

The EKOCENTER: A Case Study in Coca-Cola, Corporate Social Responsibility,  
and Bluewashing

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## **Abstract**

In 2013 The Coca-Cola Company announced their latest corporate social responsibility (CSR) project: the EKOCENTER. Envisioned for communities lacking access to safe drinking water, the EKOCENTER kiosks contain vaccine storage, wireless communication technology, clean drinking water, and Coca-Cola products under the premise of “social enterprise.” In light of the global water crisis, a textual and visual analysis of the CSR press release materials produced by The Coca-Cola Company in addition to media coverage highlights the ways in which Coca-Cola utilizes public concern about the environment and public health in order to safeguard their position as the world’s largest beverage distributor. The EKOCENTER’s discourse exemplifies “bluewashing” rhetoric that contests negative perceptions of Coca-Cola. Furthermore, the EKOCENTER discourse glosses over the contradiction between Coca-Cola’s reliance on water access for their business model and Earth’s limited fresh water supply. The EKOCENTER embodies a precarious deferment of water stewardship and governance to transnational corporations.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

The phrase “Coca-Cola” generates a host of images. One can speculate on the collection of objects that could come to mind: a shapely glass filled with brown, fizzy liquid; the Spencerian script<sup>1</sup> logo with its distinctive and fluid curvature spelling out the all too familiar letters; or perhaps a polar bear donning Santa’s hat with a vintage six-pack in tow. One image that is not likely to appear is a red kiosk situated in an undefined rural landscape. Coca-Cola has introduced this new, albeit unusual, object into Coca-Cola’s image repertoire.

In fall of 2013 Coca-Cola introduced the media to a new corporate social responsibility (CSR)<sup>2</sup> initiative: the EKOCENTER.<sup>3</sup> According to the official press release from Coca-Cola, located on [www.coca-colacompany.com](http://www.coca-colacompany.com), the EKOCENTER, or kiosk as it is commonly referred to, is “downtown in a box”: equipped with a Slingshot water purification system designed by DEKA R&D and an assortment of other services and products including, but not limited to, “sustainable energy, wireless communications, refrigeration vaccination storage, health education,” for the communities where the EKOCENTERS are located (The Coca-Cola Company, 2013b). Bolstered by a commitment to “jump-start entrepreneurship opportunities and community development,” Coca-Cola initially announced they would place approximately 1,500 kiosks across the world by the end of 2015. Although the specific kiosk locations have not been disclosed

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<sup>1</sup> Spencerian script was a popular form of handwriting in the mid 1800s. It was developed by Platt Rogers Spencer and was used early renditions of the Ford logo. (Patton, 2010)

<sup>2</sup> I agree with Frankental (2001) that there is no accurate way to measure the effectiveness of CSR, so it is essentially an “adjunct of PR, a function of the company’s external relationships, a peripheral activity” (pg. 22). In other words, PR and CSR are synonymous.

<sup>3</sup> Note that the first four letters in “EKOCENTER,” (E-K-O-C), spell “coke” backwards.

publically, the primary target regions include North America, Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Coca-Cola currently has a few pilot EKOCENTERS up and running in South Africa and Vietnam, but little-to-no information has been provided concerning the other centers' specific locations. Coca-Cola originally claimed that 1,500 EKOCENTERS would be implemented by 2015. In the first press release, Coca-Cola reported that it would implement 1,500 EKOCENTERS by 2015; however, information recently released by Coca-Cola reveals that this proclamation was grossly over-estimated. Now, the company is hoping to implement 150 centers by the end of 2015 ("Ekocenter Infographic," n.d.).

It is sometimes difficult to explain to friends, colleagues, and family members my "beef" with Coca-Cola. The company is, after all, an American icon. Nostalgia surrounds the seemingly ageless beverage: one might fondly remember having a Coke on road trips, after school with friends, with ice cream during childhood birthday parties, or at a sporting event. Furthermore, it's almost impossible to escape the logo's omnipresent status: Look up from your computer at the local coffee shop and there's a strong possibility you'll see a Coca-Cola truck pass by in the next few minutes or maybe a Coca-Cola sign hanging in the corner grocer's window. The Super Bowl yields at least one noteworthy Coke commercial that incites viewer responses such as "I liked that one," or "I missed it! Was the commercial good?" Even a recent email in my inbox from Student Activities & Unions office at the University of Minnesota evokes the brand by lauding Coca-Cola Grants for extracurricular programs. The truth is, however, that there is no "beef" to be had with Coca-Cola. Rather, I hope to embark on a much-needed critical approach to a company that is too often passed off as either an evil corporate

entity contributing to the global diabetes epidemic or a savvy beverage giant that is continually building and re-articulating their global image. The story is much more complex than these two polarizing vantage points represent.

### **Research Question**

The critical point of entry for my analysis is how the EKOCENTER discourse (such as press releases and mainstream media coverage) is used as an instrument to increase shareholder and consumer value for The Coca-Cola Company. I found the EKOCENTER article in *The New York Times* (McNeil, 2013); however, the EKOCENTER has little-to-no impact on my every day life as a *Times* reader. Why is it that Coca-Cola targets me with their PR information through the *New York Times*? As a white, middle-class, privileged U.S. American I do not face water scarcity or have a dire need for telecommunications or vaccine storage. As I will later explore in more detail in the literature review, CSR programs are aimed at Western “target publics” as reputational management at the expense of marginalized “Third World publics” (Munshi & Kurian, 2005). For my analysis, “image management” comes in the form of the EKCOENTER discourse. The term “discourse” in my analysis is understood as structural and strategic “text, talk, verbal interaction or communicative events...” (Van Dijk 1993; pg. 250). Van Dijk (1993) argues that discourse is persuasive insofar that it deploys text, talk, etc., to influence the minds of others.<sup>4</sup> It’s abundantly clear that Coca-Cola has its share of negative publicity. In the midst of a global diabetes crisis, the company has come under fire concerning their sugary drinks and the epidemic. Contesting these negative

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<sup>4</sup> Van Dijk is grounding his work in Gramsci, Foucault, and Marx.



stereotypes involves a calculated communication strategy. Here, I want to unpack how Coca-Cola draws upon environmental rhetoric to green-, or blue, wash their brand. In addition, what is the significance of the Slingshot<sup>5</sup> water purifier (designed by DEKA R&D and Dean Kamen) located within the kiosks? What does Slingshot's location *within* the EKOCENTER signify and communicate about water privatization? I will begin answering these research questions by allowing the object, the ECKOCENTER, to drive my analysis. This object-inspired case study will illuminate how the EKOCENTER's discourse works to legitimize Coca-Cola's governance in the global beverage market.

### **The Coca-Cola Company**

Although Coca-Cola is based in Atlanta, Georgia, the company has a global reach that has made its icon one of the most recognizable in existence. Operating in more than 200 countries and doling out more than 1.9 billion servings of Coke products a day, the company receives a substantial amount of revenue from overseas expenditures operated through a franchise bottling system ("2012 Annual Report," 2013). Coca-Cola does not directly own all of these local franchising systems (some are independently owned but still purchase concentrate and other raw materials from Coca-Cola), but the company does own a large percentage of the stock in several of them,<sup>6</sup> creating a money "funnel," as Blanding (2010) labels it, from foreign locations back to Atlanta. And it's a not a small funnel, Coca-Cola runs the largest beverage distribution system in the world. In 2014 the company reported their net assets for the preceding year at \$33,440 million ("2012

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<sup>5</sup> Developed by Dean Kamen (the inventor of the Segway) and DEKA R&D Slingshot technology "uses a vapor compression distillation system" in order to purify unclean water (Corporate, 2012; "Coca-Cola Announces").

<sup>6</sup> One example of this is Coca-Cola FEMSA, one of the company's largest bottling plants located in Mexico. The Coca-Cola Company owns 30% of the bottling plant.

Annual Report,” 2013). In addition to the classic Coke soft drink, the company has a 15% share in the bottled water market (“Coca-Cola eyes,” 2014)—a market that is increasingly dominated by multi-national corporations that consolidate at an alarming rate (Brei & Böhm, 2011). Therefore, to assume that any analysis of the Coca-Cola Company is referencing just Coke would be naïve and incomplete. The company owns more than 90 soft drink and bottled water brands such as DASANI, Minute Maid, Bacardi Mixers, and Honest Tea in its diverse portfolio. Also of note is that Coca-Cola either directly owns, licenses, or markets more than 500 brands globally (2013 Annual Report). DASANI alone is a \$4.61 million gross profit generator (“Coca-Cola eyes,” 2014).

Coca-Cola’s eclectic product portfolio is indicative of their objective for continued success in the non-alcoholic beverage market. One anecdote in particular speaks volumes to this ambition. Michael Blanding’s (2010) *The Coke Machine: The Dirty Truth Behind the World’s Favorite Soft Drink* references a 1995 interview with former CEO Roberto Goizueta in *Fortune* in which Goizueta “envisioned a world where the C on the kitchen faucet stood not for ‘cold’ but for ‘Coke.’” (Blanding, 2010; pg. 64). This zealous ambition cannot be overlooked. Twenty years later, the “C” could stand for DASANI, SmartWater, or another Coke subsidiary. Given the public health backlash against Coke the company has invested interested in promoting healthier sparkling beverages. Nonetheless, this anecdote points to a market-oriented objective of colossal proportions.

## **Method**

Primarily in the business of image management, PR is an entity that relies heavily on dissemination of information across mass media outlets.<sup>7</sup> At the most basic level, PR and CSR work to manage the public's opinion of a concept or entity. PR and CSR are frustratingly difficult to define, seeing as their goals, motives, and tactics are incredibly diverse. PR can range from Tweets about top ten summer getaways to communication following major organizational crises. For instance, Johnson & Johnson's 1982 response to the tampering of Tylenol bottles that resulted in seven deaths is a model example of PR "done right." It is almost impossible to define every PR "event" given its multi-layered scope; however, I have chosen to focus my study on a portion of Coca-Cola's PR through the company's content strategy on Coca-Cola Journey, the company's main website. Here, their overarching branding strategy is exposed and provides a rich entry point into the company's communication strategies. Thus, the Coca-Cola Company's corporate rhetoric (textual and visual) composes the empirical materials that support my argument. Although my analysis is centered on the EKOCENTER, other supplementary material gathered about Coca-Cola's other interlocking CSR initiatives and reports such as RAIN, "The Water Stewardship & Replenish Report," and 5by20 invariably contribute to my argument. These satellite CSR programs will be considered and explained to in chapter four. First, the Coca-Cola Journey website necessitates a brief explanation due to its robust content marketing strategy.

Coca-Cola argues, "Content is King, and the Corporate Website is Dead" (Brown, 2013). This declaration inspired a massive website makeover in 2012 that presents the

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<sup>7</sup> I use the word "equivocal" here because it is often difficult to tell the difference between PR and news coverage, as scholars Ewen (1996), and Herman and Chomsky (2002) have argued.

corporate website as more of a digital magazine rather than simply a storehouse for corporate documents (Brown, 2012). The re-design continues to deliver investor information, CEO profiles, and quarterly reports to visitors; however, the noteworthy modification is the significant amount of attention placed on consumer-targeted content. Content such as articles about the EKOCENTER, food recipes for Super Bowl parties, the Beatles, and even nail polish.<sup>8</sup> There are articles and videos galore: in 2013, the company reported that the online platform published 1,200 articles and 6,800 videos with more than 330,000 views (“2012 Annual Review,” 2013).

Coca-Cola’s sense of self-importance is visibly intertwined throughout the content. Coca-Cola’s Director of Digital Communications and Social Media, reveals “[w]e also decided that it was time to take these stories outside of our four walls and share them with you” (Brown, 2012). Hence, click-through headlines such as “Fighting for Civil Rights at the Soda Fountain” are prominently displayed. In an op-ed about the website design, *The New York Times* commented poignantly on the strategy behind this narrative thematic:

The use of the word “story” is significant because the [website] changes are indicative of the growing interest among marketers in recasting their communications with consumers as storytelling rather than advertising. Just as attention is being paid to developing

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<sup>8</sup> These stories were available on February 14, 2015 from <http://www.coca-colacompany.com/>. Due to the constant rotation of some 1,200 stories on the website, each visit or click-through presents new stories. Nonetheless, articles about music, food, videos, company history, and sustainability were constant throughout my research from September 2013 to February 2015.

content to use for brand storytelling, an appetite also exists for corporate storytelling. (Elliott, 2012)

The website does indeed present itself as a digital magazine (albeit a red-hued newspaper) than an archival vault filled with plain-text hyperlinks for press releases and corporate reports. Videos, infographics, vivid photography, op-eds and articles (with bylines), and social media fill the coca-colacompany.com domain. *PR Daily* celebrated in the 2012 makeover endeavor and bestowed Coca-Cola with the “2013 Best Website Launch Award”—a testament to its transformation (Journey Staff, 2014).

A corporate website as a magazine seems strange, but the Director of Digital Communications at Coca-Cola defends the assertion: “We are acting as newshounds in the organization...[...] we want to be a credible source” (Elliott, 2012). Statements of credibility or objectivity are undeniably questionable in this context. Even with 40 supposed “freelance” contributors, Elliott explains that the website exhibits “[a] notable difference...from most media... [t]he storytelling on the [website] will be subjective, not objective, material that is favorable to the brands, products and interests of the Coca-Cola Company” (Elliott, 2012). In other words, it’s safe to assume an op-ed inspired by this thesis will not appear on the Coca-Cola Journey’s “Front Page.” Nonetheless, the praiseworthy rhetoric in response to the website spewed by *AdAge*, *PR Daily*, *The New York Times*, and other industry websites is not ubiquitous. Mark Higginson, a contributing editor for the online content-marketing website *Sparksheet*, found that the engagement levels (meaning social media shares) for Coca-Cola Journey’s stories are incredibly low and contends that there is no salient correlation between content marketing

and increased sales. Put plainly, “these efforts produce little in the way of a justifiable return” (Higginson, 2014). Then again, sales are just one measure of success. Even if Coca-Cola Journey is flailing as a content-marketing strategy, the way in which Coca-Cola’s corporate message is picked up by major news outlets is testament to the traction CSR programs can have fostering feelings of “good-will” with the broader, non-Coca-Cola-Journey-reading public. Therefore, an examination of EKOCENTER messaging exterior to Coca-Cola Journey is compulsory supplemental material. Nonetheless, the EKOCENTER’s “storytelling” strategy prompts a fertile framework for critical discourse analysis (CDA).

