

Product (RED)

How Celebrities Push the Boundaries of 'Causumerism

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Product (RED): How celebrities push the boundaries of ‘causumerism’

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Abstract

Product RED is a co-branding initiative launched in 2006 by the aid celebrity Bono to raise money from product sales to support The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. In this article, we argue that RED is shifting the boundaries of ‘causumerism’ (shopping for a better world) by enrolling consumers in ways that do not rely on accurate knowledge of the products or specific understanding of the cause that The Global Fund engages, but instead rely on a system of more general, affective affinity between the ‘aid celebrities’ who are behind RED (such as Bono) and the consumers who buy iconic brand products to help ‘distant others’. While in many other forms of causumerism, labels or certification systems ‘prove’ that a product is just, in RED, aid celebrities provide the proof. From the consumer point of view both labels and celebrities provide a similar simplification of complex social, economic, and environmental processes. At the same time, we argue that there are important distinctions as well – labels and certifications are ultimately about improving the conditions of production, while RED is about accepting existing production and trade systems and donating a proportion of sales income to help distant others in Africa. The iconic brands sitting under the RED umbrella also play an important role as they offer a consistent and known venue for channeling consumer affect. In this article, we argue that celebrity validation, backed up by iconic brands, facilitates at least three shifts in the realm of causumerism: from ‘conscious consumption’ (mainly based on product-related information) to ‘compassionate consumption’ (mainly based on the management of consumer affect); from attention to the product and its production process toward the medical treatment of the ‘people with the problem’ (AIDS patients in Africa); and from addressing the causes of problems to solving their manifestations.

Introduction

The Product (RED)TM initiative was launched by Bono the Irish rock star at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2006. Product RED is ‘a brand created to raise awareness and money for The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria by teaming up with iconic brands to produce RED-branded products’ (see www.joinred.com). With the engagement of iconic brands, such as American Express, Apple, Emporio Armani, Gap, and Starbucks, consumers can help HIV/AIDS patients in Africa. From an Emporio Armani RED watch to a RED iPodTM and from (Starbucks)^{RED} whole bean coffee to a Belvedere special edition RED vodka, a percentage of the profits from the sale of all RED co-branded products is contributed by the ‘iconic’ partners directly to The Global Fund. The Global Fund is an international mechanism to channel aid financing to developing countries, and it controls the second largest pool of donor funds in the world (after the UN itself). Companies behind the partner brands pay a licensing fee to RED and commit to a multi-year partnership. As of December 2010, RED had donated over \$160 million to the Global Fund. RED grants are made through the Fund’s standard disbursement processes and have been dedicated to the Fund’s best-performing programs for AIDS in Africa – so far, funds have been disbursed to Ghana, Lesotho, Rwanda, South Africa, Swaziland and Zambia. In this article, we argue that aid celebrities, backed up by iconic brands, are shifting the boundaries of ‘causerism,’ or ‘shopping for a better world’ by enrolling consumers through the management of affect. In this modality, consumers engage in ways that do not rely on accurate knowledge of the products or specific understanding of the cause supported by The Global Fund, but instead rely on a system of more general, affective affinity between the aid celebrities who are behind RED (such as Bono) and the consumers who buy RED co-branded products to help ‘distant others’. While in many other forms of causerism, validation of the

cause is embedded in systems of certification and labeling, RED functions through celebrity validation backed up by iconic brands. From the consumer point of view, both labels and celebrities provide a similar simplification of complex social, economic, and environmental processes. At the same time, we argue that there are important distinctions as well – labels and certifications are ultimately about improving the conditions of production, while RED is about accepting existing production and trade systems and donating a proportion of sales income to help distant others in Africa.

Many examples of linking product sales with donations to a cause have been seen over the past two decades – but usually these campaigns have been time-bound and had a clear closure. Celebrity involvement in ‘good causes’ and political activism is not new either. What RED does is to combine the two in a unique way and through a modality of celebrity mediation where affective management can be stretched over time without a planned termination—providing ‘sustainability’ for ongoing funding to support the cause. As a result, a unique combination of celebrity mediation, iconic brands and an umbrella RED brand is helping move causumerism further away from ‘conscious consumption’ (mainly based on product-related information) and more towards ‘compassionate consumption’ (mainly based on the management of consumer affect).

The organization of this article is as follows: in the next section, we briefly introduce Product RED and the companies under its co-branding umbrella. Then, section three outlines the theoretical framework on consumption and the historical changes in consumer behaviour that are useful for analyzing causumerist forms of consumption, and our case study of RED. Section four defines our use of the term causumerism and explores how RED engages causumers in its cause. Then, section five compares RED as a form of causumerism with other initiatives that are also

engaging ethical consumers – labels and sustainability certifications. In section six, we trace the increasing importance of celebrities as affect managers in mediating causes between consumers and deserving distant others. Finally, we conclude with a brief discussion of three shifts in the boundaries of causumerism brought about by RED.

