

THE NEOLIBERAL “DO-GOOD” SPIRIT:  
A CASE STUDY OF UNILEVER’S DIGITAL COMMUNICATION OF CORPORATE  
SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

By

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## **ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION**

### **The Neoliberal Do-Good Spirit: A study in Unilever's digital communication of corporate social responsibility**

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In this dissertation, I argue that Unilever—a multinational corporation with one of the world's largest advertising budgets—exemplifies capitalism's latest attempt to preserve the dominant social order after the 2008 financial crisis. Drawing on scholarship that is critical of neoliberalism and its appropriation of social justice and the common good, I show how Unilever's use of corporate social responsibility (CSR) serves to construct the company as a good corporate citizen. In particular, I focus on the production of CSR discourse online, a powerful site for the construction of a corporate identity, due to the unique affordances of social media. I call CSR online discourse i-CSR.

My analysis of Unilever's corporate website and social media engagement from 2013 to 2017 shows that Web 2.0 affords an unprecedented capacity for corporate intrusion into sociality conducted online. As a real-time subject with a voice, Unilever, I show is able to manufacture compelling digital content and build a loyal brand community around social responsibility and sustainability. However, even while Unilever has effectively co-opted collective values at the core of a participatory democracy, there is space for resistance. I show that interactivity on social media allows oppositional users to mount extended attacks on the corporation using hashtags and memes. While we may

celebrate such resistance, it is important to note that data is a commodity and that algorithms are not neutral. Designed to learn trends, curate high volume interaction, and prioritize corporate imperatives, social media platforms have the potential to tame such resistance.

In sum, this dissertation examines the creation, negotiation, and opposition to i-CSR discourse and the ways in which MNCs in the neoliberal era imitate progressive activism via the new “do-good spirit” of neoliberalism in order to ensure profit maximization. It adds to the existing, but limited, scholarship on digital CSR and charts new ground through its focus not only on corporate websites but on social media as well.

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I have also gained a tremendous amount of knowledge about the role of marketing in shaping social responsibility discourse from my interview participants. I am so very grateful for their patience, honesty, and keen insights over the years. They have generously shared their time and expertise with me, despite the demands on their time. My conversations with each of them has nurtured a healthy skepticism about the role of CSR and moral discourse produced by elite capitalists.

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## **Introduction**

The era of neoliberalism has birthed a set of contradictory business values that on the one hand glorifies efficiency and individual success, while on the other hand publicly emphasizes collective social responsibility. The principle of continuously growing profits, however, remains central to neoliberalism. Since the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s, Nestle's tainted infant formula campaign targeting the developing world in 1973, Union Carbide's deadly gas leak in Bhopal in 1984, Exxon Valdez's oil spill off the coast of Alaska in 1989, Nike's notorious use of sweatshops in Indonesia in the 1990s, Enron and Arthur Andersen's accounting fraud in 2001, and the banking industry's participation in the US subprime mortgage bubble in 2007 are a few publicly known scandals that uncovered the destructiveness of unchecked profit-maximization (Bakan, 2004; Klein, 2000; Ritholtz & Task, 2009). Paradoxically, during this period there has also been a rise in academic research and business activity around a set of ethics known as "corporate social responsibility" (CSR). In management literature, CSR is supported by stakeholder theory—a framework used to identify external social groups impacting a business organization (Freeman, 1984/2010). In business practice, CSR constructs an emergent "market for virtue" catalyzing companies to develop "green" products, forge nonprofit partnerships, encourage employee volunteerism, make philanthropic donations, measure social initiatives, and publish social impact reports. Today, the ubiquity of CSR is in large part due to the positive communication of CSR, especially through marketing and business reporting (Ihlen, Bartlett, & May, 2011).

The era of neoliberalism is marked by the appropriation of progressive discourse to sustain and paper over exploitative profit-making (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007; Fraser, 2013; Ashcoff, 2015). Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) trace the way in which the 1960s social justice and welfare discourse was retooled by business managers to mitigate anti-capitalist attitudes from the 1970s to the 1990s. Similarly, Fraser (2013) and Ashcoff (2015) uncover the way neoliberal euphemisms, such as diversity and conscious capitalism, redirect progressive values in service of neoliberal directives. The pervasiveness of CSR communication shows the extent of progressive appropriation. At the same time, because digital media and social networking platforms create spaces for citizens to respond to corporate CSR messaging, it also offers space for resistance. This project examines CSR communication online, what I call *i-CSR*, a potent site both for the naturalization of neoliberalism and for the resistance to corporate values.