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

In an attempt to understand how the EKOCENTER operates as a communicative apparatus meant to ensure asymmetrical power relations, the following case study deploys CDA to construct key themes from deep readings of the Coca-Cola’s press releases, blog, promotional videos, and all other subsequent information about the EKOCENTER. The term “discourse” is indistinct, thus providing a challenge for CDA practitioners. As Maria von Trapp once cleverly advised, the beginning is sometimes “the very best place to start.” CDA’s beginnings in this instance are rooted in semiotic analysis and Foucault.

There are some key definitional characteristics paramount to any CDA endeavor. As Stuart Hall (2013) articulates, discourse is more than just language, it’s a conglomeration of statements “which provides a language for talking about a particular topic...” (Henrietta Lidchi in Hall, 2013; pg. 158). In contrast, semiotic scholars like

Saussure and Barthes rooted their analysis in language, with primary focus on the *denotative*, *connotative*, and *myth-making* (Barthes, 1972) signifiers. Barthes' (1972) concept of mythology does help expound the various stories our culture tells itself through semiotic analysis. This helps us move beyond merely what is said, and instead exposes what is implied and what assumptions about culture are naturalized through communication.

While there is merit in using denotative, connotative, and myth-making filters (particularly with advertisements), they limit an evaluation to particular texts without paying credence to situational circumstances. For Saussure and Barthes, language is king. Foucault and Hall instead move from “language” to “discourse” and contended that historical and cultural context, in addition to “relations of power,” must be taken into account (Hall referencing Foucault, 2013; pg. 29). In other words, discourses are not mere reflections of reality. According to Foucault, meaning is constructed in and through discourse—a constructivist system. The conceptualization the EKOCENTER, therefore, is contingent upon *multiple* textual, visual, and aural communicative messages within the context of power. Put simply, discourse is “language *and* practice” (Hall, 2013; pg. 29). Instead of embracing a Foucauldian-inspired “nothing meaningful exists outside of discourse” methodology,<sup>9</sup> my use of CDA highlights how power is exercised and constructed through discursive formations.

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<sup>9</sup> In *Representation*, Hall (2013) gives significant attention to refuting the common critique that the phrase “nothing meaningful exists outside of discourse” ignores material conditions. Hall contends that Foucault recognizes materiality and “the concept of discourse is not about whether things exist or not,” (because they do) “but about where meaning comes from” (Hall, 2013; pg. 30).

Van Dijk's (1993) work is handy for grounding and applying these representational and discursive theories presented by Hall and Foucault. CDA, according to Van Dijk, is concerned "with the discourse dimensions of power abuse and the injustice and inequality that result in it" (pg. 252). There are decidedly political and social justice-oriented dimensions to Van Dijk's definition. Dominance, or "the exercise of social power by elites, institutions or groups, that result in social inequality, including political, cultural, class, ethnic, racial, and gender" is produced and re-produced through discourse, and CDA scholars must challenge such power dynamics with vigor (van Dijk, 1993; pg. 249–250). An analysis of this sort is motivated by the most "pressing social issues" (Van Dijk, 1993) and hopes to bring about change. If I am to respond to Van Dijk's call, then I am hard pressed to find a more dire social issue than water. Our Earth's dwindling freshwater supply is not only a threat to the human and non-human population, but to further populations as well.

### **Water Crisis**

Critical discourse analysis "pre-supposes an applied ethics" (Van Dijk, 1993; pg. 253). As I'll mention in more detail in chapter 2, I argue that water must be treated as a commons (Barlow, 2010) and that private interests have no place in the administering or control of such a valuable resource. Another "applied ethic" is that of environmental justice. An environmental justice framework aims to "recognize and halt the disproportionate burdens imposed on poor and minority communities" from various environmental conditions (Cox, 2013; pg. 246). Unfortunately, for the less-privileged



segment of the world, access to clean drinking water is *current* reality.<sup>10</sup> According to the co-authored WHO and UNICEF report “JMP Thematic Report on Drinking Water 2011,” more than 800 million people lack access to safe drinking water (UNICEF, 2011).

However, don’t take my (or my sources’) word for it: even Coca-Cola recognizes the situation’s severity. Observations in the 2012 Annual Report on Form 10-K paint a dire situation for Coca-Cola’s main ingredient.<sup>11</sup> The report states:

As the demand for water continues to increase around the world, and as water becomes scarcer and the quality of available water deteriorates, the Coca-Cola system may incur higher production costs or face capacity constraints that could adversely affect our profitability or net operating revenues in the long run.” In the report, Coca-Cola also references climate change and how it will potentially intensify the water scarcity and availability, which will

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<sup>10</sup> As of late, attention has been given to the draught in California and the various water restrictions associated with it. Although the draught has serious consequences and is indicative of climate change, what I try to do here is highlight the more direct and dire public health crisis for communities facing lack of access to clean *drinking* water at the present moment.

<sup>11</sup> When the EKOCENTER first came onto the scene in September 2013, clean drinking water seemed to be Coca-Cola’s primary driver. I did notice in 2015, when re-visiting the corporate website, that there had been a significant shift in focus from water to Coca-Cola’s partnership with SOLARKIOSK, “a private company based in Berlin, Germany” (The Coca-Cola Company, 2013c). According to Coca-Cola, “SOLARKIOSK combines an award-winning design and innovative technology with an inclusive and proven business model to foster local entrepreneurship serving the Base-of-the-Pyramid, enabling economic and social development in rural off-the-grid communities” (The Coca-Cola Company, 2013c). Again, it’s somewhat hard to tell why or when information of this sort changes in the Coca-Cola Journey narrative. I can only assume it’s partly due to its quasi-journalism and marketing status. For instance, although the primary EKOCENTER page that I just referenced concerning SOLARKIOSK indicates it was published in 2013, the first EKOCENER page I encountered back September 2013 focused on water, not solar energy. I cannot easily locate that water-focused page at this moment on the corporate website and instead have to use my armature “googling” skills or RefWorks login to locate it. Why does this matter? There must be *some* reason why Coca-Cola has changed the way in which the EKOCENTER is framed on the most visible Coca-Cola Journey pages. I surmise two hypotheses: 1) an un-announced difficulty with the Slingshot technology; or 2) the initial water-focused CSR meant to appeal to environmental and philanthropic-sensitive readers and was a “boom and bust” piece meant to fade after significant exposure.

create a challenge for their bottling operations. (“2012 Annual Report,” 2013; pg. 18)

Overall, the 2012 Annual Report is a treasure-trove of insight into Coca-Cola. I have posited in this introduction how PR functions as image management. Not unsurprisingly, Coca-Cola does so as well and claims:

...success depends in large part on our ability to maintain the brand image of our existing products, build up brand image for new products and brand extensions and maintain our corporate reputation. [...]... [A]dverse publicity surrounding obesity and health concerns related to our products, water usage, environmental impact, labor relations or the like could negatively affect our Company’s overall reputation and our products’ acceptance by consumers. (“2012 Annual Report,” 2013; pg. 18)

Coca-Cola’s self-reflexivity in relation to branding’s impact on business success further justifies the ensuing analysis of the EKOCENTER CSR program.

The water crisis in particular highlights an important connection between discourse and lived experience. In other words, whether it’s environmental or social matters that corporations communicate about to the public through PR or branding, it’s essential to study the discourse in order to draw connections between the rhetorical techniques and the “real world” material realities. Analyzing Coca-Cola’s PR renders a salient connection between representation and the very poignant realities surrounding the

current water crisis such as public health, water depletion, drought, and endangered ecosystems.

### **Outline of Chapters**

In the following chapters I will explore the EKOCENTER discourse through a variety of perspectives. In Chapter 2, I highlight existing scholarship that antagonizes globalist and capitalist totalizing narrative and their subsequent pitfalls. Then, I will consider various environmental perspectives in relation to water and sustainability. In the literature review I go back more than 100 years ago to when modern PR was forming as a normative modern business practice to showcase how its beginnings are inextricable from its current role in our society. Then, I look at contemporary PR and corporate social responsibility (CSR) scholarly work, which argues that PR is primarily a management tool that positions the corporation in an eco-friendly light to increase public and shareholder value.

In the third chapter, which contains the bulk of my analysis and argument, I take the materials I gathered from the Coca-Cola website and popular news outlets and categorize them according to certain themes that arose from deep readings of the text. In particular, I look at how the EKOCENTER frames water figuratively and literally; problematize the public-private partnership (PPP) aspect of CSR; I attempt to capture the power that companies like Coca-Cola wield in PR practices; and I grapple with the “larger picture” in relation to the myth-making (Barthes, 1972) attributes of the EKOCENTER discourse in relation to consumerism and corporate governance. In the final chapter I re-visit Hall’s (2013) “regime of representation” concept in relation to

branding. In addition, I point to potential areas for additional scholarship, especially calling attention to ethnographic research. Finally, I argue that Coca-Cola's iconic brand makes it vulnerable to competing narratives (Ghosh, 2010); however, even if counter narratives can "flip" the logo on its head ultimately the power of PR continues to advocate for a productivist discourse that runs counter to sustainability (Smith, 1998).

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

The foundation of the EKOCENTER analysis is built upon four themes surveyed in the following literature review: 1) how globalist and capitalist narratives overdetermine CSR programs; 2) establishing a guiding environmental ethic for water that will stand in relation to Coca-Cola's EKOCENTER business model; 3) a brief history of PR that illuminates the ways in which CSR works to manage public opinion and ultimately benefit the corporation; and 4) how the combination of CSR practices and environmental ethics generates "bluwashing" rhetoric that perpetuates consumption.

#### **Globalization and Capitalism**

Coca-Cola presents itself as a powerful global entity via aggressive advertising techniques and innovative branding that has established its authority as one of the most recognizable (and profitable) brands in the world. Slogans and advertising campaigns such as "I'd Like to buy the World a Coke," "Open Happiness," and "Happiness Without Borders" highlight this ethos. At the same time that Coca-Cola advertises global dominance, it is simultaneously appropriated by "outsiders" (such as academics, activists, and authors) as being *the* signifier of "Americanization" or "globalization." For instance, Culture Jammers frequently "flip" the Coca-Cola logo to make a statement about corporate power<sup>1</sup> and many books and articles plop in "Coca-Cola" in the title in order to codify globalization and its presumed negative impacts. Coca-Cola is often positioned as the "poster-child" of globalist discourses. Take for example the term "coca-colonization,"

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<sup>1</sup> An example of this type of Culture Jamming is a fake Coca-Cola logo that says "Enjoy Capitalism" rather than the standard "Enjoy Coca-Cola." For more examples simply Google image search "culture jamming and Coca-Cola," or see Ghosh (2010).

which is used as a pseudonym for Western expansion.<sup>2</sup> Wagnleitner's (1994) *Coca-Colonization and The Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War* is not necessarily a Coca-Cola-specific case study, but rather focuses more broadly on Western cultural influence. Even the field of medicine deploys the term. Zimmet's (2000) "Globalization coca-colonization and the chronic disease epidemic: can a Doomsday scenario be averted?" addresses the worldwide Type 2 Diabetes epidemic claiming that "[r]apid socio-economic development over the last 40–50 years has resulted in a dramatic change in lifestyle from traditional to modern" (pg. 302). Coca-Cola, in other words, is the most clearly identifiable pseudonym for Western expansion.

My goal is to avoid the common pitfall of positioning Coke as a homogenous economic entity and instead draw upon various scholars that problematize totalizing discourses. In other words, a more grounded approach to understanding the ways in which the EKOCENTER operates as a communicative apparatus. In doing so, I hope to lay the groundwork to explore the *reasons* behind Coca-Cola's attention to CSR, marketing, branding, and advertising. To anti-corporate or anti-capitalist activists,<sup>3</sup> the EKOCENTER may appear as a manifestation of "advanced capitalism," "globalization," or "neoliberalism;" however, attaching such blanketed terms obscures the complex relationships and value making process embedded in The Coca-Cola Company and thus makes an argument against the EKOCENTER less substantive. In order to critically

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<sup>2</sup> According to Zimmet (2000), Arthur Koestler (1972) coined the term in his book *The Call Girls*.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, the Campaign to Stop Killer Coke ([killercoke.org](http://killercoke.org)) takes a very "anti-coke" stance. Similarly, artist Karina Nurdinova created a coke-shaped image containing words from famed street artist Banksy that heavily criticize corporate advertising (Albright-Hanna, 2013).

analyze the EKOCENTER, it is essential to avoid tempting labels and categorizations that provide an “easy way out.” The scholars highlighted in this literature review similarly interrogate economic idioms in order to approach sites of capitalism in a nuanced and grounded manner. Complicating globalist discourses sheds light on the reasons why Coca-Cola might use globalist phrases such as “social enterprise” or “economic development” in their press releases, as we’ll see in chapter 3.

What happens when you hear the word “economy?” How about “capitalism?” What comes to mind? What is contained in definitions or mental maps and what is excluded? These powerful terms are categorizations that conceal complex and intricate networks. McGee (1980), in writing about the power of language in the discipline of rhetorical criticism argues that words, or ideographs as he calls them, like “economy” or “capital,” produce “a political language...with the capacity to dictate decision and control public belief and behavior” (pg. 500). Mitchell (1998), in tracing the origins “the economy” similarly gives credence to the power of language by arguing the creation of the economy constructs spherical and exclusionary boundaries. Various social practices that constructed the “economy” made it possible to “imagine the economy as a self-contained sphere, distinct from the social, the cultural, and other spheres” (Mitchell, 1998; pg. 91). Boundary-making calls into question what is *included* and *excluded* within said boundaries. Mitchell writes:

To fix a self-contained sphere like the economy requires not only methods of counting everything within it, but also, and perhaps more importantly, some method of excluding what does not

belong. No whole or totality can be represented without somehow fixing its exterior. To create the economy meant also to create the non-economic. (Mitchell, 1998; pg. 92)

While Mitchell (1989) uses a spherical shape to explain artificial constructions of the economy, Gibson-Graham (1996) rely on the feminist master model to illustrate the problematic construction of a capitalist “Straw Man.” Drawing on previous feminist scholarship that describes identity as “open, incomplete, multiple [and], shifting” Gibson-Graham (1996) argue that a binary way of thinking encapsulates a capitalist/noncapitalist structure that ignores sites of heterogeneity and difference (pg. 2). Specifically, they warn against taken-for-granted assumptions that capitalist institutions are inherently motivated towards profit, commodification, or even exploitation. They argue that dominant economic rhetoric exemplifies a “capitalocentric” framework:

Other forms of the economy (not to mention noneconomic aspects of social life) are often understood primarily with reference to capitalism: as being fundamentally the same as (or modeled upon) capitalism, or as being deficient or substandard imitations; as being opposite to capitalism; as being complement of capitalism; as existing in capitalism's space or orbit. (Gibson-Graham, 1996; pg. 6)

Henceforth, everything is understood in *relation* to capitalism. Just as gender is understood in relation to female/male if one is to adhere to the gender binary.



