the spectator further” and create a stronger visual impact (69).

### **Democracy of Consumption**

Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J.H. Plum take on the next ‘consumer boom’ that they argue occurs in eighteenth century England. McKendrick writes that “more men and women than ever before in human history enjoyed the experience of acquiring material possessions” as a result of this consumer boom (McKendrick 1). He stresses that “the *desire* to consume” exists pre-eighteenth century, but that the marked change that occurs during the eighteenth century is the increase of “the *ability*” of more people to consume (McKendrick 2). Moreover, other aspects of consumption also changed in the eighteenth century, according to McKendrick. For one, he argues that “those who possessed little bought more, those who had inherited ample possessions bought new ones, and those born to superfluity seemed eager to add to the excess with every passing fashion” (McKendrick 27). This trend is a marked change in the social meaning system where the possession and consumption of ‘new’ commodities is more valued than that of ‘old’ or inherited items.



Other new retail practices also became convention, such as the display of a “fixed price and of encouraging customers to inspect [and handle] merchandise even if they did not make a purchase” (66). These developments restructured this facet of public life and affected the social practice of shopping. One element of commerce that was altered was the “active verbal interchange between customer and retailer was replaced by the passive, mute response of consumer to things ... encouraging desires and feelings directed toward things” (Williams 67). No longer was there bartering over price, nor an implied obligation to purchase—a person could browse, touch, and fantasize about owning the commodities that were before them. Department stores allow “consumers [to] indulge temporarily in the fantasy of wealth” (Williams 91).

Consumer culture, however, then goes beyond mere fantasy of having commodities and things once the use of credit becomes a common practice. The availability of a “credit purchase [allows] an ordinary wage-earner to enjoy a convincing [and dangerous] illusion of wealth” that continues to be prominent in modern society (Williams 93). The illusion of wealth intersects with the “democratization of luxury” that Williams also discusses (94). Mass production processes that were innovations from the industrial revolution made it possible for “the working classes [to] afford factorymade [*sic*] rugs and wallpapers that offered some appearance of wealth in the place of the reality” (Williams 97). These innovations in production manufactured “cheap and persuasive facsimilies [*sic*] of the rarest varieties” of commodities that were once only attainable for a privileged few (Williams 97). Increased availability and assortment of goods, as well as their affordability, served to increase consumption among all social classes. As Williams remarks, “the privilege of following fashion had spread to both men

and women, people whose grandparents had probably purchased only a few outfits in their lives” (97).

Furthermore, there is evidence that the value of goods was shifting further from an assessment of the quality to the image and external meanings associated with the item. Store owners and consumers alike were “not interested in the quality of the goods, but how they looked” (Spring 23). For example, a “shopgirl prefers a shoddy, mass-produced silk to a sturdy, handsome cotton because silk, originally valued for its intrinsic beauty, is now valued by the masses for conveying an aura of moneyed glamour” (Williams 98). As an example, with the availability of a cheaply made silk and the ability of the shopgirl to purchase it, this luxury item, which connotes wealth and status, is ‘democratized’ and brought within the realm of the less affluent classes. However, democratization of luxury is an illusion of equality and disguises “a social system where significant inequalities in income endure despite the growing equality in merchandise,” Williams astutely observes (99).

### **Mass Consumption, Advertising, and Branding**

Anne McClintock introduces two interwoven dimensions of consumer culture during the nineteenth century: branding and advertising. McClintock asserts that through the course of the nineteenth century, the ‘commodity’ grew to take a “privileged place not only as the fundamental form of a new industrial economy but also as the fundamental form of a new cultural system for representing social value” (130). She specifically explores soap as a commodity, a subject of advertisement and as a nineteenth century “technology of social purification” (McClintock, 133); interestingly, it appears

that (Product)<sup>RED</sup> is following a similar thread today, that of the commodity as a technology of potential social *salvation*.

Advertising aided the creation and “mass consumption of the commodity spectacle” and allowed for the systematic use of images, concepts and ideologies in marketing (McClintock 130). By the 1920s, the “burgeoning advertising and marketing [industries]... were selling not just consumer goods, but consumerism itself as the shining path to modernity” (Slater 180). The ideal of a new, progressive and modern society was communicated within a framework of consumerism, and “the world was to be modernized partly *through* consumption; consumer culture itself was dominated by the idea that everyday life could and should be *modern*, and that to a great extent it already was” (Slater 180). This idealization of all that is ‘modern’ continued post-World War II. The experiences and scarcity of the Depression and the war years “advanced the notion of personal fulfillment through consumption ... [and] millions of working-class Americans and even Europeans sought to join the middle class in sampling the satisfactions that advertisers ... had continuously displayed during the lean years” (Cross 200).

As advertising and brand marketing developed during the twentieth century, images are used as the form, content, and language of consumerism. Both types of marketing transform cultural norms and social practices into commodified forms and images that rely on existing images with specific social meanings or ‘ways of seeing’ already embedded in them (Rifkin; Berger). John Berger observes that modern day citizens are not only the first to be so consumed with images, but is also the first to have the level of saturation of images that we witness in our culture. Consumption (of

products, images, ideas, values) dominates today's culture and media, promising fulfillment and happiness through individual consumption. By buying certain brands, the consumer "is purchasing access to a lifestyle, an image of a way of life he or she would like to have and experience" (Rifkin 172). But fulfillment is never achieved and the consumer is always left wanting more and wanting what he does not have—the latest sneaker, phone, car, etc.—because advertisements and marketing campaigns use speak in future tense, always presenting a new 'future' yet to be realized (Berger 146).

Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson build on Berger's concepts and his assertion that the consumer is constantly being told that she is not 'good enough' on her own, and is asked to imagine the new, improved, and envied person she will become through the consumption of commodities. Marketing sells us a story of our potential selves—advertisements sell us identities, values, lifestyles, and 'coolness' more so than they sell tangible products (Goldman and Papson). Advertisements do not merely ask us to buy a (Gap)<sup>RED</sup> T-shirt or the (RED) I-pod, "ads ask us to choose and construct our identities out of our consumption choices" (Goldman and Papson 85). Advertisements and brand names have created a "make-believe cultural world of shared values and meanings" that are lacking 'real' meaning—they are merely hollow props used to construct fantasy lives, identities and experiences (Rifkin 172). If we are what we buy, then who exactly are we hoping to become by buying (RED)? Is (Product)<sup>RED</sup> selling us social redemption?

Echoing Berger, Goldman and Papson, Stuart Ewen argues that "beyond displaying surfaces, ... style makes up a way of life, a utopian way of life marked by boundless wealth" (Ewen, *Images* 47). Ewen notes a reoccurring theme within the style of consumption: the possibility or promise of change. Advertising images for luxury or

‘elite’ status items “reek of money, offering the consumer a democratic promise of limitless possibility while, at the same time, projecting the sheltered prerogatives of an elite few” (Ewen, *Images* 50). He also notes that “in the world of style, ideas, activities, and commitments become ornaments, adding connotation and value to the garment while they are, simultaneously, eviscerated of meaning” (Ewen, *Images* 51). Now in the world of images and consumption, being associated with extreme sports, feminism, or the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign becomes a badge of honour that both the brand and the consumer use to create identities.

### **Charitable Consumption: Riding the New Wave of Consumption**

Gap’s partnership with (Product)<sup>RED</sup> is a perfect example of the trend Stuart Ewen refers to as a kind of ‘ornamentation of style’ as well as what Dwane Hal Dean defines as ‘cause-related marketing.’ Cause-related marketing occurs when there is a direct correlation between a company’s revenue earning practices and charitable donations that the company makes (Hal Dean 92). Hal Dean sought to determine whether cause-related marketing versus an unconditional donation to a charity affected the perception a consumer had of a company or brand. His study concluded that although a company or brand could improve their image with an unconditional donation, cause-related marketing did not negatively impact the image of a brand (Hal Dean 103). And so it follows that a company, such as Gap, has nothing to lose by partnering with (Product)<sup>RED</sup> and everything, including revenue and consumer goodwill, to gain.

A similar study looked at the comparative effectiveness of “public service advertising, alignment advertising, and traditional brand advertising as marketing tools” (Park, Bush Hitchon, and Yun 750). Alignment ads would be advertisements that

“simultaneously promote both a social cause and its sponsoring brand” (Park et. al 751). Much like the aforementioned experiment, this study found that “an alignment ad by an established brand produced better responses than a traditional brand ad with regard to attitude toward the ad” (Park et. al 763).

The emerging trend of big brands partnering with social causes and charities speaks to a larger trend with capitalism. As Jeremy Rifkin<sup>2</sup> argues in his book, *The Age of Access*, the twentieth century marks an era of change towards a new economic system that is increasingly focused on selling the ‘experience’ (8). According to Rifkin, the movement to an experience-oriented economy means “the selling of the culture in the form of more and more paid-for human activity” (9). It seems that today, one can buy almost any experience, even social experiences such as dating are up for sale on match-maker websites. Rifkin believes that we are heading towards a culture that functions almost solely through ‘bought’ experiences “where traditional reciprocal obligations and expectations—mediated by feelings of faith, empathy, and solidarity—are replaced by contractual relations in the form of paid memberships, subscriptions, admission charges, retainers, and fees” (9). As it is a person can find and buy nearly any social experience with a short trip to the nearest shopping mall (Rifkin 9). Is (Product)<sup>RED</sup> the latest and newest social experience one can purchase at the mall, the experience of ‘saving the world’ one T-shirt at a time?

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<sup>2</sup> Rifkin also observes a movement towards a “network approach to commerce,” where ““networks of bits and pieces of companies ... come together to exploit a market opportunity, perhaps stay together for a couple of years (though changing shape, dramatically, several times in the process), then dissolve, never to exist again in the same form”” (28). Interestingly, the structure of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> follows this model closely.

## **Conclusion**

The historical development of consumption and consumer culture provides an interesting frame of reference for the study of the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> initiative. It is clear that companies have much to gain by creating and participating in avenues of charitable consumption; charitable consumption is a winning equation for a corporation where selling charitable commodities = revenue profits + positive publicity + loyal, happy customers = more potential future revenues. What is less clear at first glance is the explanation of why or how charitable consumption is presented as the natural progression of modern consumer culture. I believe that specific examples of charitable consumption and their associated discourses are evidence of a larger trend in society—a trend that sees consumption (or capitalism) as a solution to all problems, whether these are social, economic, or personal in nature. I would also argue that this trend is a manifestation of neoliberal capitalist ideology into social practice.

### Chapter 3: Choosing Sides on the (Red) Picket Fence: Dialogue of the People

By examining some of the history of consumption and consumer culture, it is clear that the meaning of consumption has largely revolved around primary meanings of identity creation and status demarcation. T-shirts have long been worn as proud (sometimes loud) displays of personality and even social or political statements, but new discourses of consumption are invoking far greater power and meaning into the everyday T-shirt: the power to save the world. I argue that charitable consumption, as seen with the example of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, reorganizes the meanings of consumption and charity by equating the fight against poverty and AIDS in Africa with an act of consumption. Moreover, the discourses of the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> brand of charitable consumption posit this new 'form' of consumption as not only a solution to many of the problems of the Third World brought on by the cycle of capitalism, but also as the new, modern way to take part in charitable movements. The main (Product)<sup>RED</sup> website introduces the public to the discourse that surrounds and is embodied by (Product)<sup>RED</sup>. The ideology of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> is that of neoliberalism, defined by Mary-Beth Raddon as "a hegemonic project that has been advanced over several decades by pro-business activists seeking higher rates of corporate profit and a diminished welfare state" (43). It is apparent when examining the discourse of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> that knowledge and structures relating to capitalism and consumption are privileged, and it is this privileging of knowledge that informs the foundations of charitable consumption.