Product RED

Four companies can claim the title of ‘founding member’ of the RED initiative: American Express, Armani, Converse and Gap. Their RED product lines were made available soon after the RED launch in Davos – in March and April 2006. Motorola launched its range of products in May 2006 (but left the initiative in late 2008). Apple joined the initiative in October 2006, followed by Hallmark in 2007, Dell and Starbucks in 2008, and many other companies thereafter. Table 1 provides a general picture of the involvement in RED by the ten most well-known companies. The table shows: (1) when the first RED product was launched; (2) the range of RED products available, their prices and their geographical markets; and (3) the proportion of sales value or profit that is donated to The Global Fund from the sale of these products (when known).

[INSERT TABLE 1 NEAR HERE]

The RED product lines sold by these companies are all co-branded, they are not generic products. They are not cheap trinkets, but most are not prohibitively priced for the budgets of Western middle-class shoppers. Most products range in price from \$50 to around \$200, with exception of some more-expensive Emporio Armani items and Dell computers, and some cheaper Gap accessories, Hallmark cards, iTunes gift cards, Penguin books and Nike shoelaces. In RED, the proportion of the profits or set contribution from each sale donated to the cause varies dramatically, with almost each company defining its help in a different way. For the AmEx card, the contribution to The Global Fund is 1% of money spent with the card. Gap, Armani, Penguin

and Nike contribute a proportion of the total profits of all their RED products. Converse and Hallmark contribute a proportion of retail or wholesale price, depending on the product purchased. Starbucks and Dell contribute set amounts for each item sold. Apple does not release information on the amount donated.

The total amount of RED's donations to the Global Fund was over \$160 million as of December 2010. This is less than one per cent of the total (public and private) \$18.2 billion disbursed by donors to The Global Fund since its inception. Ninety-five per cent of disbursed funds so far have come from bilateral donors. However, among private sector donors, RED is actually the second largest source of funding to the Global Fund (after the Gates Foundation which has provided 69 per cent of the total). RED is being taken seriously as a potential funding modality by the institution, and it is often mentioned anytime the Fund appears in the popular media (see, for example, *The Economist*, February 19th 2011). How has buying RED products become an important modality of funding one of the largest public health institutions in the world? To answer this we move into a discussion of the theoretical understandings of consumption and of the increasing importance of ethical issues in shaping consumption choices.

Consumption

The material and cultural aspects of consumption, the role and limitations of consumer activism, and consumption politics have been the focus of a large body of literature over the last two decades. The classic critiques of conspicuous consumption date back to the early 20th century (Simmel 1930, [Veblen 1912](#)). Rather than providing a detailed review of the large consumption literature (for such reviews see, among others: Aldridge 2003, Fine 2002, Trentmann 2006), in this section we highlight some broad tendencies, and then move on to examine consumerism.

Characterizations of consumers in the literature vary according to how much power is placed on consumer agency and how material or symbolic the act of consumption is thought to be. In simplified terms, both rational choice models based on *homo economicus* (see critical coverage in Fine 2002) and some of the cultural/symbolic approaches to consumption (see coverage in Campbell 1995) conceive consumers as empowered, communicating and dominant actors. In contrast, the Frankfurt school of sociology (see, among others, Adorno 1991; [Marcuse 1973 \(1969\)](#)) and political economy/regulation approaches (see, among others, Marsden, Flynn and Harrison 2000; Trentmann 2006) have portrayed consumers as dominated – either through subtle manipulation (Finkelstein 1989) or sheer retail and advertising power. Similarly, [Bourdieu \(1976\)](#) posits that consumption behaviour is an expression of class position, and that consumer choice and agency are severely limited by habitus – the set of appropriate tastes that are learned within a specific class culture. Extreme post-modern positions completely dismissed the issue of agency, and see consumption as entirely symbolic (Baudrillard 1998). More moderate versions of post-modernism still see society as a ‘spectacle’ where everything and everyone can be objectified and commodified, including all forms of contestation; the spectacle unfolds without meaningful participation, activity or involvement (Debord 1967).

While the postmodern take on consumption is that it is either positive or meaningless, condemning accounts of consumption still abound in the mainstream literature--from critiques of commodity culture as ‘debasing’ (Featherstone 1991) and of consumerism as the ‘economics of deception’ (Bauman 2005), to accounts of the so-called processes of McDonaldization ([Ritzer 1996](#)) and Disneyization ([Bryman 1999](#)). But much of the recent consumption literature has underlined the reflexivity and multiple identities of consumers ([Gabriel and Lang 1995](#)), the

complexity of acts of consumption, consumer politics, and consumer agency (Fine 2002; Miller 2001; Warde 1997), and the tensions between consumption and citizenship (Aldridge 2003).

Our own take on consumption as material, cultural and ethical contestation builds on Slater's (1997) characterisation of consumer culture as neither exclusively restricted to the consumption of signs, nor just a reflection of an existing social order. Consumer culture is a site of contestation playing out in three fields, as Slater elaborates. First, it is a struggle over social (and cultural) arrangements that underpin the mobilization of material resources. Thus, it is important to examine how access to the objects of consumption is regulated, and what specific productive arrangements, technologies, and labour relations underpin the provision of goods (see also Fine 2002). Second, consumption 'animates public and social systems of signs, not necessarily in the sense of public display [as in conspicuous consumption] . . . but more fundamentally through the process of cultural reproduction As consumption has become an ever more central means of enacting our citizenship of the social world, struggles over the power to dispose of material, financial and symbolic . . . resources have become central to the cultural reproduction of the everyday world' (Slater 1997, 4-5). Third, struggle plays out over ethical questions such as 'the scale, nature and social ordering of consumption . . . [that underpin the] social, moral or religious regulation of the self' (Ibid., 5).