Dismantling the capitalist/noncapitalist binary (Gibson-Graham, 1996) or economic sphere (Mitchell, 1998) sheds light on a significant “gray” area that complicates Coca-Cola’s globalist and capitalist characteristics. Foster (2008) gives recognition to this gray area by means of conducting an ethnographic study of Coca-Cola entitled *Coca-Globalization: Following Soft Drinks from New York to New Guinea*. He traces Coke as a commodity and demystifies the notion of globalization—which shares many characteristics as capitalist narratives. Foster’s ethnography implicitly highlights the ways in which governments, consumers, schools, and other actors outside of the producer/consumer binary contribute to Coca-Cola’s bearing.

Tracing soft drinks gives Foster a “privileged window onto an array of processes now glossed as globalization” (Hébert, 2010). His ethnographic method (de)glosses globalization by grounding his research at the local site and in the particularities of the global/local dynamic. Foster (2008) argues that globalization is not a singular force *placed* upon social actants, but is rather a multi-faceted site of numerous working parts that assemble complex networks of meaning. Consequently, he approaches Coca-Cola’s globalizing rhetoric as an “open question” (pg. 63), and follows how The Coca-Cola Company deploys a self-reflexive narrative of uniformity that perpetuates an “impersonal, homogenizing, almost dehumanizing rhetoric that foregrounds concerns with increasing ‘share of stomach’ and comparative per-capital consumption rates” (pg. 63). Foster’s use of the term “*glocalization*” (Robertson, 1995) exemplifies globalization’s multifarious nature. He warns scholars:

avoid debating globalization in terms of a false choice between homogenization (“the global”) and heterogenization (“the local”) and instead to pay attention to the “ways in which homogenizing and heterogenizing tendencies are mutually implicative.” (Foster, 2008 quoting Robertson; pg. 27)

More than a simple intersection between product and consumer, drinking Coca-Cola is a negotiated process that threatens Marx’s conceptualization of the producer, worker, and commodity by introducing the ways in which consuming creates affective value. He further deconstructs the causal relationship between producer/consumer through Daniel Miller’s (1987) notion of *consumption work*. *Consumption work* dismantles the capitalist/noncapitalist binary (Gibson-Graham, 1996) by accounting for the work that consumers do in creating sentiment and brand value. Just as feminist scholars have criticized Marxism for ignoring household economics that do not fit into the defined structures and measurements of capitalist production, *consumption work* is similarly blurry, unaccounted for labor that problematizes quantifiable measures of a product’s success. In other words, consumers participate in the value-making process of a commodity. For instance, I enjoy drinking Coke on occasion (particularly with a Chile relleno at my favorite Mexican restaurant) and I have a certain nostalgic feeling as the server places the bottle next to my “be-careful-that’s-hot” plate. My nostalgic feelings add value to the brand that stretches outside of the producer/consumer relationships.

Another important aspect of Foster’s (2008) analysis is the abstractive characteristics embedded in Coca-Cola’s advertising and PR. There is stark contrast

between the abstractive narrative and the messiness that is Coca-Cola's bottling operations at local sites. The significance of the abstraction in Coca-Cola's own discourse will be discussed later where I argue that such abstraction helps Coca-Cola's global brand. Similar to the idea of abstraction, Carrier (1998) offers the concept of *virtualism*, which can broadly be defined as abstraction at a "formal, conceptual level" or a type of "virtual reality" (pg. 2). Carrier (1998) writes:

Perceiving a virtual reality becomes virtualism when people take this virtual reality to be not just a parsimonious description of what is really happening, but prescriptive of what the world ought to be; when that is, they seek to make the world conform to their virtual vision. (pg. 2)

Therefore, these virtualistic terms truncate context and actual corporate practices, just as Foster (2008) proves that "globalization" glosses over consumption work, local cultures, and negotiated uses of a product. Gibson-Graham (1996), Mitchell (1998), and Carrier (1998) clearly outline the cons in categorizing and virtualizing economic terms and processes. But their analysis only goes so far: when such discourses are deployed, who does it serve? Or in other words, what might be the driving impetus behind deploying virtualistic discourses? A possible answer comes from Davis' (2009) "OEM model" of organization.

Davis (2009) argues that corporations have transitioned from an industrial to post-industrial era by means of a "finance-centered economy" that is beholden to investors and shareholder value. By the end of the 1990s, the "corporation existed to create shareholder

value” and “other commitments were means to that end” (Davis, 2009; pg. 33). This shift prompted corporations to focus on branding and marketing to ensure economic success. This “OEM model” of organization pushes companies to focus on image, rather than operational management:

[T]he Coca-Cola Company itself is primarily in the brand management business, while manufacturing and distributing the product is done by dispersed bottlers. The value added...is through intellectual property—brands, patents, advertising copy, distribution know-how [...] Coke, like pharmaceutical companies and universities, are in the idea business. (Davis, 2009; pg.33)

While Davis (2009) explains the incentive behind Coca-Cola’s focus on branding, Banet-Weiser (2012) takes a significant departure from Davis (2009) by arguing that we live in a new era of branding in which consumers themselves generate authenticity *through* the brand. Banet-Weiser (2012) describes this concept as “brand cultures,” which are “far more than an economic strategy of capitalism, [they] are the cultural spaces in which individuals feel safe, secure, relevant and authentic” (Banet-Weiser, 2012; pg. 113). The brand should be understood as cultural, rather than purely economic. She writes:

The practice of branding is typically understood as a complex economic tool, a method of attaching social or cultural meaning to a commodity as means to make the commodity more personally resonant with an individual consumer. But it is my argument that in the contemporary era, brands are about culture as much as they

are about economics. (Banet-Weiser, 2012; pg. 18; emphasis

Banet-Weiser)

Banet-Weiser foils the notion that “culture” and “economy” are distinct domains of creation. Similarity can be found in Foster’s (2008) discovery that many Papua New Guineans were re-using Coke cans to cook rice or how often Coca-Cola advertising was *mediated* by the consumer in advertising contexts. Applying the preceding literature on capitalism, globalization, and branding to environmental ethics aids in the process of critiquing Coca-Cola’s CSR objectives.

### **Environmental Ethics**

In August 2012, *Aljazeera* cheekily commented, “The author Mark Twain once remarked that ‘whisky is for drinking; water is for fighting over’ and a series of reports from intelligence agencies and research groups indicate the prospect of a water war is becoming increasingly likely” (Arsenault, 2012). There are two themes that dominate the EKOCENTER analysis: CSR and environmental ethics. Water is perhaps the most vital resource on our planet. Who has the right to own and manage the Earth’s limited freshwater supply? The question is becoming increasingly more difficult to answer considering the current water crisis and massive population boom. Discussion about water as the “gold of the 21st century” and the potential of “water wars” has been growing louder, as the article from *Aljazeera* indicates.

It is vital to mention forthright that my analysis holds at its core the assertion that water should remain a public entity, or “commons,” void of private ownership and/or profit incentives. This declaration draws heavily upon the work of many environmental

scholars and activists, including Maude Barlow, a water activist, author, and chair of the organization Food & Water Watch. Barlow (2010) makes a case that “[p]rivate ownership of water cannot address itself to the issues of conservation, justice, and democracy—the underpinnings of a solution to the world’s water crisis” (pg. 184). Additionally, Barlow (2010) argues that establishing “a language of the Commons” is essential in facing the water crisis that the Earth, and its many populations face. This language “will restore more democratic control over water and establish the supremacy of citizen ownership in its care and stewardship” (Barlow, 2010; pg. 184).

Vendana Shiva is also a loud voice against the commodification of water, particularly in India. Shiva (2008) pairs the words “water” and “culture” (“water cultures”) to create “a consciousness of being immersed in a water cycle, the consciousness of knowing that we are 70 percent water, and to tread extremely lightly to ensure that the water balance is not destroyed [...] every right wing think tank that is promoting and supporting water privatization repeatedly states that water is just another commodity” (Shiva, 2008; pg. 500). Instead of giving water management rights to distant global corporations, power needs to be localized in order to adequately meet the diversified needs of communities. Attaching a monetary value or incentive to water obscures the delicate balance of maintaining a healthy water cycle. Barlow (2010) articulates this juxtaposition:

While corporations argue that the privatization of water services is socially beneficial, the consequence of corporate control is that

social and environmental concerns come second to the economic imperative of profit. (Barlow, 2010; pg. 80–81)

It is not just economic mental maps that obscure social and cultural relations: binary ways of thinking similarly restrict a holistic understanding of water. The EKOCENTER section of the Coca-Cola website openly discusses the world's water crisis, highlighting statistics such as “water problems affect half of humanity,” or “800 million people in developing countries live without access to safe water,” in an attempt to preface a societal ill that needs to be solved. Water dualism (wastewater/clean water) devalues the linkages between water and the land, water and people, and water and the larger ecosystem (Gaard, 2001), or the larger water cycle as whole that fosters a “water culture” (Shiva, 2008). In an article about the master model (the same framework used by Gibson-Graham's capitalist/noncapitalist binary) and the world's relationship with water, Gaard (2001) writes:

[O]ur conception of power and energy, as well as our relationship to water, is based on a linear model that is now showing itself to be not only inaccurate, but life threatening. This linear model is based on the assumption that energy can be continuously extracted from nature—from water, from poor people, from people of color, from women—without giving back anything of sustenance. (pg. 167)

Shiva (2008), Barlow (2010), and Gaard (2001) provide a useful framework for water and various political economy aspects. How does water privatization fit into environmental ethics as a whole? Some environmental perspectives, such as

preservationist ideas or deep ecology, separate the environment from humans and tend to focus on the intrinsic value in nature, as if the environment is always “over there.” This perspective is relatively hard to “sell” to non environmentalists given its intangible nature. Instead, what if we worked to expand our understanding of what the “environment” is and what topics and solutions fall under its purview by re-configuring its relation to people, class, race, and place?<sup>4</sup> In other words, instead of abstracting the idea of the environment, it should be grounded more heavily in intersectional relationships bolstered by economics and culture. The EKOCENTER perhaps is a perfect materialization of this: a physical object where people are encouraged to gather, acquire employment, and access telecommunications, vaccines, water, and Coca-Cola products. To solely look at the “environment” in this situation ignores other actants such as the corporation, the sociopolitical climate of the area, the people accessing the water themselves, and the political and economic motives. Wapner and Matthew (2009) take this idea a step further, arguing that the environment should be viewed as a medium for human-to-human exploitation. They re-conceptualize “the environment” as not a primary area of concern, but as a *tool* used by humans to exploit each other. A shift to a “global environmental ethic,” as they label it, “[draws] attention to the nonprudential dimensions of environmental harm [by] highlighting the way humans mistreat each other through the medium of nature” (Wapner & Matthew, 2009). Their position argues that focusing on

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<sup>4</sup> This line of thinking is very much influenced by the environmental justice movement. There is ample literature about the “competing” interests of environmentalism and environmental justice. Instead of entering a debate about which perspective is more correct, or even a debate about why there should not be a debate between environmentalism and environmental justice frames (Sandler & Pezzullo, 2007), I wish to simply argue that focusing on the social injustices enacted by environmental degradation is more influential for the EKOCENTER analysis.



human relations and how humans appropriate the environment as means of oppression allows for a more realistic platform to charter social and environmental justice. One such way that the environment is used as a medium of oppression against underprivileged populations is through disingenuous CSR programs. I wish to build upon this idea of language and culture that Barlow (2010) alluded to as it applies to CDA. Environmental communication is completely contingent upon environmental ethics. The ways in which humans view the nonhuman world will manifest into different discourses. One area where these ethics are communicated is through Coca-Cola's PR rhetoric.

### **Corporate Social Responsibility**

When tackling any social phenomena such as public relations, it is imperative to consider its history in order to garner a holistic perspective. The metaphor of a tree is useful here: public relations, as we know it today, is everything above ground, or, the branches. Glorified PR workers in New York or Los Angeles work with celebrities, politicians, universities, and businesses to promote and disseminate information via press releases, Twitter, YouTube, and other social media platforms. Students obtain degrees in PR from journalism and mass communication colleges and learn the art of crafting enticing and persuasive messaging. Simultaneously, PR contains a complex root system below ground (out of sight) that both mimics and supports the tree's life. In other words, its history. In order to cognize how PR and the EKOCENTER do work in today's society, a consideration to the initial goals and uses of PR is fundamental. PR's beginnings in WWI and the early 1920s in comparison to PR today are inseparable insofar that the very theories, modes, purposes, and norms imitate each other.

