

Responsible Consumers or Consuming Responsibility?

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Abstract

The globalised experience economy forefronts new ways of acting, living and relating for both consumers and organisations. In this article, we present an analysis and discussion of the global, cause related marketing campaign (RED) as an emblematic case for new ways of negotiating relations between consumers, organisations and distant Others in a globalised experience economy. The campaign has been criticised for blurring the boundaries between business and ethics. However, we argue that it is the philanthropy and commerce hybrid that facilitates and constructs new response strategies to the challenges of global social responsibility.

Keywords

(RED); social responsibility; globalisation; experience economy; multidisciplinary approach; brand relationship

Introduction

Based on a case study of the cause related marketing campaign (RED), this paper presents an analysis and discussion of how relations are constructed between consumers, organisations and distant Others in a globalised experience economy. Within an analytical branding framework, we focus on organisational responses as well as the options offered to consumers in responding to the moral obligation to care for the less-privileged.

Our aim is to create insights into the challenges of social responsibility (in this context conceptualised as a moral obligation to care for the distant Others) posed to individuals and organisations by globalisation and the experience economy, and to address the question of how such challenges can be handled. Corporate social responsibility manifested as cause related marketing campaigns which offer organisations and individuals joint possibilities for moral response are numerous. One of the most significant campaigns in recent years is (RED): a global effort which offers consumers and businesses the possibility of donating to HIV/AIDS infected Africans through the buying and selling of specific branded products. What makes (RED) significant is its emblematic character in the sense that it combines ideas and ideals from what is traditionally perceived as opposite paradigms (ethics and business). (RED) synthesises these ideas and ideals into new configurations which reflect new ways of

being, thinking, acting, relating and consuming within the era of globalisation and experience economy.

In exploring social responsibility challenges and their possible response strategies, the article includes the following elements: after a presentation of the research questions, we introduce our theoretical framework which combines experience economy, globalisation and corporate social responsibility. Subsequently, follows a case study of (RED) as a brand inviting for consumer relations based on both ethical and aesthetical value propositions; the branded incarnation of the good-looking Samaritan. Finally, a discussion of a new ethic posed by (RED) concludes the paper.

The paper constitutes an experiment. The authors are academically involved in different fields of studies; ranging from strategic corporate social responsibility, consumer research, branding and marketing to visual culture and cultural studies, literary- and media studies. We consider the inter- and multidisciplinary approach of the study as an epistemological eye opener to grasp social responsibility in a global experience economy as it presents multidimensional perspectives on the different levels of meanings: the classical notion of either-or approaches is replaced by multifaceted methodological openness.

Our Study

The globalised experience economy highlights several potential challenges to organisations and consumers in relation to handling social responsibility. These potential challenges and responses have led to the formation of the research questions that will guide our analysis of (RED). One of the overreaching dilemmas introduced by the context is the ethical challenges of deontology and utilitarianism to consumers and organisations respectively. Consequently, the questions explored in the study are: how is social responsibility constructed and handled through the constituted relationships between organisations and individuals in relation to the juxtaposition of altruism and business? And is there a »third« possibility of ethical involvement transcending or deconstructing the dilemma between deontological and utilitarian ethics?

Multidisciplinary Theoretical Framework and Methodological Considerations

In answering our research questions, we apply a multifaceted or multidisciplinary theoretical framework composed of relevant theories taken from the experience economy, globalisation and corporate social responsibility as outlined below. Moreover, the theoretical framework draws on recent contributions within brand management and consumer research. In our case analysis, we use a hermeneutical approach with inspiration from media and literary theories, applying textual and media analysis, visual semiotics and discourse analysis in analysing the (RED) campaign website (www.joinred.com) as it appeared in the spring of 2008. Our case analysis introduces and demonstrates perspectives on how a multidisciplinary approach to analysing post modern business strategies and consumer forms may account for the breakdown of former contradictory and opposite cultural, individual and organisational behaviours and performances.

Theoretical Framework

The following section presents three theoretical fields (the experience economy, globalisation and corporate social responsibility) in order to further qualify and narrow our research scope by pointing to relevant aspects to be explored in the study.

The Experience Economy and the Consumer

It is said that one of the most important premises of the experience economy is the intertwining of culture and economy in contemporary societies (Pine and Gilmore 1999; Ray and Sayer 1999; Gay and Prike 2002). In this paper, we seek to investigate how social responsibility is handled by consumers and organisations embedded in this cultural and economic intertwining. Here consumers and organisations alike use anything and everything in a constant production and reproduction of identity (e.g. McCracken 2008; Elliott and Davies 2006; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Thompson and Tambyah 1995; Venkatesh and Meamber 2008). Consequently, Storey states: “Consumption is perhaps the most visible way in which we stage and perform the drama of self-formation” (2003, 78) thereby highlighting that the (post)modern consumer consumes products, services, media, relations, sociality etc. to produce (and reproduce) social and cultural identity.

Three different understandings of or approaches to the experience economy can be identified within existing literature. In the first approach, the experience economy is conceptualised as an epistemological turn or a paradigm shift said to make it the most important revolution in the history of mankind since the industrial era (Pine and Gilmore 1999). The turn hypothesis points to two inherent qualities or basic premises concerning how value is looked upon and produced: the immaterial and existential (identity producing) character of the experience, and the empowerment of the consumer to assign value. In recent research, the potential existential and political empowerment of the consumer is emphasized as activist and self-directed initiatives are appointed to (potentially) change the global power balance; from a media perspective (e.g. Arvidsson 2008; Bosjwick 2007); a brand perspective (e.g. Holt 2002); and an ‘anti-corporate’ perspective (e.g. Thompson and Arsel 2004).

