# **Refigu(red): Talking Africa and Aids in** "Causumer" Culture<sup>i</sup>

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Margaret recently graduated magna cum laude from Columbia University in New York City where she studied Cultural Anthropology. In her senior year she completed an honors thesis titled "Refigu(red): Talking Africa and Aids in 'Causumer' Culture," from which this article is derived. This is her first publication.

### Abstract

In this article I will consider "causumer" culture from an anthropological perspective in order to examine some of the discourses involved in the brand's engagement with the topic of treatment of HIV/AIDS patients in Africa. At the center of this discussion lies a question of authority: From where does the (RED) brand derive authority in representing ideas of transparency, political activism, and community when talking about AIDS in Africa? By facilitating a particular mode of political activism through consumer choice, (RED) emphasizes the empowerment of shoppers to make a statement with their purchases. Consumer identification with (RED), in turn, forms a brand community that lends feelings of collective action. Ultimately, however, the brand's mediation of the surrounding discourses intervenes in the consumers' agency and places a reductive lens on the topic of AIDS in Africa. Through language of transparency, political activism, and community, (RED) attempts to figure the brand in the image of a social movement and re-embed commodities in a social context. This social context, however, is formed by images of connectedness and activism, representations of homogenized groups of "first world consumers" and "African AIDS patients," and a particular notion of exchangeability of people and things.

## Introduction

Bono and Bobby Shriver launched (Product)Red in 2006 with the goal of tapping large corporate brands and the millions of shoppers who buy their products to raise funds for the treatment of HIV/AIDS in Africa. I am chiefly concerned with the language and images employed by the (RED) brand as well as the responses, both in support and not, it evokes in consumers. As such, this paper turns an eye toward the brand itself and the particular consumerism it enables – what I term "causumerism," as (RED) is representing the humanitarian cause of treating AIDS patients in Africa and consumers are making purchases as a means of supporting that cause. I distinguish this from the broader scope of consumerism, as this paper does not discuss the wide and varied range of consumer actions and impetuses. Additionally, it is important to note that this paper does not provide any substantial examination of the "receiving" side of the (RED) initiative or attempt to analyze the practical effects of the campaign in Africa. Rather, the discussion that follows will examine the causumer culture surrounding (RED) and some of the different discourses invoked in this engagement with the topic of AIDS and Africa.

My research on (RED) is drawn from media and marketing materials inclusive of information accessed by visiting locations where (RED) products are sold in order to observe the brand in action. Specifically, I tracked the news of the brand, collected their advertisements, and sought out the products in stores. While sales people at the stores were generally eager to talk with me about (RED) products, I found few shoppers willing to engage in discussion. Past my initial discouragement, I realized that this lack of engagement is perhaps indicative of (RED)'s form of "movement." While consumers may be buying the same products and share the same concern for AIDS treatment in Africa, they are not connecting with one another face-to-face or engaging in much conversation about their causumerism. Where these consumers are interacting, however, is online through the joinred.com website and in groups on networking sites like MySpace and Facebook. Consequently, I joined these groups to see what consumers are saying about (RED), in addition to what (RED) is saying about itself. Viewed with a critical lens, these materials acted as my entry into the workings of the (RED) brand and its reception by consumers.

The discourses around (RED) involve political activism, community, and transparency, all evoked in the realm of the corporate brand. While many shoppers buy into this rhetoric and feel justified in their (RED) purchases, the brand is also met with skepticism and distrust. This uneasiness, I believe, comes from a question of legitimacy. Does the (RED) brand have the authority to represent these ideas of activism, community, and transparency in talking about AIDS patients in Africa? Put another way, how is (RED)'s engagement with these discourses legitimated, and in what ways does this legitimacy fail? Referencing Max Weber's definition of authority as forms of domination that are considered legitimate by followers or subordinates, we can consider the brand's claims in representing both the cause of treatment for AIDS patients in Africa and the social awareness of consumers. In framing the brand in the image of a social movement, (RED) creates a narrative of social relations which becomes real to some but remains divorced from reality to others.

To begin with, (RED) derives its authority from consumer participation. That is, people buy into the brand by choice, and in that choice they affirm the goals of the consumer-based initiative. Furthermore, one could argue that the ends justify the means, as the cause of treating AIDS patients in Africa is the underlying claim of authenticity for its humanitarian motivation. At the international level, the brand is largely met with praise, and ushered into the aid spotlight alongside major philanthropic and government efforts. On the other hand, the corporation holds a position of power, largely in the form of wealth, which allows it to make these claims regardless of legitimacy. In a sense, the brand is determining the "choice" of the consumer within the realm of corporate hegemony. The "voice" of the consumer is limited by what items and ideas the brand puts on the market, such that the agency of choice can only operate in a narrow sense. Lastly, there is a great distance and disconnect between (RED) products and HIV/AIDS patients in Africa. The absence of African agency, and the substituted images and signs, calls into question the representation of the cause and the specific "awareness" the initiative is raising. In examining the authority of (RED), I have chosen to focus on the relationship between the brand and its "followers or subordinates" rather then probe the legitimacy gained on the global and institutional levels.