Modern PR was founded upon the principle of maintaining and controlling public opinion about certain companies, products, and figures. One such instance, among many, is the 1914 Ludlow Massacre, where Standard Oil and the National Guard killed 11 women and children amidst labor union strikes in Colorado. Scholars such as Ewen (1996) argue that the Ludlow Massacre was the first instance of modern PR at work and set the blueprint for large corporations in the early 1900s that needed to combat their negative public perceptions. Or, as Edward L. Bernays (considered the “Father of Public Relations”) explained in an interview, there was a time before people had a “social conscience” about the placement of power in society and how it related to the well being of the public (Ewen, 1996). It was after the public gained this supposed “conscience” that public relations was given clout as a necessary endeavor for corporate communication strategies (or rather, *the* strategy). Writing specifically about Ivy Lee, considered one of the founders of the public relations industry (and responsible for redeeming the Rockefeller name after the Ludlow massacre), Ewen (1996) describes the industry objectives during the early 1900s:

Business leaders themselves, [Ivy] speculated, must finally see the light and assume hands-on responsibility for making the institutions that they run more authentically responsive to the common good. (pg. 84)

In addition, PR and advertising were instrumental in creating the consumerist society that grew out of the 1920s prosperity, thus representing increased interdependence between the public and corporations (see Ewen, 1996 and also Veblen,

2000). In a published debate from March 1929 about the consequences and ethics behind propaganda between Bernays and Everett D. Martin, Bernays proclaimed “[w]hen a society is organized as it is today, the happiness of a nation is very largely dependent upon its economic well-being,” and that the businessmen who utilize propaganda “contributed...to the happiness of the people generally” (Martin & Bernays, 1929; pg. 147). Bernays furthers this argument by claiming that propaganda serves to unite public and private interest through selling products. This is in stark contrast to the suspicious attitude of the public towards corporations that was rampant in the United States at the turn of the century leading up to the 1920s (Ewen, 1996). In fact, pessimism towards big business that Progressives perpetuated at the turn of the century was a rare sentiment by the late 1920s. The happiness of the public (specifically those who were not at the bottom of the income ladder) was bound to the success of corporations. This was due to many factors beyond the reach of public relations: corporations were becoming publically traded, intensified consumerism due to the middle class’s increased spending power, and an overall increase in prosperity for more people than just the elite few. Ewen (1996) comments that consumerism “as a way of life [created] a situation in which corporate America and a large sector of the population seemed to be joined in a relationship of apparent mutual interest” (pg. 219).

This ideological sentiment that corporations foster happiness and economic security is still viscerally present today within narratives of the free market and government deregulation. Furthermore, it is indicative of advertising’s attempt to associate feelings of happiness and success with the purchase of commodities. Ewen

(1996) argues a similar case about the transition of business into the consumerist society and explains that “[b]usiness, overall was becoming more and more dependent on a play of symbols, on insubstantial representations of value” (pg. 228).

In addition to shifting perceptions about the role of corporations in society, WWI gave the budding industry validity. The unpopularity of WWI spurred President Woodrow Wilson to create the U.S. Committee on Public Information (CPI) on April 17, 1917, immediately after the United States joined forces with the European Alliance. The CPI was formed in order to establish “an ideological apparatus that would systematically promote the cause of war” (Ewen, 1996; 106). The CPI approached propaganda much in the same way that American advertising did around 1917, with strong appeal to emotions that linked goods and products with happiness and other human needs (Ewen, 1996). The unprecedented use of propaganda in the United States during WWI is significant because it is the grounds upon which Bernays ties business to propaganda. He uses WWI as proof that propaganda can influence human attitudes and behavior and that its success should continue beyond wartime needs. Thus, an industry was born.

It is with this historical perspective that we can categorize the EKOCENTER as a modern manifestation of an old practice: presenting a corporate entity in a positive light in relation to social and environmental issues in order to secure the public's trust. Applying this insight to CSR in the 2000s, brings about a more complex dimension: the consumer's desire to engage with a company due to its supposed commitment to social and environmental concerns overseas.

A more contemporary demonstration of how CSR and PR work as corporate image management tactics presents itself in a seemingly bizarre object: playgrounds. In an ethnographic study of Coca-Cola in Israel, Barkay (2011) finds a clear disconnect between the stated corporate goals for the playground CSR initiative and what actually occurred on the ground during its implementation. He details how Coca-Cola's immersion in the local community creates a type of 'new governance' that makes it possible for local governments to depend on partnerships with transnational corporations. The stakeholders that lose in this situation, he argues, are the communities whose voices were silenced during the implementation of the playgrounds. He argues that once these CSR programs are assessed on the ground, "there is evidence to suggest that the asymmetry between corporations and local governments, and the primacy of a business-case approach to social responsibility, may bias the design and character of community programs in ways that do no benefit local people and public authorities" (pg. 286). Barkay's Israeli case study suggests that the EKOCENTER program warrants a critical framework cautious of the material corporate contradictions that CSR programs conceal.

Similarly, Aiyer (2006) concludes in his case study of specific Coca-Cola's CSR initiative in India that CSR is nothing more than corporate rhetoric. He argues that CSR works to counter-balance attacks to the corporation and position the corporation as an informed individual that is aware of social and environmental ethics. However, what the CSR rhetoric tends to do, Aiyer (2006) claims, is reinforce existing power structures, or, a type of hegemonic underpinning that legitimizes the corporation's position. Now that I have detailed PR's beginnings and some brief studies that re-affirm its superficial

disposition, I will align my literature review more directly to environmental communication.

### **Environmental Communication**

An article from the *New Hampshire Union Leader* newspaper on October 6, 2012 displays a photo of Dean Kamen, the successful engineer with DEKA Research and Development Corp., smiling proudly next to his new invention: the Slingshot water purification system (Solomon, 2012). The most notable element in the photo are two objects that he stands next to: to his left is a large, industrial looking machine that roughly resembles a refrigerator; to his right is a sleek, curvy red object about half the height of the object on his left with The Coca-Cola Company's logo displayed on two of the pictured sides. Both items are water purification systems that perform the same function; however, when photographed together they represent a new partnership between Kamen's Slingshot water purification system and Coca-Cola. The picture signifies a transition from the original water purification design to the branded Coca-Cola version. This is an important transition to take note of, as it is a curious peak into the complicated process of branding, commodification, and the environment.

The initial information about the EKOCENTER in fall of 2013 placed significant emphasis on the Slingshot technology and how Kamen's invention would be at the forefront of the CSR project. Emphasis on DEKA and the Slingshot has slowed significantly since then; however, it is unclear why. Nonetheless, the problematic deferment of water stewardship to the Coca-Cola Company remains. Coca-Cola is concerned about the water crisis just like the rest of the world, if not more so. After all,

their very existence as a business relies on access to water. Coca-Cola, and other beverage industries, attempt to secure their access to water because “[w]ater is the main ingredient in our beverages, central to our manufacturing process and necessary for growing the agricultural products we use as ingredients” (“2013 Water”, n.d.). This is a precarious situation in which a business is completely dependent upon a rapidly depleting natural resource for their monetary success.

As previously noted, Wapner and Matthew (2009) describe how the environment is used as a *medium* for oppression—a unique and pragmatic take on environmental ethics. Munshi and Kurian (2005) lend insight into how that might become manifested through communicative practices: disingenuous PR strategies create hierarchical publics that continue the domination of Western publics over peripheral publics of the Third World. The authors argue that environmental PR works to appease the interests of Western populations, or “publics,” while systematically exploiting “publics at the margins” (Munshi & Kurian, 2005; pg. 515). In other words, environmentally focused PR strategies work as a guise to protect the corporation’s continued domination of natural resources. The bottled water industry in particular has jumped on this marketing bandwagon. Growing public concern regarding bottled water and its impacts on the environment since 2008 has encouraged companies such as Coca-Cola to “[adopt] marketing strategies that associate their products with ethical actions often situated in the so-called ‘developing world’” (Brei & Böhm, 2011; pg. 234).

Munshi and Kurian (2005) explain that PR draws upon existing notions about the environment in order to side step the oppressive structures established and maintained by

corporations. “Existing notions” that the public holds, for instance, could be concerns about climate change or bottled water. Henceforth, the term “greenwashing,” which speaks to the notion of corporations riding the coat tails of the general public’s concern for environmental issues is pertinent to my analysis. The “[g]rowing concern for the environment on the part of citizens has led corporations to advance a new ideology of green capitalism, in which consumers are urged to help the environment through the purchase of ostensibly eco-friendly products” (Budinsky & Bryant, 2013; pg. 209). The color green denotes a certain type of environmental concerns, therefore, in this analysis I introduce the concept of *pre-emptive bluewashing*.<sup>5</sup> I argue that companies such as Coca-Cola work to proactively manage their corporate image surrounding water within a framework of economic prosperity and humanitarian aid in order to secure future access to bottled water markets. The term “bluewash” recently surfaced in response to the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC), which is a program that Coca-Cola has claimed to model their water-focused CSR programs after. The UNGC has come under harsh criticism from some critics for acting as a “public relations instrument...an excuse and argument to oppose any binding international regulation on corporate accountability, and as an entry door to increase corporate influence on the policy discourse and the development strategies of the United Nations” (The Center for Media, 2013).

Maintaining and recruiting new consumers through environmental rhetoric resides under a powerful ideology of productivism (Smith, 1998). Smith (1998) argues that green consumerism exists within a larger hegemonic structure of productivism that perpetuates

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<sup>5</sup> The term “bluewash,” is a term that plays off of the “greenwash” concept. Some argue that the term gained prominence in response to the United Nations Global Impact program (“Bluewashing”, 2010).



an “expansionistic, growth-oriented ethic” (Smith, 1998; pg. 10). The issue at hand is that expansionistic goals are entirely in contention with ecological concerns (Smith, 1998; see also Budinsky & Bryant, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

The preceding literature review provides a solid framework for the EKOCENTER analysis. I use these scholarly works to argue that Coca-Cola positions itself as a totalizing entity that perpetuates a “capitalocentric” mentality (Gibson-Graham, 1996), all of which resides under a productivist system (Smith, 1998). These narratives foster resource extraction/ownership by powerful elites and corporations at the expense of the environment and populations who lack access to clean drinking water. In the following chapter, I employ these different theories in my analysis of the EKOCENTER discourse to show how branding works as a powerful language tool that fosters certain worldviews of humanitarian aid and sustainability.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Analysis**

This analysis section is divided into four sections: 1) framing water, 2) public-private partnerships, 3) the power of public relations, and 4) myth. In “framing water” I argue that Coca-Cola uses language that appeals to humanitarian concerns; however, the rhetoric ultimately deploys a worldview that puts economic interests above environmentally sound practices. In “public-private partnerships” (PPP) I analyze public-private discourse within the context of Coca-Cola’s “golden triangle of economics” metaphor. In particular, I complicate the idea of “communities,” how they are fetishized within CSR rhetoric (Joseph, 2002). Additionally, I show how women in developing countries are employed as image management tools under the constant gaze of privileged Western elites. In the third section, “the power of public relations,” I survey two major newspapers and their initial coverage of the EKOCENTER. Additionally, I analyze comments and articles gathered from other news sites that point to the contested and mediated reception of Coca-Cola’s PR. I end the chapter with a reflection on myth (Barthes, 1972) and Hall’s (2013) “regime of representation,” which works to encapsulate all categories and argue that together they perpetuate the fallacy that social justice and environmental sustainability can be easily realized through the corporate entity.

#### **Framing Water**

Piper (2014) suggests an uncompromising opposition between two water paradigms: water as a “human right” versus water as an “economic good” (pg. 10). This ideological divide is the very battlefield upon which Coca-Cola concurrently deploys 1)

environmentally conscious CSR and 2) business models for growth in the non-alcoholic beverage sector. In other words, Coca-Cola adopts contradictory narratives in relation to water as a human right or commodity. I'll tease out these contradictions in the following section by giving a brief overview of Coca-Cola's controversy in countries like India, Colombia, and Mexico. Then, I'll focus on the water component of the EKOCENTER and show how the use of language perpetuates an economic worldview while simultaneously appealing to a humanitarian one.

**Coca-Cola's negative publicity.** If Coca-Cola is in the image management business, then it is imperative to identify the "not-so-positive" aspects of Coca-Cola's operations. In other words, what actions does Coca-Cola justify by claiming they're "doing good?" in their various CSR programs? (Richey, 2011). Coca-Cola's foreign bottling plants are laden with conflict: numerous reports expose how Coca-Cola has at times ignored local communities' needs, water extraction regulations, human rights, and sovereign nation states. Not to mention the common critique that Coca-Cola advocates for unhealthy beverages through aggressive marketing tactics in schools, at international sporting events such as the FIFA World Cup, and in convenience stores (Blanding, 2010). These accounts counter Coca-Cola's believability when it comes to the EKOCENTER's aim to "improve the well-being of communities" (The Coca-Cola Company, 2013a).

**Water.** One area fraught with controversy as it pertains to water is India. Perhaps the most publicized is Coca-Cola's water extraction practices in Plachimada, where community activists eventually forced Coca-Cola to shut down a plant (Ghosh, 2010). However, that was back in 2004, and as of late Coca-Cola's eye on the purchasing power

of India's growing middle class is sharpening ("Indian Officials," 2014). Coca-Cola's recently revitalized dilated focus on India has not been easy go lucky: old habits die hard. Ten years after the Plachimada closer, in June of 2014, authorities in India rejected a proposal to expand the Mehdiganj bottling plant in the town of Varanasi amid similar allegations of groundwater depletion and pollution (Mosdenz, 2014). The Varanasi village council (the local governing body) articulated their grievances in letters to the government:

[g]roundwater resources in Mehdiganj have fallen precipitously since Coca-Cola began bottling operations in the area [in 1999], dropping 7.9 meters (26 feet) in the 11 years since Coca-Cola started its bottling operations in Mehdiganj. In the 11 years prior to Coca-Cola beginning operations in Mehdiganj, groundwater levels had risen 7.95 meters. ("Opposition Grows," 2013)

The subsequent dismissal of the Megdiganj' bottling plant expansion proposal was a major win for Indian activists concerned about Coca-Cola's negative effect on farmers and local drinking water sources. In response to Coca-Cola's continued malpractice, Indian communities are organizing against the beverage giant and a handful of closures or canceled expansions have occurred in 2004, 2013, and 2014 ("Authorities cancel," 2014).<sup>1</sup> The Indian Resource Center is not alone in calling attention to discrepancies between Coca-Cola's rhetoric and its operations. Organizations such as The Campaign to

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<sup>1</sup> The allegations and closures in 2013 and 2014 happened *after* Coca-Cola's 2010 claim that they reached their goal of becoming "net positive" with water usage ("Contact Us," (n.d.). In other words, it's questionable that Coca-Cola reached their groundwater commitment if the Megigani plant expansion was cancelled due to Coca-Cola's inability "to obtain clearance to extract groundwater from the Central Ground Water Authority" according to the India Resource Center ("Opposition Grows," 2013).

Stop Killer Coke produce counter-Coke narratives in light of numerous allegations of union suppression, violence, and exploitation in countries such as Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, India, Mexico, China, and Turkey.

