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Commodifying COVID-19: Humanitarian Communication at the Onset of a Global Pandemic

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ABSTRACT
Corporations have become prominent actors in responding to COVID-19. Within the context of increasing privatization of humanitarianism and marketization of social justice, corporate marketing has played a part in the "interpretive battles" to define the global crisis of COVID-19. Understanding corporate COVID-19 communications contributes to understanding the politics of the global pandemic. This article analyzes companies' humanitarian communications during the early phase of COVID-19 in Europe and North America to identify how their messages define COVID-19 and justified particular responses. We find that brands constructed COVID-19 as a crisis of expertise and logistics, a crisis of resources and capital, and a crisis of the self. In response to these crises, corporations provide products to "help" consumers to manage the pandemic and to manage themselves. These humanitarian narratives make the case that business has a concrete role to play in solving crises and present individual consumption as a humanitarian act.

Introduction

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic continues to have wide-reaching effects on global politics. As scholars scrutinize these implications, it has become common to refer to the pandemic as a crisis.[1] Like other crises, COVID-19 has called forth a humanitarian response to alleviate suffering and protect people from harm. Understanding humanitarian communication is central to grappling with the politics of pandemic

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[1]Tariq Omar Ali, Mirza Hassan, and Naomi Hossain, "The Moral and Political Economy of the Pandemic in Bangladesh: Weak States and Strong Societies during Covid-19," *World Development* 137 (January 1, 2021): 105, 216,https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105216; Joseph Baines and Sandy Brian Hager, "The Great Debt Divergence and Its Implications for the Covid-19 Crisis: Mapping Corporate Leverage as Power," *New Political Economy* (January 6, 2021): 1–17, https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2020.1865900; Lorenzo Cotula, "Towards a Political Economy of the COVID-19 Crisis: Reflections on an Agenda for Research and Action," *World Development* 138 (February 1, 2021): 105, 235,https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105235; Charis Vlados, "The Growth and Development Analytical Controversies in Economic Science: A Reassessment for the Post-COVID-19 Era," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, December 30, 2020), https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3763038.

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response. As defined by the field's experts, "Humanitarian communication refers to public practices of meaning-making that represent human suffering as a cause of collective emotion and action."[2]

As political science scholarship has previously shown, conceptualizing major events as crises serves to proactively justify particular responses as necessary "solutions" by defining the "problem."[3] As Liam Stanley has argued, this "interpretative battle" for "causal stories" in periods of instability is not only a matter for policymakers, but also involves the public, as interpretative stories must capture public opinion to acquire legitimacy.[4] Periods of uncertainty and risk, exemplified by the onset of COVID-19, have the potential to reconfigure political arrangements, and as such, processes of meaning-making are closely related to the "new forms of intervention" which emerge during crises.[5] Corporations have been affected by these transformations, and played a role in crafting the narratives that prevail.[6] In particular, corporations are prominent contenders in the "interpretive battles" over defining the global humanitarian crisis of COVID-19 by commuicating their own role in addressing its effects, and in enabling consumers to help as well. Understanding these humanitarian communications contributes to our understanding of the politics of the pandemic.

Humanitarian crisis narratives have increasingly positioned corporations and consumers as the actors who can "solve" problems. The privatization of humanitarianism has fostered the emergence of new actors claiming to help during crises. This requires us to understand the politics of humanitarian response beyond the narratives of states and international organizations. Both the promotion of ethical products, whose proceeds contribute to social causes, and boycott campaigns, seek to leverage the power of the market for humanitarian ends. This logic, which Susanne Soederberg has called the "marketisation of social justice,"[7] depends significantly on advertising and marketing communications, and in particular on communications about companies' social roles, their social responsibility efforts, or the ethical qualities of their products and services. Such marketing represents a form of humanitarian communication which promises

[2]Lilie Chouliaraki and Anne Vestergaard, "Introduction: Humanitarian Communication in the 21st Century," *Routledge Handbook of Humanitarian Communication*, Chouliaraki and Vestergaard, eds, (London and New York: Routledge): 1–22 (2022).

[3]Peter Gourevitch, *Politics in Hard Times: Comparative Responses to International Economic Crises*, 1st edition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986); Colin Hay, "Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the `Winter of Discontent'," *Sociology* 30, no. 2 (May 1, 1996): 253–77, https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038596030002004; Mark Blyth, *Great Transformations: Economic Ideas and Institutional Change in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Wesley W. Widmaier, Mark Blyth, and Leonard Seabrooke, "Exogenous Shocks or Endogenous Constructions?: The Meanings of Wars and Crises," *International Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (2007): 747–59, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2007.00474.x.

[4]Liam Stanley, "'We're Reaping What We Sowed': Everyday Crisis Narratives and Acquiescence to the Age of Austerity," *New Political Economy* 19, no. 6 (November 2, 2014): 895–917, https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2013.861412.

[5]Nari Senanayake and Brian King, "Geographies of Uncertainty," *Geoforum*, August 14, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2020.07.016.

[6]Paul Langley, *The Everyday Life of Global Finance: Saving and Borrowing in Anglo-America* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Johnna Montgomerie, "The Pursuit of (Past) Happiness? Middle-Class Indebtedness and American Financialisation," *New Political Economy* 14, no. 1 (March 1, 2009): 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1080/13563460802671196; Leonard Seabrooke, "The Everyday Social Sources of Economic Crises: From 'Great Frustrations' to 'Great Revelations' in Interwar Britain," *International Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (2007): 795–810.

[7]Susanne Soederberg, "The Marketisation of Social Justice: The Case of the Sudan Divestment Campaign," *New Political Economy* 14, no. 2 (June 1, 2009): 211–29, https://doi.org/10.1080/13563460902825999.

consumers the possibility of everyday heroism through consumption.[8] As such, humanitarian communications are a key medium through which one type of interpretative story about crisis is advanced.

In this article, we explore the humanitarian communication undertaken by companies in the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe and North America. We analyze how these messages define the nature of the COVID-19 crisis, the problems that they claim to address, and the business-provided solutions they offer. Our empirical work finds that companies' messaging was quick to coalesce around two conceptualizations of how corporations could "help": managing the pandemic and managing yourself. We argue that in providing consumers with these two narratives to make sense of the crisis, these humanitarian communications also teach consumers how to respond. Together, these messages make the case that business has a concrete role to play in solving the crisis, and thereby present individual consumption as a humanitarian act. By situating business at the center of what counts as caring, such branding creates rhetorical space for the private sector and for individual consumption as part of a humanitarian response.

The article proceeds as follows: the first two sections set up the scholarly debates on the privatization of humanitarianism and humanitarian communications that inform our analysis. The third section explains our methodological approach, empirical focus, and analytical typology. The fourth section presents our results along the first axis of our typology, distinguishing between brands who claimed to be helping manage the pandemic themselves and those who claimed to be doing so in conjunction with external partners. The fifth section explains our results along the second axis, distinguishing between brands who claimed to be helping manage the pandemic and those who claimed to help consumers manage themselves. The sixth section reflects on our typology to consider the narratives about the nature of the COVID-19 crisis and the role of corporate communications in shaping humanitarianism. The final section concludes on what defining the COVID-19 pandemic through a business lens means for the politics of responding to humanitarian crises. In this, analysis, we show the overlapping nature of corporate philanthropic and political behavior,[9] and the role of corporate communications as a source of discursive political power.[10]

The Privatization of Humanitarianism

We draw on existing scholarship about the established role of corporations as humanitarian actors in making sense of their role in responding to COVID-19 specifically. We consider the pandemic as a humanitarian crisis, a category defined by the United Nations as any "event or series of events that represents a critical threat to the health, safety, security or well-being of a community or other large group of people."[11] This

[8]Lisa Ann Richey, "Conceptualizing 'Everyday Humanitarianism': Ethics, Affects, and Practices of Contemporary Global Helping," *New Political Science* 40, no. 4 (October 2, 2018): 625–39, https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2018.1528538.

[9]Rosa Chun et al., "Corporate Reputation: Being Good and Looking Good," *Business & Society* 58, no. 6 (July 1, 2019): 1132–42, https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650319826520; Michael Hadani and Susan Coombes, "Complementary Relationships Between Corporate Philanthropy and Corporate Political Activity: An Exploratory Study of Political Marketplace Contingencies," *Business & Society* 54, no. 6 (November 1, 2015): 859–81, https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650312463691.

[10]Doris Fuchs, *Business Power In Global Governance* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007).

[11]Bok G. Jeong and Jungwon Yeo, "United Nations and Crisis Management," in *Global Encyclopedia of Public Administration, Public Policy, and Governance*, ed. Ali Farazmand (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 1–8, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-31816-5_850-1.

category ordinarily includes natural disasters, armed conflict, and epidemics of disease, such as COVID-19. As such, we situate corporations, in their efforts to help respond to COVID-19, as humanitarian actors.

Over the past three decades national governments and international organizations have encouraged private actors such as corporations to take on new responsibility for humanitarian responses, as part of a wider privatization of humanitarianism as shown by scholars including Duffield,[12] Richey and Ponte,[13] Soederberg,[14] and Carbonnier and Lightfoot.[15] This includes responsibility for their own supply chains, including mitigating complicity in human rights atrocities, as well as efforts to use private investment to promote peace and political stability.[16] The UN Sustainable Development Goals, and in particular, SDG 17 on "partnership," prominently call for private financing in pursuit of development objectives.[17]

More relevant to our study is research that investigates how companies contribute proactively to humanitarian assistance, through investments in infrastructure, other contributions to reconstruction or the provision of logistics or administrative support to actors engaged in direct humanitarian relief.[18] Indeed, traditional aid actors often welcome such logistical interventions as representing an area where companies can add value by drawing on their existing business competencies.[19] Our study advances this insight in analyzing the distinction between COVID-19 interventions that draw on companies' existing core business and those that do not. While prior scholarship has sought to distinguish the ways these two types of intervention are received by other humanitarian

[12]Mark Duffield, "Humanitarian Intervention, the New Aid Paradigm and Separate Development," *New Political Economy* 2, no. 2 (July 1, 1997): 336–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/13563469708406309.