Bringing together various bodies of scholarship such as those critical of neoliberalism as well as CSR research, my dissertation examines the production of CSR discourse online and its implications for progressive democratic values and the common good. I focus specifically on Unilever, a leading multinational corporation with one of the largest advertising budgets in the world, to unpack how it uses digital communication tools to negotiate values of profit-maximization and social responsibility. In order to differentiate the regular modes through which CSR discourse is communicated, and to focus specifically on digital media and account for its unique affordances, I call CSR online discourse *i-CSR*. My research shows that Unilever applies strategies unique to online communication to create a moralizing discourse which I call the “Do-Good

Spirit.” The Do-Good Spirit is an ideological apparatus that normalizes neoliberal morality.

My analysis of Unilever’s i-CSR campaign and its articulation of the Do-Good Spirit begins after the financial crisis of 2008. Crises are typically moments at which the system seeks to justify and normalize itself. Chapter 1 introduces the surge of moral discourse produced by various cultural leaders, as well as wealthy capitalists, after the crisis of 2008. I offer an overview of the scholarship on neoliberalism and CSR in order to contextualize the discursive Do-Good Spirit within a larger historical and political economic landscape.

Chapter 2 discusses the methodology used to select and study Unilever and its i-CSR discourse. Unilever’s i-CSR campaign revolves around a nebulous conception of “sustainability.” The core textual data for my analysis was collected from Unilever’s corporate website between 2009 to 2017, and its major social media platforms during an extended CSR campaign between 2013 to 2017. In addition, I conducted informal interviews with six marketing professionals to understand the strategies that corporations adopt for Web 2.0. The discussion of my discourse analysis is separated into two remaining chapters that are organized by the level of control the corporation exerts over i-CSR production.

Chapter 3 focuses on the Unilever’s operationalization of i-CSR discourse using one-way communication, mainly on the closed corporate website. By charting the peripheral role of i-CSR discourse on its website from 2005-2008, and then its eventual dominance from 2009 to 2017, I find evidence for Unilever’s pronounced morality as a response to



anti-capitalist critique prevalent after 2008. Even when expanding to social media during the launch of an i-CSR campaign in 2013, Unilever applies digital marketing techniques to control the meaning-making process. First, Unilever's adopted personality and voice for digital interaction works to legitimize its role as an authentic do-gooder. Next, producing high quality audio-visual content for digital distribution, Unilever strategically shares stories to build a narrative around an aesthetic of transparency and profitable sustainability. Furthermore, its adoption of i-CSR discourse at the center of its corporate communications strategy works to naturalize CSR as a benign corporate practice.

Chapter 4 details the interactivity between Unilever and users around sustainability discourse in intended and unintended ways. Here, Unilever's engagement with oppositional users puts the legitimacy of i-CSR into serious question. In this chapter, I identify Unilever's use of crowd-sourcing as a tool for co-option and co-production of progressive social activism. Using examples from Unilever's Facebook and Twitter posts, I also present critical examples of user-led opposition that culminates around two sustained assaults against Unilever during my study—the #UnileverPollutes and #BoycottDove attacks. Despite the presence of anti-Unilever discourse, this chapter shows how Unilever wields influence over a loyal community of users who readily endorse commodified morality and corporate endorsed social activism.

Overall, my examination of Unilever's i-CSR discourse contributes to media studies and CSR scholarship two key ways. First, my project identifies the affordances of social networking technology in constructing a "corporate subjectivity"—the capacity to communicate in real-time like any other user. I-CSR is different from traditional CSR in

that social media affords individual users and groups the capacity to participate in two-way communication with a corporation. My project is the first to study what happens to CSR discourse in this interactive on-line context. Second, my analysis points to consequences of the values-centric interaction between the corporation and users and the ways in which hegemonic i-CSR discourse severely limits democratic citizenship. When a corporation channels the social good in ways that do not fundamentally challenge the profit motive and the destruction of the environment it commodifies social activism. This has consequences for people, the planet, democracy and morality. While social media do offer possibilities for resistance, as chapter 4 shows, the maturation of CSR and its evolution in social media platforms like Facebook, commoditizes information related to human morality and impulse. Furthermore, the machine-learning algorithms which prioritize corporate discourse and curate cultural trends that will engage more users should not be underestimated. Facebook's promotion of high volume posts, regardless of moral or ethical consequences, constructs a faux-public sphere that naturalizes i-CSR discourse and undermines progressive values.