This article is concerned with the causumer culture that has arisen from particular geopolitical relations; as such it does not aim to unlock global relations of power behind (RED), but to view them through a particular causumer lens.

Using language and images of political activism, transparency, and community, the brand seeks legitimacy through associating (RED) products with social relations. Transparency is invoked as a way of making visible the social context of the (RED) commodities. It allows for notions of exchangeability and investments of value that lie outside of standard use-value, but the equivalences posed by (RED) raise concerns of representation. Framing consumerism as an expression of political activism locates (RED) purchases as a means of social change. This causumerism is portrayed as a voicing of radicalism and dissent, yet to a degree the "activism" is limited to the shopping mall. The marketing of (RED) as a social movement raises questions of community and the ability of the "brand community" to constitute collective action. In defining the brand community, we are faced with distinctions of "self" and "other" that draw a strict line between empowered "first world consumers" and African AIDS patients.

## Transparency and Visibility

Consumers are promised a window into corporate spending when they are told money from their purchases is directed to the Global Fund, but the notions of transparency and visibility evoked by (RED) are far more complex and illusive. In marketing and in the products themselves, emphasis is placed on the "impact" of the consumer's purchase, making explicit connections between the (RED) commodities, the lives of African AIDS patients, and the lives of consumers. (RED) attempts to form a visible and transparent social context for its products, allowing for understandings of exchangeability and value that differ from usual conceptions of use-value. This semblance of a social context, however, relies on figurative representations of real human relations and fails to incorporate the production of the commodities.

Critics of (RED) accuse the brand of a lack of transparency with regards to corporate spending and access to contribution figures. What (RED) does offer instead of corporate financial transparency is the opportunity for consumers to calculate their impact, create impact cards, and share the information about their (RED) purchases with friends. The "Impact Calculator" allows customers to select their purchased product, then applies a formula to convert the purchase to money "generated" to nevirapine treatments. The result is a reductive but comprehendible chain connecting the consumer's purchase to the doses of treatments. It allows consumers to connect their purchase to the lives of others, as one Facebook group member did when he wrote, "I have saved a 177 lives." The consumer is thus encouraged to see through and beyond his actual purchase to the "impact" it represents. Phrased in these terms, the brand becomes the enabler of consumer impact; it acts as a hub for the relations between consumers and the cause.

Transparency is brought into play in order to illuminate the social connections surrounding the purchase. In emphasizing to consumers the promised impact of the commodity on the lives of African AIDS patients, (RED) calls attention to the "politics of value" which Arjun Appadurai posits in the sociability of commodity circulation. VIII He frames the "commodity situation" as follows:

I propose that the commodity situation in the social life of any "thing" be defined as the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature. Further, the commodity situation, defined this way, can be disaggregated into: (1) the commodity phase of the social life of any thing; (2) the commodity candidacy of any thing; and (3) the commodity context in which any thing may be placed.<sup>ix</sup>

When it comes to the trajectory of (RED) commodities, we can think about the "commodity context," in which the thing to be exchanged is equated to the lives of African AIDS patients, as well as to the market price paid by the consumer. (RED) marketing highlights this exchangeability in order to ground the commodity in a context of social relations.

The "2 Weeks" T-shirt sold by Gap works in tandem with Appadurai's notion of the "commodity situation," as it highlights a particular exchangeability. The red-colored T-shirt with "2 Weeks" printed on the front in white lettering represents the two weeks worth of antiretroviral medication provided by the donated portion of the shirt's sale.



Figure 1: Photo by author.x

The T-shirt bought and worn by an anonymous consumer in the U.S. comes to represent the two weeks worth of (hypothetical) anti-retroviral pills consumed by an (hypothetical) AIDS patient in Africa. The shirt will last longer then the two weeks of medication, yet it perpetually represents two weeks of life when those weeks have long since come and gone. The exchangeability of a T-shirt is normally posed in terms of money; this is true of the "2 Weeks" T-shirt, as it can be purchased for \$27.99. The (RED) T-shirt, however, takes another step to bring a third term into the trajectory of the commodity. This additional exchangeability indicates the two weeks of ARVS for an African AIDS patient.