Particularly relevant to my thesis is a 2006 report by the London-based organization War on Want. Entitled “The Alternative Report,” their research aims to “compare and contrast the rhetoric of corporate social responsibility (CSR) with the reality of companies’ actual practices” (Zacune, 2006). The report “details how Coca-Cola’s public relations campaigns are now being overshadowed by its record of undermining workers’ rights and depleting community water systems around the world” (Zacune, 2006). In an essence, that is what this is what I aim to do; however, instead of combating CSR “spin” by exposing Coca-Cola’s contribution to depleting water systems, I analyze how Coca-Cola uses language, imagery, and powerful branding mechanisms to assuage consumers and shareholders in the United States. This type of analysis avoids positioning Coca-Cola in such black/white terms of the War on Want report. Rather, the feelings of “good-will” prompted by CSR programs complicate the narrative and provide a daunting challenge to critique Coke’s intentions. I can evidence this complexity from my own experiences: when I give the EKOCENTER elevator pitch to friends, colleagues, or family, I consistently receive feedback that Coca-Cola’s goals are admirable. In fact, at face value it is hard to criticize the basic claim that Coca-Cola is trying to solve a drinking water crisis. As I’ve tried to expose in this analysis, the safe drinking water component is part of a much larger story that highlights Coca-Cola’s “not-so-admirable”

actions. Perhaps a more accessible story for United States consumers is Coca-Cola's connection to obesity.

**Obesity.** In the United States and Mexico,<sup>2</sup> Coca-Cola is criticized heavily for contributing to diabetes and other sugar-related health problems. This critique is leveled on grounds that Coke products contain high amounts of sugar typically in the form of High Fructose Corn Syrup (Blanding, 2010; see also Harris, 2013). These concerns eventually prompted Mexico to initiate a single peso tax on sugar-laden drinks (Guthrie, 2014). Newspaper articles about Coca-Cola and High Fructose Corn Syrup in the United States are commonplace and have encouraged a rhetoric of “sparkling beverages” and “healthy lifestyles” (Journey Staff, 2014). CSR and corporate image building aid Coca-Cola in glossing over contradictions such as water extraction, labor suppression, public health that rupture the corporate image. Of particular note is the emphasis on the EKOCENTER's clean water component, which diverts attention from Coca-Cola's invested interest in water access and instead re-focuses the company on a healthier beverage option.

**Pre-emptive image management.** How does the EKOCENTER specifically divert attention away from the environmental contradiction inherent in privatized water? Ponte and Richey (2011) claim, “extremely competitive practices and/or exploitative relations of production and trade can be justified ex-post by ‘doing good’” (pg. 129). Ponte and Richey's research (2011) documents how corporations do this *after* exploitation. For example, I could argue that Coca-Cola's CSR programs in India counter Plachimada's a

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<sup>2</sup> A 2009 per capita consumption report indicates that Mexico drinks an average of 665 coke products per year (8 oz). By comparison, the United States consumes 399 (“Per Capita,” 2010).

2004 conflict. While this “ex-post” strategy is certainly the case for Coca-Cola, an expansion of the CSR timeframe is necessary in the context of water scarcity. Therefore, I argue that Coca-Cola uses the EKOCENTER a *pre-emptive* image management strategy. I maintain this assertion because of the looming (and existing) water crises that is severely exasperated by climate change. While the EKOCNETER claims it will help solve access to safe drinking water, the CSR program also paves the way for Coca-Cola to ensure agency and ownership in communities that will be most effected by water shortages in the future.

**The politics behind branded water.** The Slingshot water purifier’s politics are insightful insofar that they uncover the ambiguity of the EKOCENTER business model. In Chapter 2, I mentioned an article from the *New Hampshire Union Leader* that showcased the Slingshot water purification device pre-, and post-, Coca-Cola’s involvement (Solomon, 2012). The Slingshot device uses a heated compression system to purify almost any type of liquid into drinkable water. What is the significance of the transition from the boxy, gray, un-branded version of the Slingshot water purifier to the shiny vending-machine style Coca-Cola dispenser? What does the transition communicate about Coca-Cola’s intentions involving water privatization? The devises are the same, but signify different worldviews entirely.

Here I draw upon Piper’s (2014) definition of water privatization in her book *The Price of Thirst: Global Water Inequality and the Coming Chaos*. Water privatization refers to “the introduction of the ‘profit motive’ both *practically* and *theoretically*, to transactions involving water” (Piper, 2014; pg. 10; emphasis mine). Clean drinking water

was at the forefront of the rationale behind the EKOCENTER in the initial EKOCENTER press release. The branded makeover of the Slingshot purifier (with the red color, sleek design, and logo placement) creates the framework in which the meaning of water is constructed and maintained. In other words, the meaning behind access to clean drinking water is created *through* The Coca-Cola Company. This placement of the brand as the *medium* in which clean water is constructed is in complete contradiction to the notion that water should be treated as a “commons” (Barlow, 2010), especially when the Slingshot water purifier is placed *within* the EKOCENTER kiosk that sells other Coca-Cola products. One has to go through Coca-Cola’s storefront to access the water. Water is symbolically/theoretically, and physically/practically, associated with The Coca-Cola Company (Piper, 2014).

Kamen’s intentions for the Slingshot purifier are clearly articulated in an article about the EKOCENTER published in *Wired* magazine in August of 2013 (Higginbotham, 2013). Kamen claims he wanted to solve what he understands as one of the biggest problems facing the world: clean water; however, Kamen asserts that it was only through the world’s largest soft-drink distributor that his vision could possibly become a reality. *Wired* claims that Kamen initially looked to other institutions for help with distributing the Slingshot, “[b]ut medical-equipment manufacturers weren't interested in the poorest and most deprived markets in the world, and the likes of the UN and World Health Organisation told [Kamen] they weren't in the manufacturing business” (Higginbotham, 2013). It is questionable why Coca-Cola agreed to take on the project, given that Kamen initially looked towards the UN and WHO. The Slingshot technology and the



EKOCENTER that administers it must serve Coca-Cola and their shareholders to some degree in order to justify it as CSR; therefore, the partnership makes Coca-Cola's motives business-oriented to some degree. One red flag as it pertains to the Slingshot/Coca-Cola partnership is Kamen's blunt admittance that his previous inventions with DEKA R&D "were at the other side of the spectrum, building exotic, sophisticated medical products for the world that *can afford* them" (Higgenbotham, 2013; emphasis mine). The key word here is "afford." Coca-Cola has not disclosed whether or not the drinking water will be offered for free. Although, even if it is an affordable price for a "world" that "can" afford it, the key point of contention is the profit motive built into the corporate structure.

Water privatization demands we take a more anthropocentric view of water, considering its inextricable correlation to public health.<sup>3</sup> Bottling water for sale and over-extracting water at bottling plant sites epitomizes powerful entities using the environment as an oppressive medium (Wapner & Matthew, 2009). Wapner and Matthew (2009) claim that the treatment of the environment mimics the "geography of power in world affairs" (pg. 208). Displacement, or the "transferring, relocating, or otherwise transporting environmental challenges to those who have little choice but to suffer them," by political and economic elites can displace underprivileged populations over space and/or time (Wapner & Matthew, 2009; pg. 208). The EKOCENTER claims that the Slingshot technology will solve lack access to safe drinking water. Can we then assume that Coca-Cola is not aiming to use this water for sale, and thus enacting discrimination

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<sup>3</sup> Some environmental frameworks, like deep ecology, aim to highlight the intrinsic value of nature. While I argue that it is impossible to divorce from an anthropocentric view of anything, deep ecology and other environmental perspectives aim to put humans on the same playing field as nonhuman entities. I argue that water in this case should be viewed in a human-use framework instead of with a mentality that water has intrinsic value.

against those without adequate monetary means to acquire it? The devil is in the details for the answer to this important question. Coca-Cola conveniently left out of its press release whether or not the water supplied by the Slingshot technology in the EKOCENTERS would be free or at a lower cost than government entities. Instead, they opted to announce that the exact business model for has not been not been solidified (The Coca-Cola Company, 2013b). This is also evident in Coca Cola's explanation of TechnoServe's (an international non-profit) advisory role for the project:

EKOCENTERS will initially operate with a Slingshot water purification system, power source and commercial space. The partnership will then work to grow the technology, once optimally developed, to be a fully equipped retail outlet. (The Coca-Cola Company, 2013c)

I read this to mean the EKOCENTER will transition from a clean drinking water dispensary to a retail outlet. The above quote verifies TechnoServe's adherence to a business-oriented approach to reducing poverty (similar to IMF or World Bank) and self-proclaiming as "a nonprofit organization that develops business solutions to poverty by linking people to information, capital and markets" ("About Us," n.d.). Again, the market-oriented approach to this type of aid is precarious given the Earth's finite freshwater supply and the massive amounts of literature that dispels the claim that private entities should manage water resources (see Piper, 2014 and Barlow, 2010). In the case of South Africa in particular (one of the few places where a pilot EKOCENTER has been implemented), one can only assume that the water is, or will be, sold for Coca-Cola's

financial gain given that the EKOCENTER resides in the same city as the Coca-Cola's subsidiary Valpre Spring Water ("About," n.d.).

Nonetheless, even if the water is at a low cost, it should be noted that a corporate entity is the one administering access to water, further fostering a brand culture that promotes a "new governance" (Barkay, 2011) upon which the corporate entity oversees and administers water access, and ultimately, profits from it. This notion of corporate governance was poignantly articulated by Kamen in the following statement to *Wired*: "The irony is that the one company that took the chance to be able to say, 'We are the biggest healthcare provider on this planet' was Coca-Cola" (Higginbotham, 2013). Coca-Cola and healthcare? Now there is one contradiction that the CSR program is blatantly trying to conceal given Coca-Cola's previously noted connection to diabetes (Stabile, 2000). Ironically, Kamen is the person that highlights this healthcare/coke incongruity: a corporate entity that sells bottled water and "sparkling beverages" administering access to safe drinking water as if it were a public health institution. This insight suggests that Coca-Cola had a vested interest in partnering with Kamen, and according to the CSR and theory previously presented in this paper, this partnership helps Coca-Cola align itself with socially responsible programs in order to increase their brand image and value. The Slingshot's association with the Coca-Cola Company, and their massive profits in the bottled water and non-alcoholic beverage market (more than 47 billion in 2013), directly links clean drinking water with a transnational business—the antithesis to a worldview that the environment should be treated in a sustainable manner. This antithetical relationship manifests as *bluewashing* rhetoric.

**The bluewashing strategy.** To solely consider the Slingshot water technology in the EKOCENTER would be in error. After all, EKOCENTER is just one among many water-focused programs. After all, Coca-Cola uses water at their bottling plants (it is the main ingredient in their beverages) and has other water-oriented CSR programs and reports such as the Water & Stewardship Report and “RAIN: The Replenish Africa Initiative.” Greenwashing, (or a company’s insincere claims about environmentally sound products and initiatives in order to appear ecologically responsible), is established terminology in environmental communication. I maintain that instead Coca-Cola deploys *bluewashing* discourse. Why blue instead of green? I believe when talking about water, the color green is limiting in its cognitive association with forests, plants, and trees and draws attention away from water’s intrinsic centrality to humans and ecosystems alike. Food & Water Watch argues “[t]oday, with heightened media attention on the world water crisis, blue is the new green — and corporations appear to be using similar ‘bluewashing’ tactics to obscure their effect on the world’s water” (“Bluewashing,” 2010). Perhaps a product most apt for bluewashing criticism is the bottled water industry, with its relation to oil, down cycling, plastic waste, and pollutants.

**Bottled water.** The contradictions inherent in bottled water industry were on display during the EKOCENTER press conference at the Clinton Global Initiative Annual Meeting in September 2013. During the conference, the camera is directed at Coca-Cola CEO Muhtar Kent, but visible in the frame is a Coke bottle to his left and a SmartWater bottle to his right (CocaColaCo, 2013). In fact, every participant in the press conference video has a SmartWater within reach. The product-placement-style reference

to bottled water cannot be ignored, and here's why: a considerable drop in the bottled water industry sales here in the United States has encouraged bottled water companies like Nestlé and Coca-Cola to look for market growth abroad. The attention on foreign markets has nothing to do directly with consumers here in the United States, because concerns have continued to surface in in the United States since 2008 about the environmental impacts of bottled water. What's happening here is a fusion between foreign operations and domestic marketing. In other words, CSR strategies "promise to provide drinking water for (what they name as) 'poor African people' by way of Western consumers purchasing bottled water (Brie & Böhm, 2011; pg. 234). For instance, Coca-Cola's Water Stewardship Report features several photos of women and children dressed in presumably traditional African or Indian clothing. This signifies Coca-Cola's intent to help developing countries, furthering the "poor African" and "helpless woman" tropes. Like Brie and Böhm (2011), I argue that there are two forms of water privatization at work here: 1) for domestic and foreign bottled water and 2) Coca-Cola's access to water supplies for in foreign locations. Coca-Cola aims to "[stimulate] ethical consumption" and "sustain growth" by marketing socially and environmentally conscious CSR programs to consumers in the developed world (Brie & Böhm, 2011).

It's plain as day that Coca-Cola Company does indeed intend to sell the purified water distributed through the EKOCENTER as evidenced from the SmartWater references and proclamation that Coke products will be in the "retail" EKOCENTER space. The basic question remains: should the world's most underprivileged populations be beholden to transnational corporations for water? My answer (and the answer of many

scholars and activists like Shiva and Barlow) is “no.” A more important question to answer for this analysis, however, is how Coca-Cola tries to convince the public that they should.

**Language.** Coca-Cola’s language regarding water is contradictory. On the one hand, the language appeals to the notion of water as a human right, on the other hand, references to economic opportunities and solutions are omnipresent. Ultimately a business-oriented perspective dominates the discourse. This market-oriented frame is emboldened and justified through appeals to sustainability and humanitarianism. Thus far I have presented contradictions in the EKOCENTER as far as bottled water and negative perceptions, now I’ll focus on how language is engineered to promote market-oriented water frames.

My analysis focuses on how “dominant speakers...manipulate the mental models of the audience in such a way that ‘preferred’ social cognitions tend to be developed, that is, social cognitions (attitudes, ideologies, norms, and values) that are ultimately in the interest of the dominant group” (Van Dijk, 1993; pg. 280). The values and norms disseminated in the discourse favor those with existing power, the “elites,” or those with access to the Earth’s resources. This exemplifies Munshi and Kurian’s (2005) argument that disingenuous PR strategies create hierarchical publics in which Coca-Cola maintains the upper hand and continues to exploit natural resources in developing countries. Coca-Cola’s 2013 Water Stewardship & Replenish Report’s opening statement demonstrates how Coca-Cola appeals to Western audiences’ values:

Inside every bottle of Coca-Cola is the story of a company that understands the priceless value of water, respects it as the most precious of shared global resources and works vigorously to conserve water worldwide. We can't imagine treating water any other way. ("213 Water," n.d.)