In an interactive environment dominated by private-interests and corporate discourse, my concerns regarding the power of the Do-Good Spirit are: who is defining CSR policy that is in service of the common good, and how can progressive activism challenge the inadequacy of profit-driven sustainability? Given the case study of Unilever's engagement around sustainability values and its growing profitability around sustainable products, it is clear that i-CSR discourse is intentionally working to establish norms around acceptable corporate citizenship. If "freedom of speech" on social media is

free only to the extent that it can advocate the neoliberal ethic, is any attempt to examine the limits of neoliberal progressive discourse a fruitless endeavor? I am certain it is not. Though social responsibility and democratic citizenship are moving targets, my dissertation establishes why now, more than ever, they are charged sites for social struggle. First, my case study shows the way i-CSR discourse distinctly unhinges ideas of accountability, transparency, stewardship and sustainability required for protecting social justice and welfare in a democratic society. In so doing, I find that values constituting social responsibility are rapidly becoming new commodities for businesses and a new battleground for public contestation. Finally, anti-Unilever discourse in my study shows that capitalist critique is not slowing down. In fact, soon after the #BoycottDove attack hijacked the stream of sustainability discourse on Twitter and Facebook by towards the end of my study, the i-CSR campaign was suspended for several months and the “enlightened” CEO of Unilever resigned in 2018. Going forward, my project points to the need for more research to understand the capacity of anti-capitalist movements to reclaim symbolic production online and put neoliberal capitalism on public trial.

### **1. The Neoliberal Spirit Anoints the Do-Good Spirit**

Democracy, capitalism, and morality—all living ideas shaping social reality—might seem at odds, especially in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008. That September, the US subprime-mortgage bubble burst, catalyzing a series of investment banks to declare bankruptcy and stock markets to crash around the world. In the following months, US citizens witnessed a short-lived moment of reckoning as the Senate Banking Committee began an investigation—better described as a “blame game”—between elected and private purveyors of the financial system. During the public hearings, greedy financiers were the first to be chided for wrongfully profiteering from fundamentally insecure financial instruments extracted from credit-deprived individuals (Ritholtz & Task, 2009). Before any federal prescriptions were enacted to rectify the crumbling banking system, President George W. Bush admitted to the “irresponsibility” of market players and begrudgingly endorsed government intervention:

With the situation becoming more precarious by the day, I faced a choice, to step in with dramatic government action or to stand back and allow the irresponsible actions of some to undermine the financial security of all. I’m a strong believer in free enterprise, so my natural instinct is to oppose government intervention. I believe companies that make bad decisions should be allowed to go out of business. Under normal circumstances, I would have followed this course. But these are not normal circumstances. The market is not functioning properly. There has been a widespread loss of confidence, and major sectors of America’s financial system are at risk of shutting down. (Bush, 2008)

The Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008 passed into law in early October 2008, committing \$700 billion of federal funds—borrowed from present and future taxpayers—to “relieve” the largest investment banks of their “troubled assets.” As

Graeber (2010, p. 84) points out, the enfranchised populations in a capitalist democracy are still unable to vote on overhauling economic policy designed by a group of “unelected, and unaccountable, neoliberal technocrats.” Public onlookers certainly questioned who would benefit from this golden parachute. The Treasury Secretary during the Bush administration, Henry Paulson, was just one public official who hastily popped into public scrutiny—especially since he was the CEO of Goldman Sachs benefiting from “the bailout” while it was actively selling these toxic products (Johnston, 2008). While opinion polls reported public opposition to the bailout (Bowman, 2009), neoliberalism was able to rehabilitate itself and continue a new cycle of growth. Neoliberal ideology—characterized by Harvey (2005) as including privatization, corporatization, financialization, crisis manipulation, and state redistribution—was not derailed. Even after the professed “regulation” of financial markets, CEO pay and stock prices rose as the wealth gap continued to expand (Piketty, 2017). This is not the first time that capitalism was able to get beyond a crisis. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) have argued that capitalism is able to face and overcome crises, including opposition to its priorities via workers and anti-capitalist movements, due to its adaptable “spirit.” Drawing on these scholars, I study the “neoliberal spirit”—a guiding ideological force shaping theory, policy, and praxis in US capitalist society from the 1970s-- that animated the rehabilitation neoliberalism in the post-2008 era.

