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‘We’re all in this together’: Commodified notions of connection, care and community in brand responses to COVID-19

Abstract

The current COVID-19 (coronavirus) global pandemic has resulted in a wave of advertising and marketing approaches that are based on commodified concepts of human connection, care and community in a time of crisis. At the core of many brands’ marketing messages – whether these be supermarket advertising campaigns or celebrity self-branding – is the notion that ‘we’re all in this together’. While it is true that the impact of COVID-19 has affected the lives of many people around the world, not everyone is experiencing this crisis the same way, due to structural inequalities and intersecting oppressions. What is the relationship between COVID-19, capitalism and consumer culture? Who is the ‘we’ in the messages of ‘we’re all in this together’, and how might such messages mask distinct socio-economic disparities and enable institutions to evade accountability? This article examines sub-textual meanings connected to brand responses to COVID-19 which rely on an amorphous imagined ‘we’—and which ultimately may aid brands’ pursuit of productivity and profit, rather than symbolising support of and concern for people.

Keywords: Advertising, capitalism, consumer culture, COVID-19, inequalities

‘We’re all in this together’ is a statement that has repeatedly circulated amid consumer culture and brand responses to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) global pandemic. In the context of the UK, this alleged commitment to shared responsibility and collective endeavour is apparent in many forms of branding, including the marketing of supermarket giants Asda, Lidl, Marks & Spencer (M&S), and Tesco. For decades, brands have used rhetoric and representations with the aim of yielding adverts which feature emotional appeals. Often, such efforts are intended to humanise brands and make them relatable and attractive to different target demographics, even by (mis)using images and ideas associated with grassroots collective organising and activism (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012; Sobande, 2019).

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As is illustrated in the work of Wahl-Jorgensen (2019, 1)

emotions are central to our social and political lives, and the ways in which we make sense of ourselves and the collectivities and communities we inhabit – a process which increasingly takes place through the media. This means that we have to understand the institutionalized and systematic ways in which emotions are constructed and circulate through forms of mediated discourse as pivots of public life,

True to form, since the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, brands have been quick to invoke ambiguous yet arguably commodified notions of connectivity, care and community, in the service of capitalism. To (re)present their products, services, and themselves as being essential, ethical and invested in people—not (just) profit—brands have produced marketing content and communication strategies that connect to the current COVID-19 situation and the myriad fears and concerns that it has catalysed. At the centre of many such advertising and branding messages is the idea that everyone is impacted by COVID-19, and that this crisis is a unifying force—‘we’re all in this together’. The ‘Appeal from Roger, Asda’s CEO. We’re all in this together’ video, as well as the ‘We’re all in this together’ videos of M&S, Flibit and Disney Channel UK, are just a few examples of brands’ advertisements in recent weeks. The comments of celebrities such as American singer-songwriter Madonna, who has claimed that ‘coronavirus is the great equaliser’, convey a similar sentiment and the damaging perspective that this crisis is being universally experienced in the same ways by all.

Put briefly, brands are framing the current COVID-19 global pandemic as bringing people together, in ways that may distract from their dubious treatment of employees, as well as their thirst for productivity and profit. In similar ways, celebrity self-brands frame the crisis as a great leveller, whilst obscuring the extreme forms of inequality which are exacerbated in the crisis. The ‘we’re all...’ platitudes of brands enable them to platform and promote themselves, under the guise of being invested in human connection, care and community, as opposed to commercial success. ‘We’re all in this together’ is a statement often akin to ‘lean on me’ and its association with compassion. It is a statement associated with strong social bonds and mutual support that exists between people with a shared goal. In the context of commercial marketing and branding campaigns during the COVID-19 crisis, ‘we’re all in this together’ are five words that can conveniently cloak the reality that due to intersecting structural oppressions and socio-economic disparities which precede COVID-19, Sobande, F. (2020), “‘We’re all in this together’: Commodified notions of connection, care and community in brand responses to COVID-19”, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*.

even if ‘we’re’ all impacted by this crisis, ‘we’re’ are not all experiencing it in the same way. Moreover, ‘we’re all in this together’ was the phrase uttered by Conservative MP George Osborne to justify austerity measures. Thus, such words have a history of being used as part of rhetorical commitments to collectivity that in fact contribute to the active reproduction and exacerbation of inequality in Britain.