The second approach involves new ways of viewing consumption including abandoning the rational economic approach to consumption as utility maximisation. Instead consumption becomes hedonistic play (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982); a desire to experience a ‘warm glow’ reflecting an unambiguously postmodern desire (Andreoni 1990). The warm glow is experienced in several ways: for example through avoidance of everyday life routines; by ways of intensifying phenomena, events, areas and relations for the individual or the organisation (Lash and Lury 2007; Løfgren and Willem 2005); through the desire for transformation or change via consumption; and through the consumer’s active investment in the experience, whether symbolic (giving meaning to), economic, emotional or corporeal (Lipovetsky 2006; Schulze 1997; Knudsen 2007).

Throughout the 90s, we detect a significant shift, both in consumer behaviour and in the ways of theorising this behaviour. Consumption is viewed as a value or meaning-producing activity for the consumer, focusing on his/her personal life-design-project as well as on creating and maintaining social relationships. Within an interpretive consumer research tradition, Østergaard and Jantzen present two different ontologies of consumption i.e. the basic condition describing why and how the consumer engages in consumption (2000, 12). The first type of consumer, metaphorically conceptualised as a *tourist* searching for consumption experiences, is emotionally engaged in consumption based on the individual’s desire for meaning (13).

The process of consuming is guided by the heart's desire. When the consumer chooses to consume through renunciation (e.g. through disciplines of the body or lifestyle as in 'simple living' movements), we must conclude that renunciation is one of the possible expressions of such a desire (Schulze 1997). The second type of consumer is metaphorically conceptualised as a *tribe member* (Maffesoli 1996) searching for the 'right' symbols for the purpose of being recognised by the other members of the tribe: "This recognition process is guided by *the eye* in a metaphorical sense: the reason for choosing a product is not based on deep psychological motives, but is instead guided by the awareness of the symbolic surface." (Østergaard and Jantzen 2000, 19). Hence, the interpretive turn within consumer research prioritizes the emotional and aesthetic dimensions of consumption reflecting a new economy based on experiences.

The third approach conceptualises the experience economy as a symbolic economy in an extension of anthropological and sociological theories of cultural exchange and identity-construction at several levels. Leading this approach are the British Cultural Studies tradition (Lury and Lash 2003, 2006, 2007) and the Swedish special edition of the New Economy (O'Dell 2002; Løfgren and Willem 2005). Here, social theories deduced from pre-capitalist societies are combined with the designs and understandings of the new economy.

All three approaches will be visible in the analysis of the relations between consumers, organisation and the distant Other in the case study: relations are interactive, interventionist and dynamic, and each entity or actor can be considered involved and responsible.

Globalisation

The mutual knowledge and dependency that globalisation introduces (due to a flow of people, money and images) can be conceptualised in different ways. It is possible to speak of a *diminishing* of the world, producing closer (intimate) relations among the inhabitants of the planet through the media-related extensions of human senses or of the body itself: "Electric circuitry has overthrown the regime of "time" and "space" and pours upon us instantly and continuously the concerns of all other men" (MacLuhan and Fiore 1967, 16, quotation from Tomlinson 1999, 154). Simultaneously, one can claim higher *complexity* due to global dependency: "One paradoxical consequence of the

process of globalisation is not to produce homogeneity but to familiarize us with greater diversity” (Featherstone, Lash and Roberson 1995, 86) – a so called *enlargement of reality* (augmented reality) due to new possibilities of socialisation through new global media. These three consequences of globalisation are not in opposition, but interact in what we claim globalisation signifies to consumer and organisational responses to social and global responsibility.

Two of the most striking properties of globalisation are increasing mobility (travel, migration) and new mediated forms of connectivity (images, the internet) (Tomlinson 1999; Appadurai 1996). The opposition between the ‘real’ face-to-face encounter and the mediated encounter no longer exists since global media have augmented our spheres of intimacy in significant ways: “Globalisation spans the ‘out-there-ness’ of the world and the ‘in-there-ness’ of our phenomenal worlds” (Tomlinson 1999, 170).

Tomlinson states that increased moral and emotional efforts will be required to engage with the situations of distant Others (177). Our study addresses, in part, if and how (RED) can be looked upon as an answer to the challenges that Tomlinson (1999) formulated which are put to western media-users and consumers by the new public intimacy.

We describe the different relations, involving the distant Other, established between consumer, organisation and society. Some have pointed to the mediated relationship between spectator and distant Other as a *relationship of complicity* (Ellis 2000). The viewer position relative to audio-visual events can be characterised as one of power (i.e. the viewer can overlook the event from many angles and still be safe); one of powerlessness (i.e. the event unfolds whether we like it or not); or as someone *appealed to*. “At once distanced and involving, it implies a necessary relationship with what is seen. The relationship is one of complicity, because if you know about an event, that knowledge implies a degree of consent to it. *With this complicity comes an aching sense that something must be done*”. (Ellis 2000, 11, our emphasis). Thanks to the media, it is primarily those who wield power who are subjected to a certain degree of visibility (150) and at the same time subjected to certain fragility (156). It can be debated who ‘has’ the power – those visible in the media or those who are invisible (Thompson 1995, 2001). The mediated character of the

relationship seems to stress the morality of the representation itself: “the morality of the media refers to the generality of orientation and procedure within which the world is constructed by the media and within which the other appears.” (Silverstone 2007, 7). The media representations of the Others is one part of the production of the spectator as empowered and morally obliged to the distant, represented Others, to whose economic, social and cultural deficit modern consumers feel obliged to respond with different kinds of interventions.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Cause Related Marketing (CRM)