[13]Lisa Ann Richey and Stefano Ponte, *Brand Aid: Shopping Well to Save the World*, A Quadrant Book (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

[14]Soederberg, "The Marketisation of Social Justice."

[15]Gilles Carbonnier and Piedra Lightfoot, "Business in Humanitarian Crises. For Better or for Worse?," in *The New Humanitarians in International Practice: Emerging Actors and Contested Principles* (London: Routledge, 2015), 169–209.

[16]OCHA, "The Business Case: A Study of Private Sector Engagement in Humanitarian Action" (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, November 28, 2017), https://www.unocha.org/publication/business-case-study-private-sector-engagement-humanitarian-action; Jennifer M. Oetzel and Chang-Hoon Oh, "Learning to Carry the Cat by the Tail: Firm Experience, Disasters, and Multinational Subsidiary Entry and Expansion," *Organization Science*, 2014, https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2013.0860; Ans Kolk and François Lenfant, "Partnerships for Peace and Development in Fragile States: Identifying Missing Links," *Academy of Management Perspectives* 29, no. 4 (October 19, 2015): 422–37, https://doi.org/10.5465/amp.2013.0122; Jane Nelson, "The Business of Peace: The Private Sector as a Partner in Conflict Prevention and Resolution | Business & Human Rights Resource Centre" (London: Business and Human Rights Resource Center, January 1, 2000), https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/pdf-the-business-of-peace-the-private-sector-as-a-partner-in-conflict-prevention-and-resolution.

[17]Emma Mawdsley, "'From Billions to Trillions': Financing the SDGs in a World 'beyond Aid,'" *Dialogs in Human Geography* 8, no. 2 (July 2018): 191–95, https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820618780789; Marco Andreu, "A Responsibility to Profit? Social Impact Bonds as a Form of 'Humanitarian Finance,'" *New Political Science* 40, no. 4 (October 2, 2018): 708–26, https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2018.1528533.

[18]Juliette Bennett, "Multinational Corporations, Social Responsibility and Conflict," *Journal of International Affairs* 55, no. 2 (2002): 393–410; OCHA, "The Business Case"; Anisya Thomas and Lynn Fritz, "Disaster Relief, Inc.," *Harvard Business Review*, November 1, 2006, https://hbr.org/2006/11/disaster-relief-inc; Steven A. Zyck and Randolph Kent, "Humanitarian Crises, Emergency Preparedness and Response: The Role of Business and the Private Sector – Final Report" (London: Overseas Development Institute, July 2014), https://www.odi.org/publications/8534-humanitarian-crises-emergency-preparedness-and-response-role-business-and-private-sector-final.

[19]Elisa Pascucci, "More Logistics, Less Aid: Humanitarian-Business Partnerships and Sustainability in the Refugee Camp," *World Development* 142 (June 1, 2021): 105,424, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2021.105424; Thomas and Fritz, "Disaster Relief, Inc."; Rolando M. Tomasini and Luk N. Van Wassenhove, "From Preparedness to Partnerships: Case Study Research on Humanitarian Logistics," *International Transactions in Operational Research* 16, no. 5 (2009): 549–59, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-3995.2009.00697.x; L. N. Van Wassenhove, "Humanitarian Aid Logistics: Supply Chain Management in High Gear," *Journal of the Operational Research Society* 57, no. 5 (May 1, 2006): 475–89, https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.jors.2602125.

actors, our analysis of humanitarian communications explains the different claims businesses make when engaging in them. When traditional aid agencies welcome certain forms of corporate intervention, they are accepting a particular construction of the nature of a given crisis which situates corporations as relevant to the solution. Our analysis of humanitarian communication during COVID-19 makes explicit this process of narrative construction. We focus on what corporations themselves say about the formative period of a specific crisis, COVID-19, and their role in it.

Prior research has also found that businesses are more likely to intervene in crises surrounding natural events than in manmade crises such as political conflict.[20] In fact, governments often choose to partner with businesses in relief efforts in part because they are perceived as apolitical in contrast to partisan NGOs.[21] Health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic occupy a liminal space between these poles: while disease has natural causes, the pace of spread and the severity of impact in different locations depend on political choices surrounding public health. As scholarship on the 2014 Ebola epidemic has shown, private involvement in health response raises particular ethical and political challenges, including questions about the normative viewpoints corporate actors bring to their relief work.[22] In scrutinizing corporate humanitarian communications during the COVID-19 pandemic, and analyzing the normative claims embedded in these messages, we contribute to efforts to understand these political dimensions of corporate humanitarian response.

Moreover, while traditional humanitarian actors are largely nonprofit organizations, the role of business in humanitarianism has both for-profit and not-for-profit components. While some companies make charitable donations to humanitarian causes, others may assist in a crisis by offering their own products or services for sale to frontline relief organizations.[23] Moreover, the strategic motivations for business to enter the humanitarian sphere, which include the cultivation of consumer goodwill and the expansion of a brand into new markets, can provide a profit rationale for charitable actions.[24] The rise of "ethical" consumption provides a further opportunity for companies to profit from the sale of "brand aid" products whose proceeds are partially shared with nonprofit partners to benefit a humanitarian cause.[25] In analyzing communications that describe several of these types of intervention, we contribute new evidence of the increasingly blurred lines between profit and principle. While previous literature on corporate humanitarianism has

[20]Jasper Hotho and Verena Girschik, "Corporate Engagement in Humanitarian Action: Concepts, Challenges, and Areas for International Business Research," *Critical Perspectives on International Business* 15, no. 2/3 (January 1, 2019): 203, https://doi.org/10.1108/cpoib-02-2019-0015.

[21]Elena Lucchi, "Introducing 'for Profit' Initiatives and Actors in Humanitarian Response | Centre for Applied Reflection on Humanitarian Practice" (Center for Applied Reflection on Humanitarian Practice, February 2018), https://arhp.msf.es/aid-environment/introducing-profit-initiatives-and-actors-humanitarian-response.

[22]Adam Kamradt-Scott, "Navigating the Role of the Private Sector in Health Emergencies," *Medicine, Conflict and Survival* 32, no. 3 (July 2, 2016): 171–74, https://doi.org/10.1080/13623699.2016.1249145; Jeremy Youde, "Private Actors, Global Health and Learning the Lessons of History," *Medicine, Conflict and Survival* 32, no. 3 (July 2, 2016): 203–20, https://doi.org/10.1080/13623699.2016.1249526.

[23]Hotho and Girschik, "Corporate Engagement in Humanitarian Action"; Lucchi, "Introducing 'for Profit' Initiatives and Actors in Humanitarian Response | Centre for Applied Reflection on Humanitarian Practice"; Christopher Spearin, "Private Security Companies and Humanitarians: A Corporate Solution to Securing Humanitarian Spaces?," *International Peacekeeping* 8, no. 1 (March 1, 2001): 20–43, https://doi.org/10.1080/13533310108413877.

[24]Hotho and Girschik, "Corporate Engagement in Humanitarian Action," 209; OCHA, "The Business Case"; Jennifer Oetzel and Kathleen Getz, "Why and How Might Firms Respond Strategically to Violent Conflict?," *Journal of International Business Studies* 43, no. 2 (2012): 166–86.

[25]Richey and Ponte, *Brand Aid: Shopping Well to Save the World*.

primarily concentrated on crises in the Global South, however, our article contributes new evidence on how these dynamics operate, both similarly and differently, in the Global North.

Understanding Humanitarian Communications

Scholars of humanitarianism have highlighted the role of narratives in building support for social causes.[26] Such humanitarian narratives define a problem and offer a story about how a particular intervention can solve it. For example, as they compete for funding, NGOs commodify the images of their beneficiaries to sell their story to potential donors.[27] As a result "humanitarian organizations operate today much like brands and speak to us as consumers just as any other brand would do."[28] In this context, social movements, from feminism to environmentalism, can become commodities to be bought and sold.[29] The rise of such activities, and ethical consumption more broadly, places marketing communications at the center of corporate humanitarian practice.

A growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship examines such corporate humanitarian communication.[30] Some scholars focus on CSR communication, or how corporations communicate – through official reports, media interviews and advertising – about their corporate social responsibility efforts. This includes research on how accurately CSR communication reflects CSR practices,[31] and how CSR communication affects corporate reputation and performance.[32] CSR communication also includes research on the extent to which communication is itself constitutive of CSR

[26]Christiana Abraham, "Race, Gender and 'Difference': Representations of 'Third World Women' in International Development," *Journal of Critical Race Inquiry* 2, no. 2 (April 9, 2015), https://doi.org/10.24908/jcri.v2i2.4723; Alexandra Cosima Budabin and Lisa Ann Richey, "Advocacy Narratives and Celebrity Engagement: The Case of Ben Affleck in Congo," *Human Rights Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (May 23, 2018): 260–86, https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2018.0015; Katharina Glaab and Lena Partzsch, "Utopia, Food Sovereignty, and Ethical Fashion: The Narrative Power of Anti-GMO Campaigns," *New Political Science* 40, no. 4 (October 2, 2018): 691–707, https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2018.1528060; Luis Fernando Restrepo, "Celebrity Authors, Humanitarian Narratives, And The Role Of Literature In World Crises Today: The Medecins Sans Frontiers' Newspaper Chronicles Testigos Del Horror (Witness Of Horror)," *Comparative Literature Studies* 55, no. 2 (2018): 345–60.