There has been increasing interest in various forms of ethical and political consumption, or causumerism, over the past two decades. That causumerism rests on such an empirical change suggests that it may be important to examine how existing scholarship interprets *change* in consumer behaviour. Warde (1997) highlights four main interpretations. A first is that diversity in consumer behaviour has increased as a result of the decreasing constraints deriving from social group approval (Beck 1992). From this point of view, the consumer is seen as a 'hero' engaging

in ‘a conscious project of autonomous, reflexive self-creation’ (Warde 1997, 15). As stated by Featherstone, ‘the new heroes of consumer culture make lifestyle a life project and display their individuality and sense of style in the particularity of the assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance and bodily dispositions they design together into a lifestyle’ (Featherstone 1987; cited in Warde 1997, 15). A second interpretation of changing consumer behaviour is that the disembedding from traditional social networks does not lead to individualisation and the total disappearance of regulation, but to more specialized and small group (neo-tribe) formation (Bauman 1991). These are groups where ‘people are intensely, if temporarily, attached to each other by means of shared self-images . . . Lifestyle groups proliferate, visible through their differences, but not grounded in a social or material substratum’ (Warde 1997, 16).

A third interpretation, contrasting with the previous two suggesting diversification in consumer behaviour, suggests that uniformity and apathy characterize the sphere of consumption. Mass culture feeds uniform and soothing cultural products to consumers who accept them passively in private (Adorno 1991; Ritzer 1996). This leads to greater conformity of consumer behaviour. A fourth interpretation, according to Warde, is that consumer practices are in fact increasingly differentiated along structured social principles, such as class, ethnicity or nation (Bourdieu 1976). In this perspective, we see increasing diversification, but along predictable and traditional paths of cleavage.

Our RED case study suggests that diversification of consumer behaviour is being managed through a co-branding initiative that takes in many diverse products, yet only one brand within each product range – allowing each brand to mobilize monopolistic ‘ethical rents’ within its category of product. The use of new media spaces (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) creates a RED

‘brand community’ that can function as a consumerist neo-tribe, that could, in theory, cut across the divides of race, class, or nation, yet in practice does not appear to do so. So, while there is increasing diversification, there is simultaneously uniformity in the way that all RED products from baby strollers to books are conduits for saving lives in Africa. Therefore, they are all equally ethical, with no consideration for the circumstances of their actual production, distribution or trade.

Consumer culture is a culture *of* consumption (Slater 1997), where the values of society are organized through and derive from consumption. It is a culture portraying freedom of choice and consumer sovereignty, and a culture of needs that are in principle unlimited and insatiable. As Slater elaborates, in contemporary consumer culture values expressed through consumption spill over to other areas of social action such as health provision (Ibid., 24-25), or as in RED, the financing of giving. As the value of goods depends increasingly more on their ‘sign’ than on their functional or economic value, advertising, marketing and branding become central functions on their own, not subordinate to production. In the Global North at least, material satisfaction is increasingly subordinate to the consumption of culture, signs, representations, services and ‘experiences’ (Ibid., 32). What we add to this characterization of consumption is a specific reflection on the importance of how manifestations like RED link Northern consumers and global causes through the management of affect by celebrities.

Causumerism

The term causumerism seems to have been first coined by Ben Davis, co-founder of www.buylesscrap.org, a website critical of the RED campaign which promotes direct donations to The Global Fund in place of purchasing RED products (see also Sarna-Wojcicki 2008). In its original formulation, the term was meant to signal ‘shopping for a better world’, effecting change

through the marketplace. Other terms have been used in the literature, such as political and ethical consumerism, to denote similar phenomena. Holtzer (2006), for example, argues that political consumerism is the collectivization of private consumption choices, guided by a ‘social movement’ (see also other contributions to the special issue of *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 30(5), 2006). Such an approach places emphasis on individual consumers ‘lending’ their purchasing power to social movements to enable them to effectively voice their concerns and leverage positive or negative sanctions. Other contributions to the large literature on the subject (including a recent special issue of this journal, 42(8)) have sought to go beyond dual characterisations of ‘ethical’ versus ‘non-ethical’ consumption and ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ products (see [Goodman et al. 2010](#)). They have also fine-tuned the links between the ethics and politics of consumption ([Barnett et al. 2011](#); [Clarke et al. 2007](#); [Clarke 2008](#)) and examined the ethics of ‘everyday consumption’ ([Barnett et al. 2005](#); [Jackson et al. 2009](#); [Miller 2001](#)). One of the important aspects emerging from the debates on ethical and political consumerism is the fact that the possibility of ‘consuming ethically’ is based on the consumption of branded products, despite the ‘No Logo’ battle cry of the anti-globalization movement. In other words, it is brands’ vulnerability to ethical concerns that opens up space for consumer action. But because branded companies seek to minimize such vulnerability, RED provides a helpful tool by detaching ethical concerns from the products and attaching them to a cause (saving AIDS victims in Africa).