In light of increasing ethical concerns and the desire to express oneself through social commitment amongst consumers, activists groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), companies are compelled to show an equal will to contribute to benevolence in order to keep their ‘licence to operate’ e.g. to maintain legitimacy for their business activities in civil society (Paine 2003). Companies are supposed or expected to contribute by giving back some of their benefices to society, proving themselves good corporate citizens. However, companies have different motivations for engaging in CSR. Paine (2003) outlines various perspectives on corporate values which are embedded in CSR initiatives. Such initiatives may be reactively problem-driven or proactively opportunity-driven and manifest in different positions. *A risk management position* motivates companies whose CSR activities constitute a response to more critical stakeholders, globalisation and the media by anticipating and trying to eliminate risk factors before they turn into crises and scandals. *An organisational functional position* is promoted by companies whose CSR activities are seen as a means of creating a committed and innovative business environment in order to retain and attract employees. *Market positioning* drives companies whose CSR activities are identity and reputation-oriented through brand, trust and stakeholder relationship building. *Civic positioning* leads companies to make efforts to act as good corporate citizens, with the aim of managing their reputations in the community by establishing relationships with civic stakeholders, NGOs, local government and institutions, etc. Finally, according to Paine, ‘*a better way*’ is a driver for companies for whom ethics and responsibility are identified and practiced as values in and for themselves without any need for further or specific justification (2003).

Whatever the motive or position of companies in responding to their global social responsibility, they are challenged to conceive a CSR profile that fits into their business strategy and performance as well as the general expectations of their stakeholders, including consumers who buy their goods and services, in order to turn social responsibility into a win, win, win project – a project which gives credit to the company, the cause and the consumers emotionally or financially affected by the cause (Adkins 1999). However, a classic dilemma referring to two ethical oppositions still appears in today's theoretical discussions and practice of ethics and social responsibility. The two opposite positions can be traced back to the works of philosophers of ethics from the age of enlightenment i.e. those of Kant, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau in the 17th and 18th century (Langer 2006). The dilemma shows itself as lying between a utilitarian (doing good for a benefit) and a deontological (virtue) ethics (doing good for its own sake) (Nielsen 2005). With reference to the utilitarian approach to CSR, it is possible to ask: can businesses make donations and at the same time maximise value for shareholders? And should they? This type of questions frequently surfaces alongside the often quoted rational-economic philosophy of Milton Friedman “The business of business is business” (Friedman 1970). However, it is also possible to present the counterargument of a ‘better way’, according to which businesses are encouraged to make donations and contribute to redistributing welfare for its own sake, which is equally often part of the CSR (media) agenda. The dilemma between these extreme positions still seems to influence businesses and members of the general public in their responses and reactions to business-generated socially responsibility initiatives, as we shall return to in our case study.

Cause related marketing (CRM) is a CSR initiative that directly involves consumers in that businesses commit to making a contribution or to donating a percentage of revenues to a specific cause on the basis of their product sales (Kotler and Lee 2005, 81). CRM is thus based on collaboration between a business and a non profit organisation, providing resources for that organisation's cause. To quote Adkins, CRM is “clearly understood, appreciated and developed with the integrity, transparency, sincerity, mutual respect, partnership and mutual benefit it requires” (1999, 5). It offers an option for marketers, corporate and community managers and fundraisers to enter into partnerships and achieve mutual benefits. From an organisational perspective,

CRM is an opportunity for businesses to establish relationships with stakeholders and engage them in mutually beneficial social and societal projects such as environmental economy as well as development and health care projects. In this respect, consumers play an important role as stakeholders, who, together with activists and NGOs, are increasingly confronting businesses with sophisticated demands and demonstrating cynical behaviour as consumers: “They expect compliance, honesty and ethical trading standards” (Adkins 1999, 6), to which businesses’ growing adherence to “Fair Trade”, “UN Global Compact” and similar models of certification bear witness. Consumers and other stakeholders have an increasing impact on businesses’ corporate and marketing policies across the world. However, the question is how much and in which ways consumers are concerned with and engage themselves in businesses’ CSR initiatives. Surveys have shown that, price and quality being equal, consumers are generally more likely to switch to brands which are subject to CRM initiatives (Brønn and Vrioni 2001). Most consumers link CSR positively to product and brand evaluation, brand choice and brand recommendation (Reisch 2006, 192). As such, consumers appreciate companies’ involvement in CRM if it aims at raising funds for a cause (Brønn and Vrioni 2001). CRM thus has a great potential for companies in building and maintaining relations with the public, and in enhancing their corporate reputation, because it seems “sensitive, trustworthy and relevant to society” (Brønn and Vrioni 2001, 215). Other consumers, however, are cynical and sceptical about companies’ engagements in CSR and their communication on the issue (Beckmann 2006, 172). Consumer scepticism towards CSR and CRM often derives from a distrustful and cynical attitude towards advertising. Hence, businesses have to encounter the public on its own premise by framing forms of interaction, aesthetics and styles of social responsibility that are part of the new contextual paradigm posed by the experience economy and globalisation.

Case Analysis

(RED) – A philanthropy and commerce hybrid

(RED) (Figure 1) was first launched in the United Kingdom in January 2006 by artist and activist Bono, in cooperation with American politician and Global Fund representative Bobby Shriver, as a new approach to generating awareness and ensuring donations for a worthy cause by setting up a branded licensing company.

[Figure 1]

From a strategic branding perspective, (RED) is rather unique in the sense that it has been created or constructed with the specific purpose of raising money for HIV/AIDS infected Africans. To realise this purpose, (RED) positions itself between philanthropy and commerce as it collaborates with a number of iconic brands¹ in a co-branding effort to raise awareness of the African HIV/AIDS epidemic and to obtain donations for the Global Fund earmarked for Africans in need. The cause related marketing idea behind (RED) is that licensed partner companies donate a percentage or a part of their (RED) product profits to the Global Fund, and benefit from their involvement by enhancing their good standing with the public, thus ensuring their legitimacy. In addition to directly supporting the cause by providing funds for the purchase of HIV/AIDS medication generated by the sales of specific (RED) products, the partner companies pay for and carry out all marketing of their own (RED) products.