This promise of the trajectory and social life of the commodity appears repeatedly in the presentation of (RED) products. At the bottom of printed Gap ads a line reads: "All Gap (Product)Red clothing is designed to help eliminate AIDS in Africa." The phrase "designed to help eliminate AIDS" would lead one to believe that there is something in the utility of the object that is related to AIDS treatment. One Motorola phone TV commercial features comedian Chris Rock haranguing consumers to buy a MotoRazr phone: "You can save a life by making a call. You! You! Stupid! You! You never did nothin' good in your life. Use (RED) nobody's dead." The hyperbolic lines of Rock's brief rant invent a cause-and-effect relationship between the (RED) cell phone and saving lives. Like the "Impact Calculator," such advertisements connect consumers to the cause by positing the (RED) commodity as a link comparable to a real social relation.

"Impact" becomes a quality of the commodities that sets the use-value, or promise of use value, as different from other comparable, non-(RED) items. Regardless of what function (or lack there of) the commodities perform in treating AIDS, *appearance* of use-value becomes the selling point for the commodities. As Haug argues, the "aesthetic promise of use-value" takes priority over the object and its actual use-value:

In all commodity production a double reality is produced: first the use-value; second, and more importantly, the appearance of use-value...which, in terms of a single sales-act, is liable to be no more than mere illusion...The aesthetics of the commodity in its widest meaning – the sensual appearance and the conception of its use-value – become detached from the object itself.<sup>xii</sup>

T-shirts printed with "2 Weeks" and claims to being "designed to help eliminate AIDS in Africa" are sold as signs of an "impact" that is actualized elsewhere. These commodities hold an "appearance of use-value" in so far as they stand in for the cause as a physical, wearable, and usable manifestation of a promised circulation of money to AIDS patients in Africa.

In this move of claiming the appearance of the cause, the (RED) commodities become a means of making visible the consumer's involvement in the represented social connections. One Facebook (RED) fan wrote: "I have the red shirt…and I have the red iPod. I get so many compliments on both and I love that the money I spent goes to a great cause…and that my wearing (or using the iPod) spreads the message since others have since gone and gotten their own red products." Another consumer expressed similar intentions to "spread the message": "We got our 14-month-old daughter a (RED) shirt rather than a Christmas dress this year.

I can't wait to explain it to everyone!" Like (RED), pink ribbon products, Livestrong bracelets, and many green brands allow consumers to display participation in their respective causes. The term "causumer" applies here, as the products represent a cause and it is the signification of the cause that the consumer seeks.

The emphasis on visibility and display raises questions of representation. As the (RED) brand operates along a divide between "first world consumers" and AIDS patients in Africa, the production of signs and images is the main mode of representation of the latter group to the former. The cover of the (RED) edition of The Independent, xiv is perhaps the most controversial instance of representation, featuring model Kate Moss with her skin painted black, and the title "Not A Fashion Statement." Skin is used as a means of invoking the experience of an African woman by performing a surface-level transformation of an iconic British supermodel. An extraordinary imagination is at work here, in suggesting that it is an outer surface, a skin that separates the figures. Lisa Ann Richey and Stefano Ponte argue that in addition to its dedication to the poor, (RED) is about "redeeming sex and stylizing gender relations." They write, "While racialisation of sexuality long pre-dates the contemporary initiatives, RED takes a new twist in which sexuality is being reclaimed by the West as healthy. Bono provides the healthy and sexy body to contrast with the 'African woman dying from sex' body."xv In this case, it is Kate Moss' painted body claiming sexuality, while standing in for the "African woman dying from sex' body." In a questionable move of signification, this image plays on the racialized and gendered image of AIDS using the hypersexualized body of the iconic supermodel, Although it is executed in less extreme ways, this push for visibility and external representation is evident throughout the scope of (RED) commodities.

While (RED) seems eager to make the social life of the commodity visible and create a context in which the terms of exchange are transparent, (RED) commodities remain entirely abstracted from their original social context, that is, their production. Marx's discussion of the commodity establishes abstract human labor as the basis of commodity exchange in which we find "the residue of the products of labor... merely congealed quantities of homogeneous human labor." The processes of production remain opaque and divorced from (RED) commodities, limiting the transparency and visibility of social relations. Some of the (RED) partners attempt to bring the production of the commodities into the picture. Converse sells a line of sneakers made from "African mud cloth," Gap offers "One vintage-style T-shirt... manufactured in Lesotho, a country in Africa, from 100% African cotton," and Hallmark has the Mali Mud Cloth Bag made from cloth "hand woven into strips from unbleached 100% Malian cotton, hand-tinted using clay from the Niger River and then laid out in the hot West African sun." These (RED) partners are again trying to offer consumers a sense of transparency, by marketing commodities produced in Africa as labor that is somehow less abstract.

Reductive language and images bypass labor and production, and turn the complex life of a (RED) product into a palatable story. One such telling is phrased, "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." "xviii"

Formed in the most basic terms, this statement connects the consumer's purchase of "(RED) stuff" to the AIDS patients in Africa – named here as "they" and figured elsewhere as a red silhouette of the African continent branded (RED) – via an elementary chain of events. In this promise of directness and simplicity, (RED) performs a sweeping homogenization that leaves no space for the heterogeneity of experience of different African nations, let alone individuals. The brand's tendency to gloss over relations of production and dismiss the agency of African AIDS patients, undermines such statements which imply that (RED) facilitates transparency of social relations .