The cause in this form of causumerism has increasingly taken on a life of its own, separate from the product. The RED product saves lives, and such an ‘emergency’ cause actually precludes a discussion of the ethical (and indeed political) aspects of how the product is brought to the consumer. In RED, the distant others with whom ‘citizen-consumer hybrids’ ([Johnston 2008](#)) engage are not the producers and workers that handle the RED products. The distant others are

the passive recipients of help (HIV positive Africans who take anti-retroviral medication) who have no connection with RED products themselves.

As we have indicated in the previous section, the consumption of signs and experiences can be the vehicle for the mobilization of ‘meaning’, political action and belonging to a ‘community’. Citizen-consumers are increasingly seen as exercising their rights to demand social and environmental change via individual acts of ‘conscious consumption’. In this operating environment, citizen-consumers are often portrayed as ever more informed, reflexive, active, sometimes socially and environmentally conscious, and empowered to make a difference with their purchasing power (Trentmann 2006). This is a far cry from some of the duped and victim consumer depictions presented in some parts of the literature. But while consumer agency may take the form of collective action through campaigns and consumer organizations’ pressure, in RED the focus is on the individual act of consumption of branded products. Depictions of Product RED consumers as fashion-conscious yet actively engaged, reflexive and therefore inspi(RED) are part and parcel of this trend.

The engagement of consumers may go beyond their responsiveness to received information about the products upon which they will make a shopping decision. They are increasingly involved in product formulation and customization as well. The Converse (RED) series of sneakers, for example, can be customized by consumers with a wide array of designs of both shoe and canvas through a platform called ‘Make Mine (RED)’. On the Converse website, consumers are invited to ‘Pick a Shoe. Make it Yours’ in which a series of choices from shoe type, style and material are all up to the consumer’s click. On the introductory webpage, together with the choice of diverse shoelace colours, consumers can click a link labelled ‘You like shoes, you buy them, you help people’.

But this involvement of consumers in their products can be far less empowering than it appears to be. Banet-Weisler and Lapsansky show how RED delimits the space for consumer participation and how it ‘has appropriated the language of social action and rebellion, and mixed it with a neo-liberal economic model of consumption in a way that . . . strengthens the pillars of . . . consumer culture on which it is premised’ (2008, 1254). More generally, Callon, Méadel and Rabehariosa (2002) have suggested that one of the main concerns of business is to prompt consumers to question their preferences and, indirectly, their identities. What Callon and colleagues define as an ‘economy of qualities’ is based on the ‘formatting of socio-technical devices which, distributing and redistributing the material bases of cognition, format the bases of calculation and preferences’ (Ibid., 213). Business is increasingly trying to steer so-called ‘spontaneous’ and gradual processes of qualification and re-qualification of products to their advantage. They do so, *inter alia*, by setting up and steering forms of organization promoting collaboration between suppliers and consumers in the qualification of products, including brand identity. In this way, competition is shifted from price to ‘the attachment of consumers to products whose qualities have progressively been defined with their active participation’ (Ibid., 212). To return to the example of the Converse shoes, consumers can make their own shoes RED, but they cannot make them more ethical -- that parameter is set by the cause.

In RED, a branded ‘causer culture’ is mobilized by aid celebrities through affect and rests on the engagement of discourses of transparency and consumer participation. But there is no transparency on the social or environmental relations that underpin the production and trade of RED products. In RED, transparency is restricted to the constructed ‘impact’ of purchase--the number of doses that will be provided to AIDS patients, and the number of people ‘saved’. The RED ‘impact calculator’ is a tool for calculating what a (RED) purchase can provide ‘to keep

someone with HIV in Africa alive' (see www.joinred.com/Learn/Impact/Calculator.aspx). When the customer clicks on start, a screen of RED products appears--an ipod, a t-shirt, sunglasses, a greeting card, a watch, a coffee cup--each with a button to add (+) or subtract (-) the product in the arithmetic of saving African lives. As you move the cursor over any product, you are informed of the amount of life-time you will buy for a African with AIDS. For example, moving over the Armani watch, calls forth the text – 'Can provide more than 30 days of lifesaving ARV treatment'. The life-time varies according to product price, as it would take four Hallmark cards with sound to buy one day of African life. But when consumers click on the 'calculate' button, they are given their answer, and the reminder, 'And remember that all of your (RED) purchases help save the lives of people with HIV in Africa'. After finalizing your product-life equation, you are given two buttons of choice, 'recalculate' or 'Shop Product (RED)'. In some cases, impact becomes the totem worn by the 'causer': the Gap's RED 'two-week' t-shirt indicates that its purchase enables the provision of two weeks of ARV medication (Sarna-Wojcicki 2008). Lost is the irony that two weeks are indeed a very short time to live. It would take the purchase of 27 t-shirts to ensure the survival of one AIDS patient for only one year. It would take many more to provide the necessary drugs every day for the rest of that patient's life.