(RED) has been met with criticism in the media, partly on account of what can be perceived as a blatant combination of philanthropy and commerce, but also because it has been reported that the companies involved have spent four times as much on marketing their involvement with the project as they have raised in donations (cf. the campaign *Buy less crap*²). Although some say that this estimate is much too high, the companies in question have still been accused of caring more about their own image than about helping those in need.

The various points of criticism aside, the sale of (RED) products has raised millions used by the Global Fund to buy medication, and the unique set-up of (RED) is a new addition to the ways in which individuals and organisations can choose (jointly) to handle their social responsibility. In light of the positive effects generated by (RED), we claim that the campaign deconstructs the posed juxtaposition of utilitarian business and deontological altruism thereby composing or opening up for new relational potentials. In other words, what from one perspective might be seen as amoral – i.e. the intertwining of hedonistic pleasure, image management and charity work – becomes

¹ Partner brands include (at the time of analysis: spring 2008): Motorola, American Express, GAP, Giorgio Armani, Converse, Apple and Hallmark.

² <http://buylescrap.org>

part of the solution in relation to handling the global challenges of social responsibility; marking a new paradigm of ethics.

Defining (RED) as a brand

The primary tenant of branding is to differentiate products, companies or services from competitors by marking a unique market position. Different branding theories propose different approaches to the process of differentiation. Traditional marketing approaches place emphasis on product aspects, thereby conceptualising brands as extended products strategically priced, placed and positioned (cf. the basic marketing toolbox, the four Ps: Product, Price, Place and Promotion, e.g. Kotler 2003). According to Aaker, however, a brand is more than just a product (Aaker 1996, 74). Drawing on a humanised notion of brands, Aaker argues that a unique brand position is guided by a strong brand identity from which value propositions are drawn and positioned with the intention of creating strong brand-customer relationships (Aaker 1996; cf. also Kapferer 1997). Hence, building strong brands involves building strong brand identity systems which represents unique sets of brand associations i.e. what the brand is and what it stands for (Aaker 1996, 68).

According to Aaker (1996), brand identity encompasses four perspectives: brand as product, brand as organisation, brand as person, and brand as symbol. Thus, from a managerial perspective, a brand is constructed and defined within different levels of meaning (i.e. physical, organisational, relational and symbolic meanings). Having brand-customer relationships as its core, the process of branding involves extracting the brand identity traits into value propositions (by offering the consumer functional, emotional and/or self-expressive benefits) which are positioned and executed, aimed at a target audience (Aaker, 1996). Aaker presents these perspectives for the purpose of building strong brands. However, they are also useful as analytical tools; not for building but for understanding the brand as value propositions offered to the consumer; as an invitation for relations. Drawing on Aaker (1996) as an overall framework for understanding brands, the following sections analyse (RED) from the four perspectives of *symbol*, *organisation*, *product* and *person*. The analysis focuses on the type of relations constructed and on how partner companies, consumers, (RED) and distant Others are construed in relation to social responsibility responses.

(RED) as symbol

Understanding a brand as symbol, Aaker's brand identity system presents a) the visual imagery and metaphors and b) brand heritage as dimensions that contribute to the meaning of the brand (1996). Analysing (RED) as symbol with specific focus on the visual imagery, the eye is literally drawn to the colour red. Although the (RED) manifesto states that not all products available within the (RED) concept are red in colour, seemingly the symbol or logo (RED) stands for the colour red in the brand.

Using the sign theory of Charles Sanders Peirce (1978) and his successors (e.g. Lury 2004), attention is drawn to the diverse dimensions of a sign. As an analytical construction, Peirce distinguishes between three different modes in which the real is implied in signification: firstness (iconic), secondness (indexical) and thirdness (symbolic). If the relation of the sign to its object is *symbolic*, the comprehension of the sign is conventionally coded. In the case of (RED) we might suggest that the colour red conventionally connotes passion and love. In addition, sharing the same colour as Red Cross globally, and the Communist Manifesto politically, red not only connotes passion but also compassion which is further visualised by the parentheses surrounding the colour (RED) – the colour is embraced. The colour red also seems to be symbolically related to the brand (RED) since it is the colour globally associated with HIV/AIDS, e.g. the Red Ribbon Project where the red ribbon symbolises solidarity with people living with HIV/AIDS (cf. the pink ribbon symbolising solidarity with people living with breast cancer or the white ribbon symbolising the fight against domestic violence).

If the relation of the sign to its object is *indexical*, it refers to a sign affected by its object through an existential relation (e.g. carrying the traces of the producer or the traces of a certain production process). In the case of (RED), the indexical relation is not verbalised. If (RED) carried the name 'Bono', we could speak of an indexical brand name strategy, referring to the co-founder of the brand. However, in the case of (RED) the indexical relation is endorsed: i.e. cultural systems of meaning is transferred (or endorsed) into branded goods and consumed by consumers (McCracken 1989). As a co-founder and active spokesperson of (RED), Bono endorses the brand and thereby transfers his own culturally situated values into the brand. Bono is the iconic incarnation of (RED): the good-looking Samaritan *in personae*, representing

both aesthetic coolness and the charitable warmth. And the consumers are invited to buy into the universe of cool Samaritans: to be good *and* look good. Following the logic of the endorsement process (McCracken 1989), the consumer is empowered to transfer meaning *back to culture*, by buying into a new cultural and political order all dressed in red. Or as the manifesto states: “As first world consumers, we have tremendous power. What we collectively choose to buy, or not to buy, can change the course of life and history of this planet.”. The consumer is empowered to embrace the future.