Words like "priceless," "conserve," "shared," "precious," and "value" appeal to environmental sentiments such as sustainability and conservation. This is an example of Coca-Cola re-positioning themselves in accordance with the public. Or, "a political language composed of slogan-like terms signifying collective commitment" (McGee 1980; pg. 508). Coca-Cola undoubtedly needs public and consumer commitment considering its powerful and iconic brand. The public is instrumental in co-constructing their corporate identity: Coca-Cola does not simply just "sell" just their products; they are in the business of selling *ideas* to the public for shareholder value (Davis, 2009). Ideas like conservation and sustainability are certainly valued in light of climate change and other environmental concerns.

Another example of how Coca-Cola deploys language for "collective commitment" (McGee, 1980) is the in EKOCENTER b-roll video. Muhtar Kent, Coca-Cola CEO, poetically claims "we're seeing here the beginning of the first trickle, in a way, of clean water, fresh clean water flowing in what we trust will become a great, dynamic, rushing river of health and hope" (The Coca-Cola Company, n.d.). A river reference (in addition to the notion of water as the most "precious of shared global resources" in the stewardship report) panders to ecological concerns akin to Shiva's

“water cultures,” Barlow’s (2010), “language of a commons,” and those that believe water should be a human right (Piper, 2014). However, this flowing river language is, by and large, subsumed by market-oriented rhetoric that resides under a business ideology that presupposes Coca-Cola as the most qualified solution to drinking water.

*Water dualism.* I wish to deconstruct this even further in order to understand how water itself is framed within the context of the EKOCENTER. After all, even though water is the key driver of the EKOCENTER, is it clouded (physically and symbolically) by the kiosk. This perpetuates water dualism, that is, water/wastewater (Gaard, 2001). Why is this problematic? Even though safe drinking water is the focus, this dualistic narrative obfuscates other areas where water exists along the Coke assemblage and in the ecosystem as a whole. It side steps nonhuman “actants” (Bennett, 2010)<sup>4</sup> in the larger water cycle. Bennett (2010) argues that it’s not just nonhuman actants that need to be considered in an assemblage. Accordingly, historical socio-political influences that cause regions such as Africa and Asia in precarious water situations in the first place cannot be overlooked. Additionally, the monetary incentive on behalf of Coca-Cola is important in the assemblage. The EKOCENTER frames water at only one point along the assemblage: sale/dispense.

A narrowed focus such as this ignores the larger water cycle, and thus, our ability to create sustainable uses of water (Shiva, 2008). Concentrating solely on drinking water

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<sup>4</sup> Bennet’s (2010) work follows a long lineage of materialist scholars such as Marx, Spinoza and Deleuze. It’s important to note her connection to Marx and the *commodity fetish*; however, Bennet (2010) argues that “demystification” of the commodity in the Marxian sense does not go far enough to critically analyze “political agency” (pg. xv). She argues that demystification tends to result in analyzing human agency, rather than political agency. I gather that Bennet (2010) assumes political agency cannot, and should not, but subsumed in humanist terms.



does not account for the massive amount of water used to produce Coca-Cola products, which further contributes to the world's water crisis: it is estimated that "45 to 82 gallons" of water is required "to produce a half liter of soda" (Gardiner, 2011). A large portion of this water input is for industrialized agriculture operations that produce barley, corn, and other ingredients for Coca-Cola products.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, "big ag" is notorious for unsustainability: "The entire system of industrial agriculture is based on obstructing rejuvenation of rivers, rejuvenation of aquifers" (Shiva, 2008). The concept of "industrial" is important here because it points to a progress-oriented approach to the environment. In his broad historical narrative of humankind's relationship with water, Fagan (2011) similarly argues that modern industrialization wrongly classified water as a finite "commodity." Industrialization moved Western society away from treating water with reverence—a shift that allowed populations in privileged, drinking water "rich" countries to take advantage of this dwindling resource. An industrialized water narrative moves further away towards a "water culture" (Shiva, 2008) that acknowledges a delicate water cycle—a culture that must be considered if we ever hope to move out of the massive hole humans have dug (sometimes literally in the form of dams) in relation to draught, climate change, and water scarcity.

Let's once more tease out these language perspectives: Piper (2014) claims that discourse like the EKOCNETER fosters a privatized viewpoint. On the other hand, Barlow (2010) calls for a "language of the commons," in an effort to address the water crisis. I believe Coca-Cola cherry picks language that adheres to the "commons" in a

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<sup>5</sup> This is not unique to Coca-Cola or soda in general. For instance, beer is another example of a beverage that relies heavily on agriculture.

rhetorical act that is used for persuasive means. In other words, environmentally conscious rhetoric is used to assuage concerns about the company. The language is artfully constructed but at its core emanates a powerful ideological standpoint that assumes corporations are best equipped to decipher how water is framed and approached. For instance, concepts such as “stewardship,” exemplify how such language still resides under a productivist discourse (Smith, 1998) that is fundamentally “corporate-centric.”

**Water stewardship.** Laden in Coca-Cola’s discourse is the word “stewardship,” which implies that Coca-Cola manages, or oversees, water resources. “Stewardship” infers an unequal power dynamic between the steward (in this case Coca-Cola) and the other parties that may be involved in water resource management like local communities, governments, ecosystems, or other key stakeholders. Stewardship implies anthropocentrism, but only for particular parties (hence my use of the term “corporate-centric” in this analysis).<sup>6</sup> As Munshi and Kurian (2005) write:

[f]rom a PR point of view, this insincerity is manifested in the privileging of key publics such as shareholders over what are deemed to be peripheral publics (i.e., the masses of people who bear the brunt of corporate actions. (pg. 514)

Coca-Cola is utilizing their foreign operational reach not only to extract water as a resource, but also in order to *create* a market for bottled water—a nod the *pre-emptive*

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<sup>6</sup> In working through my analysis, I found it frustratingly difficult to use the umbrella term “anthropocentrism.” As I mentioned previously, it is impossible to completely dissociate from an anthropocentric view, seeing as we are humans reading and writing this thesis. However, corporate personhood (as exemplified by Citizens United v. FEC) is vastly different than anthropocentrism when it comes to environmental ethics. That is why I choose to use the term “corporate-centric,” rather than “anthropocentric,” in order to clearly delineate between people and corporations. Although corporations are made up of people, they are not people but are, like their name indicates, corporations.

*bluwashing* concept I argue for in this thesis. For example, in response to a question about Coca-Cola's dedication to providing safe drinking water in an interview with *Marketplace*, Coca-Cola CEO Muhtar Kent, stated:

[i]f there's a choice between tap water and bottled water, the consumer can make that choice. In a very large geography in the world, that choice does not exist. Therefore, in my view, we are providing a huge service to humanity. (Brancaccio & Bitker, 2013)

In addition to re-establishing asymmetrical power structures that funnel money back to Western elites through bottled water sales, I would like to argue that this type of control over water is using the environment as means of oppression (Wapner & Matthew, 2009). This theoretical perspective catapults my analysis beyond the communication and enlightens the material reality that Coca-Cola can, and is, profiting off of water by means of creating a consumer market for bottled water in areas where many lack access to clean drinking water. Subsequently, this *pre-emptive bluwashing* is "discourse that merely focuses on the representation of products," or in this case the Coca-Cola Company, "and does not go far enough to critically interrogate the dominant power structures that undermine collective interests and environmental emancipation and therefore leaves the neoliberal agenda intact" (Budinsky & Bryant 2013). The "neo-liberal" agenda takes the positions Coca-Cola's discourse under a more dominating structure of consumerism and free market ideology. In an essence, consumers' trust in Coca-Cola (and the logic to follow here is that their trust translates to sale conversions) is sustained by the company's commitment to sustainability. We, as consumers, can continue to purchase and *consume*.

Productivism is the core of Coca-Cola's narrative (Smith, 1998). In the case of the EKOCENTER, language embedded with market-oriented solutions comes in the form of public-private partnership (PPP) rhetoric.

### **Public-Private Partnerships**

In the Chapter 2, I highlighted ways in which capitalism is 1) discursively represented as a sphere (Mitchell, 1998) or capitalist/noncapitalist binary (Gibson-Graham, 1996) and 2) the ways in which ethnographic work can complicate such notions. For instance, Foster (2008) shows how globalization can be problematized as inevitable or unidirectional by looking at the ways in which Coke is negotiated and contested within local contexts and how consumers are co-producers of value. In a sense, these scholars work to deconstruct and challenge what is commonly understood as “the economy,” “globalization,” or “capitalism.” These frameworks shed light on the ways in which The Coca-Cola Company makes use of such totalizing narratives in constructing a specific worldview. Put plainly, Coca-Cola clings to totalizing narratives in order to construct a non-compromising conceptual framework of “the economy” that helps with their brand image for shareholders (Davis, 2009). I wish to demystify the “capitalocentric” (Gibson-Graham, 1996) narratives seeping out of Coca-Cola's rhetoric and complicate the assumptions inherent in PPP discourses. Although my work is not ethnographic like Foster's (2008), it similarly embarks on a grounded approach that places interest on why such claims are powerful. Moreover, a bottom-up approach challenges underlying assumptions within such totalizing words like “community” and “social enterprise” and aims to demystify the dominant narrative.

**Community.** The word “community” is used frequently when discussing CSR, humanitarianism, and developing countries. In the official EKOCENTER press release, the word “community” or “communities” was used 36 times in various iterations (The Coca-Cola Company, 2013c). The almost excessive use of the word speaks to the company’s intent to inform consumers that it is truly invested in the public good. A quote from the press release exemplifies Coca-Cola’s community and sustainability rhetoric:

With an enduring commitment to building sustainable communities, our Company is focused on initiatives that reduce our environmental footprint, support active, healthy living, create a safe, inclusive work environment for our associates, and enhance the economic development of the communities where we operate.

(The Coca-Cola Company, 2013c)

Here, the company is harnessing what Joseph (2002) claims is society’s tendency to fetishize community as an all-encompassing “feel-good” word that ignores the real intricacies and challenges in specific communities. Joseph (2002) warns: “fetishizing community only makes us blind to the ways we might intervene in the enactment of domination and exploitation” (pg. ix). Similarly, Gibson-Graham (1996) argue “greying” such terms such as “community” or “capitalism” make enacting critiques and alternatives more attainable. “Community” is a gloss-over word that the Coca-Cola Company uses to blind consumers to exploitative practices such as labor disputes and water commodification. Furthermore, the word community suggests singular, individual

communities; but when it's coupled with Coca-Cola's global dominance, the rhetoric tends to totalize all communities, ignoring the true needs of a specific community.

Activists, scholars (myself included), and corporations alike frequently deploy the word "community" with ease—re-affirming it's superior status in discussions of social change. In fact, I attempt to analyze what community-centered action looks like through the work of Ledwith (2010), who argues that a community is best served by participatory actions from those members of the defined community. Participatory community building requires a raised consciousness among members that unveils power structures that may exist (Ledwith, 2010). Essentially, participatory community building is rooted in a social justice framework, which criticizes the "oppressor/oppressed" relationship articulated in some community development plans (Ledwith, 2010, pg. 17).

Another term that speaks to this unequal power dynamic is "parachute activism," which criticizes temporary "help" from Western humanitarians. Coca-Cola's press release language exhibits a paternalistic mentality with words like "serve," "help," and "provide" (The Coca-Cola Company, 2013b). In other words, parachute or paternalistic activism contends outsiders are not best equipped to solve social and environmental issues, rather, the people directly facing the issues are. Ledwith's (2010) definition of participatory community building seems to be at odds with the CSR model of community building, which advocates community development *through* the corporation. The corporation, therefore, exhibits a "power-over" approach that robs communities of the "decision making process that affect their lives, giving voice to the most [marginalized]...thereby making institutions accountable" (Ledwith, 2010; pg. 15). In

order to realize this transformative notion of participatory community development, the community must be aware of the power dimensions that stifle the democratic process of participation (Ledwith, 2010). This is difficult to achieve when you consider the substantial disparity between communities and Coca-Cola's access to resources, political decision makers, and media outlets.

However, it is with caution that I use the word "community" in an assessment of Coca-Cola's approach to social change. Joseph (2002) also warns against the romantization or idealizing of the "local" in the age of global capitalism, stating that:

[p]art of the seductiveness of the global/localization story (by contrast with the globalization as totalizing story) is that it seems such a precise answer to the yearning for community produced in the Romantic narrative. [...] In a blatant disavowal of the transformational process it describes, most iterations once again constitute community as autonomous from capitalism and modernity. (pg. 152)

In other words, a community/corporation binary ignores the complicated networks that PPP require. It also gives power, again, to "capitolcentric" thinking (Gibson-Graham, 1996). Binaries naturalize capitalism. Binaries naturalize communities. The story is more complex and complicated and "greying" these terms lends insight into how to enact change. A gap in my research is ashamedly obvious if this notion is taken seriously. An even more grounded critique of the EKOCENTER would use ethnographic research to compare the CSR rhetoric to a particular communities' water access, government

structure, employment rates, etc., much like Barkay (2011) achieved in his analysis of Coca-Cola playgrounds. Nonetheless, Coca-Cola's focus on community in the discourse is at odds with Coca-Cola's global ethos and provides productive grounds for analysis that aims to deconstruct totalizing narratives.