The 'brand community' is created via blogging on the RED website and in networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook and perhaps meeting at (RED) Nights concerts in places like Carnegie Hall in New York. It is a community of Western causers, whose voice 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' (Ibid.,15). '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' (Ibid., 27). African agency in RED causumerism is notably missing.

RED vs. other forms of causumerism

RED is not the only initiative seeking to canvass causumer culture. For this reason, in this section we place RED against the background of the evolution of selected labels and certifications that attempt to improve the social, economic and environmental impacts of production and trade of specific commodities, also known collectively as 'ethical' or 'sustainable' trade.

Sustainability labels and certifications are available for a large range of products purchased by Western consumers. They allow consumers to choose products that are putatively 'better' for the environment, trade relations, producers or workers. Via a label or logo placed on the product, consumers can identify which products have such characteristics, and thus promote sustainability or ethical trade via a market-based (rather than regulation-based) mechanism. A survey and discussion of the range of sustainability labels and certifications is out of place here. However, there are several lessons to be drawn from specific experiences that have implications for RED.

In the realm of food and agriculture over the last two decades, consumers have become more aware of the socio-economic plight of developing country farmers, and increasingly interested in the health and safety of food. Sustainability initiatives have been popularized through a growing awareness that expansion of agricultural and fishing 'frontiers' constitutes a great threat to global biodiversity. As a result, these initiatives have enjoyed a much greater recognition and a fast-growing market value. The concept of sustainability in agriculture usually refers to aspects variously referred to as 'economic viability for farmers' (or wage earners), 'environmental conservation' and 'social responsibility'. Both existing and emerging labels and certification systems seek to meet some or all of these needs ([Giovannucci and Ponte 2005](#)). By developing

‘sustainability’ labels, social and environmental movements (later, in collaboration with industry) were able to give consumers the possibility of making informed choices that directly influenced the way coffee was grown and traded. Labels, in other words, helped turn consumers into ‘causumers’. While such initiatives started in the late 1980s in limited ways catering to only niche markets, they have now moved into the mainstream.

The performance of different initiatives in terms of delivering to their beneficiaries is quite varied. It is indeed possible to ‘do good’ via causumerism, but the spread and depth of ‘good’ varies, as well as the power relations between giver and taker. With the right dynamics, the efforts needed to meet sustainability standards required by ethical trade initiatives can create a virtuous circle of empowerment and organizational strengthening among beneficiaries. But in other cases, beneficiaries find it difficult to maintain organizational cohesion if the expected benefits do not materialize in the short-term. For many producers, the hidden costs of marketing, coordination (e.g. time spent in meetings, transport), uncertainty, and the limitations of collective action may significantly decrease the overall net benefits of certification efforts and threaten the existing governance structures in cooperatives or associations. Sustainability labels and certifications for food required for ethical trade include some beneficiaries and exclude others, and the costs and benefits of inclusion vary. They can also marginalize smaller producers and producers in poorer countries, even though they were designed with the best intentions ([Gibbon et al. 2010](#); [Klooster 2005](#); Swinnen 2007).

The divergent performance of sustainability initiatives has an important historical dimension as well, which is particularly relevant to RED. The literature shows that ‘old wave’ initiatives (established before 1990) such as organics and fair trade are the only ones paying regular and predictable premiums to producers, and are the only ones where certification costs are not fully

paid by producers in Third World countries ([Klooster 2005](#); [Ponte 2008](#)). Old initiatives tend to be more radical in their objectives: for example, fair trade attempts to address some of the inequalities that are built within the trading system itself, and the organic movement questions the nature of an industrial approach to agriculture. In both cases, however, these ‘radical’ challenges seem to be on the wane in the name of commercial success ([Guthman 2002](#); [Raynolds 2004](#); [Raynolds, Murray and Taylor 2004](#); [Mutersbaugh 2005](#); for a dissenting view see [Gibbon 2008](#)). But in ‘new wave’ initiatives (established in the 1990s and later), the imperative of commercial success has been ‘built in’ from the beginning. And as certifications become widely accepted, there is growing unwillingness amongst retailers and consumers to pay extra for such achievements--leaving farmers with higher costs of production and no direct financial incentive.

RED can be seen as an extension of the trend illustrated here – the radical difference with RED is that in order to ‘do good’ it has severed the link with producers (or workers) completely. The problem with the product (e.g. low prices paid to producers) is substituted with the problem with the people who benefit from RED profits (women and children with AIDS).

In addition to this, in RED, third-party certification against a set of (more or less) negotiated standards is substituted by celebrity validation. All is served in simple terms on the plate of consumers, who do not have to sacrifice anything to achieve the good of others. While some labeling initiatives do leave space for NGOs and consumer organizations to engage with standard setting and revision via civil society groups, in Product RED participation is limited to shopping (and to some extent blogging or concert-going). Sustainability certifications and labels have had a mixed record in delivering to their putative beneficiaries. But at the very least, the beneficiaries of better economic returns and/or positive social or environmental dynamics have an active role in the process – they produce, process, and/or trade such commodities. In RED, beneficiaries are

passive recipients, not the workers of the factories that produce RED t-shirts and mobile phones. RED shifts focus from the product it is selling to the people with the problem it is solving.