Tracing the trajectory of (RED) products by defining their "impact," explaining corporate contributions, or giving a location of production narrates an account of the social life of the commodities. These accounts rely on an illusion of transparency, as they invite consumers to look into and beyond the commodities to a social context that ties together the African AIDS patients, the (RED) shoppers, and the corporate brand. In this scenario, the (RED) brand claims to be a means of making these relations visible, and the (RED) commodities become rhetorical signs of the consumer's attachment. This presentation of relations, however, works from a commodity that is necessarily divorced from its original context of production and subsequently figured to represent a newly forged social context.

#### **Political Activism**

(RED) markets an explicit call to action, boldly demanding consumers to direct their attentions to "change." By employing language of activism and revolution (RED) posits consumerism and its products as viable outlets for political engagement. This document, along with other marketing of (RED) products, uses language of empowerment, appeals to collective action, and alludes to radicalism to produce the brand in the image of a social movement.

While the brand maintains the standard call to action — 'buy our products'— (RED) has so much more to say about the consumer's actions it has set forth "The (RED) 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.

A manifesto, a form typically reserved for explicitly political declarations, is an intriguing starting point for a corporate brand – it tells the consumer that (RED) is political, it's social, and it's also an easily accessible brand of consumer goods. The (RED) Manifesto allows for a rather ironic allusion to Marx's *Communist Manifesto* or Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book*. The opening of the "Manifesto" immediately undermines the premise of sameness of the alluded-to communist precursors. "All things being equal. They are not." The recognition and abrupt dismissal of inequality is directly followed by, "As first world consumers, we have tremendous power." From here the consumers' "choice" is vested with the epic weight of changing "the course of life and history on this planet." Where Marx or Mao saw the need to overturn the capitalist system that produces said inequality and conceptions of the individual, the (RED) Manifesto has embraced it.

By putting their brand on the same level as other corporate labels, (RED) sets itself up as the better option of two otherwise equivalent products. The "needs" of the consumer can be met either with a product that involves a contribution to the Global Fund or one that doesn't. It is not a dramatic step outside of the shoppers' routine; rather, it is a practical choice rationalized within the continuity of their regular consumption practices. This choice, presented as (RED) versus non-(RED), also functions to narrow the consumers' scope of options to two. Hedging out other modes of action (including not shopping and direct donation) and the multiplicity of reasons for choosing brands, products, and causes makes for a straightforward, either-or decision.

The marketing of the brand takes on a surprisingly subversive, anti-establishment tone, given that (RED) partners represent some of the most iconic multi-national corporations. One print ad for the (Converse)RED sneakers co-opts the idea of "dissent" to comment on the desire for "healthy culture." In lettering that imitates the scrawled script of an artist, the advertisement supports the "voice" of the consumer, by emphasizing the choice in the design of the shoe and the creative power of the buyer. For instance, it states: "A healthy culture welcomes dissent. Listens for the sound of new voices. Supports original imaginations...We all want to eliminate AIDS in Africa. We believe creativity can help. Be an agent of change. Start by designing a converse (Product)Red shoe." To be an "agent of change" is to play an important role in the world, and Converse posits its "Make Mine Red" sneakers as one place to start. The use of mock-graffiti as the background to the text furthers this idea of alternative political space, and the appeals to "dissent" and "healthy culture" suggest that the product can be a means of personal expression.

Like the language of dissent used by Converse, an Emporio Armani advertisement features the slogan "See Red. Live Red." What exactly the consumer should "see red" over is left open, but one legible meaning would be the unjust suffering of HIV/AIDS patients in Africa. As an outlet for this anger, the purchase becomes a means of protest and an expression dissent. Furthermore, to say "Live Red" suggests that (RED) is a lifestyle rather then a brand of products, and comparable to abiding by a principle or adhering to an ideology. In this dissent, however, there is a certain irony of the privileged wishing for equality. The extravagance of an \$85 (Armani)Red T-shirt is a paradoxical sign of protest to the suffering of those who cannot afford to buy medicine.