[27]Monika Krause, *The Good Project: Humanitarian Relief NGOs and the Fragmentation of Reason*, Illustrated edition (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 41.

[28]Devika Sharma, "Doing Good, Feeling Bad: Humanitarian Emotion in Crisis," *Journal of Esthetics & Culture* 9, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 1, https://doi.org/10.1080/20004214.2017.1370357.

[29]Peter Dauvergne, *Environmentalism of the Rich*, 1st edition (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016); Kathryn Moeller, *The Gender Effect: Capitalism, Feminism, and the Corporate Politics of Development*, First edition (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018); Elisabeth Prügl, "Neoliberalising Feminism," *New Political Economy* 20, no. 4 (July 4, 2015): 614–31, https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2014.951614; Ben Richardson, "Making a Market for Sustainability: The Commodification of Certified Palm Oil," *New Political Economy* 20, no. 4 (July 4, 2015): 545–68, https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2014.923829.

[30]Lilie Chouliaraki and Anne Vestergaard Jørgensen, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Humanitarian Communication*, 1 edition (London: Routledge, 2021).

[31]Christopher Wickert, Andreas Georg Scherer, and Laura J. Spence, "Walking and Talking Corporate Social Responsibility: Implications of Firm Size and Organizational Cost," *Journal of Management Studies* 53, no. 7 (2016): 1169–96, https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12209; Peter Winkler, Michael Etter, and Stefan Wehmeier, "Forms of Talk-Action-Inconsistency: Introducing Reverse Coupling:," *Management Communication Quarterly*, March 28, 2017, https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318917699523; Kemi C. Yekini, Kamil Omoteso, and Emmanuel Adegbite, "CSR Communication Research: A Theoretical-Cum-Methodological Perspective From Semiotics," *Business & Society*, May 7, 2019, 0007650319843623, https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650319843623.

[32]Chang-Dae Ham and Jeesun Kim, "The Effects of CSR Communication in Corporate Crises: Examining the Role of Dispositional and Situational CSR Skepticism in Context," *Public Relations Review* 46, no. 2 (June 1, 2020): 101,792, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2019.05.013; Carol-Ann Tetrault Sirsly and Elena Lvina, "From Doing Good to Looking Even Better: The Dynamics of CSR and Reputation," *Business & Society* 58, no. 6 (July 1, 2019): 1234–66, https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650315627996.

practices,[33] or acts as an "aspirational" exercise which shapes future corporate strategy.[34] Indeed, CSR practitioners are sometimes internal activists,[35] who leverage communications to shape practices toward their normative agenda. In this view, corporate CSR communications are speech-acts which perform a direct function in the world through the messages they convey and the sentiments they evoke in their target audiences. In the case of humanitarian communications, these speech-acts create imaginaries of corporate helping in response to crisis.

Scholars of both business and development have also drawn attention to communications that are intended to serve directly as a form of CSR, called cause-related marketing.[36] Cause-related marketing (CRM) is marketing devised to sell a product or service to consumers by highlighting that part of the profit or sale price, typically linked to the volume of sales, will be donated to a "good cause." CRM was first pioneered by American Express in the early 1980s, when it ran advertising campaigns encouraging its card-holders to use their cards to support local causes in the United States.[37] One 1983 campaign to restore the Statue of Liberty cost the company $4 million in advertising, raised $1.7 million for the cause, and triggered a 27 percent rise in AmEx card use and a 45 percent increase in new card applications.[38] These figures underscore that while companies often highlight the sums raised for charity, such campaigns also drive new business to sponsoring brands. Indeed, this commercial success led AmEx to legally trademark the term "cause-related marketing,"[39] making humanitarian "helping" itself into a branded

[33]Dennis Schoeneborn, Mette Morsing, and Andrew Crane, "Formative Perspectives on the Relation Between CSR Communication and CSR Practices: Pathways for Walking, Talking, and T(w)Alking," *Business & Society* 59, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 5–33, https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650319845091.

[34]Kunal Basu and Guido Palazzo, "Corporate Social Responsibility: A Process Model of Sensemaking," *The Academy of Management Review* 33, no. 1 (2008): 122–36, https://doi.org/10.2307/20159379; Robert Caruana and Andrew Crane, "Constructing Consumer Responsibility: Exploring the Role of Corporate Communications:," *Organization Studies*, December 1, 2008, https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840607096387; Visa Penttilä, "Aspirational Talk in Strategy Texts: A Longitudinal Case Study of Strategic Episodes in Corporate Social Responsibility Communication," *Business & Society* 59, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 67–97, https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650319825825; Peter Winkler, Michael Etter, and Itziar Castelló, "Vicious and Virtuous Circles of Aspirational Talk: From Self-Persuasive to Agonistic CSR Rhetoric," *Business & Society* 59, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 98–128, https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650319825758.

[35]Verena Girschik, "Shared Responsibility for Societal Problems: The Role of Internal Activists in Reframing Corporate Responsibility:," *Business & Society*, July 26, 2018, https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650318789867.

[36]Sue Adkins, "Why Cause Related Marketing Is a Winning Business Formula," *Marketing*, 2000, 18; Taylor Beard, "Cause-Related Marketing: A Fantastic Fundraising Tool or a Corrupter of Philanthropy?" (BA, Tacoma,WA, University of Puget Sound, 2013), https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/ipe_theses/8; Matthew Berglind and Cheryl Nakata, "Cause-Related Marketing: More Buck than Bang?," *Harvard Business Review*, September 15, 2005, 11; Roberta Hawkins, "Shopping to Save Lives: Gender and Environment Theories Meet Ethical Consumption," *Geoforum* 43, no. 4 (2012): 750–59, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2011.12.009; Roberta Hawkins, "'One Pack = One Vaccine' = One Global Motherhood? A Feminist Analysis of Ethical Consumption," *Gender, Place & Culture* 18, no. 2 (2011): 235–53, https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2010.551650; Aradhna Krishna and Uday Rajan, "Cause Marketing: Spillover Effects of Cause-Related Products in a Product Portfolio," *Management Science* 55, no. 9 (June 26, 2009): 1469–85, https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.1090.1043; Nina Langen, Carola Grebitus, and Monika Hartmann, "Success Factors of Cause-Related Marketing in Germany," *Agribusiness* 29, no. 2 (March 1, 2013): 207–27, https://doi.org/10.1002/agr.21331; Stefano Ponte and Lisa Ann Richey, "Buying Into Development? Brand Aid Forms of Cause-Related Marketing," *Third World Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (2014): 65–87; Joelle Vanhamme et al., "To Do Well by Doing Good: Improving Corporate Image through Cause-Related Marketing," *Journal of Business Ethics* 109, no. 3 (2012): 259–74.

[37]Jocelyne Daw, *Cause Marketing for Nonprofits: Partner for Purpose, Passion, and Profits (AFP Fund Development Series)* (John Wiley & Sons, 2006).

[38]Daw.

[39]Daw.

commodity.[40] Since then, many companies have followed in AmEx's footsteps, and these relationships of "purpose" have grown from CRM's early focus on local causes to cover more global ones.

Such campaigns often rhetorically position consumers as themselves humanitarian actors, with companies as middlemen who manage or facilitate consumers' desire to do good while shopping well. Indeed, some scholars argue that we have entered an era of "post-humanitarianism," in which those who engage in or support social causes do so as much in pursuit of their own self-fulfillment as in the service of helping others.[41] Seen in this light, these campaigns therefore represent a form of "everyday humanitarianism" as defined by Richey as "an expanded series of practices in the everyday lives of citizens that purport to make a difference outside the traditional boundaries of humanitarian activity."[42] This elevation of the consumer as everyday hero is enabled by the explosion of social media, which encourages individuals to chronicle their purchases or reference favorite brands as part of their digital persona.[43] Our article advances this insight by showing that there are distinct types of narratives in corporate humanitarian communication which afford consumers different degrees and forms of agency.

Both the CSR and corporate humanitarianism literatures have acknowledged the significant changes to corporate practice as a result of new digital technologies and in particular social media.[44] Companies provide social media platforms for consumers to build loyalty as "fans" and as "helpers" through sharing their own interactions with the company or its products in what amounts to free advertising.[45] As Nyberg and Murray have argued, a crucial dimension of social media is the ability of corporations to speak alongside – and in identical form to – individual users, constructing themselves as "citizens" with their own view of the common good.[46] This potential is particularly salient in the context of crises and other fast-moving news events whose political or economic significance is determined in real time through debate on social media. In recent years, corporations have begun to invest in new forms of online marketing that specifically leverage this real-time functionality, but the implications of these forms for corporate humanitarianism have not yet been scrutinized. In focusing on the use of these forms of communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, we begin to remedy this gap.

[40]Lisa Ann Richey, "Eclipsed by the Halo: 'Helping' Brands through Dissociation," *Dialogs in Human Geography* 9, no. 1 (March 1, 2019): 78–82, https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820619831139.

[41]Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012); Richey, "Conceptualizing 'Everyday Humanitarianism.'"

[42]Richey, "Conceptualizing 'Everyday Humanitarianism,'" 627.

[43]Ruben Kremers and James Brassett, "Mobile Payments, Social Money: Everyday Politics of the Consumer Subject," *New Political Economy* 22, no. 6 (November 2, 2017): 652, https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2017.1306503.