**The global brand.** In September 2013, around the time that the EKOCENTER project was announced, Interbrand (a corporate brand evaluation and consulting company) announced that for the first time in 13 years that Apple passed Coca-Cola as the world's most valuable brand (Elliott, 2013). This is not surprising: Coca-Cola is frequently tagged as one of the most successful global brands. Former CEO of the company, Douglas Daft, isn't shy about the brand's omnipresent trait and boasts that Coca-Cola has "arguably the strongest and most pervasive marketing [...] system in the world" (Klebnikov, 2013). Accordingly, the company's advertisements encourage a symbiotic relationship between "global" and "Coca-Cola." "I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke" and 2013 Super Bowl advertisement in which people sang "America the Beautiful" in multiple languages, are just two among many examples of the global tenet. There is no doubt this is intentional on Coca-Cola's behalf: CSR programs like that of the EKOCENTER are proven to be positive brand-building schemas because of their positive link with being "global" (Becker-Olsen, Taylor, Hill & Yalcinkaya, 2011). However, Coca-Cola's use of the word "global" works to obfuscates the local (as articulated by Foster, 2008). A global narrative works to construct an uncomplicated, un-challengeable notion of PPPs as they are implemented at the 1,500 EKOCENER sites. One way in



which Coca-Cola rolls out a global homogenous schema is through the “golden triangle” metaphor.

*The golden triangle.* In “EKOCENTER” the B-roll video on the press center of the corporate website, Coca-Cola’s CEO Muhtar Kent, claims the partnership system Coca-Cola has developed is “the most beautiful example of what I call ‘*the golden triangle*’ of government, civil society, and business coming together to really make a difference in one of the big societal problems but also opportunities of the world” (The Coca-Cola Company, n.d.; emphasis mine). This “golden triangle” (a powerful visualized metaphor) is prevalent throughout the discourse either visually, in speeches, or in writing. In order to maintain the myth that the “economy” is a naturalizing, self-perpetuating force, Coca-Cola must clearly separate sites of economic activity versus sites of non-economic entities (Mitchell, 1998). This similarly implies that each section of the triangle (government, civil society, and business) are not mutually reinforcing unless they are united under the “golden triangle” structure set forth by Coca-Cola. Mitchell (1998) claims that this division between “business,” “civil society,” and “government” has a distinct purpose:

The conception and arrangement of the economy as a self-contained sphere requires, from the beginning, and at every point, in every interaction and exchange, the maintaining of difference between the monetary and non-monetary, the economic and the personal, the public and the private. This process of differentiation, very fuzzy and uncertain in its details, precedes and makes

possible the effect of the economy as a self-contained sphere. (pg.

93)

I appreciate the word “fuzzy” in Mitchell’s (1998) description because it points to the complicated dynamic of the community/capitalism that I was grappling with previously. In fact, the “fuzziness” exonerates many of the binaries that have been thus far analyzed in this analysis: water/wastewater, community/capitalism, capitalist/noncapitalist. The EKOCENTER discourse (as presented on the Coca-Cola Journey website) is indeed very “fuzzy” and uncertain in details. Why? If Coca-Cola plans to implement 1,500 “downtown[s] in a box” it would be nearly impossible to spell out every detail. Therefore, Kent’s rhetoric suggests that the CSR program is more about branding, PR, and shareholder value than creating substantive and sustainable water access solutions. The issue of scale raises several questions: Is it efficient for a global company to roll out 1,500 retail outlets under the premise of providing clean drinking water? Or is there a better alternative that does not use Coca-Cola’s global scale and instead re-focuses the decision making power to specific towns and communities?

Also featured in the B-roll video is Pravin Jamnadas Gordhan, South Africa’s Minister of Finance. It’s interesting to note that it is South Africa’s minister of *finance* that is at the press conference, not another arm of the government that directly relates with clean drinking water or public health. Logically, public health is the most direct consequence of unsafe drinking water. As previously mentioned, Kamen (the Slingshot innovator), called Coca-Cola “the biggest healthcare provider on this planet” in relation to administering clean drinking water access (Higginbotham, 2013). What I’m

questioning here is the deferment, and naturalization, of public health responsibility to Coca-Cola and other financial institutions. The deferment of natural resources, such as water, to private entities is similarly problematic. The working parts here certainly are “fuzzy” (Mitchell, 1998): finance, water, public health, and Coca-Cola. The issue is when these categories are subsumed under Coca-Cola’s “golden triangle” and are henceforth “capitalcentric” (Gibson-Graham, 1996). The categories work together to form a type of “new governance” that misaligns the responsibility that governments traditionally poses.

*Social enterprise.* Similarly, the concept of “social enterprise” maintains a separation between the “economy” and other facets (Mitchell, 1998). The Coca-Cola Company website explains that, “By social enterprise we mean that this is neither a philanthropic (social) project nor a purely business (enterprise) oriented project – instead it tries to combine the best of both worlds” (Bruce, 2014). This exemplifies Mitchell’s (1998) “sphere” theory almost to a tee. The notion that Coca-Cola can pick and choose which elements of the social and enterprise “worlds” they wish to utilize for the EKOCENTER highlights the process of categorization. In this frame of categorical logic, the social, economic, and cultural are not mutually constitutive, but rather reside in solidarity and are easily quantifiable. As if business is not a social or cultural act in and of itself. This worldview also assumes that philanthropy is merely a social project and not one that simultaneously works to increase trust in the brand or create potential relationships for Coca-Cola in transnational locations such as Africa, Asia, and Latin America. PR was *founded* to utilize the social and the concerns of society as means to increase trust in the corporation (Ewen, 1996). The “social” in this instance is subsumed

by the “entrepreneurial” due to the dichotomy that PR and Coca-Cola construct of society/business. The golden triangle metaphor and social enterprise concept are posited as virtual entities that hide the messy relations of a natural recourse, location, place, race, etc. of all the EKOCENTER sites. It serves to place a blanket structure, or model, of economics placed onto an entire global schema.

*New governance.* This governmental and corporate partnership for the EKOCENTER is common within CSR rhetoric and exemplifies the term I previously alluded to: “new governance.” The “new governance” paradigm recognizes that in the era of globalization the power to regulate — once the sole province of states — is now fragmented, diffused, and contested” (Bradford, 2012; pg. 165). Kamen, the Slingshot water purification engineer, alludes to “new governance” in the press release: “Few projects to date have so ambitiously vowed to help rural communities through such a tightly linked partnership structure that incorporates world-renowned organizations from the public, private and civic sectors” (The Coca-Cola Company, 2013b). In Kent’s definition of the “golden triangle of economics,” one word that prompts inquiry is “opportunities:” he claims the triangle can “make a difference in one of the big societal problems but also *opportunities* of the world” (The Coca-Cola Company, 2013b; emphasis mine). Kent’s use of the word “opportunities” demystifies the alleged intentions behind the CSR. Coca-Cola views the world’s water crisis, and the resulting public health crisis, as an “opportunity.” Coca-Cola’s corporate identity suggests that the “opportunity” that Kent speaks of is for increasing the company’s market growth.

The totalizing characteristic of these concepts in the EKOCENTER discourse also subsumes the women that will be operating the EKOCENTERS and uses gendered discourse for additional brand value.

**Women, water, and well-being.** Thus far I have shown how Coca-Cola draws upon environmentally conscious language for water, but what about socially conscious language? The social and environmental are not separate categories for Coca-Cola and the two categories find common ground in gendered discourse. On the sustainability page of the Coca-Cola's website, the subheadings read "women," "water," and "well-being," decidedly aligning the three categories. According to Bexell (2012), companies frequently use women as a way to assert their legitimacy. In other words, the feminization of water and the promise of the woman entrepreneur are embedded in the EKOCENTER discourse as a way to legitimize the CSR program.

According to Coca-Cola, the EKOCENTER is "[i]ntegrating Coca-Cola's sustainability priorities of well-being, women and water," (The Coca-Cola Company, 2013). Coca-Cola rarely mentions water without alluding to women (either through photos or textual references) in the EKOCENTER discourse. This exhibits intertextuality, or, "the accumulation of meanings across different texts, where one image refers to another, or has its meaning altered by being 'read' in the context of other images" (Hall, 2013; pg.222). Women, water, and the EKOCENTER all weave together in constructing a dominant ideology of consumerism and "new governance."

The EKOCENTER is a part of Coca-Cola's "5by20" program, which is their "global commitment to enable the economic empowerment of 5 million women

entrepreneurs across the company's value chain<sup>7</sup> by 2020" ("5by20," n.d.). Coca-Cola's 5by20 initiative works to mystify women in developing countries under the guise of "empowerment" in order to further justify their access to local water resources and consumers. This analysis is in line with what I have previously argued about "community" and "the economy," and how such totalizing narratives facilitate Coca-Cola's agency. It's important to re-emphasize that access to water is instrumental in Coca-Cola's business model and plan for the regions where the EKOCENTER is located. Five million women across a global value chain is no small feat. Here, we can draw upon Mohanty's (1984) argument that the Western world constructs "'third world women' as a singular monolithic subjects" (pg. 349). Mohanty (1984) argues against totalizing women's needs in developing countries and subsequently placing gender above race, class, or ethnicity. Furthermore, Mohanty (1984) criticizes the notion that the only way to help these women is through economic means, or, a "capitalocentric" discourse (Gibson-Graham, 1996). My use of the word "help" is also problematic and constructs an "us/them" binary that puts the entity helping above those being served. Regardless, Mohanty (1984) rightly argues that homogenizing women in the developing world actively ignores historical, ethnic, economic or sociopolitical factors and "ultimately robs [the women] of their historical and political *agency*" (Mohanty 1984).

Grewal's (2005) analysis of transnational corporations builds on Mohanty's (1984) to provide further insight into the "power over" tendency of programs aimed at women in developing countries that often construct identity in terms of American

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<sup>7</sup> Coca-Cola considers their "value chain" to be distribution, retail outlets, packaging, agriculture. Essentially it is anything and anyone related to the operational structure of the company (including ingredients and water).

consumerism. Her perspective on neoliberalism's contribution to the American application of identity to foreign subjects is articulated here:

[T]echnologies of feminist empowerment and pleasure that were promoted by late capitalist consumer culture became yoked to the promise of new discourses of modern female and feminist subjectivity and citizenship and the removal of violence and poverty for female populations in what were called 'developing countries.' (Grewal, 2005; pg. 25)

Bexell (2012) agrees that this type of "development" under the premise of corporate entities is problematic and "[t]he critical and emancipatory potential of empowerment is weakened by the imposed boundaries of neoliberal market criteria and their demands for economic effectiveness" (Abstract). In other words, the women may be helped in the short term, but longevity is weakened by the PPP fallacy. This suggests that the legal constrains that corporations must adhere to effectively stymie any attempt to actually bring about long-lasting change in women's lives that challenges structural barriers. Although Bexell (2012) focuses on PPPs that involve the United Nations, her critique is pertinent considering Coca-Cola's "golden triangle" approach to economics, which incorporates Coca-Cola, civil society, and government.

Condoleezza Rice is another speaker whose rhetoric blurs the relationship and responsibility between the three components of the golden triangle, but she also adopts gender as a form of legitimacy (Bexell, 2012). She offered her thoughts at the same press conference where Kent presented his "golden triangle" concept:

If you want to do something about economic development, educate a woman, give her a micro-loan, or give her a chance to run an EKOCENTER. And, she's going to bring a whole community together her with her, a whole village together with her in economic development and prosperity. [...]...Perhaps with a Coca-Cola in their hands. (The Coca-Cola Company, n.d.).

Before cheekily commented about communities having “Coca-Cola in their hands,” (which garners an audience chuckle), Rice gives an interesting visual of the EKOCENTER. She envisions that EKOCENTERS will eventually “dot the landscape,” which brings forth the notion of the omnipresent logo. There is a sense of rural romanticism here as well: Africa is positioned in Rice’s speech as an economically deprived, isolated region. Coca-Cola is positioned as the savior that will enter the “landscape” and jump-start prosperity—a paternalistic temperament. The responsibility of “economic development” falls heavily onto the woman EKOCENTER employee in Rice’s commentary, therefore homogenizing all women along the “value chain” (Mohanty, 1984). In fact, the woman entrepreneur here is heightened in such a way that she embodies the transformation of the community to prosperity (through Coca-Cola’s oversight, of course). This exemplifies the romanticization of women in developing countries in addition to giving credence to Coca-Cola’s program. The mystification of the “third-world” woman is useful for brand value.

The company’s narrative also assumes that within every woman there are entrepreneurial qualities. This further naturalizes the market (or business) as the rational



solution to poverty, water scarcity, etc. The implication is oozing with paternalism that forces the articulation of agency *through* Coca-Cola. Coca-Cola often says they are “unleashing the entrepreneurial potential of women” (The Coca-Cola Company, n.d.), which suggests that women must have Coca-Cola “unleash” this power for them. All of these claims reside under a powerful myth of societal and environmental change via the corporate entity.

Left isolated on the corporate website, however, this rhetoric would have far less reach. How does Coca-Cola get the environmental and social messages that support this paradigm out to the public? The powerful reach of PR highlights the power large corporations like Coca-Cola wield across various media channels.

### **The Power of Public Relations**

One aspect of the EKOCENTER communication apparatus is how the “story” is disseminated to mass media outlets. Coca-Cola’s access to media resources is ginormous, much like any large company with such massive profits. After all, I did not find the article at the Coca-Cola Journey website, rather it was *The New York Times*’ article that caught my attention (McNeil, 2013). Modern PR was designed to take advantage of mass media outlets. Early practitioners like Edward L. Bernays used media as a way to exaggerate the significance of staged events like the Lucky Strike campaign in New York City.<sup>8</sup> Companies have staff dedicated to sending out press releases to large media

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<sup>8</sup> Bernays was notorious for using celebrities and staged photo-ops to enhance his message—a practice that is still widely used today. Most notably, Bernays used celebrity endorsements to improve Calvin Coolidge’s image in the 1924 presidential campaign and orchestrated a calculated staging of the Torches of Freedom campaign for Lucky Strike. For more on Bernays, see Tye (1998).

companies in hopes of gaining coverage—a privilege that only resource-rich entities can afford.

The *New York Times* article was published in the “Global Health” section of the website and takes a very straightforward approach to the EKOCENTER, outlining the major goals and costs. Interestingly, however, at the end of the article, writer McNeil points out:

Soft drink companies are often accused of contributing to the obesity epidemic and Coca-Cola has been criticized for expanding its line of sugary products into poor countries where nutrition is subpar and dental care is lacking. Coke executives have countered that their bottling plants supply clean water and small entrepreneurs make money selling their drinks. (McNeil, 2013)

McNeil alludes to the fact that the EKOCENTER may be working as an image management tool, although his article is centered on the obesity epidemic. Nonetheless, it supports my argument about environmental management as well: Coca-Cola uses the EKOCENTER to pave the way for further ownership of water.