The irony of the subversive tendency in the (RED) campaign has not gone unnoticed by some members of the public. Buy (Less) Crap is a poignant parody of the (RED) campaign. Their motto: "Shopping is not a solution. Buy (Less). Give More." Their website (www.buylesscrap.org) opens with imitation Gap ads featuring nude models and false (Red) slogans like "(RED)ICU(LESS)." The website then gives links to charities including the Global Fund where individuals can make direct donations. In their mission statement they present their attempt to raise "causumer attention," and remind the public that donating directly to a cause is more efficient then consumerism. Wendy Dembo, a New York based strategic marketing consultant, took the Gap (RED) T-shirts as an opportunity for her own social commentary. The red T-shirts screen-printed with "Uninsu(red)" were sold briefly at the Reed Space, a trendy Lower East Side boutique, drawing attention to the fact that in addition to AIDS in Africa, consumers ought to think of our own health care crisis here in the U.S. The practice of co-opting a brand or logo is part of a larger activist effort termed "culture jamming." In terms of social movements, it can be "seen as making a claim of democratic sovereignty relative to the social contract engaging in the 'life politics' of selfdetermination in the face of an evolving global capitalist system."xx Both the Uninsu(red) shirts and Buy (Less) Crap reel in the hype of (RED), ground it in the real world of inequality and human suffering, and encourage potential (RED) shoppers to seek out more direct modes of political and social activism.

In the United States, the politicization of consumption is no new phenomenon, as political economy and consumer movements have shown the connectedness of consumer and citizen. Lizabeth Cohen uses the term "Consumers' Republic" to describe the mass-consumption based ideal that allows Americans "to participate in political decision-making on an equal footing with their similarly prospering neighbors, and to exercise their cherished freedoms by making independent choices in markets and politics." Approaching this link between consumer and citizen from a different angle, it is also possible to see the notion of citizenship taking on elements of consumerism, or as Cohen puts it, the "Consumerization of the Republic." Market segmentation and marketing strategy are increasingly employed by election campaigns and government officials, as "[A]dvertising's most important social impact...lies in the diffusion of the advertising model of persuasive communication to other social processes, and especially in the rise of political marketing." With governments and voters operating on principles of "customer satisfaction," and with consumer movements staking out "consumer demands," (RED) is entering a space in which the roles of consumer and citizen are intertwined.

In terms of politicized consumerism, the (RED) brand is an example of "cause marketing" or "cause-related marketing," the marketing of for-profit business for a social cause. "XXIV" We could also consider other contemporary examples like fair trade, pink ribbon, and green or environmentally friendly products as sharing in a broader notion of the market as the key sphere for forwarding a cause. XXIV Most similarly to the (RED) model, pink ribbon products for the cause of breast cancer awareness are sold with the promise of a contribution to a breast cancer related charity or research foundation. In her essay "Welcome to Cancerland," Barbara Ehrenreich discusses her experience as a breast cancer patient and her encounter with the "breast cancer culture:"

Bears are only the tip, so to speak, of the cornucopia of pink-ribbon-themed breast-cancer products. You can dress in pink-beribboned sweatshirts, denim shirts, pajamas, lingerie, aprons, loungewear, shoelaces, and socks; accessorize with pink rhinestone brooches, angel pins, scarves, caps... brighten your home with breast-cancer candles, stained-glass pink-ribbon candleholders... "Awareness" beats secrecy and stigma, of course, but I can't help noticing that the existential space in which a friend has earnestly advised me to "confront [my] mortality" bears a striking resemblance to the mall. "xxvi"

In products that were supposed to make her feel prettier, stronger, more spiritual, or more feminine, Ehrenreich found irritating infantilization and the negation of anger and suffering. Like the pink-ribbon push for "awareness," the (RED) products purport to provide an outlet for consumers to express their concern for the cause of AIDS. While an African AIDS patient may never use a (RED) branded product as a breast cancer patient might wear a pink ribbon product; (RED) consumers seek visibility and outward expression for a fully distant cause. As Ehrenreich writes, the awareness on sale at the mall may prove a superficial answer to those seeking deeper engagement with a cause.

The (RED) brand, in its "Manifesto" and other marketing materials, explicitly emphasizes the notion of consumer choice as a form of political activism. For some consumers, (RED) represents empowerment to make purchases that reflect their political concern and support for a cause. Expressing her feelings of change, one MySpace (RED) member wrote, "Thank you for helping the masses to (RED)irect our priorities. If we keep doing what we've always done, we're going to keep getting what we've always gotten." She supports the idea that (RED) is involving "the masses" in something new and transformative. Others are less satisfied with the form of "activism" that (RED) offers. On Facebook, a supporter looking for more involved action wrote, "Man I love (red). I just wish I could really get my hands dirty and help out other than buying a shirt. Of course it helps but does anyone know of anything else we can do? Passing out flyers, organizing speakers, contacting senators, etc." Members have also posted links to other cause-related websites. Thus, the potential for (RED) to inspire broader political activism does not disappear entirely, but to a large degree causumer action is limited in its confinement to the shopping mall.