This chapter will analyze how the key actors and institutions are using language within the discourses of charitable consumption to shift understanding of a consumer's



consumption choices from having a primary meaning denoting one's image/identity to having the dual function of image-creation and social transformation. What this chapter aims to capture is an understanding of both the corporate and institutional voices that contribute to the discourses of charitable consumption because these are the sites of meaning creation for (Product)<sup>RED</sup> and the concept of charitable consumption. These discourses form the framework for consumers' experience with charitable consumption, and inform their perception of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> as an authentic avenue for individual philanthropic contributions. Through the contributions of these varied voices, (Product)<sup>RED</sup> and the notion of charitable consumption becomes validated and later reinforced as a viable method for individualized charitable action.

### **Boundaries of Knowledge**

Neoliberal ideology, which privileges the individual over community, is the cornerstone of most knowledge within the Western world and "has penetrated into every corner of ... society, shaping all major institutions, ways of thinking, and human interactions" (Clawson 2007). We try to 'sell' ourselves to potential employers and politicians try to 'sell' us new ideas, just as companies promote and sell brands, and now more and more often we are being sold the idea of personal consumption in the name of charity. Mary-Beth Raddon examines the rise of the 'new' philanthropy and argues that "the very conditions for philanthropy, and discourses about them, simultaneously confirm and validate the process of neoliberalization within the charitable sector" (28).

Neoliberalization of the charitable sector includes the adoption of business ideals of 'lean' and efficient companies, an increased number of compensated employees opposed to volunteers, and evolving forms of fundraising and promotion that borrow more and

more from traditional business marketing practices. Raddon examines discourse to demonstrate “how policies and practices of philanthropy are reconfiguring relationships of wealth, the state, and citizenship” (27). I think that charitable consumption is a further evolved example of what Raddon calls “hyped-up fundraising,” a result of “the intensification and professionalization of fundraising” (28). Philanthropy is no longer a private and personal act of charitable giving, whether of time or of money, that connects individuals in a community and instead it is becoming a very conspicuous display of charitable consumption that further isolates the individual from others members of their community. Much like with the development of the social practice of shopping, the social engagement aspect of charity work is largely removed from the process and reduced to the purchase of a T-shirt at the Gap and is completely disconnected from the cause it claims to support. With charitable consumption, philanthropy is a highly individualized act—it focuses on the wants and desires of the consumer rather than on the communal needs of the public and the underprivileged. (Product)<sup>RED</sup> is a manifestation of a new movement towards a public spectacle of charitable consumption choices and it also provides corporations a new and profitable way to become involved in philanthropy. Moreover, (Product)<sup>RED</sup> and other charitable consumption campaigns reinforce the neoliberal conceptualization of “the market as the mover and shaker of the economy and the key instrument through which social problems can now be solved” (Heron 89). Reoccurring themes of neoliberalist ideology—“lifestyle, individualization or social disembedding” (Johnson 107)—are leading consumers to ask themselves: what will I buy today to save the world?

## Rallying the Troops: (Red) on the Web

There are several websites that contribute to the discourses of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> and its brand of charitable consumption, one of the most significant being the official website of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, [www.joinred.com](http://www.joinred.com). When looking more specifically at (Gap)<sup>RED</sup>, there are two websites maintained by Gap that also build upon and reinforce the discourse of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>: [www.gapinc.com/red](http://www.gapinc.com/red) and [www.gap.com/red](http://www.gap.com/red). As discussed previously, discourse consists of language, images, social practices and institutions that, together, comprise a system of representation that organizes social knowledge. These websites are key sites of linguistic and visual forms of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>'s discourse, though this chapter will only address the linguistic. It is important to keep in mind that discourse is rooted in ideology and social practices, but is not merely located in the symbolic; discourse is rooted in the movement and reorganization of social practices and knowledge systems. Gramsci's concept of hegemony is also significant to the understanding of how one ideology or worldview becomes dominant within a culture. Hegemony refers to the ideological dominance of one group over others through consent and coercion, not by force; "the 'unity' of classes is necessarily complex and has to be *produced* ... as a result of specific economic, political and ideological practices" (Hall, 'Gramsci' 14). "Hegemonic formations also institutionalize pressures to live in certain ways," or to see consumerism/capitalism as the solution to social and economic problems (Johnson 107). In order for hegemony to exist, a balance of power must be achieved in society but this balance is always precariously dependant on the continuing consent of the majority. Consequently, "hegemony' is a very particular, historically specific, and temporary

‘movement’” that is constantly in transition and “each hegemonic formation will thus have its own specific social composition and configuration (Hall, ‘Gramsci’ 15). And so the concept of hegemony is key to understanding the discourse of charitable consumption and it begins to clarify how charitable consumption links and reduces citizen action to the act of buying on the part of the consumer.

One aspect of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> that is most interesting is that, under the umbrella brand of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, it unites a diverse assortment of already well-known brands and products that have spent a considerable amount of marketing time, effort, and money to differentiate them from other brands and products. There are no natural or innate connections pre-existing between Emporio Armani and the Gap aside from the basic fact that they both make clothing. Nor is there a natural connection between Apple and Motorola electronics except in the most basic sense. In fact, each of these pairs has put great effort towards differentiating their respective brand identities and products, however similar or dissimilar they factually are. Yet, through the discourse of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, these brand names and their disparate products are connected and united as brethren companies. Through (Red), these distinct brands become “Partne(Red) [as] eight brands [with] one aim” (joinred.com, Learn), their public identities intertwined in a cohesive image of charitable, capitalist enterprise.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the ‘one aim’ held collectively by the various brands holds an ambiguous meaning. Is the aim of these corporations to make money or to save lives? With charitable consumption’s reorganization of capitalism, both contradictory purposes serve as motivation.

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<sup>3</sup>Since launching in 2007, other companies have also become ‘partne(red) with (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, including Dell, Microsoft, Hallmark, and Starbucks.

Just as there are no naturally existing connections between these brands, there is no natural, innate connection between consumption and charity; in fact, it can be argued that they are quite the opposite. Consumption and consumer culture, as seen from the historical review, are most often associated with selfishness, individuality, discarding the old for the newest and latest product/fashion/fad, and the acquisition of material goods without thought to the social context in which they are produced and distributed. In contrast, charity is about selflessness, community, and focuses on the social and human attributes that connect us all. I argue that these are attributes of charity that charitable consumption is appropriating and manipulating through discourse, leading to a marriage between charities and consumption. Moreover, the very knowledge of what it means to give and be charitable is being reorganized within the context of consumption so that to give also means to get something in return, i.e. a fashion t-shirt or a (Red) Ipod.

### **The Story of (Red) Begins: A Discourse**

The [joinred.com](http://joinred.com) website provides the consumer with a wealth of (Red) information and images that shape and define the (Red) discourse. A key artifact that lays the groundwork for the (Red) discourse is the (Red) Manifesto (see Appendix A). The Manifesto begins with the statement: “All things being equal, they are not” ([joinred.com](http://joinred.com), Manifesto). The bold statement reads as a definitive, unarguable fact and a confirmation that we live in an inequitable world where some have, while others have not. This may be quite obvious; however, what are less apparent upon first reading are the underlying assumptions that are implied: that inequality within the world is inherent, that the inequalities cannot be avoided because that is the way the world works, but despite this ‘reality’, inequalities can be balanced out through strategic, charitable

consumption. No other potential solutions are available within the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> discourse. What the manifest's statement omits from the declaration is that the inequality may, in fact, be contingent on the nature and development of consumption and consumer culture, as a development of capitalism. Hence, also rejected from the discourse is the possibility that if consumption may be a contributor to the problem of inequality, then more consumption is not a natural or logical solution and may, in fact, compound the problem! What is excluded as well from the discourse is the possibility of different, non-consumer focused solutions to the problem of AIDS in Africa.

The Manifesto goes on to tell the reader that “as First World consumers, we have tremendous power” (joined.com, Manifesto), bringing to mind knowledge about the binary opposition of the First World versus the Third World as well as associated meanings of power and affluence, duty and goodwill. First World countries and citizens are invariably associated with high standards of living, general good health, economic wealth and world power, as well as both the power and the implied duty to help those less fortunate, i.e. in the Third World. The Third World, in contrast, is associated with frailty, hunger, poverty, sickness and disease, helplessness and dependence on the benevolence of the First World. This example provides a first glimpse of the ideology of imperialism that forms part of the foundation for the logic of charitable consumption and (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, as we will see further in the next chapter. In this instance, as citizens and consumers in the privileged First World it is implied that our ‘power’ position is based on our economic and social standing in the world and is bigger than we are aware since we must be told that our power is “tremendous” (joined.com, Manifesto). The use of the

word ‘tremendous’ suggests something bigger than life, awe-inspiring, remarkable and significant.

However, just as (Product)<sup>RED</sup> empowers the consumer, it then immediately harnesses that power in the following sentence, “what we collectively choose to buy, or not to buy, can change the course of life and history on this planet” (joinred.com, Manifesto), limiting the breadth of the ‘tremendous’ power possessed by the First World consumer to purchasing power. Although the consumer’s power is limited to the power to buy or not to buy, the magnitude of the purchasing power is amplified by the exaggeration that it can “change the course of life and history on this planet,” presumably for the better (joinred.com, Manifesto). This declaration suggests that the change is limited to positive change, and excludes from the discourse any negative effects of a consumer’s purchasing decisions: increased pollution from mass production, outsourcing of production to Third World countries with cheap labour, exploitive labour practices and sweatshop labour, excessive greed, wastefulness, and materialism within First World nations. Moreover, this paragraph of the Manifesto begins to make the equation between consuming/buying products and changing the world or performing a goodwill act. The Manifesto goes on to say that “now, you [the consumer] have a choice” (joinred.com, Manifesto), putting the onus of responsibility on to the consumer. The choice becomes much bigger than whether to buy Brand X or Brand Y shoes; the choice is whether or not to “change the course of life and history on this planet” by buying (Red) (joinred.com, Manifesto). Or not.

The Gap’s website answers the question “can a T-shirt change the world?” with the assertion that theirs can (gapinc.com/red, Products). This is clearly a hyperbolic

statement but one that is significant. It communicates to the consumer a knowledge of (Red) as a meaningful, substantive, and constructive way to use personal consumption to create significant change in Africa, as well as the opportunity for personal redemption. More importantly, the implication that a T-shirt can save the world serves to further fetishize the commodity. When a commodity is fetishized, the social relations between man, his labour and the product of his labour are detached from their contexts and become abstract relations between commodities. With (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, we can see commodity fetishism at work in the stripping away of the social, human connection between a consumer in North America and a person affected by AIDS in Africa, as well as the separation of the products of labour into the separate form of a commodity. The focus of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>'s discourse is often about the products—t-shirts, iPods, cell phones, etc.—that have been ‘made’ (Red), infused with a magical ‘power’ to save lives that you, the consumer, can ‘activate’ via your purchase. This objectification of social relations by (Product)<sup>RED</sup> is also evidenced by Gap’s commitment to a “deeper level of investment in Africa by producing some of its products there” (Stein). The phrasing of this statement illustrates Marx’s conceptualization of the alienation of a worker’s labour and the end product when “the measure of the expenditure of human labour-power ... takes on the form of the magnitude of the value of the products of labour”—the commodity (*Capitol* 1976 164). In this instance, the value of the labour performed in Africa is measured by the value of the (Gap)<sup>RED</sup> t-shirts that are produced and there is no value accredited to the labour outside of the context of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> merchandise. Marx believed that “the commodity reflects the social characteristics of man’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products ... themselves” (*Capitol* 1976 164-5). In other words, the



(Product)<sup>RED</sup> t-shirts that are produced in Africa are given the characteristics of the African labour that produced them as if these characteristics were inherent to the commodity. In the end, it is the fetishized products that are the central focus of the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign; it is the t-shirt that can ‘change the world,’ and human agency is omitted from the equation.