The *iconic* sign (firstness) is not understood in terms of visual similitude but as quality: “Firstness is ‘a mere quality’, a quality-sign [...] It is something so emergent that it is not yet quite a sign, for it is perceptible only as it appears in other signs. So, for example, we do not ever perceive only the quality of red, or only the quality of bitterness; [...] Firstness cannot actually act as a sign until it is embodied; but the embodiment has nothing to do with its character as a sign.” (Lury 2004, 77).

We claim that (RED) as an iconic sign (and brand) relates to the viewer mainly through its aesthetic qualities. Such qualities are first and foremost actualised on the webpage which contains the manifesto, with its stencil-graffiti writing, normally used by official organizations to label objects, and subcultural milieus for artistic street art purposes, but not least inherited from the images and logos of the branded products (Armani, iPod (Apple), GAP etc., cf. Aaker’s brand heritage). These aesthetic qualities have a strong *haptic quality*, implying that the viewer relates bodily to the image (Marks 2000, 171). The consumer is invited to embody the brand by consuming it and thereby (re)producing its potentials in relation to his/her own identity: the consumer dresses in (RED), thereby becoming (RED). This is explicated on the (RED) website by the (YOU) imitating not only the brand (RED), but also the brands that constitute (RED) i.e. the (PRODUCTS). The consumer is invited to bodily consume the signs, becoming yet another branded ‘product’ in staging a cause; what one might call a ‘commodification’ of the responsible consumer. Hence, we are presented with two modes of consumption which appear relevant in describing the seemingly ethical dilemma infused in (RED) as symbol: (RED) is both an aesthetic excess, offering the consumer visual potentials to stage him-or herself as a certain tribe member, fulfilling the eye’s recognition *and* an emotional notion offering a fulfilment of the heart’s ethical urge and desire. The visible commodification of the responsible consumer also signifies

a possible proliferation of the (RED)ness through the tribe: the endorsement is a continuing process of reproduction of cultural signs.

In summary, the semiotic analysis suggests that symbolically, the colour red and (RED) draw attention to the cause, the fight against HIV/AIDS in Africa, focusing on the love and (com)passion needed to fight the disease. As such, a relationship with the consumer is built by enveloping the cause within an emotional and ethical frame of reference. Iconically and indexically, however, the ethical and political obligations towards distant Others are substituted, or at least supplemented, by the haptic quality of the brand-image crying out for the body of the viewer – thereby placing the consumer at the heart of the campaign: (RED) is not only about the compassionate (YOU) helping distant Others, but also about the performing of (YOU) with the help of the distant Others – thus inscribing the cause in an aesthetic frame of reference. Hence, the roles of sender and receiver are reversed: an aspect which will be further elaborated when analysing (RED) as person.

(RED) as organisation

From an organisational perspective, (RED) is a non-commercial brand, yet based on close co-operation with a selection of commercialised and branded goods representing the partner companies. This doubleness is reflected at both organisational and product levels. Organisationally, (RED) is constituted as an altruistic set-up whose sole purpose is to raise money (and awareness) to aid HIV/AIDS infected Africans. At this level one might define (RED) as a pure-hearted charity, inscribing itself into a deontological ethical context. The first lines of the manifesto emphasise a sort of contemporary unbalance (“All things being equal, they are not”) which marks the outset of the social intervention of the project. (RED) is motivated by a utopian vision of a stable world order, free from suffering, and this goal should be attained by a certain way of consuming luxury products. The manifesto thus describes (RED) as a way of addressing global unbalances because it creates the possibility of changing “the course of life and history on this planet” by means of consumption. Consequently, at an organisational level it can be argued that (RED) expresses a call for *the better way* (Paine 2003).

However, the manifesto also challenges such an altruistic definition when stating: “(RED) is not a charity. It is simply a business model”. The business model is reflected at the product level, and will be elaborated on in the following.

(RED) as product

From a product perspective, (RED) has been created or constructed within an economic and market-oriented framework as a co-branded universe ranging from luxurious Armani and American Express to mainstream GAP and Converse; from the coolness of iPod (Apple) to the warmth of Hallmark. These brands (among others) physically constitute the brand (RED), while (RED) at the same time is constituting and adding value pertaining to responsibility and moral obligation to the various branded products, aiding or supporting the partner companies in their CSR efforts. Each of the partner companies is given an additional brand identity element as they become (RED) licensees: “Each company that becomes (RED) places its logo in this embrace and is then elevated to the power of red.”. Thereby, the partner companies have the opportunity to demonstrate their legitimacy and enhance their reputation by adding the philanthropic brand values of (RED) to their own brands.

Aaker states that a brand is more than just a product (1996, 74), referring to the added values ascribed organisationally, relationally and symbolically. In continuation of this, one might define (RED) as more than just the brands (i.e. Armani, Apple, Hallmark) drawing attention to the added value ascribed ethically and morally. (RED) is the branded goods plus something extra – (RED) is the all and ever-embracing brand: embracing the co-brands, the cause and the consumer mirroring a win-win-win situation (Adkins 1999). As such (RED) as product inscribes (RED) into a utilitarian ethical context, where the partner companies seems motivated by a market positioning approach (Paine 2003).

Conspicuous in the previous (RED) brand analyses is a pronounced altruistic versus commercial dilemma, reflecting the two oppositional positions of utilitarian and deontological ethics. This dilemma is further manifested or expressed by introducing Aaker’s fourth brand perspective: brand as person.

(RED) as person

In analysing (RED) as consisting of personality traits, (RED) seems to dissolve into various selves. To clarify this schizophrenic tendency, and to explore the relationships constructed by (RED)'s brand personality, we draw on Greimas' actantial model, normally used to analyse fairytales³.