# **Community**

Beyond encouraging the "political activism" of individual consumers, the (RED) brand is marketed in the image of a social movement. It draws on language of collective action, membership, and community, to foster identification with fellow consumers who are portrayed as united for a cause. The consumers, in turn, are actively engaged in creating this community, associating themselves with the brand and with other (RED) supporters. In defining this community, the collectivity of "we the first world consumers" is distinguished from and juxtaposed to the African AIDS patients who are characterized in the cause. This type of demarcation between "us" and "them" acts as a boundary to the (RED) brand community, and it is a boundary that falls on lines burdened with historical and political significances.

If we consider a social movement as a collective attempt to further common interests outside of established institution, xxix it is possible to find elements of a social movement in the (RED) brand. For one thing, (RED) is, in theory, furthering the humanitarian interest of providing HIV/AIDS medication to those patients in selected African countries who otherwise cannot afford it. The action of the (RED) consumers lies within the "institution" of corporate capitalism, but the corporation is acting in a field typically left to government or philanthropic agencies, demonstrating a sort of alternative mode of change. Furthermore, the "collective" could be viewed in this case as the "brand community" of product (RED) consumers. This collectivity is very much emphasized as the driving force of (RED), as the business model of the brand is dependent on the support of shoppers.

The brand community requires further consideration, as (RED) fosters a feeling of collectivity with explicit reference to the political and social empowerment of the group. Who exactly makes up the membership of this community? It is the "we" of "we the first world consumers." More specifically, it is those consumers who are drawn to the ideas of "change" and "meaning" that are promised by the (RED) products. This community is simultaneously created by the framing of the brand, as well as the desires of the population to whom the brand has tailored its marketing. Put another way, this is not a unidirectional relation between the brand and consumer desires. The brand community is "not an occult or naïve commercialism, but one that exists in full view, with communal self-awareness and self-reflexivity...attempts to build community through consumption practices are more than mere compensatory acts." To pin the brand community as fully manipulated and forged by marketing strategy does not recognize the awareness on behalf of the consumers. They too are actors in the formation of the collective consciousness, even though it centers on the commercial brand and is encouraged and guided by marketing.

The idea of inclusion and membership is present, both overtly and discreetly, throughout images and language of (RED) marketing. On the brand website, www.joinred.com (emphasis added), each visitor to the site is invited to register and become a member. The brand logo itself is explained as "the embrace.' Each company that becomes (RED) places its logo in this embrace and is then elevated to the power of red."\*xxxiii

(RED) has also tapped into the popular online networking sites Facebook and MySpace, establishing groups for consumers and "fans" of the brand. Regular updates with (RED) product information and brand news are posted to these sites where the 591,909 MySpace friends and 42,805 Facebook fans can access it.

Through online posting, consumers are able to communicate with one another, share their support of (RED), and even in a few select cases, discuss critical perspectives of the brand. Often criticisms posted on the site are met with defensive and accusatory responses. For example one such Facebook response:

If you don't like (RED) that's just fine, don't buy the products then! And if you think you can do SO much better on your own why don't you put your money where your mouth is donate some since you're so high and mighty. You have no right to be on here saying negative things, do that somewhere else. \*xxxiii\*

The discussion on these sites remains rather limited to praise and positive feedback. Members are most eager to share their (RED) purchases, or add personal photos of them wearing (RED) clothing or using (RED) products to the large and regularly updated archive of such pictures. As (RED) relies on a 'power in numbers' ideology (i.e. the more people who buy the products the more successful the brand will be), networking sites offer opportunities for the brand community to grow in strength and numbers.

Interestingly, the brand community does not stretch to include "our brothers and sisters dying of AIDS in Africa." The semblance of a "movement" and the empowerment of (RED) are located in the world of the consumers, and the "first world consumers" at that. Exclusivity and separation between the consumer, who is changing the world, and the African AIDS patient, who is assumed helpless, regulate the membership of the brand community. The delineation of this boundary extends out of development discourse, and echoes with rhetoric of Western modernity saving Africa. The Armani website demonstrates this when they tell shoppers the following:

At a time when people around the world are skeptical about what we in the west have to offer, these drugs are great advertisements for our ingenuity, innovation, our technology. Getting them to those who can't afford them is the best advertisement for our values. Buy (Product) Red. Help fight AIDS in Africa. xxxv

Trumpeting the technology, innovation, and ingenuity of "we in the west," the Armani website highlights the "values" and knowledge represented by ARV drugs. As Arturo Escobar discusses in *Encountering Development*, faith in Western science and technology, "markers of civilization par excellence since the nineteenth century," plays a key role in development discourse as the means of "press" and future material prosperity for the underdeveloped world. Yet the establishment of such programs and institutions plays out as "forms of power and control, more subtle and refined... poor people's ability to define and take care of their own lives was eroded in a deeper manner then perhaps ever before." \*\*xxxxvii\*\*

While the Armani website refers to the skepticism over what the west has to offer, it fails to recognize the relations of power implicit in the offer of drugs, technology, and values. Development discourse, evoked in this way, perpetuates the position of power held by the so-called innovative, technological west, and locates the (RED) brand and its consumers in that discourse.