I am not the first person to point out how brands are trying to maintain momentum amid the pandemic by producing marketing material that depends on an amorphous imagined ‘we’—all of whom have disposable income. However, even though the cynical ‘pandemic marketing’ endeavours of brands have come under scrutiny, what is still seldom addressed is the potential for such advertising approaches to contribute to pervasive media, political and public discourse which actively masks stark inequalities between how people are impacted by the COVID-19 crisis—from their experiences of work, healthcare, relationships, violence, state surveillance and family life, to the likelihood of them surviving this challenging time.

Furthermore, the sense of togetherness and sociality at the core of many current marketing messages is far from being accessible to, and, felt, by all. In other words, not everyone feels part of a collective experience or a ‘we’ during this crisis, and the intense social isolation that many people are contending with, of course, cannot be solved by the slogans of brands. In brands’ haste to (re)present themselves as being part of a universal ‘we’, they deny the realities of those who are most disconnected from other people, and who do not have the ‘spending power’ that brands seek out, and which constitutes a material barrier to partaking in the symbolic ‘we’.

What is the relationship between COVID-19, capitalism and consumer culture? This is a question that will continue to be wrestled with for months and years to follow. As I continue to encounter supermarket brands that portray themselves as more philanthropic than corporate in nature, and witness waning influencers who are attempting to stay relevant by offering tactless ‘lockdown life hacks for us all’, what remains clear is the prevalence of opportunistic ‘cause’-related marketing in pursuit of productivity and profit. In addition, brands, businesses and employers around the world are leveraging the language of ‘we’, ‘together’, ‘us’ and ‘team’, as part of their efforts to assuage criticism from employees when delivering news to them about pay cuts, furlough schemes and job losses. There is nothing collective about this symbolic ‘we’ that is deployed to help brands evade accountability and strategically ascribe individuals—not institutions—the responsibility of remedying this crisis.

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Who is the ‘we’ in ‘we’re all in this together’? While I recognise that no lives may be untouched by the impact of COVID-19, I affirm the importance of acknowledging and addressing how deeply embedded societal inequalities mean that not all lives are impacted by COVID-19 in the same way. Some people can work from home and others cannot, or have lost their jobs. Some people live alone and have not been able to see or touch someone else in person for weeks, or are trapped in an abusive home, while others are gladly spending more time with family and loved ones. Some people have immediate access to necessary mental and physical healthcare services and others do not. Some people have digital devices and internet connections that enable them to communicate with many people while at home, and others go without. Some people have a garden and others have not been in a ‘green space’ for weeks or months. Some people are being stopped, surveilled, and harassed while outside, and others seem to move around freely—even when in groups of more than three.

As evidence increasingly indicates, societal inequalities that existed long before COVID-19 have not been flattened and disappeared since the pandemic took force—far from it. The persistence of intersecting structural oppressions and socio-economic disparities is laid starkly bare when considering the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black people of African descent and Asian people in Britain who have been critically ill coronavirus patients, and who work in high risk roles that are identified as ‘key’ and ‘essential’ (Croxford, 2020), including as medical and care staff. Although some media reports in Britain have been starting to trickle through in recent weeks, there is still a glaring dearth of meaningful analysis of how issues regarding racism, anti-Blackness, classism, ableism, ageism and other intersecting forms of structural oppression significantly shape the different risks that people are dealing with right now, and the likelihood of them receiving adequate and life-saving support and care.

Brands’ marketed notions of ‘we’ which gloss over inequalities and (re)present everyone as being part of a unified mass of people who are equally susceptible to the negative impacts of COVID-19, do not simply function in ways that may propel their profit. Such a commodified construction of ‘we’ dismisses the experiences of those who are most at risk and worst affected by COVID-19. This is a ‘we’ that may also be nefariously weaponised by brands with an interest in painting a picture of places, and even the world, as being free from discrimination and differences between people, in order for them to target a broader market demographic than usual.

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I do not deny that during the COVID-19 global pandemic there is vital human connection, care and community to be found. However, I write this article to reiterate that such sociality, mutual support, unity and kindness is not located in the hollow words and (in)action of commercial brands. Rather, it is homed at grassroots levels and as a result of the work, compassion and commitment of often underpaid and unpaid individuals who themselves are most likely to be the worst impacted by the current situation.

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