The discourse goes on to solidify the idea that purchasing (Red) is the way to help those affected by AIDS in Africa: “if they don’t get the pills, they die. We don’t want them to die. We want to give them the pills. And we can. And you can. And it’s easy. All you have to do is upgrade your choice” to (Product)<sup>RED</sup> (joinedred.com, Manifesto). Once again, the discourse implies that the way for the consumer to become involved and support the efforts of the Global Fund is by choosing to buy (Red) products. Excluded from the discourse is the possibility that the consumer can or might rather donate to the Global Fund directly. As one of Gap’s websites proclaims, “Gap (Product)<sup>RED</sup> is about great products that can help make a difference in Africa” (gapinc.com, Home). The discourse emphasizes and limits charitable acts to acts of consumption—charity only exists within this discourse as it is experienced through the product’s consumption. Moreover, by simplifying the issue of Africans dying of AIDS to a matter of consumer choice to buy one product over another, both the AIDS pandemic and the very idea of charitable consumption are depoliticized. Absent from the discourse are the economic and political contexts that have contributed to the lack of funds, sexual and cultural education, and medicine that continue to plague African countries. With the discourse barren of political context, there is no obvious reason for the consumer to question why the responsibility falls on her/him to ‘change the world’ or ‘save dying Africans’. In fact,

the discourse does not prompt the consumer to question the multitude of reasons why AIDS victims in Africa do not have ready access to life-saving medicine nor encourage the consumer to acknowledge or consider solutions other than charitable consumption.

What is also interesting to note with (Product)<sup>RED</sup> is how it uses its discourse to shape and define itself in a new way. Mary-Beth Raddon notes that the “historically arms-length relationship between charities and funders is becoming more personal and more closely modeled on business principles” and (Product)<sup>RED</sup> reinforces this observation (43). As the Manifesto proclaims, “(Red) is not a charity. It is simply a business model” (joinred.com, Manifesto). The tone of this statement implies a negative connotation for ‘charity’—charity as an ineffective handout system looking for donations. Whereas (Red), being established in contrast as a ‘business model,’ evokes meanings of cost-effectiveness, streamlined resources, and efficiency. The business model also contrasts with traditional financial avenues for dealing with poverty and AIDS in Africa—international government aid. What the discourse is establishing here is that when dealing with a problem, such as people dying of AIDS in Africa, the best solution is not to establish a charitable organization or to turn to governmental support since neither is managed by a capitalist business model. Instead, the discourse proposes to the consumer that a business model is the most efficient and effective way to get aid to those who are sick and dying. Part of the assumption is that the business world will not tolerate wasteful use of resources and will be able to control and utilize funds more effectively in contrast to a charity which, it is assumed will operate inefficiently and ineffectively. However, what is not taken into consideration is the belief that business should not profit from partnerships in charitable endeavors or images of sick, dying people.

Other meanings generated by the discourse of (Red) are of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> as a business model as opposed to a ‘charity,’ building on the knowledge of business as innovative and forward-thinking. Gap Inc.’s website proudly announces that “this isn’t a charity; it’s a new way of doing business” ([gapinc.com/red](http://gapinc.com/red), Why We’re Red) drawing on meanings of charity as out-dated, stuffy, antiquated, and behind the times. In contrast, the discourse is associating (Product)<sup>RED</sup> with the innovative, fresh, progressive characteristics of the business world. The Global Fund’s official website emphasizes the innovative nature of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> by adding to the discourse that “(Product)<sup>RED</sup> is the first time that the world’s leading companies have made a joint commitment to channel a percentage of profits to assist in the fight against the HIV/AIDS pandemic” ([theglobalfund.org/en](http://theglobalfund.org/en), Our Partners: Private Sector: (Product)<sup>RED</sup>). This addition to the discourse heightens the sense of global scope that (Product)<sup>RED</sup> encompasses because it involves the ‘world’s leading companies,’ a phrase which adds to the sense of greatness and magnitude. In addition, the Global Fund’s website proclaims that (Product)<sup>RED</sup> “has become one of the largest consumer-based income-generating initiatives by the private sector for an international humanitarian cause” ([theglobalfund.org/en](http://theglobalfund.org/en), Our Partners: Private Sector: (Product)<sup>RED</sup>). The phrase ‘one of the largest’ can suggest in the consumer’s mind that it is also among the best, since bigger often is equated with better in capitalist ideology. Moreover, the use of the word, ‘initiative’ as opposed to project, program, enterprise or plan adds to the understanding of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> as progressive, forward-thinking, and ground-breaking.

Related to the idea of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> as a new way of doing business and charity is some of the corporate reasoning for a consumption approach to charitable giving.

(Product)<sup>RED</sup> proclaims that its purpose is “to create awareness and a sustainable flow of money from the private sector into the Global Fund” (gap.com/red, FAQs). The formation of this particular phrase suggests that the generation of awareness and publicity for the cause, as well as, by extension, the corporate partners of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> is the primary goal or reason d’être of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, whereas raising funds for the Global Fund is a secondary objective. Moreover, the choice of the word ‘sustainable’ in reference to raising funds through (Product)<sup>RED</sup> projects characteristics of longevity and stability onto the concept of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, negating any associations with fashion fads that fade over time, and fall out of vogue. When addressing why the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign was created, the reason given is “to engage the private sector, its marketing prowess and funds in the fight against AIDS in Africa” (gap.com/red, FAQs). This wording actually places emphasis on the participation of the companies, such as Gap, Converse, Apple, and Motorola, as opposed to the participation of the consumer. The wording, in this case, also makes it sound as though the money that is given to the Global Fund through (Product)<sup>RED</sup> originates from the corporations, as emphasized later in the same paragraph: “(Red) is designed to kick-start a steady flow of corporate money into the Global Fund” (gap.com/red, FAQs). It is *corporate* money, not the consumer’s money. By placing ownership of the fundraising on the corporations, it produces knowledge of the corporation as benevolent and giving—both of their marketing efforts and money. This knowledge contradicts the message previously communicated by the manifesto, examined above, where emphasis was made on how the consumer—through their power, their actions, their consumption—can save lives. This contradiction is interesting as well because it speaks so profoundly to the power of hegemony and its ability to reconcile

ideological contradictions. Furthermore, the contradiction noted above reveals an underlying truth about neoliberalism—that although it exalts the power and importance of the individual, conversely it is much more concerned with the success and well-being of corporate power and dominance.

The Manifesto further develops the discourse of (Red) as an efficient business model for charitable action, but not a charity, by describing the process as a simplified business transaction: “you buy (Red) stuff, we get the money, buy the pills and distribute them” (joinred.com, Manifesto). The first part is an oversimplification of the money route that takes place through (Product)<sup>RED</sup> since (Product)<sup>RED</sup> itself does not purchase nor distribute the antiretroviral medication in Africa. (Product)<sup>RED</sup> donates “some of its profits” (joinred.com, Manifesto) to the Global Fund, which then funnels the money through grants to other organizations that are the ones who actually purchase supplies and run programs to prevent and treat the spread of AIDS, as well as Malaria and Tuberculosis. In actuality, “(Red) never handles this money [that is raised]—it is sent directly to the Global Fund,” although the discourse often implies just the opposite (joinred.com, About: FAQ).

An interesting extension of the discourse is the discussion surrounding the significance of the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> logo and brand, and how it relates to the consumer. Colour plays a significant role in the discourse and images of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, with emphasis on the colour red. The colour has long been associated with AIDS awareness and became popularized with the birth of the Red Ribbon campaign by Visual AIDS in 1991 (Red Ribbon Deutschland, The History). Of course, the colour red is symbolic of AIDS because it is the colour of blood, and hence, serves as a reminder of how the

disease is often transmitted (gap.com/red, FAQs; Red Ribbon Deutschland, The History). The colour red is significant and was specifically chosen by those involved in the AIDS movement because “like love, [red serves] as a symbol of passion and tolerance towards those affected” by AIDS (Red Ribbon Deutschland, The History). Red was also used initially by the AIDS movement “as a sign of warning not to carelessly ignore one of the biggest problems of our time” (Red Ribbon Deutschland, The History). While the Red Ribbon campaign is now quite possibly the most widely recognizable action taken by the AIDS movement, before its conception another organization, AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), formed in 1987, was already very actively protesting and petitioning governmental agencies (ACT UP, “NYC Information”). ACT UP began and continues to function as a grassroots organization, often taking “to the streets with resistant, nonviolent tactics” (Hilderbrand 303) in a “challenge [to] anyone who, by their actions or inaction, hinders the fight against AIDS” (ACT UP, “NYC Information”). ACT UP was greatly “influenced by the African American Civil Rights Movement,” and held many demonstrations and protests against the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the United States government throughout the late 1980s (Boff par. 1). ACT UP continues to be an influential and active organization fighting for equal access to effective and affordable drugs to treat AIDS, “raising awareness about AIDS and getting the government more involved in stopping its spread” (Boff; see also Gevisser). What we see evidenced by ACT UP’s work for the AIDS campaign is that this movement has largely originated from underground, subcultural roots and focused on grassroots, community political activism. With the rise of the Red Ribbon campaign and more mainstream celebrity support, the AIDS campaign ventured into mainstream culture, yet

still kept its subcultural meanings and alternative image. Now with the emergence of the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign, the alternative meanings and identities that were integral to the AIDS campaign have been appropriated, stripped of their subcultural meanings, and have become über-mainstream.

The colour red continues to be used as an iconic symbol of AIDS and for the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign because “(Red) is the color [sic] of emergency ... it’s powerful and it inspires action” (joinred.com, About: FAQ). However, much of the meanings associated with the colour red in relation to AIDS activism have been appropriated: red is also associated with passion, sexiness, and strength, and these meanings and characteristics of the colour that are often be associated with the products of the (Red) campaign. Moreover, the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign is, in effect, appropriating and re-branding the colour red so that the primary associations are more specifically linked to the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign’s fight for AIDS. Now the colour “red is not (Red) ... unless it has the embrace around the word (Red) or around the partner logo” (joinred.com, About: FAQ). The parentheses mimic a loving embrace around the word red, communicating iconically the compassion and empathy of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>. “Each company that becomes (Red) places its logo in this embrace and is then elevated to the power of red” symbolically placing the partner brands within the compassionate embrace of (Red) and making them appear more humane and benevolent through association (joinred.com, About: ?).

Not only does the discourse of (Red) ‘amplify’ the partner brands to the “power of (Red),” it encourages consumers to “take your purchase to the power of (Red) ... [and] take your own fine self to the power of (Red)” (joinred.com, About:?). The narrative

creates the impression that both the products and the consumer—through consumption of (Red) products—can become a better, (Red)der version of themselves. This builds on a theme already evident in the history of consumption that continually suggests to consumers that you can become a ‘better’ and ‘improved’ version of yourself through the consumption of certain brand items. In the words of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, “what better way to become a good-looking Samaritan” than to consume (Red) items (joinred.com, About: ?)? The discourse depicts the consumer of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> not as a Good Samaritan but as a *good-looking Samaritan*, emphasizing that consumption of (Red) commodities is just as much about presenting a specific image of oneself to others as consumption of any other brand name product. In the end, even (Product)<sup>RED</sup>’s website blatantly reminds us that “giving isn’t the reason to buy a (Product)<sup>RED</sup> product. It is simply built into the product and the act of purchasing these products” (joinred.com, About: FAQ). The discourse created by (Product)<sup>RED</sup> appears to be confirming that (Product)<sup>RED</sup> is not about performing authentically charitable acts or giving selflessly to those in need, it is at its heart about consuming products and creating an image or identity through one’s consumption choices, with the added bonus of making a small difference in the world. (Product)<sup>RED</sup>’s discourse validates for the consumer that it is okay to substitute charitable consumption in place of authentic charitable giving.