[44]Michael Etter, Davide Ravasi, and Elanor Colleoni, "Social Media and the Formation of Organizational Reputation," *Academy of Management Review* 44, no. 1 (November 10, 2017): 28–52, https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2014.0280; Patrick Meier, *Digital Humanitarians: How Big Data Is Changing the Face of Humanitarian Response*, 1 edition (Boca Raton, FL: Routledge, 2015); Friederike Schultz, Itziar Castelló, and Mette Morsing, "The Construction of Corporate Social Responsibility in Network Societies: A Communication View," *Journal of Business Ethics* 115, no. 4 (2013): 681–92; Daniel Vogler and Mark Eisenegger, "CSR Communication, Corporate Reputation, and the Role of the News Media as an Agenda-Setter in the Digital Age," *Business & Society*, June 8, 2020, 0007650320928969, https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650320928969; Aimei Yang and Wenlin Liu, "CSR Communication and Environmental Issue Networks in Virtual Space: A Cross-National Study," *Business & Society* 59, no. 6 (July 1, 2020): 1079–1109, https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650318763565.

[45]Alexandra Cosima Budabin, "Crafting Humanitarian Imaginaries: The Visual Story-Telling of Buy-One Give-One Marketing Campaigns," *Proceedings* 1, no. 9 (2017), https://doi.org/10.3390/proceedings1090905.

[46]Daniel Nyberg and John Murray, "Corporate Politics in the Public Sphere: Corporate Citizenspeak in a Mass Media Policy Contest," *Business & Society* 59, no. 4 (April 1, 2020): 579–611, https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650317746176.

Methodology

This article brings scholarship on the privatization of humanitarianism and the rise of humanitarian communication together to understand corporate communications during the onset of COVID-19. In our analysis, we adopt a broadly constructivist approach and consider businesses as socially situated entities whose objectives and actions are simultaneously economic and political in nature. This distinguishes our approach from other scholarship on corporate social responsibility which treats corporate political activities as external to an assumed economic core of rational profit-seeking. While such scholarship sometimes considers corporate humanitarian response as a form of "non-market" strategy, our approach does not distinguish between the market and society in this way.

Methodologically, this means that we do not seek to distinguish between altruistic and self-interested motivations for corporate crisis response, but rather to consider these interventions themselves as rhetorical objects which perform both economic and political functions in the world. We analyze corporate communications as primary objects of study, and seek to identify the messages they convey and the sentiments they attempt to evoke. The veracity of the claims companies make in these communications, or the ultimate public health impact of their actions, therefore sit beyond our scope.

Empirically, we focus our attention on online communication, and in particular on corporate use of real-time content marketing (RTCM). Real-time marketing is a practice in which marketing professionals respond to conversations taking place across the internet, including on social media platforms.[47] Real-time marketing is cheaper than traditional advertising, as brands do not pay to post on social networks, and highly effective: in one 2014 study, 76 percent of brands reported that it increased audience engagement, 56 percent found that it increased customer satisfaction, and 25 percent found that it contributed to turning advertising audiences into paying customers.[48] Content marketing involves brands producing editorial content, such as videos, articles, podcasts or newsletters, which do not present as explicit advertising, but nevertheless promote the brand. This practice requires marketers to develop similar skills to journalists, a dynamic reinforced by changes in publishing practices which have collapsed the distinctions between news and marketing.[49] These two practices are linked, with content marketers producing material that real-time marketers insert into social media conversations. We refer to the aggregate output of these practices as real-time content marketing (RTCM).

When RTCM practitioners enter conversations consumers are having with each other, they respond not only to conversations about their brand or industry, but also to unrelated breaking news. Marketing professionals refer to this practice as "newsjacking," using already trending news topics to draw attention to the brand. Significantly, these engagements require marketing professionals to produce relevant content in a short time

[47]Rob Carpenter, "Real-Time Marketing Isn't What You Think It Is," Evergage, June 16, 2014, https://www.evergage.com/blog/real-time-marketing-isnt-what-you-think-it-is/; Andrew Pearson, "Real Time: The next Frontier for Analytics," *Journal of Digital & Social Media Marketing* 2, no. 3 (November 1, 2014): 9.

[48]Katy Howell, "What Are the Benefits of Real-Time Marketing?," Smart Insights, April 8, 2014, https://www.smartinsights.com/online-pr/real-time-marketing-online-pr/benefits-real-time-marketing/.

[49]Maha Rafi Atal, "The Cultural and Economic Power of Advertisers in the Business Press," *Journalism* 19, no. 8 (August 1, 2018): 1078–95, https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884917725162; Michael Serazio, "Making (Branded) News: The Corporate Co-Optation of Online Journalism Production," *Journalism Practice* 14, no. 6 (July 19, 2019): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2019.1637273; Evgeniya Tonkova, "Automated Marketing and the Need for Revising Traditional Practices," *Journal of Emerging Trends in Marketing and Management* 1, no. 1 (2016): 167–74.

frame, sometimes within minutes of a topic emerging.[50] This stands in contrast to traditional advertising which can take weeks or months to produce and involve more formal managerial approval. In our sample, the news event being referenced was a pandemic in its early stages whose meaning – in terms of long-term implications for economy and society – was still emerging and contestable. The rapid and ad-hoc nature of RTCM allowed marketers to play a role in making sense of the crisis, shaping how individuals and society should respond. We examine the text and images of RTCM as interactive speech-acts: particular texts create and circulate particular ideas about how individuals and organizations should engage in an unprecedented time. It is this process of meaning-making that we investigate.

Data Collection

In order to examine corporate marketing activities during the early phases of the coronavirus pandemic in Europe and North America, we collected a dataset of 80 RTCM brand engagements over a six-week period between 13 March and April 30, 2020. This dataset was compiled manually in four phases.

First, we manually archived advertisements targeted – on social media or over e-mail – to each of us which made reference to the pandemic. We are both women and professional academics, based in the United Kingdom and Denmark, but with social and familial ties to Italy, India, Pakistan and the United States. These demographic details necessarily shaped the types of products and brands which appeared in our feeds. Second, we made a public online announcement of our ongoing research into this topic, and invited submissions from the general public. This resulted in submissions not only from individual consumers of advertisements they had seen, either on social media or in e-mail newsletters, but also submissions from media professionals, such as public relations consultants and journalists, of press releases sent by brands to news organizations. This public call produced a wider range of submissions, from both men and women and from a wider range of countries, but was still necessarily shaped by our social networks. Third, through an informant who had contributed to the public submission, we examined a crowd-sourced database of corporate responses to the pandemic compiled by and for public relations professionals in the United Kingdom. While this database included employment practices, charitable donations and other activities, we extracted those examples that contained marketing communications.

Fourth, in order to mitigate biases in our sample from either companies' profiles of us or from our personal and professional networks, we located a more representative database from Facebook. The Facebook Ad Database, created by Facebook in response to public opprobrium following the 2016 US election, provides a public record of any political advertising on the social network, as well as Facebook-owned properties such as Instagram, including the dates when the advertisement appeared, what demographic groups were targeted and how much the advertiser paid. Advertisements by government officials or candidates for election are automatically recorded, while advertisements by

[50]Lotte M. Willemsen et al., "Let's Get Real (Time)! The Potential of Real-Time Marketing to Catalyze the Sharing of Brand Messages," *International Journal of Advertising* 37, no. 5 (September 3, 2018): 832, https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2018.1485214.

corporate brands are entered into the database if they include keywords linked to a social issue. This includes public health matters such as the pandemic, and thereby allowed for a simple search of advertisements making reference to essential keywords. In this phase, therefore, we collected all advertising declared on Facebook's Ad Database under the keywords "coronavirus," "COVID-19" and "stay at home" and targeted to consumers in Europe or North America during the study period.

Having gathered our sample, we conducted a multi-modal discourse analysis.[51] In this method, we performed a close-reading of each text, taking note of the language and images used and the audiences referenced to make sense of the messages advanced. At the same time, we conducted additional research, for example, by examining relevant company websites or considering the timing and placement of the communication, in order to situate the text and imagery of each example in context to better understand its message. Following this reading of each message in its own context, we analyzed the database comparatively, making note of similar types of images and language used or humanitarian activities mentioned recurring across brands. We also searched for patterns in the recurrence of particular types of messages from brands in particular industries, or from messages at similar temporal points in our collection period. Finally, drawing on the insights in the literatures on humanitarianism and communication, we documented patterns in the type of role in the crisis the message assigned to the company, consumers or other actors. This manual sorting was done by each researcher and then our analyses were compared, discussed and revised. Further examples were sorted into the categories as they were added to the database, and the categories were reviewed at fortnightly intervals and adjusted as new data showed new patterns.

Analytical Typology

Informed by our theoretical framework and the patterns identified in our iterative and multi-modal discourse analysis, we can construct the following typology for understanding the ways that corporate humanitarian communications made sense of the COVID-19 crisis in its early phases and the role they advanced for companies in responding to it.

First, we can distinguish between corporations whose communications claim that they will engage their own core business capacities in responding to COVID-19, and those who instead claim to intervene in partnership with other actors. Drawing on the distinctions drawn by Richey and Ponte[52] and Hotho and Girschik[53] in their typologies of corporate humanitarianism, and Husted et. al. in their analysis of corporate social responsibility partnerships,[54] we refer to these as "engaged" and "disengaged" interventions, respectively. For example, a marketing communication from Coca-Cola, in which the company announced plans to donate drinks and food supplies to vulnerable groups affected by the economic shutdown, represents an engaged intervention, as producing and distributing food and beverages are the company's core business. By contrast, a marketing

[51]Kay L. O'Halloran, Sabine Tan, and Marissa K. L. E, "Multimodal Analysis for Critical Thinking," *Learning, Media and Technology* 42, no. 2 (April 3, 2017): 147–70, https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2016.1101003.
[52]Richey and Ponte, *Brand Aid: Shopping Well to Save the World*.
[53]Hotho and Girschik, "Corporate Engagement in Humanitarian Action."
[54]Bryan W. Husted, David Bruce Allen, and Jorge E. Rivera, "Governance Choice for Strategic Corporate Social Responsibility: Evidence From Central America," *Business & Society*, April 24, 2008, https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650308315504.

communication from Crusoe Energy Systems, a gas provider, highlighting plans to donate its computing power to medical researchers at Stanford, would represent a disengaged intervention insofar as the company is not in the computing or medical research businesses, and instead claims to help through its partnership with Stanford.