According to Greimas' model the subject wanting something and the receiver getting something is very often the same figure in a fairytale logic⁴. When it comes to traditional charity or donation scenarios, this is however, not the case, since the donating subject is acting as the sender of an object (aid), which is received by another subject or group of subjects. This equation of subject and sender is nevertheless exactly what is challenged by forms of charity projects combining consumption and donation (as in cause related marketing campaigns). Whilst the traditional donor inhabits a *subject/sender* position, the cause-related consumer, the 'causer', may best be described as a *subject/receiver* position, since the act of consuming is both a way of helping others and a way of staging selves (i.e. satisfying personal needs through consumption).

The (RED) manifesto adds further to the personality divide by first presenting the 'you' with a choice (entering the world of responsible consuming or becoming one of the opponents) while at the same time underlining that it is in fact (RED) and the companies which are going to do all the work. The 'causer' is thus at the same time *giving help* and *receiving images, acting responsibly* and *consuming as usual* – or in other words, presented as a *subject* wanting products at the same time as giving aid, as a *receiver* getting the products and as a *helper* facilitating the transfer of money from the companies to the distant Others. Perceived as a person (RED) thereby consists of multiple selves or social roles acted out simultaneously: subjects are objectified and objects, in turn, become subjects.

The group benefiting from the right choice of the consumer is the suffering Africans. The consumers' preference simply makes the difference between treating a life-threatening disease and accepting it as an insoluble problem. The

³ The model consists of a *subject* (e.g. a prince) wanting an *object* (e.g. a princess), which is won through a process of struggle with the intervention of a *helper* (e.g. an old man) and an *opponent* (e.g. a witch). In the end the subject becomes a *receiver* getting the object from a *sender* (e.g. a king) (Greimas 1983).

⁴ The prince wanting a princess is thus both the acting subject and the receiver.

positioning of the suffering distant Others is a topic of dispute: are we witnessing a recognition of the distant Others by the campaign's unwillingness to pose them as passive victims, but as 'consumers to be'? Or is the campaign simply another example of Western citizens not acknowledging the powerlessness and poor living conditions of Africans, thereby neglecting the role of Western consumption in the upholding of these asymmetries? Or is (RED) presenting a both-and solution?

It is worth noticing that within the textual logic of the manifesto, the external 'they', though passive receivers of help, are empowered in the future to be able to continue to take care of their families and contribute socially and economically to their communities. The (RED) campaign's legitimisation of consumption is thus focused on its positive side effects for the distant Others. This line of reasoning seems to be congenial with utilitarian ethics founded on "the idea that we ought always to act so as to maximise the sum total of welfare in the universe" (Tännsjö 2002, 10). In other words, it is the consequences of a given action – not the motives behind it – that should be evaluated when it comes to determining its (un)ethical status. The utilitarian or welfare-maximising point of departure is underlined by the very economic style of writing in the manifesto:

“You buy (RED) stuff, we get the money, buy the pills and distribute them. They take the pills, stay alive, and continue to take care of their families and contribute socially and economically in their communities. If they don't get the pills, they die. We don't want them to die. We want to give them the pills”

This rational tone seems first of all to confront the more empathy-oriented strategies of other charity campaigns which focus on compassion and pity (e.g. SOS Children's Villages⁵). Within this empathic framework, the motivation to act or pay (Boltanski 1999) is closely linked to the sensual/visual experience of the Other, representing an ethical and affective invocation (Buber 1996; Butler 2004; Deleuze 2005; Levinas 1969; Løgstrup 2004). By not using this particular framework, (RED) tries to avoid the

⁵ www.sos-borneby.dk

accusation of using *strategic pathos*, i.e. a type of mediated appeal which runs a risk of creating viewer aversion or numbness (Sontag 2003).

The foreclosure of suffering is salient in the video based communication of the campaign. Compared with unauthorised videos promoting (RED) on YouTube, where the wretched faces and bodies of Africans are repeatedly used in the attempt to create charitable responses⁶, the official (RED) videos clearly follow the cool and rational line of thinking present in the manifesto. In the news section entitled the ‘media room’ on the website, 23 videos are available. A small part of these is not produced by the campaign itself, but is nevertheless authorised or endorsed by the campaign through its presence on the official website.⁷ One of the videos shows a completely abstract explanation of the (RED) concept, while others visualise transformations from misery to recovery by documenting the local impact of the campaign. Another group of videos shows the involved celebrities and companies in their common quest. *Abstraction, transformation, celebrity identification and brand promotion* in other words seem to be key concepts guiding the videos of the (RED) campaign. The two last dimensions are by far the most dominant and consist of more traditional advertising material and reportages of celebrities visiting Africa (i.e. Christy Turlington in Swaziland and Elle Macpherson in Ghana) as well as famous ‘talking heads’ telling why they support the campaign (i.e. Bono, Gisele Bündchen, Natasha Bedingfield, Joss Stone).

Only two of the 23 videos are directly depicting suffering individuals. The first of them is an interview with Bono from NBC Night News presenting a rather short sequence with children in a hospital. The other is a campaign video called ‘The Lazarus Effect’ where before and after-pictures of three HIV patients (Silvia, Nigel and Elimas) are shown while a voiceover explains how the (RED) concept has been able to transform the lives of the three individuals. The shift from the first ‘state of misery’ to the second ‘state of recovery’ is communicated visually by means of a slowly diffusing transition between still pictures of the suffering Silvia, Nigel and Elimas to still pictures of the recovering Silvia, Nigel and Elimas. This is done without a clearly marked cut

⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfOls3FhoI4>;
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=agk0KzU1x60&NR=1>;
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGXhhzurkXQ>;
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rlk8563t25g&feature=related>;
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2WvCZEfpaQ&feature=related> (13.10 2008)

⁷ www.joinred.com/News/Videos.aspx (13.10 2008)

between ‘before’ and ‘after’ the treatment, thereby creating a feeling of fruitful growing or resurrection (cf. the Lazarus metaphor). The first still picture is furthermore black and white, while the depicted person gains colour in the second still picture enhancing the effect of revitalisation. Suffering is therefore not used to motivate affect based reactions, and the consumer is not supposed to help because he/she feels sorry for a person, but because he wants to ‘vitalise’ even more.