Affective Management by Celebrities

RED is doing more than simply using celebrities to attract attention to specific branded products, something that has been done long before its inception. In RED, celebrities validate the cause – they provide a sustained management of affect. As people become increasingly delinked from their closest social relations, and as interactions across a significant social distance with people we do not know become more important, the celebrity figure also serves as a new way of creating community through the media (Turner 2004). Northern citizens care about the plight of those in the global South and seek out ways to manifest this affective need, often through the mediation of celebrities. In cases of causumerism like RED, celebrities guarantee the link in which the purchase of a product becomes ethical because it is part of solving a serious global problem.

Celebrities are those select persons ‘who are given greater presence and a wider scope of activity and agency than are those who make up the rest of the population’ (Marshall 1997, ix). While resembling in many ways other forms of charismatic leadership (see the classic discussion by Weber 1968), celebrity differs in its dependence on social distance and its mediation through the media. ‘The celebrity system is a way in which the sphere of the irrational, emotional, personal, and affective is contained and negotiated in contemporary culture’ (Marshall 1997, 72-73).

Similarly, Rojek summarizes ‘post-God celebrity is now one of the mainstays of organizing recognition and belonging in secular society’ (2001, 58). [Marks and Fischer \(2002\)](#) take this further into the political realm where rationality should have replaced myth with the loss of charismatic authority, yet citizens manufacture celebrities out of ‘bits and pieces of existent political ideology. The authority of celebrities thus derives from their ability, *through the force of*

their personality, to translate political ideology *into the person* of themselves as legitimate rulers’ (emphasis in original, 383). In forms of consumerism such as RED, celebrities embody the ways in which caring becomes ‘cool’ (see Littler 2008) and they become the trusted faces of how, in the words of Bono, ‘you buy a RED product over here, the RED company buys life-saving drugs for someone who can’t afford them over there’ (Product RED video, “Emporio Armani ‘One Night Only’” www.joinred.com).

Celebrity status sanctions power on affective claims, and celebrities are leaders in emotion. Celebrities are able to provide an anchoring for ‘affect’ in contemporary society, they facilitate embedding such affect into a brand, and can do this in ways that ordinary individuals cannot. Freud claimed in his earliest work that ‘affect does not so much reflect or think, affect acts’ (Freud 1966, cited in Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 2). There is increasing interest in affect in the fields of geography, cultural studies and even international political economy (see for example, Ahmed 2004; [Anderson 2006](#); Doss 2010; [Gammon 2008](#); [Gregg and Seigworth 2010](#); [Horton and Kraftl 2009](#); [Thrift 2004](#)). The term is used by classical psychology to refer to the middle ground between cognition and behavior: the affective realm is connected to this chain of causality between something experienced and the formulation of a reaction to that experience. Yet, affects are not something immanent, they are instead social products. It is through their management of affect—the emotional in political culture—that celebrities are able to unify disparate constituencies such as the Western consumer and the AIDS patient in Swaziland. Celebrities are now beginning to be taken seriously as actors in international politics (Cooper 2008a; [2008b](#)), environmental conservation (Brockington 2009), fair trade ([Goodman 2010](#)), social justice ([Littler 2008](#)), liberal democracies ([Marks and Fischer 2002](#)) and development aid (Richey and Ponte 2011).

In aid-related forms of causumerism, the link between product and cause, providing both legitimacy and exposure, comes from a particular form of celebrity, the ‘aid celebrity.’ Aid celebrities are development ‘experts’ and celebrities whose persona is inseparable from their aid work, but whose claims to expertise extend beyond their formal qualifications. Experts popularize their knowledge and perform celebrity roles, while stars ‘study-up’ to become legitimate aid celebrities. For example, Jeffrey Sachs who was named one of the ‘100 Most Influential People in the World’ by *Time* magazine in 2004 and 2005, has popularized his Millennium Development Goals by appearances in popular magazines, television and video roles. When a not-for-profit corporation called the ‘Sachs for President draft committee’ tried enlist Sachs to run for president in 2006, his qualifications included being ‘one of the world’s most renowned economists’, and that ‘his globe-trotting, high-profile work on Third World poverty-related issues has made him a sort of academic Bono’ (Truthdig, “Professor for President?” August 28th 2006, www.truthdig.com). Bono was popular as a rock star whose commitment to development advocacy over time earned him legitimacy as an expert. Thus, aid celebrities, actually merge achieved and ascribed status (see Cooper 2008b), distinguishing them from other stars who simply engage in ‘do gooding’ (see Littler 2008; Richey and Ponte 2011).

Aid celebrities are not perceived as fundamentally inauthentic, and thus a detriment to overcome, but are actually the faces of doing good, credibility, and believability. Aid celebrities become trusted advisors on issues of international development in ways that extend beyond the actual scope of their research or practitioner experience, and their presence is invoked to stand-in for important beliefs and social values. Being an aid celebrity does not imply that one is not also a legitimate expert in some aspect of international development. In fact, it is on the basis of the high profile of their development work that aid celebrities came to be celebrated in the first place.