We add to these analyses, however, a new dimension. While the engaged/disengaged distinction turns on *who* is doing the helping – the company or its partner – we additionally distinguish between messages on the basis of *whom* they claim to help. On this axis, we divide corporate humanitarian communications that claim to address COVID-19 at a collective level – whether by contributing to the medical response or to addressing economic or sociological impacts – and those which claim to address COVID-19 at an individual level, by helping consumers cope with the crisis. We refer to these two types of corporate intervention as "helping" and "coping" respectively. "Helping" is about managing the pandemic, while "coping" is about managing yourself. While both the above examples from Coca-Cola and Crusoe fall into the former category, advertisements encouraging consumers to purchase certain products or services to ease their own experience of COVID-19 fell into the latter. This "post-humanitarian" dimension of our analysis is novel, in emphasizing the role assigned to the consumer, as potentially both a contributor of funds and a beneficiary of coping purchases.

Thus, we introduce in Figure 1 a typology for understanding businesses' humanitarian communications during the early phase of COVID-19. While corporate interventions may span more than one category as they mix different kinds of approaches, we can use this matrix to identify discrete messages about the crisis and make sense of their meaning. As the analysis in the subsequent sections will show, these messages concentrated in three of the four possible quadrants created by our two axes. This is because corporate humanitarian communication is about the

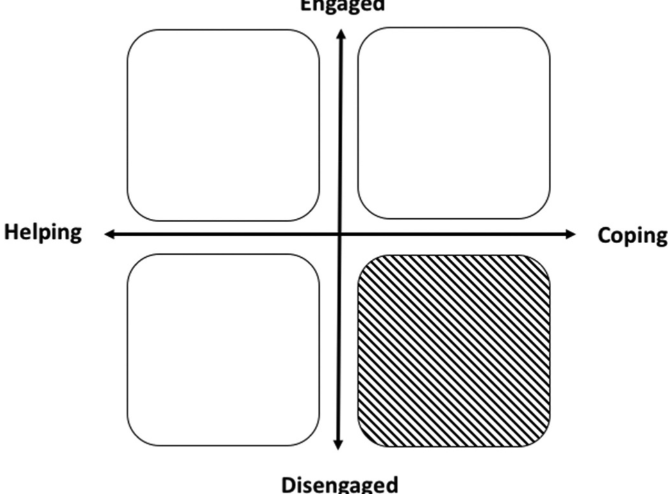

Figure 1. Typology.

branding of the company as "good" or its products as "useful." Thus, we do not find any examples of companies communicating on behalf of *other* companies' brand or products. As a result the quadrant for "disengaged coping," which would require both partnership with other actors and helping the individual consumer buy products to cope with the pandemic is, not surprisingly, empty. Companies would not use COVID-19 to sell other companies' products as solutions.

Data Analysis: Engaged versus Disengaged

Our first axis distinguishes between companies who claimed to leverage their own core business for COVID-19 intervention as engaged and those whose interventions were disengaged from their own core business, instead claiming to support partner organizations. This is an analytical distinction describing how the mechanism of intervention relates to the company's commercial operations. It is not a normative distinction and it does not describe the substantive impact of the intervention on the pandemic itself: interventions may be disengaged from the company's business, but make a substantial impact. Evaluating impact is beyond the scope of our analysis, which focuses on how companies' rhetorical claims about their interventions make sense of the crisis and position themselves within it.

Our analysis shows that these two types of communications expressed different ways of making sense of the crisis, and companies' role in it. "Engaged helping" messages positioned the company as itself working to manage the pandemic, whether in its medical, economic or other dimensions. This type of communication was particularly common among companies operating in the health care sector, or related industries. For example, Novo Nordisk), the world's sixth-largest pharmaceutical company,[55] published photos on Facebook of smiling healthcare workers holding up their protective goggles and a hand-written sign with a heart and the word "Tak" (Danish for "Thanks"). The accompanying message from the company reads, in part, "Great to see how our equipment is being used around the world to support the fight against #COVID-19" (Figure 2).

This message positions Novo Nordisk's existing business – products already made and sold – as fulfilling a humanitarian function during the crisis, rather than making any commitment to distinct COVID-19 efforts. Both the caption's mention of company markets on three continents, and the racially and gender- diverse group of workers pictured, draw attention to the company's global reach at a time of transnational crisis. A similar ethos echoed from the world's leading shipping company, Maersk, who tweeted the "news" of Maersk Bridge, an air bridge and supply chain operation in which the company's existing logistics network would transport personal protective equipment (PPE) to healthcare workers.

While such medical engagement was only possible for companies in health-related sectors, many companies emphasized managing the economic and sociological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in ways that still engaged their core business. Oftentimes, this involved repurposing existing products or materials for new COVID-related ends. For example, Starbucks communicated through an e-mail campaign that it had contributed over 700,000 meals to food banks when it was forced to close

[55]Kevin Grønneman, "Novo Nordisk Is the World's 6th Largest Pharma Company by Market Value," *MedWatch*, October 2, 2019, sec. Top picks in English, https://medwatch.dk/Top_picks_in_english/article11657489.ece.

Figure 2. Novo Nordisk, Facebook Ad, Screenshot taken April 6, 2020.

its cafes as a result of COVID-19 infections, and additionally, that it had engaged its own distribution network to help with the logistical bottlenecks caused by the increased demand on US food banks during a deepening recession. Similarly, clothing retailers turned their fabric stocks and factories over to the production of face masks for non-medical personnel. Marketing messages from these companies emphasized how these products help combat the spread of contagion, with the Lithuanian brand "Bliss by Violeta" advertising a quickly-launched line of linen face masks as "anti-septic, non-allergenic and breathable" (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Bliss by Violeta, Facebook Ad, Screenshot taken April 20, 2020.

What such "engaged helping" interventions share, whether focused on the medical or non-medical aspects of COVID-19, is a view of the crisis as a problem requiring an infusion of managerial and technical expertise. These communications tout already-existing products as relevant to the specialized needs of medical personnel, or the ability to quickly convert production networks for new health and economic needs. In doing so, they position companies as global entities whose equipment, supply chains and logistical expertise are essential to combatting a global pandemic

requiring rapid manufacture and transport of medical and non-medical supplies. This framing echoes the way that corporations have previously framed humanitarian crises as crises of logistics, and social problems as problems of project management, which corporate managers have the substantive expertise to solve.[56]

This direct management narrative contrasts to that advanced by "disengaged" communications, which emphasized partnerships. A Facebook promotion from Armedangels, a German apparel company, provides an instructive example. With a picture of a woman in a face mask embroidered with the words, "I wear this mask for you," the advertisement has similarities with the engaged intervention from Bliss above. Yet the caption reads: "We can't produce medical masks. That's why we decided to help in a different way – and support those who work on the front line." The caption explains that Armedangels will donate €2 to Doctors Without Borders for every mask sold. In other words, while both fashion brands are repurposing their facilities to make similar products (masks), Bliss claims that their own product will contribute to managing the pandemic, while Armedangels claims instead that the company helps by financially supporting others who can contribute. The former is an engaged solution, while the latter is a disengaged one that partners with an international NGO (Figure 4).

While Armedangels linked the potential size of its donation to product sales, other brands used their communication to highlight donations already promised. The Spanish shoe brand, Camper, sent a marketing e-mail detailing its "strong Mallorcan heritage" and how it has been "working with local authorities to determine how we can help." The e-mail announces that Camper is donating shoes and slippers to medical workers and patients in local hospitals and iPads from its retail stores for hospital communications. In emphasizing "working with" hospitals and local government, Camper does not claim that it is can itself combat the virus, but rather that it is making resources available to others who can. Similarly, in addition to the "engaged" use of its logistics network to support foodbanks mentioned above, Starbucks also highlighted in its promotional e-mails a $1 million donation to Feeding America, the nation's largest hunger relief organization, which had established a COVID-19 Response Fund. Finally, Facebook announced on March 17th that it would provide $100 million in grants for small businesses, with $40 million for American firms, and $60 million for applicants elsewhere. The company then partnered with the US government's Small Business Administration to notify, through its own platform, an estimated 30 million small business owners, encouraging them to apply for relief loans.[57]

Indeed, the distribution of information played an important part in "disengaged" communications. Facebook established a resource hub on its website for small businesses seeking advice about adjusting to the pandemic, and partnered with the World Health Organization to distribute health updates on both the Facebook website and via its WhatsApp messaging service.[58] The crowd-funding platform GoFundMe similarly created a dedicated webpage entitled "Fundraising for Coronavirus Relief: How You Can Help the

[56]Mark Duffield, *Development, Security and Unending War: Governing the World of Peoples | Wiley* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), https://www.wiley.com/en-us/Development%2C+Security+and+Unending+War%3A+Governing+the+World+of+Peoples-p-9780745635804; Evgeny Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism*, Reprint edition (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2014); Pascucci, "More Logistics, Less Aid."

[57]Maneet Ahuja, "Exclusive: Sheryl Sandberg On Leading Through Crisis And Facebook's Efforts To Save American Businesses," *Forbes*, April 14, 2020, https://www.forbes.com/sites/maneetahuja/2020/04/14/exclusive-sheryl-sandberg-on-leading-through-crisis-and-facebooks-efforts-to-save-american-businesses/.