The task of marketing a consumable entity makes it necessary to draw a strict line between the two monolithic groups of "we the first world consumers" and "our brothers and sisters dying of AIDS in Africa." This distinction emphasizes the distance, geographical and social, between self and other. To celebrate the first major benchmark, the (RED) website displayed a short animated segment featuring the following text: "Over \$50 million because you chose red/ over 1,000,000 lives touched 1000s of miles away/ 2 words/ Thank You..."xxxviii Directly addressing the consumer, the short points "1000s of miles away" to the "over 1,000,000 lives," represented in the animation by generic person icons. The informality of the personal address contrasts with the remoteness of the African AIDS patients who are generalized into a single mass signified by an uninformative number. Just as this "us" and "them" distinction is made by the brand, it is also expressed by consumers who are engaged in imagining the people at the "receiving" end of their (RED) purchase. Calling the brand a "movement" one (RED) supporter on Facebook wrote, "(RED) is the movement that will change the lives of many unfortunate people. [I am] more than excited to know that there are soooooooooooooooooooo many supporters like myself."xxxiix Her excitement over and identification with the number of fellow supporters is isolated from the subject of change, "the lives of many unfortunate people."

While in theory the brand community is non-geographically bound, the (RED) products are not sold in Africa, although other merchandise made by the same companies is. This exclusion of Africans from the community was the topic of an online Facebook group exchange:

Initial posting: What is insane is that I had to get my phone from the UK even though it would have made sense to also [sell] the (RED) products in Africa like in South Africa, where I live, and I bet you would make quite a bit from us, because the product are quite stylish. Plus we would also contribute.

Response: WOW, that's a good point, I never thought about Product Red being sold anywhere else.

I guess I just have a very basic view of Africa. We (in the US) never hear about wealthy or even average people living in Africa. We see in national geographic pictures of kids with guns, people killing elephants, and poverty and especially after watching the movie Blood Diamond, it's hard to think out of that mindset. Now really thinking about it, of course a whole continent can't be summed up in a movie or a couple photos.<sup>xl</sup>

The South African who purchased a (RED) phone defied the "basic view of Africa," and crossed the boundary fixed between "we the first world consumers" and "our brothers and sisters dying of AIDS in Africa." His final sentence, "Plus we would also contribute," raises the concern that consumers in African nations are excluded from this community and "movement" that are aimed at change in their own countries. Other group members problematize the first world consumer vs. African AIDS patient distinction by drawing attention to the cause of HIV/AIDS patients in the United States. Similarly, Dembo's "Uninsu(red)" T-shirts point to the healthcare crisis in the U.S., asking consumers to remember that they don't have to look all the way to Africa to find people going without proper healthcare.

The formation of the brand community of (RED) relies on a set boundary that does not arise organically, but rather is shaped in marketing and produced by consumers' definition of self against a dialectical other. The process of branding is dependent upon this focused attention to distinctiveness:

[T]o elevate the commodity to the status of brand-name. All available aesthetic devices are employed to further this end. The decisive factor, however, is the concentration into one named character of all the aesthetic, visual and verbal communications contained in the styling of the commodity. xli

This "concentration" of all communications into one character reduces heterogeneity into relative uniformity. Monolithic images and descriptions ignore the diversity of experience, but give rise to the sort of brand identification and community that we see with (RED). Africa and Africans, in their repeated use and representation as silhouetted icons, become dissociated from their referents to stand as the dialectical other to the community of "we the first world consumers." The collectivity of (RED) relies on this demarcation of "us" and "them;" the premise of the brand as a social movement is therefore limited by its perpetuation of such relations of power.

#### Conclusion

While there are numerous reasons to be critical of the (RED) brand and causumerism, it would be wrong to discredit the initiative entirely or dismiss it as illegitimate. As Daniel Miller writes:

Objects of mass consumption today are treated as so tainted, superficial and trite that they could not possibly be worth investigating. There may also be the tacit and covert implication that those people who have to live in and through such an object world are equally superficial and deluded, and are unable to comprehend their position...The argument is that people cannot construct socialism out of kitsch... xlii

Treating (RED) and its consumers in this way ignores the complexity of their engagement with the aforesaid discourses. While causumer experience must be taken seriously, the (RED) brand's mediation of the surrounding discourses calls into question the legitimacy of this form of engagement with the cause. The empowerment promised by (RED) is limited to the shopping mall of the "first world consumers," excluding African voices from the "cause" and making problematic assumptions of authority and representation. (RED), like other cause-based initiatives, is claiming to raise "awareness," yet the topic of AIDS and Africa is rendered in monolithic images and reductive descriptions. Thus the authority of (RED) is called into question, as the social context surrounding the products is formed by images of connectedness and a particular notion of exchangeability of people and things, not by real social relations.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>i</sup> This essay is a revised portion of my honors thesis, which was supervised by Dr. Elaine Combs Schilling, Dr. Paige West, and Caroline McLaughlin at Columbia University. I would like to extend my gratitude to my thesis advisors, from whose intellectual support and comments I have greatly benefited.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>ii</sup> This reluctance to talk also depends on factors outside of the scope of analysis of this paper. For example, factors such as suspicion in talking to strangers, rushed shopping habits, and feelings of privacy in purchasing decisions might also be considered here.