As one of the seminal texts on contemporary celebrity explains: ‘we can map the precise moment a public figure becomes a celebrity. It occurs at the point at which media interest in their activities is transferred from reporting on their public role (such as their specific achievement in politics or sport) to investigating the details of their private lives. Paradoxically, it is most often the high profile achieved by their public activities that provides the alibi for this process of “celebritisation”’ (Turner 2004, 8).

Famous faces abound in all aspects of the RED campaign: celebrity models like Gisele Bundchen and Christy Turlington; actresses like Penélope Cruz and Scarlett Johansson; singers like Joss Stone and artists like Damien Hirst engage in highly-publicized activities in support of RED and its products. But aid celebrities, particularly Bono, are consistent markers of the ethical foundation lying under all the ‘fun’ of new products. The use of celebrities to sell products is of course nothing new, but RED moves beyond mere celebrity endorsement by relying on the appeal of ‘aid celebrities’ for the brand’s credibility. In Product RED, Bono provides the attention guarantee that exposure and access will come from linking aid celebrities to other famous celebrities to insure the cool quotient of the initiative. In short, RED products are ‘good’ because they are part of the charisma of ethical engagement embodied by Bono.

Bono has been the public celebrity face of Product RED since his speech at its launch at the World Economic Forum. He has been on numerous television interviews in the US and UK, guest-edited the ‘Africa Issue’ of the RED Vanity Fair, and the RED Independent. Bono is considered to be ‘very serious’ and this makes any cause affiliated with him attractive to other celebrities. Interestingly, when the Global Fund was the subject of an Associated Press story on its dealing with corruption in some (notably, not RED-supported) countries, it was referred to in

popular newspaper headlines as ‘Bono’s Global Fund,’ providing some indication of the popular connection between Bono, RED and the Fund.

Bono’s appeal lies in his rock-star charisma and his ‘authenticity’. US Senator Richard Durbin refers to this saying ‘Many of these stars are counseled by their agents to show a human side . . . Bono’s different. He’s clearly committed, and he knows what he’s talking about’ (D. DeLuka, “Being hailed here ‘a very big deal’”, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 27th 2007). Bono’s social activism record, while much more visible in recent years, goes back at least to the mid 1980s with his band U2. During the 1990s, Bono’s letters to newspapers, public challenge to Tony Blair, and meetings with world leaders are thought to have had a direct impact on the G7’s debt cancellations and on the US contribution to the Heavily Indebted Poor-Country (HIPC) initiative. In the 2000s, Bono joined the campaign against pharmaceutical companies to lower their prices for anti-retroviral treatment against AIDS. He was photographed with G.W. Bush in Monterey in 2002, when the president announced that the US was to increase its foreign aid budget in what was termed a ‘Compact for Global Development’. Later in 2002, Bono and then US Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill took a ten-day tour of Africa, also known as ‘The Odd Couple Tour of Africa 2002’.

Bono’s celebrity brand is that of the ‘good looking Samaritan’. Cooper describes how Bono ‘has brought to the cause a candid emotionalism – with a strong religious sensibility – that shapes his sense of public purpose’ (2008a, 37). Bono’s identity as both ‘Christian’ and ‘cool’ is integral for Product RED’s ethos of compassionate consumption. When Bono is photographed holding Motorola RED phones up to his eyes in a parody of his famous sunglasses, he links those products with his decades of service to Africa, and perhaps to the famous episode of handing The Pope his sunglasses. He does not open up for discussion the process of mining coltan, the

salaries paid to handset assembly workers or the HIV status of a large proportion of the world's mobile phone users.

Products do not need to meet certification standards to achieve the criteria for 'goodness'; Bono's aid celebrity status is sufficient grounding for the faith that RED products are good for someone, somewhere. Because of aid celebrities, consumers can have faith in their ability to purchase positive public health outcomes for distant others. However, the relationships of international development, implemented by The Global Fund (the beneficiary of RED funds) to which consumers actually connect, are not the messy, on-the-ground interactions between different people, challenges and values. In a parallel case of celebrities in conservation spectacles, Brockington (2009) argues: 'Celebrity conservation produces images which are commodities in themselves and sold, else used to elicit donors' support, and which are consumed with little awareness of these images' origins or conditions of production' (2009, vi). Similarly, by intertwining development problems with consumption and celebrities, RED produces images of AIDS treatment in which shopping well can actually save women and children in Africa.

In RED, the affective component of causumerism (how a product makes you feel) replaces a calculation of a product's attributes (as could be evaluated through reading its label). Therefore, the mechanism of celebrity as guarantor, and in the case of RED, aid celebrities, as certifying the 'goodness' of products becomes a possibility. Aid celebrities transport the modalities of the celebrity into the realm of causumerism to support international development aid. They embody a manufactured consensus, let simple moral truths substitute for rational debate, and thus manage the affect of those who would solve the world's problems.