[58]Ahuja.

Figure 4. Armedangels, Facebook Ad, Screenshot taken April 21, 2020.

Fight,"[59] providing advice to relief organizations or individuals in economic need on how to raise funds from its userbase, and to users on how to create fundraisers for their favorite causes. Though crowdfunding is GoFundMe's core business, this consultancy-like advice lies beyond its usual remit, and the resource page explicitly describes the suggestions as derived from the government partner, the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) (Figure 5).

These "disengaged helping" communications position companies' chosen partners as those who can "help" address COVID-19, with companies in supporting roles. These interventions characterize the pandemic as a crisis of capital: small businesses losing revenue, individuals losing income and charities facing growing demands. This framing positions companies as repositories of capital, the largest ones wealthier than many governments, who can "help" by making funds available quickly. Indeed, in marketing Facebook's grant program in March 2020, COO Sheryl Sandberg explained, "We talk to small businesses all the time and what they told us they needed [most] was just financial help."[60] Second, these interventions explicitly disavow the idea that companies have substantive expertise in addressing COVID-19, but instead, emphasize their position as large networks, with unique ability to get information from governments or scientific bodies to the public, and to mobilize the public into action. Starbucks' e-mail encourages readers to follow the company's lead in making their own donation to Feeding America, while GoFundMe urges its Instagram followers to use its resource page to "learn how you can help." Indeed, the consultancy Accelerist has reported that 46 percent of American consumers donated to a social cause promoted on a retailers' website in 2020.[61]

This framing positions companies as essential to humanitarian response because of their size, in both capital and reach. The emphasis on capital echoes the case made for both public-private and private-NGO partnerships in development assistance more broadly, with both the SDGs and the Paris Agreement describing such partnerships as essential to reach the financial thresholds necessary to achieve policy targets.[62] The emphasis on reach echoes the language of cause-related marketing, "brand aid" and other forms of elite partnerships in which brands and celebrities contribute by raising "awareness" of social causes, turning consumers into everyday humanitarians.[63]

Analysis: Helping versus Coping

"Engaged" and "disengaged" helping communications both make claims to address the pandemic at a collective level, either in its medical or economic dimensions. Engaged interventions claim that the company will directly take the actions to manage the pandemic, and disengaged interventions claim that others will do the "helping" while the company offers financial and network support. The people being helped in the above

[59]GoFundMe, "Coronavirus Fundraising: COVID-19 Donation Crowdfunding," GoFundMe, May 20, 2020, https://www.gofundme.com/c/blog/fundraising-for-coronavirus.
[60]Ahuja, "Exclusive."
[61]Accelerist, "Raise More at the (New) Register: How Consumers Feel About Giving to Charity at Checkout During a Global Pandemic and Recession," *Accelerist.com*, 2020, https://accelerist.com/raisemoreatthenewregister/.
[62]Mawdsley, "'From Billions to Trillions.'"
[63]Alexandra Cosima Budabin and Lisa Ann Richey, *Batman Saves the Congo: How Celebrities Disrupt the Politics of Development* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2021); Lisa Ann Richey and Dan Brockington, "Celebrity Humanitarianism: Using Tropes of Engagement to Understand North/South Relations," *Perspectives on Politics*, 2019, 1–17, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592719002627.

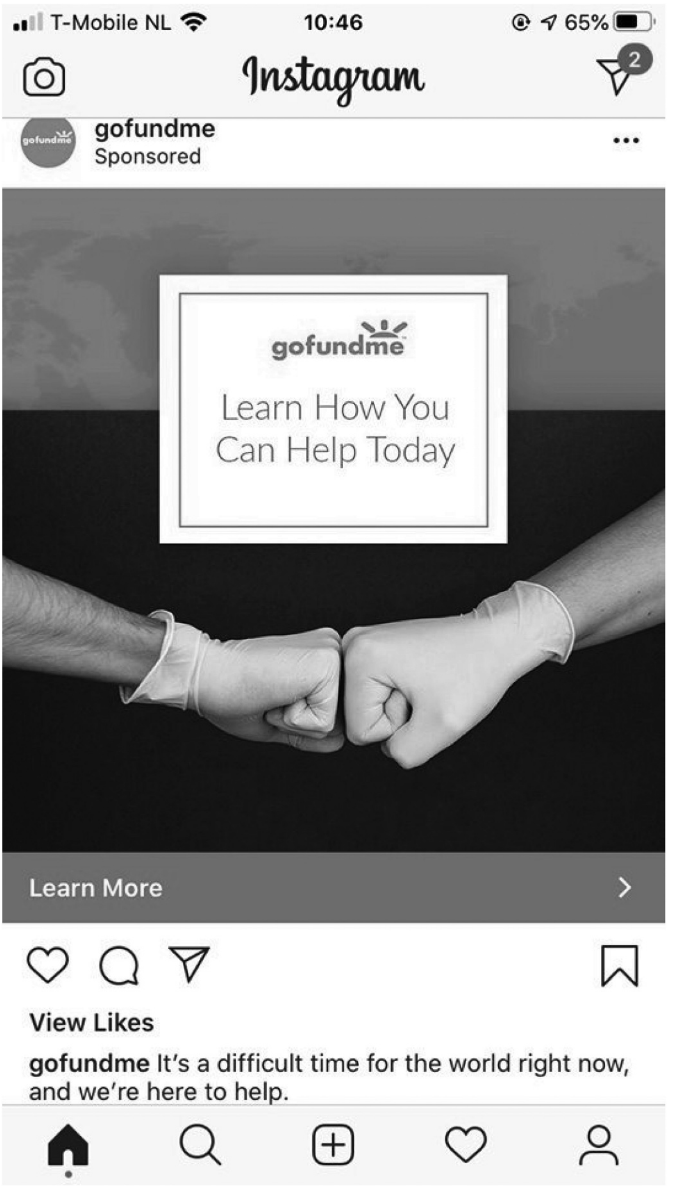

Figure 5. GoFundMe advertisement, Instagram, Screenshot submitted March 30, 2020.

examples include medical professionals and their patients, the economy (and those vulnerable to economic hardship), and key workers. While this is a diverse possible range of beneficiaries, crucially, each of these is described as someone other than the actor – the company or its partner – doing the helping. The second axis of our analysis contrasts this dynamic, of "helping" others to manage the pandemic at some collective level, with what we call "coping," interventions that help the consumer to manage the pandemic at an individual level, to manage *themselves*.

Brands offered to help consumers “cope” in three ways. First, brands communicated that their products and services would address the practical challenges of the pandemic. Consider, for example, this Instagram post from a co-working space in Amsterdam (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Zoku Instagram advertisement, Mobile Screenshot submitted March 30, 2020.

The image depicts a woman working on a laptop with a pot of tea in a clean and spare room, with a calm and relaxed facial expression on her face. The accompanying text reads: "After spending a few days at home, you might crave a change of scenery and some-much needed peace and quiet." The advertisement offers private offices for hire, "an enjoyable place to work" as a solution for professionals needing a socially distant workspace away from their household. The suggestion that these workplaces offer "peace and quiet" addresses itself to professionals with children, especially mothers, who may struggle with the disruption of remote working from a family home.

Other brands similarly addressed such offers of coping-through-practicality to consumers as professionals and parents. These included the laptop manufacturer MSI promoting cheap netbooks as a solution for home-schooling, or the home goods website aha! promoting lines of kitchen knives, chopping boards and other equipment for cooking at home. In its e-mail newsletter, Aha! notes that it "has been nice to get back to family time' but recognizes that cooking more meals a day is a burden for parents, and promises to 'make daily food prep easy for yourself." Some brands sought to present their products as a form of essential infrastructure. This included the mobile phone brand T-Mobile which reminded users in a sponsored Facebook post that strong internet connections would be "necessary" for many home-workers or energy company Williams which emphasized its reliability during the crisis, advertising on Facebook that it would "ensure your home and business stay up and running" during the lockdown.

Second, some brands – especially those in the fashion, fitness and lifestyle industries – offered to help consumers cope by making the experience of pandemic lockdown more pleasurable. Such messages promoted luxury clothes, "athleisure" exercise wear, shoes and accessories, as well as discounts for socially distant workout classes and private trainers. They presented these luxury goods as a means of coping with the stress and disruption of the pandemic through "self-care." On its website and Twitter account, for example, the fashion brand Anthropologie promoted its loungewear line as "self-care style" for "staying in." Multiple make-up brands sent messages to journalists advertising online tutorials for using their products for those with "more time (inside) on our hands" using lockdown "as an opportunity to ramp up their beauty routine." Most striking, in a promotional newsletter for the "athleisure" brand Jolyn, a slim and muscular white woman reclines on an inflatable pool float wearing sunglasses and painted toenails. Sunlight appears to reflect off the body of water in which she floats, and the caption reads: "Bikini for staycation. Impromptu spring break? Oops, looks like we'll just have to stay home and just like … live our best lives!" (Figure 7).

Such images and captions present pandemic-related lockdowns, which compelled individuals to stay home from their usual recreational activities, as an unexpected source of free time at home which consumers could fill with new pleasures, or modifications of old ones. The footwear brand Tamaris advertised its shoes as being necessary for "an online date," while the clothing brand Nicole Miller promoted over e-mail and its website a line of shirts and dresses "to ensure you look good from the top up for virtual dates or happy hours." While consumers do not need a special wardrobe for video calls, comparing lockdown to spring breaks, dates, and happy hours encourages consumers to take pleasure in luxury clothing as a metonym for the experiences of being out and about *in* the clothes that they cannot access.