Of course, any allegation that (Product)<sup>RED</sup>’s brand of charitable consumption is merely taking advantage of a growing obsession of the population with consumerism to sell more ‘things’ is met with the response that “we’re [i.e. consumers are] going to buy this stuff anyway, [so] we might as well do a little good with our shopping dollars” (Wallace Gadabout 2). As stated in the (Red) Manifesto, one of the founding principles



of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> is the idea that, when given the choice, consumers will “choose (Red) over non-(Red)” products and services (joinred.com). Marketing professionals are recognizing that “consumers increasingly want their time and money to contribute to society in some way, beyond just simply buying products,” making charitable consumption campaigns like (Product)<sup>RED</sup> seem like a logical next step in consumerism (Gordon 2). After all, “activism is the new chic, and we the consumers, have become the new activists—saving the world one credit-card transaction at a time” (Bennett 2). Charitable consumption is taking the consumer’s underlying desire to ‘do good’ and ‘make a difference’ in the world and is commercializing that desire, packaging it up in an easy to buy, ready to wear consumer product.

The whole reasoning behind charitable consumption and cause-related marketing is to capitalize on the consumer’s mentality that “‘if I’m already going to buy something, why wouldn’t I buy the thing that gives back?’” (Bennett 3) and aims to “incorporate charity in everyday life” (Baage 1). Where is the harm in that? There does appear to be some amount of logic and seeming naturalness of this idea that we, as consumers, are going to buy and consume products anyways, so why should we not have the option of choosing to consume charitably? The ‘logic’ of capitalism and consumption further supports the commodity fetishism of charitable consumption. By fetishizing all that is (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, perceived value and power is embedded into these products beyond what the commodity physically contains in itself. Assumedly, part of the logic that charitable consumption is drawing on derives from the perceived knowledge that a capitalist consumer culture is the ‘natural’ or inherent organization of the world—both economically and socially. If the world can only naturally be organized within a

capitalist, consumption-focused system, then the knowledge ‘naturally’ follows that the solutions to problems of poverty or disease are resolvable through further capitalism and consumption. The danger in charitable consumption may lie in the possibility that consumers are consuming just for the sake of consuming—because “the more you spend, the more you give” (Baage 1). Is there an invisible line that separates making critical consumption choices that do more good with less harm to the public at large, and using charity as false justification for rampant, selfish consumption patterns? If so, do charitable consumption campaigns such as (Product)<sup>RED</sup> merely toe this invisible line, or cross it? One way for a consumer to determine the answer to this question may be to recognize whether one is choosing to consume charitable products in addition to or in replacement of becoming directly involved in all other charities through volunteerism and direct donation. Another action that the consumer might take is to critically examine and evaluate transparency and effectiveness or true impact that a particular charitable consumption campaign possesses before ‘buying’ in to marketing.

### **Reconsider(RED): Reflections**

Through this initial examination of the corporate discourses associated with the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign, a pattern is emerging that shows how the systems of representation and meanings surround consumption and consumer culture are being transformed to include meanings of charity through consumption. It is clear that the conceptualization and practice of hegemony plays a critical role in the advancement of charitable consumption. Gramsci argued that hegemony is the process through which a minority group gains ideological dominance over a majority using consent. As a result of the consensual nature of hegemony, it is also historically unstable and in constant

transition. When considering the current historical context in which charitable consumption is emerging, the dominant ideology that informs the discourse is the ideology of neoliberalism. The choice of language within the discourse often draws on knowledge and understanding of the world from a neoliberalist perspective that supports and validates the concept of charitable consumption as a logical progression of neoliberal capitalist society. Furthermore, the logic of neoliberalism sets up charitable consumption not only as the logical solution but also as the best solution to problems of poverty and disease within the Third World.

What I have found while examining the discourses associated with charitable consumption and (Product)<sup>RED</sup> is that there are not only contradictions inherent to the union of charity and consumption, but there are also contradictions that emerge directly from the discourse itself. As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, there are no innate connections between the conflicting concepts of charity and consumption. Charity focuses on the betterment of the populace as a whole, sacrifice for the greater good, and selfless giving of oneself. Consumption gravitates towards the single-minded pursuit of individual desires and wants, and both are often achieved through the attainment of ‘things’ and products. (Product)<sup>RED</sup> is able to smooth over these opposing ideas and creates an impression for the consumer that they can ‘have their cake and eat it too’—i.e. they can consume endlessly and guiltlessly by choosing to consume charitably. This logic is built into much of the discourses surrounding (Product)<sup>RED</sup> and reinforces the idea that as members of a consumer-based culture, we are going to consume products anyway so the next logical step in consumption patterns is to choose charitable

consumption that will benefit those less fortunate while meeting our immediate individual needs and desires.

The other paradox that emerges from the discourse is in the language that denotes ownership of the campaign, and monies raised, and the impact of it. Initially, the discourse focuses solely on the consumer and the impact that the *individual* can make through their consumption choices. Here, ownership of the power and potential impact of charitable consumption through (Product)<sup>RED</sup> belongs directly to the individual consumer. However, as I continued my analysis, I discovered a shift in the language that takes this ownership away from the consumer and places it into the realm of the corporation. The language here is centred on the impact that the *corporations* are making through their involvement in this campaign partnership and speaks about what will be achieved through (Product)<sup>RED</sup> with the *corporation's* money. This is in complete opposition to the discourse that previously spoke of the power that each consumer's purchases had to 'change the course of history.' Because hegemony is neither static nor singular in purpose, it effectively eliminates the contradictions within the discourse by allowing each of these 'truths' to coexist on different levels. On one level it is true that the money belongs to the corporations, since it originates from the revenues and sales of their products, and so it follows that the *corporation* is impacting people in Africa through (Product)<sup>RED</sup>. On the other hand, of course the consumer is the original source of the monies given to the Global Fund, and so it follows that the true ownership of the powerful impact of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> belongs to the *consumer*, not the corporation. These aforementioned incongruous associations of achievement are accepted partly through an appropriation of the meanings and symbolism used by the AIDS movement.

The next chapter will continue to explore the discourses created by (Product)<sup>RED</sup> with a focus on the role of celebrity culture in the validation and reinforcement of the meanings created by charitable consumption discourses. *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Vanity Fair's* Africa issue, and some of the significant celebrity faces of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> that contribute to the promotion, knowledge and creation of meaning systems belonging to charitable consumption will be examined. Attention will be given to how commodity fetishism occurs within these discursive events via the celebrity.

## Chapter 4: Wizards of Media and the (Red) Brick Road

When contemplating today's consumer culture and the discourses it produces, it would be unwise to ignore the prevalent and important role that popular media and celebrity images play. Advertising has in the past been the primary site of meaning and image creation for commodities and services. However, in today's media saturated culture, advertisements per se are not the sole location for the formation of images and meaning—all forms of media have become increasingly concerned with both images and image production, especially in relation to promotion. Moreover, media production and promotional culture are so interwoven that they are inseparable; media needs promotional culture to sell its products and promotional culture requires continuous media production. As noted by Andrew Wernick, "advertising is certainly only one aspect of a wider process of cultural commodification" that, in the broader sense, includes 'promotion' as a "type of speech and ... whole communicative function ... associated with a much broader range of signifying materials than just advertisements *stricto sensu*" (181). (Product)<sup>RED</sup> especially relies on multiple media outlets, a promotional mode of communication, as well as on established celebrity personas to reinforce the connotations that are associated with the campaign's form of charitable consumption. The media outlets, specifically *Vanity Fair* issue and *The Oprah Winfrey* episode that will be examined in this chapter, draw heavily on the associations and impressions that consumers already have of established celebrity figures. These figures use their image and influence to reinforce the meanings shaped by the discourses which were analyzed in the previous chapter, and impact the consumer's perception of charitable consumption and (Product)<sup>RED</sup>. Celebrity

and promotional culture privilege conceptions of the individual over that of the community, and reinforce the ideological system of capitalism/consumption. It becomes apparent when examining (Product)<sup>RED</sup> that the use of celebrities is crucial to the communication and justification of the very premise of charitable consumption: that responsibility and power to affect change rests in the individual consumer, not in the community of citizens. Without the use of celebrity, the contradictions within the concept of charitable consumption could become apparent, and consumers could potentially view the idea more critically. Instead, the celebrity allows for a seamless fusion of selfish consumption with selfless charity and political change through charitable consumption campaigns such as (Product)<sup>RED</sup>.

Furthermore, Sean Redmond argues that “the consumption of commodities by stars and celebrities serves another ... cultural function: they fuel a general desire among people for such commodities and they promise the ‘good life’ for all if such commodities are indeed purchased” (30). With the phenomenon of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, this ‘promise of a good life for all’ is taken beyond the consumer to also include other, indirect, benefactors of one’s consumption: Africans affected by HIV/AIDS. This chapter will illustrate the significance and power of promotion in consumer culture, vis-à-vis the role of the celebrity. In addition, this chapter will establish how celebrity and promotion are critical components to (Product)<sup>RED</sup>’s positioning of charitable consumption.

### **Celebrity Culture and the Importance of Being Celeb-(Red)-y**

The celebrity culture literature spans a broad expanse of topics ranging from identity creation and the star system, the role of celebrities in religion, politics, the public sphere, beauty and body image, as well as the production and authenticity of celebrities.

Much like consumer culture, celebrity culture is a ubiquitous phenomenon that appears to function within many facets of every day life and as an integral, often inseparable, part of consumer culture itself. Sean Redmond argues “that fame [and celebrity are] ... a meta-discourse that shapes, in profound and meaningful ways, social and everyday life” (27). Images of celebrities saturate popular culture and mainstream media so that, to varying degrees, we all use these celebrity images and identities to gauge our ‘cool- quotient’ or status in society.

P. David Marshall suggests that “celebrity culture could be thought of as emblematic of a new form of ideological colonization” in the sense that celebrities are used to reinforce the dominant ideology of consumer culture (*Celebrity Culture Reader* 6). Marshall’s idea is supported by the argument that “the commodified celebrity peddles the myth of the autonomous individual and the value of consumption for a full and happy life” (Redmond 38-9). The concept of a ‘celebrity’ is decidedly modern in both nature and form that developed alongside democracy and capitalism “as a concept of the individual [that] moves effortlessly in a celebration of democratic capitalism (Marshall, *Celebrity and Power* 4). The celebrity demonstrates for the modern individual the values and traits one should possess, the potential power and influence one does possess, and emphasizes the autonomy of the individual. As Marshall contends, “the celebrity embodies the empowerment of the people to shape the public sphere symbolically” by serving as a metaphor for and extension of the private individual in the larger realm of the public arena (7). It is this infusion of empowerment that is also attributed to the individual via the ideology of consumerism. And so, the influence of the celebrity can be seen in fashion, where celebrities dictate what style trends are to be desired and



mimicked by the masses. In politics, we see celebrities being used more and more often to reinforce, support, and promote the popularity of candidates. Similarly, charities also use celebrity spokespersons to support and authenticate the importance and deservedness of a particular cause or aid organization. As we will see further in this chapter, (Product) <sup>RED</sup> intersects these three subjects—fashion, politics, and charity—and uses celebrities to promote and give credence to its cause, purpose, and methods, as well as to validate the role of the celebrity figure and the individual in society.