Overall the (RED) videos are setting aside negativity and suffering in favour of a visual focus on recovery, passion and enjoyment; the cause and its relations are aesthetised. Using one of the many catchphrases of the campaign, the videos – with their interest in beauty, luxury, resurrection and empowerment – seem to be all about LIFE INSPI(RED) or rather about the concurrent improvement of life on both a personal and a global level. Pity and ethical rules are thus seemingly replaced by an *ethics of vitality*. This tendency to block out or ‘revitalise’ suffering could be interpreted as based on the fear of a rising ‘compassion fatigue’ or ‘crisis of pity’ in contemporary culture, which – from a business perspective – implies that empathy or affect can no longer be used as an effective way of creating actions among consumers. Instead the (RED) campaign underlines how inequality can be erased at the same time as personal desires are being fulfilled.

Relationships offered by the (RED) brand

Referring to Aaker (1996) and based on the brand analyses presented above, we are able to extrapolate the benefits and value propositions the brand (RED) offers the (RED) consumer. These represent the main base for relationship construction (Aaker 1996, 95) and are categorised as 1) functional 2) emotional and 3) self-expressive benefits.

The functional benefits attributed to (RED) construct a relationship between the (PRODUCT) and the consumers. These benefits are offered to (RED) consumers by the various product brands constituting the (RED) brand portfolio (cf. (RED) as product). Functionally speaking, there is no difference between the forms of relationships developed between the (RED) consumer and (PRODUCT), and between, for instance, the non-red iPod and its user. These benefits are based on product attributes that provide functional utility to the (RED) consumer, hence, the relationship

is solely driven by brand functionality and basic consumer requirements, independent of the embrace of (RED).

The emotional benefits that (RED) offers the consumer convey a relationship between the distant Others (i.e. the cause) and the (RED) consumer. This relationship draws on the altruistic scenario of donation and the receivers' emotions, evoked by the idea of Africans suffering from HIV/AIDS, who legitimize the existence of the cause. It is an abstract, imaginary relationship constructed between the consumer of (RED) and a distant Other who makes almost no direct physical appearance in the campaign. Hence, the emotional benefits provided by (RED) offer an imaginative link to a distant world, evoking feelings of responsible, particularly ethical, behaviour. Consuming makes the consumer feel good.

The self-expressive benefits provide a way for the consumer to communicate his/her self-image (Aaker 1996, 99). Involving communication, this relationship implies visible symbols (cf. (RED) as symbol). Consuming and embracing his/herself within the aesthetics and visibilities of (RED), the consumer communicates and stages his/herself as "the good Samaritan" while at the same time drawing on the self-expressive benefits offered by the specific (PRODUCT) e.g. the image of iPod. The process of staging and communicating one's self-image assumes a recipient to decode the symbols within a certain frame of reference, recognizing the specific '(RED)ness' (cf. Østergaard and Jantzen, 2000). Hence, the self-expressive model creates and mediates relationships between consumers (within certain tribal communities) providing links to performance on the social scene as "the good looking Samaritan". The self-expressive relationship model replaces the emotional relation to the distant Others with image performance by consumers while at the same time the distant Other is what provides the link between the consumers.

Discussion and Conclusion

(RED) as an altruistic and business hybrid

The ethical dilemma articulated by (RED) brings forward a delicate balance between business (represented by a utilitarian logic) and altruism (represented by a Kantian duty ethics). As described by Kant, the consequences of an action are of no importance, while the purity of the motives driving the action is essential (Kant 1999). This way of

criticising the idea of charity channelled through consumption is significant in much of the voiced (RED) critique including the anti-(RED) campaign *Buy (less) crap*. *Buy (less) crap* defines the traditional donation as the proper or more ethically correct way of managing social and global responsibility. The project's homepage has the following text as its headline:

“Shopping is no solution. Buy (Less). Give more. Join us in rejecting the ti(red) notion that shopping is a reasonable response to human suffering. We invite you to donate directly to the (RED) campaign's beneficiary *The Global Fund* and to these other charitable causes...without consuming”⁸

Within this deontological perspective the motives for acting ethically ought to be the will to do good without selfish interests. *Buy (less) crap* thereby states that human beings have a moral duty to help prevent suffering without regard for personal benefits.

The critical voices are nevertheless not focused solely on moral duties. (RED) has also been criticised within a utilitarian logic, because the enormous sums of money put into advertising have not paid off in terms of a satisfying number of donations. This, however, merely underlines the key notion that in the discussion of contemporary charity projects based on consumption (e.g. cause related marketing), the discourses of 1) an ethics of universalistic duty and 2) an utilitarian ethics of welfare maximization play prominent parts. In the discussion forum www.digg.com, *Buy (less) crap* is criticised through classical utilitarian arguments focusing on the overall positive consequences of the (RED) project. One of the users writes:

“Private sector companies are going to do what is good for their bottom line, period, that's the way they work unfortunately. If we can find a way to make it profitable for them to provide funding for charitable causes the better in my book. Besides as someone else mentioned above, this is a more sustainable model for private investment into causes. What's wrong with that?”⁹

⁸ <http://www.buylesscrap.com>

⁹ http://digg.com/politics/Buy_Less_Crap_Give_More

Buy (less) crap seems to promote and prefer the traditional transactional charity logic with a non-receiving subject/sender position. In contrast, seen from the utilitarian perspective of the user, it is acceptable to gain personally advantages, as long as the general level of welfare is being upheld.