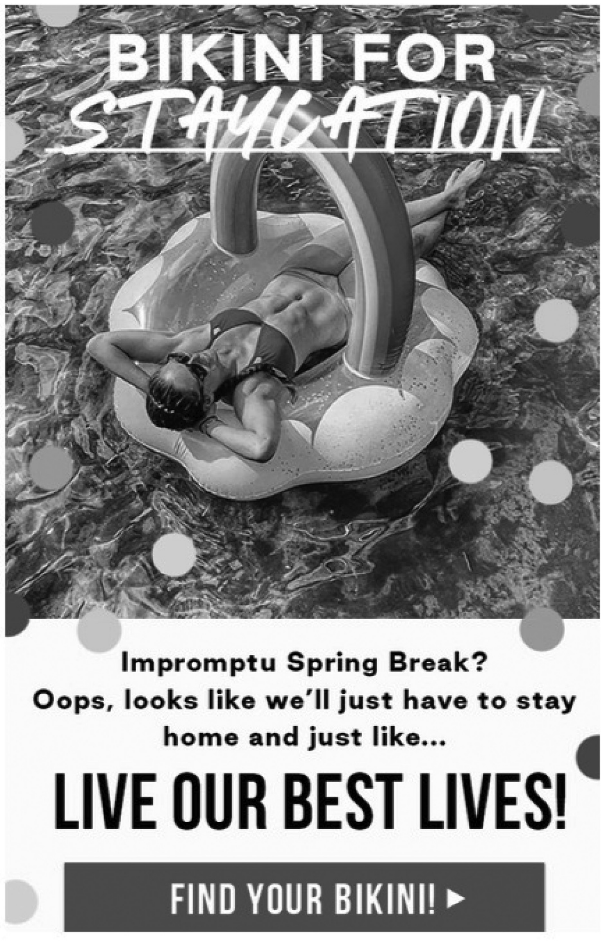

Figure 7. Jolyn e-mail promotion, March 29, 2020.

Third, some brands claimed to help consumers cope through denial, which downplayed the severity of the crisis or pretended it was not happening at all. These included, for example, Passport, a travel rewards program, contacting members in mid-March, when concerns about virus spread were focused on cruise ships, to advertise "the best pricing and exceptional bonuses" on celebrity cruises. Two Italian ski resorts, Bormio and Livigno, placed a full-page newspaper advertisement in *Corriere della Sera*, Italy's most-read newspaper, on 7 March in an attempt to attract local tourists as the lockdown was dissuading foreigners. In the image, happy parents and their child are dressed in colorful ski gear under the headline: "Live the mountain with full lungs: There's a snowy place where feeling great is contagious!"[64] This was a striking tagline at a time when the coronavirus – which kills its victims by flooding their lungs with fluid – was already beginning to

[64]It should be noted that this example has been taken up in the Italian media as how not to communicate in pandemic times. https://www.testisumisura.com/coronavirus-ripartiamo-dallabc-della-comunicazione/ https://www.pressreader.com/italy/il-fatto-quotidiano/20200311/281895890304262

Figure 8. Bormio and Livigno Ski Resort Newspaper Advertisement, March 7, 2020.

devastate some parts of northern Italy. The facing page in the newspaper identifies a spike in COVID-19 transmissions between doctors and nurses lacking protective masks in Milan (Figure 8).

These engagements came broadly from the early weeks of our sample. Brands appeared to shy away from explicitly seeking to make light of the crisis or encouraging consumers to travel in spite of it by the end of March 2020 when more severe lockdown and suppression measures were in place across Europe.

What these "coping" interventions share is a narrative that positions the consumer themself as the actor doing the "helping" as well as the beneficiary receiving the help, in sharp contrast to both engaged and disengaged helping in which the helper (companies and their partners) is distinct from the imagined recipient of the help. In this "coping" depiction, the company is a transaction partner helping consumers to help themselves. These communications suggest that individuals can address their personalized experiences of the crisis in three ways: by purchasing practical items to make their pandemic life more like "business as usual," by purchasing luxuries to make the absence of usual activities more pleasurable, or by carrying on their usual consumption habits in spite of the pandemic. Whether offering branded products as sources of reliability and security, or of pleasure and escape, these narratives all depict the crisis as a crisis for the self, for individual lifestyles and wellbeing, which can be addressed by purchasing goods and services. While scholars of humanitarianism have long noted the role of the "popular

humanitarian gaze"[65] in cause-related marketing, the elevation of consumerism during COVID-19 is particularly notable, given that overall consumer spending has fallen during the associated economic contraction.[66]

Notably, all examples of "coping" in our sample are engaged interventions: companies claim to help consumers cope by selling their own branded products and services, rather than those of any external actor. They share this dimension with the "engaged helping" category: much as engaged helping suggests the company's own core products and services can "help" address the pandemic at a collective level, engaged coping suggests that a company's own products and services can do so at the individual level. This is distinct from the emphasis in disengaged communications on a company's financial resources and reach as the source of "help." While there were no "disengaged coping" interventions in our sample, however, it is worth noting that engaged coping shares with disengaged helping an emphasis on the consumer themselves as a helper, an everyday humanitarian, whose purchases perform a caring function.

Discussion: What are Consumers Being Taught by Corporations?

In their different ways, these corporate humanitarian communications teach consumers how to respond to the pandemic by defining its nature: as a crisis of expertise and logistics, a crisis of resources and capital, or a crisis of the self. While engaged helping interventions make the case that companies themselves can concretely combat the crisis, disengaged helping and engaged coping interventions suggest that companies help by catalyzing the actions of others: partner organizations and consumers. Both engaged helping and engaged coping interventions share a visual and textual rhetoric that frames companies' products themselves as humanitarian objects – whether they are medical masks or pajamas – and therefore their purchase as a form of care. Finally, both disengaged helping and engaged coping present the consumer as a humanitarian. By situating business at the center of what counts as caring, these different forms of branding collectively create rhetorical space for the private sector in humanitarian responses.

This analysis holds insights for diverse literatures on corporate humanitarianism, which the scope of our empirical dataset spans. The interventions we survey describe donations of both products and cash, the sale of humanitarian products or services, and the sale of products whose proceeds can be donated to humanitarian causes. While previous typologies have often considered these separately as corporate philanthropy, corporate social responsibility, cause-related marketing and so on, our analysis shows that these different forms of corporate humanitarianism advance similar narratives about the nature of crisis and companies' role in it. Our typology focuses on distinguishing these narratives, with for-profit and not-for-profit interventions combined in the resulting narrative categories. This analysis problematizes the distinctions between profit and principle, market and non-market strategy, in existing scholarship on corporate humanitarian practice. In particular, we find that in these responses to the global crisis of COVID-19, selling, buying and "helping" are conflated.

[65]Mary Mostafanezhad, "Volunteer Tourism and the Popular Humanitarian Gaze," *Geoforum* 54 (July 1, 2014): 111–18, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2014.04.004.

[66]Ruth Lane et al., "Downshifting to Care: The Role of Gender and Care in Reducing Working Hours and Consumption," *Geoforum* 114 (August 1, 2020): 66–76, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2020.06.003.

Figure 9. Coca-Cola Linked In announcement, April 6, 2020.

This conflation represents a kind of commodity fetishism, in which buying and selling are elevated as having a humanitarian function in themselves, irrespective of – and sometimes in conflict with – the material realities of the humanitarian crisis at hand. For example, many "coping" messages came from luxury brands targeting women with the prospect of treating the pandemic as a "staycation," a time for "peace and quiet" or "family time." These advertisements presented the health crisis as an opportunity for their target audience to take a break from work outside the home and relax, an aspirational life of leisure that is common in "influencer" marketing, but an incongruous image at a time when many were losing employment, when women were over-represented in essential and high-risk fields of work such as social care, and when even affluent women, far from experiencing domestic leisure, were shouldering increased childcare and household labor.[67] Disconnect from this reality is not an accident but an important feature of the message this form of branding conveys.

In some cases, the disconnect between the commodity fetishism of COVID-19 branding, and the harms caused by the pandemic itself, was a cause for backlash. This included outrage at the fashion brand Draper James which advertised a free dress giveaway for teachers, and then, once it had run out of free dresses, used the e-mail addresses it had

[67]Donna Ferguson, "'I Feel like a 1950s Housewife': How Lockdown Has Exposed the Gender Divide," *The Observer*, May 3, 2020, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/03/i-feel-like-a-1950s-housewife-how-lockdown-has-exposed-the-gender-divide; Helen Lewis, "The Coronavirus Is a Disaster for Feminism," *The Atlantic*, March 19, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/03/feminism-womens-rights-coronavirus-covid19/608302/; Campbell Robertson and Robert Gebeloff, "How Millions of Women Became the Most Essential Workers in America," *The New York Times*, April 18, 2020, sec. U.S., https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/18/us/coronavirus-women-essential-workers.html.

accumulated to market products for sale to these vulnerable workers.[68] Social media influencers exploited pandemic fears to promote their own untested "wellness" products and cures, undermining the credibility of the brands who work with them.[69] Tobacco and e-cigarette companies used COVID-19 hashtags to promote vape pens for "partying at home" or distributed face masks for virus protection free with cigarette purchases, even as smoking and vaping are associated with the respiratory conditions that are a risk factor for coronavirus complications.[70] The commodity fetishism of such branding, in other words, masks the harms it claims to "help" address, including those harms companies themselves contribute to. By analyzing these messages according to the narratives they convey, rather than by whether they describe for-profit or not-for-profit activities, we draw attention to the commodity fetishism that runs through many different types of corporate humanitarian engagement.