Celebrities play an important and interesting role in consumer culture generally and within the discourse of (Product) <sup>RED</sup> specifically. On one hand, the celebrity figure is a commodity in and of itself—“treated by the larger media industry as a brand to sell and market films” and other media products through interviews and promotional appearances (Marshall, *Celebrity Culture Reader* 6). However, even as celebrity identities and personas are branded and sold as commodities themselves, they are simultaneously used as pawns to market and sell other brands and commodities. It goes beyond acting as a spokesperson for a product or service to the point where “the iconic faces and perfect bodies of the celebrated [are] attached to a brand that fuses their values together” in perfect synergy of promotion and hype (Redmond 29).

Lisa Ann Richely and Stephane Ponte first argued the importance of the celebrity figure to the (Product) <sup>RED</sup> brand of charitable consumption. They describe the role of the celebrity as a type of mediator that “negotiate[s] the interface between shopping and helping” for the consumer (Richely and Ponte 1). As we will see further in this chapter, celebrities are used by (Product) <sup>RED</sup> to reinforce the meaning system created by the various discourses in part because the celebrity figure has a unique power in our culture

that, to borrow from Richely and Ponte, is truly ‘totemic.’ That is to say that the celebrity is revered and given a status in today’s society that is akin to that of religious icons. As a result of this highly venerated status that celebrities have, “legitimacy in the process of conscientious consumption is guaranteed by aid celebrities” (Richely and Ponte 10). For Richely and Ponte, the charitable consumption of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> “is based on ‘celebrity validation’, which is based on personal capacity” and authenticity of the ‘aid celebrities’ is used to promote and validate the campaign (10). They identify three main aid celebrities in the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign: Bono, politically-minded and outspoken rock star, Jeffery Sachs, a high-profile economist, and Dr. Paul Farmer, a physician and (Product)<sup>RED</sup>’s medical expert on AIDS/HIV (Richely and Ponte 12-16). The “field experiences [of the aid celebrities] are recounted as narrative devices in various and dissimilar publications” and are a critical tool for the validation of charitable consumption as a method of charity and global aid to Africa (Richely and Ponte 12).

(Product)<sup>RED</sup> is an interesting illustration of how although “celebrities are not powerful in any overt political sense, some may possess political influence [and] others exercise their power in less politically defined ways” (Marshall, *Celebrity and Power* xi). Buying a simple t-shirt becomes a politically charged act on the part of the consumer-citizen partly by virtue of its symbolism for the fight against AIDS in Africa, but also via the connections made to specific celebrity personas—some of whom, such as Bono, will be examined further in this chapter. In addition, it is important to note that “celebrity status also confers on the person a certain discursive power: within our modern culture, the celebrity is a voice above others, a voice that is channeled into the media systems as being legitimately significant,” privileged, and authenticating (Marshall, *Celebrity and*

*Power* x). And so based on the reputation and fame of their celebrity spokespeople alone, the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign, and any other campaign or product/service, can appear to be validated as authentic and reasonable.

### **What's in a Name? Instant C(Red)entials**

Merely by changing the celebrity personality spokesperson for a product, a company can alter the meanings and values associated with the brand name. The characteristics attributed to a particular celebrity become transposed with the values and attributes attached to a brand name or specific product, which then circle back and reflect meaning on the celebrity again. P. David Marshall remarks on this process and says that “as in Foucault’s interpretation of the author, the celebrity is a way in which meaning can be housed and categorized into something that provides a source and origin for the meaning” (*Celebrity and Power* 57). This transfer of meaning is clearly seen when a celebrity is used to endorse a product or campaign like (Product)<sup>RED</sup> where one of the most politically influential celebrities associated with (Product)<sup>RED</sup> is Bono, lead singer of the rock band, *U2*. When we consider the meanings that have been attributed to and housed within the celebrity of Bono through his past public involvement in social causes, politics, and his music, some of the values that come to mind are of unconventionality, political consciousness and modern activism. By endorsing and promoting (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, Bono becomes a source of meaning for this charitable consumption campaign, transferring the values of being alternative, politically conscious and involved, as well as cutting edge, modern innovative thought onto the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> identity.

While some musicians could easily be accused of being superficial, materialistic or ignorant of social issues, it is doubtful that Bono would ever be included in that list. In

fact, Bono and his band, *U2*, are well-known for having “produced overtly political songs ... and have dedicated their albums to various political causes” in an effort to raise awareness and sway popular opinion (Drake and Higgins 90). Bono has cultivated a reputation as a socially conscious celebrity who uses his celebrity to give voice to those who don’t have access to media outlets. He has especially become known as an advocate for Africa—frequently speaking out against poverty and AIDS—and “his image [is] as someone who holds political views and has a history of putting them into action” (Drake and Higgins 91). In addition to being involved in the creation and promotion of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, Bono has also played a role in the creation establishment of DATA (Debt, AIDS, Trade, Africa)—he is often portrayed as the very public face of these organizations (joinred.com, FAQs: Bono’s Involvement). As the co-founder of DATA, Bono attended the 2005 G8 Summit in a highly publicized persuasion campaign to convince world leaders to pledge more aid funds to Africa and to forgive a significant amount of their debt; unfortunately, two years after he praised world leaders for their commitments to Africa, Bono found himself criticizing these same leaders for their broken promises when aid commitments were not met (Button; *Environmental News Service*). It is because of his very public activism for Africa, Chad E. Seales says that “fans and members of the popular press have labeled him a ‘Rock ‘n’ Roll Messiah” who preaches his political message of ‘hope’ to the world (4).

In addition to Bono, another very political celebrity who endorses (Product)<sup>RED</sup> is Oprah Winfrey, host of the daily talk show *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, media mogul and philanthropist. Magubane notes that “the general public, the news media, and government and political leaders have also recognized Oprah and Bono as celebrity

statesmen—in part because of the size and impact of their philanthropy and in part because [they possess] a certain legitimacy that other celebrities lack” (5). Magubane connects the aura of authenticity that Oprah and Bono have to the references that these celebrities often make to their personal history. Oprah connects her philanthropic motivation to the impoverished childhood that she has overcome, as well as to the professional and personal challenges she faces as an African American woman. Bono, on the other hand, identifies with the plight of Africans by equating their colonial struggles to his childhood in a religiously and politically fractured Ireland. Each of these celebrities has achieved a high profile level of fame through their success and longevity within their chosen forms of media and entertainment, and they are just as well-known for their philanthropic endeavors with charities and social causes. This blending of traditional fame with socially conscious reputations make Oprah and Bono uniquely matched to the mixed purposes and methods of the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> enterprise. As P. David Marshall argues, “celebrities are manifestations of the organization of culture in terms of democracy and capitalism ... [and] their ability to act as discursive vehicles for the expression of such key ideologies as individuality or new consumer collective identities” (*Celebrity and Power* 246-7). What this means is that celebrities, such as Bono and Oprah, speak directly to consumers in a way that the celebrity identity is used as a model and representation of a collective identity for all consumers, and in the case of charitable consumption, Oprah and Bono are role models for a new consumer identity, that of the charitable consumer.

Beyond her reputation as “the most influential woman in American entertainment today,” Oprah proves to be an interesting personality because there is also an air of

intimacy and personal connection with her audience that is unique to her roots in television (Cole and Andrews 345). Since we, as an audience, most often view television from our homes, this “point of consumption has meant that its images have been integrated somewhat into the everyday and the domestic flow of life” (Marshall, *New Media* 636). As a result, Oprah is the type of celebrity figure that is larger than life because of the extent of her fame while at the same time, she connects personally to her audience in such down to earth manner that she also can be viewed as a personal confidante or trusted friend. Partly because of Oprah’s ability to gain so completely the trust and admiration of her audience, her talk show, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and the opinions that she expresses on the show carry an immense amount of power and influence. For example, Oprah’s influence on her audience’s consumption patterns is clearly evident when one looks at the success of her monthly book club: “every volume featured so far has gone on to make the bestsellers lists” (Moran 336). As we will see further in the analysis of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Oprah’s manner of speaking tends towards the hyperbolic—she makes emphatic declarations and “inspiring insights that resonate with the mainstream sensibilities,” making her involvement in the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign significant (Cole and Andrews 345).

Another interesting aspect of Oprah’s celebrity is her status and identification with “those members of society that are generally excluded from positions of power” and “as [an] indefatigable champion of nonelites [sic]” (Marshall, *Celebrity and Power* 140). As such, Oprah is both seen as someone belonging to the category of the ‘other’, and she also serves as an example and inspiration to marginalized people since she has successfully overcome the obstacles of gender, race, and poverty. P. David Marshall

argues that her social position as an ‘outsider’ leads to Oprah’s efforts “to present the various discourses of the excluded and marginalized in the social world [and] to determine how they can be reintegrated into the social mainstream” (*Celebrity and Power* 140-1). Oprah has cemented her identity as the public champion for the underdog through her philanthropic activities as well as through the programming topics of her talk show, which she approaches “from a point of involvement and commitment to social responsibility” (Marshall, *Celebrity and Power* 141). Keeping her public persona in mind, it is a fitting match for Oprah to partner with the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign and use her show to help launch the public relations blitz.

### **Oprah Rolls out a (Red) Carpet for Bono and Friends**

While the websites of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> discussed previously in this paper are critical sites of discourse for this specific example of charitable consumption, equally important for analysis is the *The Oprah Winfrey Show* episode, “Oprah and Bono Paint the Town ‘Red,’” which was the media launch site for the 2006 North American debut of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>. Oprah Winfrey is well known as the media queen of her self-built media empire, as an African American woman who became successful despite her impoverished beginning, and, importantly, as a generous philanthropist and champion of the underdog. It is, I would argue, no coincidence that (Product)<sup>RED</sup> made its North American debut on Oprah’s acclaimed talk show, with its large and devoted audience. For most consumers, *Oprah* was their first introduction to the phenomena of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, thus the transcript of this particular episode is of great importance to the examination and understanding of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>’s discourse.

The “Paint the Town ‘Red’” episode opens with an in-studio interview with Bono that is interposed with a video clip of a trip by Bono to medical clinic in Africa where he speaks to HIV Positive children. Bono and Oprah then leave the studio to go shopping on Chicago’s famous Michigan Avenue, a.k.a. the Magnificent Mile. While they are shopping for (Product)<sup>RED</sup> items, they view a Gap (Product)<sup>RED</sup> fashion show in the Gap store that features Christy Turlington, well-known fashion model, and Penelope Cruz, movie star, as models. Bono and Oprah leave the Gap to continue shopping at other (Product)<sup>RED</sup> partnered stores and receive a ‘surprise’ phone call from Kanye West, successful rapper/singer, who is ‘conveniently’ down the street at the Motorola store (another (Product)<sup>RED</sup> partnered company). Each of the celebrities that Oprah and Bono meet during their shopping excursion endorse (Product)<sup>RED</sup> with their personal celebrity ‘stamp of approval’. After Bono and Oprah conclude their (Red) shopping spree, Oprah returns to the studio conducts an interview with Alicia Keys, Grammy-winning singer and global ambassador for “Keep a Child Alive.” “Keep a Child Alive” is a foundation that receives traditional donations from individuals and uses the funds to supply anti-retroviral medication to children in Africa infected with HIV/AIDS. Oprah’s interview with Keys is interposed twice with video clips of Keys visiting Africa. Bono reappears to close out the episode with a duet performance with Keys of their song “Don’t Give up Africa”.