However, as indicated in the analysis, we detect a third kind of relationship as a result of (RED)'s deconstructive strategy: the community-utopia of (RED) is an utopia of consumers-to-be between "we as first world consumers" and "they [who] stay alive, and continue to take care of their family and contribute socially and economically in their communities" (the (RED) Manifesto).

The (RED) communicative strategy transcends the dilemma between a deontological and a utilitarian model for relating ethically: it is more than utilitarian because it stages the desire to be virtuous as a significant part of the self-realisation of the consumer. And it is more than deontological because the here and now social impact of the consumers' action is strongly visualized in constant representations of digits on the website.

The strategy presents itself as clearly *cool* (and not morally hot) and rationally calculated. As such, it creates or represents a new path compared to the strategic pathos in the media images used for several years in donation campaigns and in visual representations of the distant Others in general. The distant Other in (RED) is more in power as a faceless other, a pure digit. The first world consumer – eventually immune to the affective strain in the visual imagery – is invited into this business model without renunciation for the individual user. (RED) responds to the challenges of the assigning, taking and handling of social responsibility within the experience economy and globalisation by offering a brand concept that establishes a cool and abstract kind of relation to the Others. The (RED) brand establishes relations with a (reflective) distance. These relations are not embodied and intimate engaging the interior of the consumer, on the contrary, the value invested in the imaginary relationship is purely economical. The distant Others are not victimised, but rather provided with future agency as they are appealed to as consumers-to-be; as future consumers of the world. The imaginary 'us' in the campaign is the all-embraced community of consumers. (RED) encompasses self-expressive benefits for the consumers, creating relationships between consumers within

certain consumption communities and reserving room for the Others as future tribal members.

The strategy used in the campaign is a strategy of contamination fulfilling the dream of all brands to proliferate all over the world. This utilitarian business model joins the 'pol-ethical' level of the campaign. The risk management and market positioning of (RED) as an organisation is, on one hand, grounded in the idea of CSR embracing the behaviours, images and reputations of Bono and Bobby Shriver towards their stakeholders respectively. On the other, *the better way* and the underlying dream of establishing more even relations is expressed through an aesthetic design connoting alternative political systems.

By using such a strategy, (RED) exposes itself to very obvious criticisms: for stressing 'the business of business is business' part of the business-altruistic model, for using a politically revolutionary content as an aesthetic expression, for further encouraging the first world consumers in their will to consume (in effect giving them licence-to-consume), for having no other utopian dream than that of creating a future consumers' paradise. The very emblematic character of this campaign seems to be that it oscillates between a position of the consumer's paradise, constructing Western and African consumers as one and the same (an inclusive democratic egalitarian ideal) and a reductionist position, mapping the Other as sameness without the possibility of any difference or other decoding possibilities.

The first step of our experimental multidisciplinary approach to understanding social responsibility within the globalised experience economy has been concluded. Potential future research projects might include investigating how tribal consumers at a micro social level respond to and negotiate (RED)'s altruistic and business hybrid and how different constructed relationships influence the identity production and reproduction of the involved organisations and individuals.

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The experiential aspects of consumption: Consumer fantasies, feelings, and fun

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THE (RED)TM MANIFESTO

ALL THINGS BEING EQUAL, THEY ARE NOT.

AS FIRST WORLD CONSUMERS, WE HAVE TREMENDOUS POWER. WHAT WE COLLECTIVELY CHOOSE TO BUY, OR NOT TO BUY, CAN CHANGE THE COURSE OF LIFE AND HISTORY ON THIS PLANET.

(RED) IS THAT SIMPLE AN IDEA, AND THAT POWERFUL. NOW, YOU HAVE A CHOICE. THERE ARE (RED) CREDIT CARDS, (RED) PHONES, (RED) SHOES, (RED) FASHION BRANDS. AND NO, THIS DOES NOT MEAN THEY ARE ALL RED IN COLOR, ALTHOUGH SOME ARE.

IF YOU BUY A (RED) PRODUCT OR SIGN UP FOR A (RED) SERVICE, AT NO COST TO YOU, A (RED) COMPANY WILL GIVE SOME OF ITS PROFITS TO BUY AND DISTRIBUTE ANTI-RETROVIRAL MEDICINE TO OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS DYING OF AIDS IN AFRICA.

WE BELIEVE THAT WHEN CONSUMERS ARE OFFERED THIS CHOICE, AND THE PRODUCTS MEET THEIR NEEDS, THEY WILL CHOOSE (RED). AND WHEN THEY CHOOSE (RED) OVER NON-(RED), THEN MORE BRANDS WILL CHOOSE TO BECOME (RED) BECAUSE IT WILL MAKE GOOD BUSINESS SENSE TO DO SO. AND MORE LIVES WILL BE SAVED.

(RED) IS NOT A CHARITY. IT IS SIMPLY A BUSINESS MODEL. YOU BUY (RED) STUFF, WE GET THE MONEY, BUY THE PILLS AND DISTRIBUTE THEM. THEY TAKE THE PILLS, STAY ALIVE, AND CONTINUE TO TAKE CARE OF THEIR FAMILIES AND CONTRIBUTE SOCIALLY AND ECONOMICALLY IN THEIR COMMUNITIES.

IF THEY DON'T GET THE PILLS, THEY DIE. WE DON'T WANT THEM TO DIE. WE WANT TO GIVE THEM THE PILLS. AND WE CAN. AND YOU CAN. AND IT'S EASY.

ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS UPGRADE YOUR CHOICE.

Figure1. *The (RED) campaign website*¹⁰

¹⁰ <http://www.joinred.com/> (accessed May, 3rd 2008)