While most corporate humanitarianism research has focused on business interventions in the Global South, our focus is on communication from companies in the Global North to consumers and media in the Global North. In the Global South, scholars typically find businesses partnering during crises with large global NGOs such as Save the Children or the Red Cross. Yet with the exception of Doctors Without Borders' collaboration with the German apparel company Armedangels, we did not find these market leaders as collaboration partners. Instead, in Europe and North America, the earliest response to the public health crisis was led by government health and public safety agencies. It is to these bodies that brands primarily promised their products, services and funds: for example, the regional president of Madrid selected three fast-food chains to deliver meals to children during the initial lockdown.[71] Engagement with government also offers corporate humanitarians strategic benefits: the telecommunications company T-Mobile, when advertising its network as essential infrastructure for those working from home, also highlighted the company's ongoing lobbying for the development of a 5G network in the United States. Here we echo recent findings from Knudsen and Moon about the growing role for the state in shaping corporate social responsibility.[72] Our findings suggests a need for greater engagement with the interaction between corporate humanitarianism and public governance.

Furthermore, considering the public sector as the preferred collaborating partner of business in humanitarian crisis brings into focus the differences in our assumptions of appropriate governance of crisis in the Global North versus the Global South. At the same time, governance practices and assumptions are not uniform across the Global North countries in our sample. With respect to the COVID-19 pandemic, a crisis triggered by disease but with significant economic effects, it is relevant to note that the Global North countries include countries with fully public systems of health care and generous welfare

[68]Vanessa Friedman, "Reese Witherspoon's Fashion Line Offered Free Dresses to Teachers. They Didn't Mean Every Teacher.," *The New York Times*, April 15, 2020, sec. Fashion, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/15/fashion/reese-witherspoon-draper-james-coronavirus.html.

[69]Arielle Pardes, "Wellness Influencers Sell False Promises As Coronavirus Fears Soar," *Wired*, 2020, https://www.wired.com/story/coronavirus-anxieties-soar-wellness-influencers-step-in/.

[70]Arvind Hickman, "'Big Tobacco' Using COVID-19 Messaging and Influencers to Market Products," *PR Week*, May 15, 2020, http://www.prweek.com/article/1683314?utm_source=website&utm_medium=social.

[71]Pablo Fuentenebro, "Will Philanthropy Save Us All? Rethinking Urban Philanthropy in a Time of Crisis," *Geoforum* 117 (December 1, 2020): 304–7, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2020.07.005.

[72]Jette Steen Knudsen and Jeremy Moon, *Visible Hands: Government Regulation and International Business Responsibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316224908.

regimes, such as in Northern Europe, countries with largely private health care systems and limited welfare support, such as in the United States, and countries with hybrid systems sitting between these poles. These "varieties of capitalism"[73] are beyond the scope of our study, but further research could consider how corporate humanitarians' relationship with the state varied across these instutional contexts. As Oldekop et al. argue COVID-19 has demonstrated the need for learning that inverts outdated notions of North-South helping.[74] This includes a need to deconstruct the Global "North" and "South" as blocs.

The Global North focus of our sample advances scholarship on humanitarianism in a second respect. Humanitarianism has historically been theorized as a relationship of difference, in which humanitarian helpers show compassion for and provide care to distant Others, and in which the distance – geographic and socio-economic – between the two is a source of validation for humanitarians.[75] More recently, scholars of "post-humanitarianism" have challenged this view, suggesting that humanitarian assistance is often as much – or more – about the self than it is about the other,[76] echoing Adam Smith's characterization of "moral sentiments" as reflecting individuals' desire to be seen to do good as part of their sense of self .[77] Scholarship in this post-humanitarian turn has still largely focused on cases in which humanitarian actors are helping others, often at geographic distance. By contrast, in our sample, these categories of the self and the other were more fully collapsed, with companies, consumers, partners, and intended recipients of corporate beneficence concentrated in the same markets. Indeed, one energy company in our sample addressed advertising to their own employees, expressing the hope that its contributions to COVID-19 relief would allow them to "take pride in knowing that their wells provide essential fuels to a life-saving network of hospitals, utilities, medical services and supply chains and can even power the search for a COVID-19 vaccine."[78] Scholars of corporate political activity have increasingly documented the rise of corporate citizen-speak, in which corporations engage in public discourse about political issues by positioning themselves as, and alongside, citizens.[79] This tendency was evident in our sample, with brands like Coca-Cola proclaiming that "we are all in this together" and that "by working together we can make a difference," language that once again turns on an identity between the corporation and the communities it professes to help (Figure 9).

In this way, our analysis makes more explicit the role of helping oneself in humanitarian response, evidencing the "dialogic view of the self" that Nick Stevenson has argued is a central feature of ethical consumption.[80] This is particularly extreme in the case of covid-coping, where the helper and the helped are the exact same individual.

[73]Peter A. Hall and David W. Soskice, eds., *Varieties of Capitalism*, Illustrated edition (Oxford England ; New York: OUP Oxford, 2001).
[74]Johan A. Oldekop et al., "COVID-19 and the Case for Global Development," *World Development* 134 (October 1, 2020): 105,044, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105044.
[75]Denis Kennedy, "Selling the Distant Other: Humanitarianism and Imagery – Ethical Dilemmas of Humanitarian Action – World," *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*, 2009, https://reliefweb.int/report/world/selling-distant-other-humanitarianism-and-imagery-ethical-dilemmas-humanitarian-action.
[76]Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator*; Richey, "Conceptualizing 'Everyday Humanitarianism.'"
[77]Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments and on the Origins of Languages* (London: H. Stewart, 1853), https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/smith-the-theory-of-moral-sentiments-and-on-the-origins-of-languages-stewart-ed.
[78]Matthew V. Veazey, "Flaring Fighter Powers Coronavirus Vaccine Research," *Rigzone*, March 25, 2020, https://www.rigzone.com/news/flaring_fighter_powers_coronavirus_vaccine_research-25-mar-2020-161492-article/.
[79]Nyberg and Murray, "Corporate Politics in the Public Sphere."
[80]Nick Stevenson, "Cosmopolitanism and the Future of Democracy: Politics, Culture and the Self," *New Political Economy* 7, no. 2 (July 1, 2002): 263, https://doi.org/10.1080/13563460220138862.

Conclusion: What are the Politics Produced by Commodifying Covid-19?

This article has reviewed the marketing interventions of corporations, targeting consumers in Europe and North America during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has examined the ways that these real-time marketing interventions claimed to either help society to manage the pandemic or to help individuals cope with the pandemic by managing themselves. What all these corporate communications share is a visual and textual rhetoric that frames the purchase of goods as a form of care: either for oneself, one's family or society at large. Our analysis has demonstrated that these interventions defined COVID-19 as a crisis of expertise and logistics, a crisis of resources and capital and a crisis of the self. All of these are amenable to business solutions. Interventions such as these teach consumers how to respond to crisis, making the case that business has a concrete role to play in combating crisis. By situating business at the center of what counts as caring, such branding creates rhetorical space for the private sector in humanitarian response.

One of the defining features of this crisis is the speed of change in our understanding of its nature and impact at all levels. While it remains the case that COVID-19 is "a societal problem [that] affects everyone in the society, and no one is immune from it" as argued by Bapuji et al.,[81] it is increasingly evident that some segments of society and some societies will suffer the consequences of this global pandemic in locally-specific ways.[82] The marketized humanitarian narrative of how to manage the pandemic and cope with it through the help of businesses we have studied in this research is one whose parameters are raced, classed and gendered. Thus, while a virus itself may not discriminate against bodies, the societies in which those bodies exist will. Businesses are now beginning to grapple with what that means for their engagement, and scholars must consider the prominent role of corporate communications in shaping the everyday politics of responding to crisis.

The marketing formats in our sample differ from the more traditional advertising and company reports that scholarship on humanitarian communication has historically considered. The ad-hoc nature of real-time response gave an amateur appearance to some content in our sample: in some cases, marketers representing more than one brand in the same sector, for example, re-used the exact same messages with recycled copy across multiple campaigns. This would be unlikely in traditional advertising, or outside the context of an acute crisis to which the marketer was eager to respond quickly. As our sample's breadth suggests, even in the earliest stages of the pandemic, corporations were loath to refrain from responding and risk being seen as uncaring. At the same time, the acute, early stage period we examine created space for corporate meaning-making: when the pandemic was fast-moving and fast-changing and its political, social and economic consequences unclear, there was unique space for the stories brands told to help make sense of the pandemic for uncertain and anxious consumers.

[81]Hari Bapuji et al., "Business and Society Research in Times of the Corona Crisis," *Business & Society* 59, no. 6 (July 1, 2020): 1067–78, https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650320921172.

[82]Esmé Berkhout et al., "The Inequality Virus Bringing Together a World Torn Apart by Coronavirus through a Fair, Just and Sustainable Economy," Oxfam Briefing Paper (Oxford: Oxfam GB, January 2021); Robertson and Gebeloff, "How Millions of Women Became the Most Essential Workers in America."

Studying the early stages of corporate responses to COVID-19 provided insight into how sensemaking was being conducted before the crisis had been institutionalized in different political contexts. We know from studies of humanitarianism that the "emergency imaginary" allows for more flexibility, different kinds of actions and greater possibilities for engagement by multiple actors. Scholarship on corporate humanitarianism has long held that corporations shy away from crises that are polarized along partisan lines, and are drawn toward natural disasters or other acute emergencies over prolonged crises that are perceived as man-made or shaped by government policy.[83] As the COVID-19 pandemic has become a prolonged crisis, its responses may become increasingly institutionalized, and the emergency phase will no longer apply. As its political meanings stabilize, or as partisan political allegiances form around particular COVID-19 policies, future research should explore whether the pandemic loses appeal as a site of intervention for corporate humanitarians.

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[83]Hotho and Girschik, "Corporate Engagement in Humanitarian Action."

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