Oprah’s introduction of each of her celebrity guests accentuates, and sometimes authenticates, their fame, significance and cultural power. For example, in Oprah’s introduction of Bono she refers to him as “the reigning king of hope” and then follows up with his ‘celebrity credentials’: his band, *U2*, had recently won multiple Grammys, Bono



was a nominee “for the Nobel Peace Prize and was also named one of *Time* magazine’s Persons of the Year” (*Oprah* 1). The success and popularity of Bono’s band speaks to the level of fame and celebrity that Bono has achieved, while the Nobel Peace Prize nomination and the Person of the Year award both speak to the depth and substance of his persona. In other words, Bono is not just another rock star; he is also a man of relevance and action beyond the pop music world. By Oprah’s logic, Bono is “the greatest rocker in the world, [and] ... could be sitting back ... yet [he] has the passion to try to change the world” (*Oprah* 3). An interesting implication of this logic is that it suggests that modern celebrity or fame does not have social responsibility necessarily ‘built in,’ and that celebrities that step outside their traditional role of celebrityhood to speak out or take action in favour of a social cause should be admired for being a Good Samaritan. However, Oprah’s comments also suggest that, by using his fame and influence to inspire and affect change in the world, Bono is doing the proper or ‘right’ thing.

Similarly, Oprah introduces another guest, musician Alicia Keys, as “a nine-time Grammy winner ... [who] has taken the continent of Africa into her heart in a very big way” (*Oprah* 23). Again, Oprah first speaks to the authenticity of Keys’ celebrity and fame—as a nine-time Grammy winner—and then legitimizes her as a ‘celebrity of substance’ through her connection to African aid and assistance. There is also an interesting choice of words in Oprah’s hyperbolic statement that is unlike the framing of Bono. The fact that Keys’ “has taken the *continent of Africa into her heart*” draws on images of motherly, compassionate women comforting a child—the entire continent of Africa. Africa is often portrayed in imperialist terms as being the proverbial little brother, always trying to ‘catch up’ to its First World big brother who is viewed as more

advanced, forward-thinking, and cultured, in addition to often being portrayed as having the ‘task’ of helping out and saving Africa. This analogy is emphasized earlier in the program when Bono states that “lots of people here in the United States have been trying to deal with the problems of Africa, you know, in a very serious way” (*Oprah* 1).

When examining the (Red) campaign and other similar charitable consumption initiatives, it is interesting to note that the imagery and discussion is almost exclusively of the celebrity spokespeople, not of the subjects of the aid: sick and impoverished Africans. Sharon Fain makes this observation in her analysis of the ONE campaign against poverty: “celebrities are the focal point. They are the ones who speak on behalf of the poor, mediating between the American audience and the poor other. The faces (and voices) of the poor are largely absent” (3). Advertisements for (Gap)<sup>RED</sup> in the (Red) *Vanity Fair* issue feature high profile celebrities wearing (Red) clothing, and make no mention of the Africans infected with HIV/AIDS who need medicine. Instead, these multi-page advertisements tell the reader that “every generation has a voice ... a heart... [and] can change the world” or that “meaning is the new luxury,” and you should “be a good-looking Samaritan” (*Vanity Fair* 1-5, 135, 137). Some of the only direct images and discussion of those directly affected by the charitable consumption of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> is a photo feature and article that displays photos of Africans who are infected with HIV/AIDS before they received anti-retroviral medication and after their treatment had begun. These photos use black and white photography, shadows, and stark camera angles to accentuate their illness in the before photos, and contrast that sharply with colour photography and light to emphasis their improved health after receiving the ARV drugs (*Vanity Fair* 156-161).

The *Vanity Fair* issue is also filled primarily with celebrities' images and personal accounts of Africa. Among the multitude of African narratives provided, some include the stories of Africa that each of the twenty-one celebrities that are featured on the twenty different covers made for this issue was selected because of a personal connection that they had with Africa. Some, like Barrack Obama (then Senator) and supermodel Iman, have familial and ethnic roots in Africa, others have been involved politically in Africa, like then President George W. Bush, or have become invested in activism and aid efforts for Africa, like actor Brad Pitt (*Vanity Fair* 45-56). Again, we see that when the magazine does present images of African citizens, they are of 'clean,' 'sanitized,' and 'civilized' Africans that are meant to represent the "spirit of Africa" and "the continent's hidden wealth"—including a president, a singer, an artist, a journalist, a soccer team, economists, and religious leaders (176-197).

The representation and portrayal of female celebrities as 'mothers' or 'motherly' is a theme that reoccurs both within the *Oprah* episode, as well as within the *Vanity Fair* issue. For the *Vanity Fair* issue, there were twenty different cover photos, all of which were photographed by the famous photographer Annie Leibovitz. In crediting Leibovitz in his 'Guest Editor's Letter,' Bono describes her as a "devoted mother" first and foremost and it implies that her identity or sense of worth is dependant on her identity as a mother, not as a talented and highly successful professional photographer (32). Later on when model Christy Turlington is introduced during Oprah's shopping spree, the discourse of her public persona focuses on her personal identity as "a mother of two" (*Oprah* 12). When she speaks, Turlington uses her role as a mother to frame the philanthropic aspect of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>'s mission saying that as a mother, the concept of

being unable to “give ... their children medicine, [or get] medicine for themselves to take care of their children is just unfathomable” (*Oprah* 12). What Turlington’s appearance and speech achieve is to draw attention towards the humanitarian aspect of the (Product) <sup>RED</sup> campaign and associates those images with the clothing she’s modeling. In this way, the T-shirts and the pins are more than just fashionable pieces; they are fetishized with the power to provide medication to Africans with AIDS/HIV and save lives.

Interestingly, much like the familial metaphors, some of Bono’s remarks also draw on ideals of imperialism and capitalist democracy as a way to save Africa and Africans. Bono points out to Oprah that some of the (Product) <sup>RED</sup> items are “made by people who, if you like, in these factories [in Africa] ... are, by making Red stuff, are paying for their own healthcare, and that’s—and that’s really powerful. There’s a dignity there in ... working” (*Oprah* 8). Capitalist-neoliberal ideology is clearly evident in the idea that the Africans receiving aid via (Product) <sup>RED</sup> are ‘earning’ their keep by helping to produce (Red) products—ironically enough made in factories found in developing countries. Bono’s statement also draws on a stereotype of aid to Africa not being used efficiently, and as such, Africans do not deserve ‘free’ aid but should earn it in some manner. There is also the ideology of the American Dream evidenced in the idea of helping poor, sick Africans help themselves become better, healthier people by working and, again, ‘earning’ their healthcare. In the *Vanity Fair* ‘Guest Editor’s Letter,’ Bono declares that what Africa needs is “a leg up, not a handout” and implies that through democracy, and capitalism, the citizens of Africa can better themselves through hard work and opportunity (32). Zine Magubane recently argued that (Product) <sup>RED</sup> adheres to an imperialist/colonial ideology that has historically and presently “married philanthropy

and consumerism [and] the bridge or balance between the two [has] always [been] economic empowerment” (10). Historically, colonialism was a philanthropic and religious mission to civilize, educate and modernize a ‘backwards’ people. Today, charitable consumption is presenting a new philanthropic mission to ‘save the world’ and eradicate HIV/AIDS via the modern ‘religion’ of consumption.

The idea that Africans are able to better themselves through their labour echoes findings by Anne McClintock in her study of early brand advertising of soap. She found that within the developing consumer culture and promotional culture of the early nineteenth century there were “emergent middle class values ... [including] industrial capital (‘clean’ money, which has value) ... and the imperial civilizing mission (‘washing and clothing the savage’)” (129). As McClintock points out, there is a “history of European attempts to impose a commodity economy on African cultures” and make them more ‘civilized’ (131). (Product)<sup>RED</sup> seems to fall back into this old pattern of trying to ‘help’ Africa by reforming it into a democratic, consumer-based society. Whereas the nineteenth century advertising spoke of the ‘magical’ (racial) cleansing potential of soap, today, (Product)<sup>RED</sup> infuses (Red) “T-shirts and some other stuff” with the ability to “change the world” and empower working Africans (*Oprah* 7-8). The (Red) products are “more than merely *symbol[s]* of imperial progress ... [they have] become the *agent* of history itself” affecting fundamental changes seemingly “without process or social agency” (McClintock 141). Combine the fetishization of (Red) products with the insinuation that Africans are “incapable of themselves actually engendering change,” and the ideology of imperialism is used to justify and validate the need to ‘save’ Africa (McClintock 143). As Magubane charges, (Product)<sup>RED</sup>’s motivation is to “create a class

of Western consumers who will ‘save Africa’” through the only sustainable means, consumerism (13).

Another trend in the use of celebrities within the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign is to use their personal experiences and travels to Africa as storytelling. Once again, this storytelling/ethnography draws its roots from the traditions of early missionaries and ideology of imperialism. Even in the nineteenth century, “missionaries were very strategic in how they staged, packaged, and disseminated images of African suffering” because how their messages were received by the Western world affected the amount that these missionaries were able to fundraise for their missions (Magubane 11). The conscious framing of stories of Africa continues today through the tales told by celebrities, who “can be seen as modern day missionaries who are also engaged in a process of image building through philanthropy” (Magubane 4). As Bono states in his ‘Guest Editor’s Letter,’ he “needed help in describing the continent of Africa as an opportunity, as adventure, not a burden” to the consumers of the Western world (*Vanity Fair* 32). Several times within the *Oprah Winfrey Show* episode on (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, the interviews are interposed with video diaries of trips to Africa made by both Bono and Alicia Keys. One video clip tells of Bono’s visit “to a clothing factory in Lesotho, Africa, where they make the signature Red Gap T-shirts” (*Oprah* 3). In this particular clip, Africans infected with HIV/AIDS are used as ‘props’ and speak of the challenges, poverty and lack of food they experience, even if they are able to obtain the medications that they need (*Oprah* 4). In another video clip, Alicia Keys is shown visiting a medical clinic in Mombasa, Africa, where families are treated for HIV/AIDS. Keys speaks with a mother and son who are HIV-positive and are responding well to treatment, as well as

with the doctors of a seventeen year old boy who did not begin treatment until he was fourteen and is too sick to attend school (*Oprah* 23-4). Each of these video clips communicates the urgency and need that exists for medication and money in the style of a promotional documentary. These clips are consumed by the viewer as fascinating snapshots of a foreign culture, while also reinforcing and promoting the *raison d'être* of the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign and serving as motivation for the consumer to go out and buy (Red). These clips also reinforce the legitimacy and effectiveness of the campaign through the use of 'authentic' celebrities who are visibly committed to the cause.

Throughout the rest of the episode, it becomes apparent that Oprah's conversations with Bono and other celebrities complement and authenticate the messages that were previously examined within the web-discourses surrounding (Product)<sup>RED</sup>. One of the first discourses brought up in the conversation between Bono and Oprah surround the conceptualization of the consumer becoming an 'activist' through (passive) consumption of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> commodities and the justification for this logic. Bono, in describing how (Product)<sup>RED</sup> came to be, states that "not everybody has the time to be an activist ... you know, or put on the marching boots" (*Oprah* 1). The image that he paints with his words is somewhat amusing because he implies that being an activist precludes any activity outside of marching the streets in protest. And so Bono creates for the consumer the possibility of participating in civic action and community activism even if one is unable to take to the streets or go to Africa—all you have to do is take 'action' through your personal consumption and buy (Red). Bono continues by saying that "we [he and Bobby Shriver] said, 'Well, how are we going to get the shopping malls involved? How are we going to get to where people live and shop?'" (*Oprah* 1-2).

Though there is no explanation given during the episode for why he considers shopping malls so significant to involving consumers, nor why it is important to involve people as *consumers* and not as *citizens* in the traditional sense. However, this focus on the consumer illustrates the transition from citizen in the traditional sense to a new configuration that charitable consumption discourse generates of the consumer as an active citizen who impacts and changes the world through their individual consumption choices. This interestingly coincides with P. David Marshall's argument that "individuality is one of the ideological mainstays of consumer capitalism where, through consumption, we as individuals can have the ... [impression or feeling] of transformation and change *and* the sensation of choice and possibility" (*New Media* 635). Bono has garnered a reputation for himself in recent years as a celebrity who uses "his fortune and fame [to marshal] the forces available to someone in his position in a serious crusade for debt cancellation and for eradication of HIV/AIDS in Africa" (*Vanity Fair* 28). Bono's celebrity persona as a result is one of action, change and hope.