Conclusion

In Product RED, celebrities facilitate a particular form of causumerism, ‘compassionate consumption’, that is based on the management of affect. Brands are key factors in this process as well because they are vulnerable to attacks based on ethical concerns. Any initiative that can move attention from the ethics of production to the ethics of a cause can help minimize brand risk. Celebrity at first sight seems contradictory to the ‘audit culture’ ([Power 1997](#); Strathern 2000) that underpins other forms of causumerism, such as a ‘conscious consumption’ based on social and environmental labels and certifications. But for consumers, both celebrities and labels help in simplifying very complex phenomena. The label is a ‘sign’ that performs a simplified complexity, and celebrity does the same work. But, instead of an aura of science, the celebrity is vested in the performance of persona. Aid celebrities, popularized as ethically committed, adequately informed and yet still cool enough to sell products, guarantee that a percentage of the profits from those product sales will support a worthwhile cause. At the same time, the informational depth of the message carried through by labels and celebrities is quite different. Codes of conduct and ethical trade initiatives are ultimately about improving the conditions of production for laborers and/or small farmers. RED is about accepting the status quo, maximizing sales and profit, and donating a proportion of sales of products (no matter how or where they have been produced) to help distant others in Africa.

With RED, consumers of branded products are enrolled by celebrities to save the lives of distant others (Africans with AIDS). They can become causumers without extra effort. They are not asked to address the social and environmental relations behind the products on offer. They are not asked to pay a higher price for RED products over equivalent products of the same brand either. Within the emerging realm of causumerism, RED facilitates at least three shifts: from ‘conscious consumption’ to ‘compassionate consumption’; from attention to how a branded product was

produced and brought to the market toward the medical treatment of the ‘people with the problem’ (AIDS patients in Africa); and from addressing the causes of problems to solving their manifestations.

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Table 1: Involvement in Product RED by selected companies

Company name	First RED product launched	RED product range	Markets where available	Price range	Proportion/amount of sales/profits donated
<i>American Express</i>	mar-06	American Express RED card	UK only (including Crown dependencies)	Typical 18.9% APR variable	1% of all money spent with the card
<i>Gap</i>	mar-06	(PRODUCT)RED t-shirts, hoodies, jeans, tote bags, other accessories; also has kids and baby line	Online in the US; at Gap stores in US, Canada, UK, France and select stores worldwide; also available online with shipment to 46 countries	Wide range	50% of profit
<i>Armani</i>	apr-06	Emporio Armani (PRODUCT) RED perfume, sunglasses, clothing, watches, accessories	In all Emporio Armani stores worldwide	Wide range	Average 40 percent of its gross profit margin
<i>Converse</i>	apr-06	Converse (PRODUCT) RED Chuck Taylor All Star African mudcloth shoe; Converse (PRODUCT) RED collection	US, UK; also at select Gap stores; available from online store and shipping to 29 countries	\$22-80	15% of net retail price or 5% of net wholesale price, depending on the model
<i>Apple</i>	oct-06	Special Edition (PRODUCT)RED iPod Nano and iPod Shuffle; iTunes Gift Cards	US, UK, Canada and Japan; elsewhere via online Apple Stores, with shipment to 25 countries	iPod Shuffle: \$59; iPod Nano: from \$149; iTunes gift card: from \$15	Unknown

<i>Hallmark</i>	oct-07	(PRODUCT)RED boxed holiday cards, photo cards, e-cards, gift book, invitations	Online in the US; at Gold Crown stores in the US and Canada	From \$1 cards and e-cards to \$13-14 for boxed cards	8% of net wholesale sales
<i>Dell</i>	jan-08	(PRODUCT)RED XPS laptops, XPS Desktop, netbooks, tv-hubs and printers	Available worldwide through Dell online stores although collection and configuration vary regionally	Netbooks: from \$535-758; XPS Latops: from \$935-1845; TV-hubs: from \$300-939; Printer: \$90; XPS Desktop: 1349-1739	A specific amount is donated depending on which Product RED Dell item is bought
<i>Starbucks</i>	nov-08	(PRODUCT)Red payment card, ceramic cup, water bottle, tumbler reusable cup, and East African whole bean coffee	Available in the US, UK, Ireland and Canada. Product range varies	Wide range depending on the country	5 cents is donated every time the (PRODUCT)Red payment card is used; Purchase of other products entails a donation of \$1
<i>Nike</i>	nov-09	(PRODUCT)RED Shoelaces, Nike Dunk Shoes, Limited edition N98 track jacket and a football	Available online	Nike Shoelaces: \$4; Dunk shoes: \$125; Nike N98 track jacket: \$132	100% of the profits from the shoelaces and the football; 8% of the profit from all other (PRODUCT)Red items; Half of all donations go to the Global Fund and the other half to Nike-supported football programs
<i>Penguin Books</i>	may-10	(PRODUCT)RED various classic books	Available worldwide through Penguin Books online store	From \$11 to \$15	50% of profit

Notes:

Other products and companies involved in (Product) Red are: Channel Island Surfboards, Diptyque candles, Shazam smartphone application, Flowe(red) bouquets (in collaboration with Flamingo Holdings), Timbuk2 bags, Beats by Dr.Dre headphones, Solange Azagury-Partridge Jewelry, Bugaboo baby strollers, Girl Skateboards, Belvedere special edition RED vodka, Carolina Bucci Bracelets and (Penfolds)RED wine.

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