iii In my completed research I also address discourses of business, morality, and personal affect, but have omitted these from this article in order to focus more on the "social movement" aspects of (RED).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>iv</sup> Max Weber. 1957. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Trans. A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons. New York: The Free Press, p. 326.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>v</sup> Authority, in the case of (RED), does not come exclusively from one direction. While it is legitimated from bottom up via consumer participation, acceptance and recognition of the brand by centers of power contribute to a more top down form of authority.

vi See Nixon, Ron. 2008. "Bottom Line for (Red): How Much Trickles Down to Charitable Mission?" *New York Times*, 06 February 2008 and Frazier, Mya. 2007. "Costly Red Campaign Reaps Meager \$18 Million." *Advertising Age*, 05 March 2007.

vii 23 February 2008.

viii Appadurai, Arjun. 1986. "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value." *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. ed. Arjun Appadurai. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 6.

- <sup>x</sup> Window display photographed 05 November, 2007 at Gap store located at Broadway and Astor Place, New York City. The text in center panel reads, "Can the shirt off your back change the world?" and at the bottom, "Yes it can. Introducing the "2-Weeks" T-shirt."
- xi See Gap "Change" print ads. "Designed to help eliminate AIDS in Africa" is also used on the (RED) website (www.joinred.com) as the headline on the 'products' page, with images of and links to each of the (RED) partners' products.
- xii Haug, Wolfgang Fritz. 1986. *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society*. Trans. Robert Bock. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 16.
- xiii 01 January 2008
- xiv The Independent, September 2006.
- xv Richey, Lisa Ann and Stefano Ponte. 2008. "Better (Red) Than Dead? Celebrities, Consumption and International Aid." *Third World Quarterly* 29.4, pp. 711-29. 720.
- xvi Marx, Karl. 1977. "The Commodity." Capital Volume 1. New York: Vintage, p. 128.
- xvii http://www.joinred.com/products/ Note: none of the items are produced in countries that receive money from (RED) contributions to the Global Fund.
- xviii "The (RED) Manifesto"
- xix The Converse(RED) advertisement was featured in *Vanity Fair July*, 2007.
- xx Carducci, Vince. 2006. "Culture Jamming: A Sociological Perspective." *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 6, p. 118.
- xxi Cohen, Lizabeth. 2003. A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p. 403.
- xxii Cohen, Lizabeth. 2003, p. 397.
- xxiii Leiss, William, Stephen Kline, and Sut Jhally. 1997. Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products and Images of Well-Being. London: Routledge, p. 389.
- xxiv The 1983 American Express campaign for the Statue of Liberty Restoration was the first instance of cause marketing.

ix Appadurai, p.13

xxv Fair Trade and green marketing are not entirely comparable to (RED), as their promises are directly related to the production, trade, and consumption of the products. Fair Trade involves actual changes in trade and labor relations; green products reduce environmental impact either in changes in production or in the effects of the product as it is consumed.

xxvi Ehrenreich, Barbara. 2002. "Welcome to Cancerland." *The Best American Essays* 2002, ed. Stephen Jay Gould. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., p. 72.

xxvii 21 January 2008.

xxviii 26 November 2007.

xxix Anthony Giddens' definition

xxx Muniz, Albert M. Jr. and Thomas C. O'Guinn. 2001. "Brand Community." *Journal of Consumer Research* 27. 4. The term was first coined in this article; it is now used widely in marketing/advertising research to refer to the non-geographically bound community of brand admirers and consumers.

xxxi Muniz, Albert M. Jr. and Thomas C. O'Guinn. 2001, p. 415.

xxxii http://www.joinred.com/red/

xxxiii 05 December 2007.

xxxiv Line from the "(RED) Manifesto": "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 antiretroviral medicine to our brothers and sisters dying of AIDS in Africa."

xxxv www.emporioarmaniproductred.com/

xxxvi Escobar, Arturo. 1995. *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 36.

xxxvii Escobar, Arturo. 1995, p. 39.

xxxviii www.ioinred.com

xxxix 26 November 2007.

xl 30 November 2007.

xli Haug, Wolfgang Fritz. 1986. *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society*. Trans. Robert Bock. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 25.

xlii Miller, Daniel Miller. 1987. *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 166.