Bono also reiterates the desire of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> to 'earn' money as a business venture and not ask for 'handouts' when he says, "look, we don't want to turn up on your [Oprah's] show and ask people to write another check [sic] for charity" (*Oprah* 2). This statement echoes the negative connotations attached to traditional forms of charity fundraising that were identified and examined in the previous chapter. Kanye West remarks later in the show that he "likes new ideas. [(Product)<sup>RED</sup> is] not just like a regular charity where you're just asking people for money" (*Oprah* 17). (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, via its celebrity spokespeople, convinces consumers that "by just buying a T-shirt, a pair of jeans, even a cell phone, you can actually begin to save lives" (*Oprah* 5). It is about



the individual using their consumer buying power to ‘save’ lives, and equating selfish consumption with a selfless act of charity. There is no acknowledgement that greater impact could be made by the individual either through volunteerism or direct donations instead of having a mere portion of the profits go to charity from the sale of a \$20 T-shirt. It may be “down to about 40 cents a day [to] ... keep people alive” that are infected with AIDS, but how much of the profits from the sale of a T-shirt gets donated (*Oprah 5*)? The dollar amounts are never disclosed, and since there is no acknowledgement of the possibility of donating directly to the cause, no argument is posed to refute the illogical nature of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>.

Roughly during the middle section of the episode, Oprah and Bono leave the studio to ‘paint the town (Red)—go shopping for (Product)<sup>RED</sup> products on Chicago’s Michigan Avenue. It is at this point in the show that the focus of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> talk narrows to the glitz and glamour of the products and other peripheral celebrities associated with the campaign. The seriousness of AIDS is superseded by “an entire mile of nothing but shopping ... [that is] gone all Red. Fun, huh?” (*Oprah 6*). The conversation between Bono and Oprah at this point serves to fetishize the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> items that they see as they are shopping. For example, Oprah and Bono look at Converse shoes that are made out of traditional African mud cloth produced by a woman in Mali and Bono comments that the shoes are “all hand-made, they’re one of a kind” (*Oprah 10*). (Product)<sup>RED</sup> has taken the cultural meaning and significance of African mud cloth, taken it out of context, and appropriated it in the form of a sneaker with a ‘sanitized’ North American version of African culture. Penelope Cruz’s appearance as a (Red) clothing model continues the fetishization of (Red) products. Her appearance is

dominated by discussion of the clothing she's modeling in context of the amount of medication it could provide (*Oprah* 12). Furthermore, Cruz simultaneously reiterates the logic of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> and fetishizes the clothing by saying that "people are going to buy Gap anyway, so ... [when you buy (Red)] you're wearing a beautiful, very cool T-shirt that is actually saving somebody's life" (*Oprah* 13). A (Product)<sup>RED</sup> pin is also given mythical power through the discourse of charitable consumption: "this little tiny pin, one dollar, it's like four pills, two days, helping a mother prevent passing on this illness to their children" (*Oprah* 12). When Bono and Oprah go into the Apple store to look at the (Red) iPods and Nanos, they 'ooh' and 'ah' over how "very, very cool" the gadgets are and that they are "so cute!" (*Oprah* 14). It is quickly apparent that the focus is now more on the look, feel and 'cool' factor of these products, rather than the charitable nature of them. The charity aspect of these products is now being tagged on as an 'added bonus' of owning these cool new gadgets and clothes. Kanye West demonstrates this mentality when he shows off his new (Motorola)<sup>RED</sup> cell phone and describes it as "a moment where I bought something I really wanted anyway and now I'm, like, helping to save lives" (*Oprah* 17).

What is interesting about Bono and Oprah's (Red) shopping spree is the way that their actions serve as a model for individual actions and as an endorsement of today's dominant capitalist organization of society. As P. David Marshall asserts, when a celebrity "participates openly as a marketable commodity [it] serves as a powerful type of legitimation of the political economic model of exchange and value—the basis of capitalism—and [they] extend that model to include the individual" (*Culture and Power* x). Oprah begins her "Paint the Town 'Red'" episode by declaring that she is "wearing

the most important T-shirt I've ever worn in my life. I love this so much I bought one for every person in this audience" (*Oprah* 1). This is the first of many statements/actions that reinforces consumerism by flaunting her personal purchase and gifting purchases to her studio audience. This also highlights the aforementioned role of the celebrity to 'fuel' consumers' desires to consume and purchase more commodities (Redmond 30). Oprah goes on to legitimate the importance and significance of said T-shirt by saying that "the reason why you need your own [(Red) T-shirt] is because this Red tee is a revolutionary idea" (*Oprah* 1). With these two above statements, Oprah establishes a connection in the audience members' minds of the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> T-shirt and conceptions of significance, revolution and change, as well as trendiness (because everyone should have one). Many of the advertisements in the *Vanity Fair* issue also use images and words to fuel the consumer's desire to buy 'stuff'. An advertisement for the (Red) Motorola Razr cell phone declares that "desire meets virtue" and legitimizes the selfishness of personal consumption with the selflessness and virtuousness of giving to charity (*Vanity Fair* 37). Advertisements such as this one for Motorola epitomize the essence of the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> message: that it is okay to consume products endlessly if your consumption is charitable, i.e. the products you consume 'give back' to your (global) community. Another advertisement for (Product)<sup>RED</sup> as a whole claims that "meaning is the new luxury" while another urges the reader to "be a good-looking Samaritan" (*Vanity Fair* 135, 137). Each of these advertisements further reinforces the idea that it is fashionable and cool to participate in charitable consumption—as opposed to the anonymity that often comes with direct donation to a charity, movement, or

cause—and that it is the responsibility of the individual to take action through their consumption choices.

The connection to the individual is emphasized again when Oprah tells the audience that “the T-shirts that the audience is wearing today will provide enough medication to prevent transmission of HIV from mother to child for over 14,000 pregnant women. That’s what you did today” (*Oprah 2*). Of course, the way that Oprah phrases this statement gives the audience a sense of empowerment and accomplishment without having actively ‘done’ anything at all. In fact, the audiences are being artificially empowered on two levels. First, literally all that the audience has actually done that day is attend *The Oprah Winfrey Show* taping. Second, the T-shirts were, as stated during the introduction of the show, purchased *by Oprah for* her studio audience, therefore, Oprah is responsible for the medications that can be provided indirectly through the purchase of these T-shirts, not her audience. Bono stresses the ‘power’ of the (Red) consumer: “whenever you see Red products and you buy one and use one, you’re paying for these two little [anti-retroviral] pills for people who cannot afford them in Africa. And you are literally saving their life in [sic] you shop Red” (*Oprah 6*). As previously noted in chapter three, the monies from the sale of (Red) products actually changes hands many times—roughly from the consumer to the store to (Product)<sup>RED</sup> to the Global Fund to other various organizations working in Africa—before a person infected with AIDS ever sees the medication. However, what Bono’s statement does accomplish is to put the image of a human face to the invisible African dying of AIDS. With a human face associated as a benefactor of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, consumers may feel more connected to the concept of shopping to save lives.

An added layer to the focus on individuality and the ‘cool’ factor is while Oprah and Bono are shopping with Kanye in the Motorola store, Kanye reveals what is ‘really cool’ about buying the new (Motorola)<sup>RED</sup> phone is that “whether you’re a celebrity or not, you get to sign this wall, and I’m going to be the first person to sign the wall over here” (*Oprah* 18). This statement further fetishizes the phone for the consumer who wants to emulate Kanye and other celebrities. By buying this phone, they can sign the ‘wall of fame’ and own their own unique piece of pseudo-celebrity status. We see this occur again when Oprah and Bono are shopping in the Armani store for (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, and Oprah sees “Bono glasses. ... [And she quickly announces,] I want a pair. ... Do they look cool?” (*Oprah* 19-21). Again, the discussion makes it more about being cool, looking good, and emulating the style of a celebrity than it is about charity or saving lives of AIDS victims.

Interestingly, Bono remarks that some of the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> items are “made by people who, if you like, in these factories [in Africa] ... are, by making Red stuff, are paying for their own healthcare, and that’s—and that’s really powerful. There’s a dignity there in ... working” (*Oprah* 8). Capitalist-neoliberal ideology is clearly evident in the idea that the Africans receiving aid via (Product)<sup>RED</sup> are ‘earning’ their keep by helping to produce (Red) products—ironically enough made in factories found in developing countries. Bono’s statement also draws on a stereotype of aid to Africa not being used efficiently, and as such, Africans do not deserve ‘free’ aid but should earn it in some manner. There is also the ideology of the American Dream evidenced in the idea of helping poor, sick Africans help themselves become better, healthier people by working and, again, ‘earning’ their healthcare.

## Summary of Chapter

When we consider the role of the celebrity and promotion in relation to the discourses of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>, it is clear that the conception of charitable consumption is critically dependant not only on the celebrity endorsement, but also on ideologies of imperialism, democracy and capitalism. The basis of imperialism is to propagate the values of Western capitalism and democracy to ‘uncivilized’ parts of the world, namely Africa in this instance and in many other historical examples. Democracy promises the individual equality and fairness—in opportunities for success, happiness, and personal attainment of goals and even ‘things.’ Capitalism tells the consumer that the way to achieve the promises of democracy is through the consumption of products and a monetary value system based on free market competition. For each of these ideological systems, the individual is a central component through which they are all connected. Democracy protects individual rights, capitalism allows for individual success and advancement in society, and both are the cornerstones of consumer culture that highlights the individual through the public figure of the celebrity.

The celebrity serves as a model and promotional supporter that is critical to the successful operation of charitable consumption and without the celebrity, the contradictions and logical flaws of charitable consumption would become glaringly obvious to the consumer-citizen. Celebrity is critical to the impact and success of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>’s brand of charitable consumption. Without celebrity, the movement would lack authenticity, and consumers might view it more critically as another ‘spin’ by corporations trying to make a buck. Consumer culture also relies heavily on the celebrity figure to encourage desire for ever-changing products and fashions, in addition

to the celebrity acting as a role a model for the successful individual in a democratic capitalist society. The American Dream is the goal that many strive towards—to be successful enough that one has the purchasing power to buy anything and everything imaginable, including happiness. Another central idea of the ideology of capitalist consumerism is that this particular brand of democratic capitalism provides an equal playing ground that allows anyone the opportunity to better themselves and be successful provided they are willing to work hard and honestly. And what becomes clear is that at the nexus of the various ideologies, the focus is on the individual as opposed to community.

Therein lies the key social transformation that (Product)<sup>RED</sup> and similar charitable consumption campaigns achieve: moving ideas of charity away from a community-based purpose and being towards a very individualized, solitary act. Earlier I expressed that there are no innate or even logical associations that link the concepts of consumption and charity. That is because at the core of charity is the community bonds that highlight, create, and strengthen the human and social connections between individuals. Community is important because it is these social relationships and interactions that make us human; we are social creatures. To take the aspect of ‘community’ out of the act of charity makes charitable consumption a very distant, disconnected social activity that is focused on the ‘things’—iPods, T-shirts, cell phones—one can buy, consume, then discard for the next latest fad, and not the people in need of aid and assistance.