The *Washington Post*, an agenda-setting news service like *The New York Times*, reported on the EKOCENTER with an entrepreneurial theme in the article entitled “Why entrepreneurs have an edge over governments in shaping global development” (Basulato, 2013). While the author mentions that some may find the EKOCENTER “a bit too capitalistic,” he ultimately concludes that Coca-Cola is responding to the United States’ financial shortcomings and tech-oriented solutions like that of the EKOCENTER are

more effective than “large institutions and big governments” (Basulato, 2013). This logic is flawed: Coca-Cola *is* a large institution. Perhaps the most telling statement from the piece that exemplifies the uncomplicated narrative that the EKOCENTER assumes is Basulato’s (2013) conclusion:

Instead of looking for a complex and sophisticated solution to these problems — or assuming that the disadvantages in the fight to solve humanity’s problems were just too great to even try — it may turn out that all we needed was a bit of tech-agility and a Slingshot.

Water depletion *is* a complex and sophisticated issue. Therefore, it is absolutely critical that the solution been complex and sophisticated. The simplicity that Basulato, and Coca-Cola, assumes is a dangerous perspective that gambles with sustainable change. The *Washington Post* and *The New York Times* lightly touch upon potential criticisms of the EKOCENTER, but don’t go far enough to interrogate the ideological assumptions of the program: that corporations can best serve societal and environmental ills. Smaller news outlets were more akin to directly quote the EKOCENTER press release rather than provide critical inquiry.

**Mediated readings.** Nevertheless, PR is not a transmission-model of communication (Carey, 1989). Rather, media texts are, in turn, mediated, contested, and fluid. YouTube comments from the EKOCENTER videos provide insight into public readings of the Coca-Cola’s CSR program; however, so few comments were recorded and none of them give insight for a substantial audience analysis. It is useful to briefly

mention the existing comments insofar that they provide a glimpse into how the campaign was received.

Comments were accessible through sites such as *Gizmodo* and *The Verge*, which transcribed the press release from Coca-Cola into online stories in a less analytical reporting style than that of the *Times* and *Post*. Reactions were mixed on *Gizmodo*. Several readers acknowledged that Coca-Cola is doing a surface level program to detract from real issues in Africa (thus re-instigating colonial-style relationships), whereas others defended a corporation's intent on tackling social issues despite popular hatred towards corporations. *The Verge*, a website of Vox Media, yielded slightly more benevolent feedback. User Lelang comments: "Yup, it's impressive. A guy actually figured out a way to use Coke's incredible supply chain to get vaccines and medicines to remote areas" (Kasternakes, 2013). While others alluded to several of the other red flags highlighted in my analysis: "Question is will the water they sell be cheaper than the coke? My inner cynic leans toward coke being the cheaper of the two" (Kasternakes, 2013). Branding, like capitalism or water, is not black/white. While some users feel inspired or uplifted by the EKOCENTER, others are more cynical and criticize the true intentions behind the project.

**Missing voices.** The small selection of YouTube comments does present a small rupture in the reception of the EKOCNETER discourse, however; user comments provide little traction in unhinging the "fixed" meaning that Coca-Cola's rhetoric assumes in relation to the EKOCENTER (Hall, 2013). Other alternative narratives (albeit in less prestigious newspapers and sites than *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*) have

surfaced that similarly showcase mediated readings of Coca-Cola's CSR programs.

*GlobalPost* for instance ran a story in 2014<sup>9</sup> about Coca-Cola's CSR efforts in Tanzania, ironically a site of one of the first EKOCENTERS (Kushner, 2014). The news outlet embarked on their own case study of CSR and grappled with the same questions of this thesis: what is the relationship between CSR representation and material reality? Furthermore, the article questions the premise of PPP and whether Coca-Cola's CSR programs even physically exist (a question that I have wondered several times in relation to the EKOCENTER),<sup>10</sup> due to a lack of transparency from Coca-Cola concerning specifics (Kushner, 2014). It is information and perspectives like this that are frequently missing from larger media outlets.

Van Dijk (1993) reminds us "[i]ndeed, some 'voices' are thereby censored, some opinions are not heard, some perspectives ignored" in dominant discourses (pg. 260). The *GlobalPost* story attempts to give credence to those "ignored" that are absent on the Coca-Cola website, the Coca-Cola-sponsored blog posts, and agenda-setting newspapers. In writing about Coca-Cola's CSR, *GlobalPost* reports:

Indeed, most water experts and residents interviewed by  
*GlobalPost* say (...) the project did not address the root causes of  
the pollution: the absence of a sewer system and trash collection  
for the communities along the river's banks. (Kushner, 2014).

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<sup>9</sup> The article in the *GlobalPost* was also published on the *Huffington Post*'s website on September 30, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Over the course of my research on the EKOCENTER (from roughly Fall of 2013 to Spring of 2015), the locations of the EKOCENTERS have been vague at best. Initially, only regions were disclosed and then slowly specific sites trickled out of the company's website (Tanzania, Vietnam, South Africa.). It has been difficult to figure out any exact details in relation to location, that is, until Coca-Cola Journey publishes articles about blogger visits, or create promotional videos about a specific kiosk's implementation.

The water experts and residents interviewed by the *GlobalPost* are inextricably important for gaining a holistic view of the CSR project. Voices from residents and water experts are glaringly missing from the EKOCENTER discourse, especially in the Coca-Cola-sponsored blogging trips.

Media texts can be consumed, mediated, and contested, thereby challenging the Coca-Cola discourse. This further gives credence to the notion that totalizing claims, tropes, and narratives obscure the particularized details of The Coca-Cola Company and the place that such corporations have in our society.

### **Myth**

In a semiotic sense, the EKOCENTER story exemplifies a powerful “ideologically framed message or meaning” (Hall referencing Barthes (1972), 2013, pg. 24). The EKOCENTER representation obscures operational details and constructs a myth that the market is natural, forward moving, and ultimately will solve social ills. The main myth perpetuated by the sustainable-, community-, economic-, and women-, centered discourses is that social and environmental change is easily realized through Coca-Cola. The logic assumes that if Coca-Cola has access to people and places, women will get jobs and safe drinking water will be provided. Women, community, and sustainability, are all understood within a hegemonic discourse of consumerism (Smith, 1998).

Perhaps the most literal representation of this myth is the EKOCENTER infographic. The elementary-themed PDF of the EKOCENTER articulates the programs goals through cartoon-like icons and drawings (“Ekocenter Infographic,” n.d.). For instance, next to the written statement “4,000 children die each day from waterborne

diseases” there is a drawing (made to look like it was done in pencil) of a water class with orange polka dots. Another example of the iconographic aspect of the piece is the “women” icon that looks very similar to a woman female bathroom sign and a stylized droplet represents water. Although this infographic is just one among many webpages about the EKOCENTER, it speaks volumes about the dichotomy I’ve attempted to set up in my analysis: Coca-Cola uses grandiose narratives about the economy, community, women, and sustainability that are directly opposed to the very small-scale issues at hand. Issues like water access and socioeconomic contexts cannot be realized through such totalizing narratives. Furthermore, totalizing narratives are advantageous for marketing reasons: they provide a clean narrative of Coca-Cola’s place in the world.

Piper (2014) argues that “development” discourse perpetuated by private water companies’ rarely outright claims that the companies would like to privatize water. Rather, they construct their discourse under the premise of the United National Millennium Development Goals or environmentalism (Piper, 2014). In analyzing the Suez and Veolia (two of the largest water companies in the world), Piper (2014) concludes: “Publicly, their goals are saving the planet and helping the poor. But behind closed doors, the meetings are about making the poor pay and raising water prices” (pg. 25.) While I doubt that think Coca-Cola is interested in raising water prices directly, they are *indirectly* doing so through replacing public water with bottled water. Symbolically they do so through the “downtown in a box.” In fact, more than just text from the Coca-Cola website that perpetuates the water privatization, objects themselves “function as signifiers in the production of meaning” (Hall, 2013; pg. 22). In this case, the kiosk

signifies Coca-Cola's symbolic and theoretical association with water. Safe drinking water is actualized *through* the EKOCENTER structure.

### **Conclusion**

Although Coca-Cola avoids outright claims to local water resources for bottled-water markets, the “accumulation of meaning across different texts,” both literal and figuratively, create a “regime of representation” (Hall, 2013; pg. 222) that instills the privatization paradigm. As I mentioned earlier, Coca-Cola's omnipresent logo at school, scholarship grants, public sporting events, and other media support Coca-Cola's continued agency in locations both domestic and abroad. The analysis portion of my thesis utilized textual and visual analysis of the EKOCENTER press release material to further understand the complicated relationship between representation and material reality. Through deep readings of the text and press release videos, I constructed several themes that drove my analysis.



## Chapter 4

### Conclusion

As climate change continues to threaten our world's fresh water supply, the most disadvantaged populations will face the brunt end of the crises. Lately, due to the draughts in California, water usage has been brought to the forefront of public discourse. For instance, the world's biggest food company recently came under scrutiny after an article in the *The Desert Sun* revealed that Nestle was siphoning off water from national forest land unregulated since 2008 (James, 2015). However, for many in the world, safe drinking water is a *current* reality and one that warrants careful action concerning sustainability and affordable access. The stakes are high, and analyzing the communicative strategies of large transnational beverage corporations like The Coca-Cola Company is more important than ever.

In the introduction and literature review I argued that the EKOCENTER is much more complicated than the black/white or good/evil narrative than some organizations and scholars construct. Davis (2009) claims that corporations are now primarily in the "idea business." The *idea* of Coca-Cola providing clean drinking water is, at first blush, a good *idea*. The concept, however, translates into creating a larger ideological mentality that corporations should have primary access, ownership, and dispensary rights for basic human needs such as water. Coca-Cola's narrative (and the EKOCENTER) embodies a worldview that allows Coca-Cola to use water as a means of oppression (Wapner & Matthew, 2009). That is, because water access is realized *through* a major for-profit corporation, water is used as a tool to continue the exploitation of the world's most disadvantaged and vulnerable populations while appeasing corporate goals. This ideology

does not adequately address the incredibly complex and daunting task of water security and further perpetuates a consumerist-oriented approach to solving social ills (Smith, 1998). Furthermore, it's just that: an *idea* (Davis, 2009). PR is used as an image/idea management tool that diverts attention from actual operational activities of the corporation.

Water, like many natural resources, cannot be sustainably addressed under this consumerist, idea-oriented framework. Instead of allowing Coca-Cola to take a part in solving the drinking water crises, we should take heed with leaders like Barlow (2010), Shiva (2008), and other environmentalists and activists who advocate for water as a “commons” (Barlow, 2010) or human right, rather than an economic good (Piper, 2014). As I pointed out in my analysis, a strong differential exists between the representational powers of Coca-Cola and activists like Barlow and Shiva. Within the context of Coca-Cola’s “regime of representation” (Hall, 2013) it can be difficult to contest Coca-Cola’s marketing prowess and “complicate the narrative,” so to speak.

However, it should be noted that sometimes the popularity of the global icon sometimes works counter to the corporation’s intentions. The pervasiveness of the icon makes The Coca-Cola Company vulnerable to local interests and demands (Ghosh, 2011). Coca-Cola’s logo in Plachimada, India, for instance, served as a platform for local activists to disrupt Coca-Cola’s presence in the country with billboards picturing women with empty water containers—meant to signify and publically call-out Coca-Cola’s poor and over-aggressive treatment of local water supplies (Ghosh, 2011). This form of resistance provides an encouraging example of local communities harnessing the iconic

power of Coca-Cola to voice their concerns. Ghosh, (2011) argues the popularity of the global icon acts as a check and balance system that keeps global corporations surveyed and represents positive example to look to for forms of resistance against dominant entities like that of Coca-Cola. This gives hope for more critical inquiries and potential changes as it pertains to water privatization. Perhaps we can use powerful global brands to bring about change and rupture the “corporate-centric” discourse. As Klein (2010) articulates in *No Logo*, there are limits to this type of culture jamming. Although significant, “flipping” the brand pales in comparison to structural inequalities bolstered by mega-corporations like Coca-Cola.

### **Opportunities for Further Study**

Clearly, the EKOCENTER story does not end here. Of particular interest to my thesis would be ethnographic research that compares and contrasts the EKOCENTER implementation and the critical discourse analysis I completed for this thesis. For instance, a long-term study of the pilot program in South Africa would provide rich insight into how the EKOCENTER was received by the town and the forthcoming “business model” of the program. Additionally, it would be useful to continue tracking the EKOCENTER content on Coca-Cola Journey. Throughout my analysis there were numerous articles posted concerning the EKOCENTER since its launch date in 2013. Although water was the primary focus initially, articles on the website now focus on solar energy and blog posts from Coca-Cola-sponsored writers. The fluidity of topical focus is interesting and possibly suggests that the initial press release was used as an attention-grabbing mechanism.

In this analysis I decidedly strayed away from using terms such as “capitalism” or “neo-liberalism.” Gibson-Graham (1996) challenge scholars to avoid taking such terms for granted so that we may better understand how to intervene in exploitative practices in the name of the “economy.” I aimed to do so in my analysis by digging deep into Coca-Cola’s discourse. I highlighted how Coca-Cola uses language and imagery as an image management tool that diverts attention from their documented instances of water depletion, correlation to diabetes and sugar-rich diets, and labor union suppression. Coca-Cola’s global ethos is contingent upon consumer participation: advertisements, branding, and rhetoric are calculated operations used to appease consumers and encourage co-created trust in the brand. As Foster (2008) points out, this image management strategy resides within structural economic and governance systems; however, feelings of goodwill towards Coca-Cola should not be taken for granted. More research is warranted to discover how consumers potentially find authenticity through Coca-Cola (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Additionally, is potential affective value in the Coca-Cola brand a form of *consumption work* that forces a re-configuration of Marx’s producer/consumer relationship? How is value established with global brands and is this another way that consumers are exploited? These questions certainly warrant more research, perhaps within the framework of audience studies.

Concepts, companies, and brands are often taken for granted and abstracted in such a way that it becomes difficult to untangle narrative from the “reality.” However, abstracted narratives frequently serve the purpose of those producing the narrative and create a powerful communicate apparatus. I attempted to demystify the EKOCENTER by

unpacking the various claims, intertextual relationships, and narratives and pave the way for a more critical approach to Coca-Cola, water, and social and environmental justice.

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