Traditional ideas of charity rely on donations from individuals, groups, and corporations. (Product)<sup>RED</sup> and similar charitable consumption campaigns mark a distinct shift away from this traditional donor-recipient relationship to one that is based

on a business model. Not only does this new form of charity raise money via consumer capitalism, but it also imbeds neo-liberal ideology within the distribution of these monies and the deservedness of the recipient. Traditional charity is selfless giving by those who have to those who have not. The neo-liberal conceptualization of charity focuses on what the recipients have done to earn or what values and characteristics they possess that make them deserving of charitable aid. For a charity to fulfill a need is also not nearly enough and charitable donations and support must now be earned based on the values of consumer culture: good service and high valued products must now be given in exchange for the consumer-citizens support of charity. And so the cycle of consumerism is propagated and reinforced via charitable consumption's encouragement to continue buying commodity goods, especially those that have the side benefit of helping people.



## Chapter 5: Roll the C(RED)its—Final Thoughts and Future Research

(Product)<sup>RED</sup> is an interesting case study that illustrates a developing pattern in consumer culture. Over the past few decades, there has been a trend towards celebrity involvement in and promotion of charitable and political causes, though these have in the past been mostly confined to the celebrity endorsement or the charity concert. The new development of charitable consumption takes the idea of ‘charitable giving’ into a new era of consumerism and equates an individual act of consumption to an act of charity. The discourse of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> draws heavily on the ideology of neoliberal capitalism. Neoliberalism idealizes a highly deregulated, privatized free market economy and favours cuts to public funding for social services. Moreover, neoliberalism emphasizes the role and responsibilities of the individual and places the onus on them to find solutions to any problems they may face—there is no vision of a ‘public good’ or of an obligation to contribute to public services for those who encounter difficult times. According to neoliberal beliefs, the solution to all social issues, such as poverty, healthcare, and education, can be found in free enterprise, individual ingenuity, and capitalism. Given such a framework, (Product)<sup>RED</sup> appears to be the most logical solution, partly because it is presented as cost-effective and non-burdensome to citizens. (Product)<sup>RED</sup> places the onus on the individual to take action through their existing consumption patterns, and buy (Red) stuff so that Africans can get life-saving ARV medication. Within the parameters of neoliberalism, donating directly to a charity is not a viable option because there is a perception that traditional charities are run haphazardly by unprofessional volunteers, resulting in misuse of the funds. So it logically follows that

not only is charitable consumption the best solution to the problem of African poverty and AIDS, it is the *only* solution since it works within the boundaries of the neoliberal capitalist system.

The problem with the neoliberal logic, as was discussed in this thesis, is that the comparison of consumption to charity is a glaring contradiction of terms. Charity is necessarily a selfless endeavor that privileges the communal good over individual needs and wants, and ideally, is about giving freely without the expectation of receiving compensation beyond the ‘feel good’ feeling. Consumerism selfishly focuses on the individual’s wants and desires above all else, and prioritizes individual gratification over communal satisfaction or well-being. The ideals of charity clearly conflict with the ideals and goals of consumerism. Yet, (Product)<sup>RED</sup> is able to overcome this contradiction within its discourse and convince the consumer that yes, you can give back to charity *and* still get that fashion T-shirt, shiny new iPod, or (Product)<sup>RED</sup> item. Charitable consumption campaigns like (Product)<sup>RED</sup> have capitalized on the consumption obsessed culture of modern times and have spun the marketing in such a way that the consumers actually believe that they can *do good* by shopping more—as long as they’re shopping (Red) that is. The contradiction is reconciled since, although consuming products is obviously an individualized, selfish activity, there is a degree of truth to the claim that some charitable good is initiated by the purchase.

Of course, another contradiction that became apparent within my study of (Product)<sup>RED</sup> was the conflicting impressions of ownership of charitable consumption itself. In the corporate discourse, the consumer was often given ownership of (Product)<sup>RED</sup>’s life-saving potential. It is always about how ‘you,’ as the consumer, have the

power to change the world, save lives, and make a difference via your consumption choices. However, the contradiction arises when in the same discourse, the ownership of the monies raised by (Product)<sup>RED</sup> and the credit impact of these donations is given to the benevolent corporations who have taken initiative by partnering with the campaign. Again, the two contradictory claims to ownership are permitted to coexist since they are both true in a sense—the money that goes to the Global Fund originates with the consumer, but once the purchase is made, the money belongs to the corporation who then donates a portion of the profits.

Central to the functionality and success of the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign is the involvement of celebrity personalities as endorsers and champions of the cause. Celebrity culture is a seamless part of consumer culture; they serve a dual role as the subjects of consumption, and as advocates of consumerism either directly as spokespeople, or indirectly as models of consumption. What is interesting about the function of the celebrity persona is perfectly fitted to the ideology and intentions of democracy, neoliberal capitalism, and consumer culture. Central to each of these concepts is the idealization and advancement of the individual. Democracy stresses the rights of the individual regardless of class or wealth, while neoliberal capitalism adds that the individual is responsible for their own success or failure, since democracy affords each person equal opportunity. With the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign, celebrities also legitimate the concept of charitable consumption by reinforces the discourse surrounding the campaign, conveying an impression of authenticity that (Product)<sup>RED</sup> would be lacking otherwise. Of course more consumption is the solution to Third World poverty and disease, (Product)<sup>RED</sup> tells us. Of course you can change the world by working

within the confines of the current system of social and economic organization. Implied is the idea that rebelling against the system is a waste of funds and efforts; omitted is the possibility that the current system has caused many of the social and economic problems that it claims it can solve.

(Product)<sup>RED</sup> and charitable consumption turn the traditional conceptualizations of charity and active citizenry upside down. Traditional forms of charity, where one donates money or time directly to an organization with no expectation of compensation, are necessarily linked to ideas of community and the common good. Charitable consumption focuses primarily on the consumption and offers as a ‘bonus’ feature for a product the socially conscious aspect of it and a small donation to a social cause. With the primary focus on consumption, charitable consumption takes the human connectivity out of charitable giving and transforms the act of giving into a very succinct, segregated and individualized act. Charitable consumption is less about giving selflessly, and more about being able to give a little while not having to sacrifice the instant, though empty, gratification that comes with endless consumption of things.

More importantly, it is the wider implications of what (Product)<sup>RED</sup> and charitable consumption means in a social context and in relation to concepts of the public sphere that make this a critical topic of discussion. Habermas’ vision of the “bourgeois public sphere ... is defined as the public of *private* individuals who join in debate of issues bearing on state authority” (Calhoun 7). However, critical debate and active participation are both necessary components for a successful public sphere. As Craig Calhoun states, “a public sphere adequate to a democratic polity depends upon both the quality of discourse and quantity of participation” (2). Bono, Oprah and the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> call on

consumers as global citizens, asking them to take action by buying (Red) merchandise, but, as is evidence in my investigation, they fail to involve the consumer in an active, critical discussion of why charitable consumption is a viable solution to Third World problems, or the history and development of these problems to begin with. (Product) <sup>RED</sup>'s 'call to action' reinforces the argument that people in modern capitalist society have a "tendency to replace the shared, critical activity of public discourse [with] a more passive culture consumption ... and an apolitical socialbility" (Calhoun 22-23). (Product) <sup>RED</sup> does not ask the consumer to critically examine the root causes of poverty in Africa, nor the ways in which the capitalist system has exasperated and complicated the issues of poverty and disease. What (Product) <sup>RED</sup> does do, however, is raise awareness of the need for financial aid and assistance in Africa in a superficial way, "without making the topics ... subjects of genuine public debate" (Calhoun 26). "A public sphere adequate to a democratic polity depends upon both the quality of the discourse and the quantity of the participation," unfortunately (Product) <sup>RED</sup>'s discourse tends to focus on the superficialities of consumer culture rather than on the very real social and political issues at the heart of African poverty and disease (Calhoun 2). The lack of substantial, critical discourse about (Product) <sup>RED</sup>, AIDS in Africa, and charitable consumption itself is worrisome and points towards a lack of real citizen engagement in civic affairs.

Today's continuing obsession with consumerism and individualism is seemingly detrimental to the public good. "The consumption orientation of mass culture produces a proliferation of products designed to please various tastes ... [but] these [are] not subjected, according to Habermas, to much critical discussion" and (Product) <sup>RED</sup> is

another such product—designed to superficially please consumers interested in social causes (Calhoun 25). While there is some social benefit within the idea of consuming products that are socially conscious—whether there is a donation made to a charity with each purchase, or the items are a the product of fair trade practices—since ‘smart’ consumption is an improvement on mindless, indiscriminate consumption. However, the danger lays in the possibility that charitable consumption and consumption more generally will supplant active citizen engagement in social causes, civic events, and philanthropic activities. There is a significant difference between Habermas’s model of a citizen of the public sphere, and (Product)<sup>RED</sup>’s consumer citizen, and there should be public debate about the merits and dangers associated with the shift in concepts. Can the consumer citizen co-exist as an active citizen of society? (Product)<sup>RED</sup> appears to be capitalizing on a desire of the public to achieve principles of social justice and equality within the structures of society, however, charitable consumption is also evidence of the desire to achieve this goal in a ‘hands off,’ ‘no-fuss-no-muss’ manner. The consumer may desire on one level to aid in the attainment of social justice for all, but at the same time, the consumer would rather not have to get involved in the messy details or the hard work needed to actually achieve this goal.

Another risk associated with widespread charitable consumption is the transparency of the products and companies that are associated with it. How is the consumer to judge which charitable consumption campaigns are legitimate? How can one evaluate the effectiveness of a single charitable purchase? Without full transparency, the authenticity of any charitable campaign is questionable.

### **Into the (Red) Sunset: Future Research**

One area of further research that can be conducted is to examine the counter-discourses that have and continue to emerge in response to (Product)<sup>RED</sup> and other charitable consumption campaigns. How do these counter-discourses refute the claims of charitable consumption? What critiques are made about charitable consumption?

Many of the corporations/brands that have partnered with (Product)<sup>RED</sup> committed to a specific length of time that they would produce (Red) products. For example, Gap made a five year commitment to the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign, until 2011. So another avenue for future research would be to reevaluate the involvement of the various brands a few years from now to see how many are still involved? Have any new brands joined or any of the original brands left the (Product)<sup>RED</sup> campaign, and what can be said about the sustainability of charitable consumption? It will be interesting to see five, even ten years from now whether charitable consumption continues to be a new, dynamic way for consumers to support political and charitable causes, or if this is a passing trend in consumption patterns. In the future, will we see more or less charitable consumption campaigns? And how will charitable consumption affect and alter the traditional avenues and forms of social involvement and charitable giving?

## Appendix A

### The (Red)<sup>TM</sup> Manifesto

All things being equal, they are not.

As First World consumers, we have tremendous power. What we collectively choose to buy, or not to buy, can change the course of life and history on this planet.

(Red) is that simple an idea. And that powerful. Now, you have a choice. There are (Red) credit cards, (Red) phones, (Red) shoes, (Red) fashion brands. And no, this does not mean that they are all red in color, although some are.

If you buy a (Red) product or sign up for a (Red) service, at no cost to you, a (Red) company will give some of its profits to buy and distribute anti-retroviral medicine to our brothers and sisters dying of AIDS in Africa.

We believe that when consumers are offered this choice, and the products meet their needs, they will choose (Red). And when they choose (Red) over non-(Red), then more brands will choose to become (Red) because it will make good business sense to do so. And more lives will be saved.

(Red) is not a charity. It is simply a business model. You buy (Red) stuff, we get the money, buy the pills and distribute them. They take the pills, stay alive, and continue to take care of their families and contribute socially and economically in their communities.

If they don't get the pills, they die. We don't want them to die. We want to give them the pills. And we can. And you can. And it's easy.

All you have to do is upgrade your choice.

<http://www.joinred.com/manifesto/>

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