This “spirit” has troubling consequences for democracy. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762), argued there needs to be social discussion of what is in the best interest of society if there is to be such a thing as a society. He states that

[T]he general will alone can direct the State according to the object for which it was instituted, i.e., the common good: for if the clashing of particular interests made the establishment of societies necessary, the agreement of these very interests made it possible. The common element in these different interests is what forms the social tie; and, were there no point of agreement between them all, no society could exist. It is solely on the basis of this common interest that every society should be governed.

A democratic society requires a process of negotiation in order to establish an “agreement” between opposing interests.

It would be reasonable to ask therefore why, in the wake of the economic recession, the current democratic system is not directed by the “the general will” to protect the public against capitalist interests and economic injustice? The common good, equality, and justice—the foundational philosophical concepts shaping democratic thought (Rousseau, 1762)—are conspicuously at odds with capitalism. This is particularly true of the neoliberal period. Hence, the primary question driving my cultural analysis of the contemporary moment and the role of communication is: how has the neoliberal spirit and a “do-good” philosophy held democracy in a vise grip in order to secure the interests of the wealthy while convincing the public that this is a common good?

### **The Role of Oppositional Discourse Constituting the Neoliberal Spirit**

Part of the answer is the way neoliberal capitalism historically reinvented itself by co-opting the values and language of its opponents. Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) have argued that the persistence of capitalism in the face of past crises and anti-capitalist movements is due to its shape-shifting “spirit”—the ability to incorporate anticapitalist critique to justify its existence. By examining management texts written by French

employers during the rise of neoliberalism, Boltanski and Chiapello present the way business organizations from the 1970s to the 1990s responded to select criticisms raised by social movements by strategically co-opting progressive language, revising organizational models, and developing “flexible” policies for workers. They summarize three “impacts of critique” on capitalism over three decades: it delegitimizes values supporting prior versions of profit-making, it placates the oppositional “troops” by partially integrating their criticism in service of accumulation, and it disarms detractors by assembling new modes to make profit (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007, p. 29). Ultimately, they argue, capitalism’s response to critique eludes improvements towards justice and attends to the business objective for generating growing profits.

Similarly, Fraser (2017a) examines US politics from the 1980s and charts the ascent of “progressive neoliberalism” which combines an “expropriative, plutocratic economic program with a liberal-meritocratic politics of recognition.” As the political elite superficially draw on egalitarian and emancipatory ideals, progressive social movements are disarmed and seduced to join the neoliberal cause (Fraser, 2017a). For Žižek (2012), propaganda produced by the elite does not annihilate radical structural change directly; instead, it reinforces the status quo with a cynicism toward any alternative. In other words, powerful cultural messages work to naturalize a resignation to the status quo.

To explain the irrational and irresponsible behavior of the politicians and creditors who caused the economic crisis of 2008, Aydin (2011) points to an underlying moral crisis concerning the ethical obligations of large-scale businesses and a democratically

elected government to their publics. In the aftermath of the crisis, mounting public distrust, measured by the Edelman Trust Barometer (2009), marked overwhelming moral condemnation for businesses and governments recklessly competing to provide political freedoms and economic welfare for private interests at the expense of the public interest. Survey respondents from across the globe expressed skepticism in business, media, and government institutions; however, “trust in government score[d] even lower than trust in business” due to the failure of the government to adequately regulate systematic abuses (Edelman, 2009).

Resistant voices across the social spectrum (like Occupy Wall Street on the Left and the Tea Party on the Right) emerged as discontented and disenfranchised groups organized movements online and in the streets to protest the moral dissonance between democracy and capitalism inspired by neoliberalism (Stiglitz, 2007). Critical reactions to the conflicting normative moral standards are now widespread, as seen in research across disciplines, dystopian media texts (like *The Hunger Games* and *Mr. Robot*), art installations (like Molly Crabapple’s *The Shell Game*), bestselling books (like Andrew Ross Sorkin’s *Too Big to Fail* and Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*), and popular music (like Kanye West’s album *Yeezus*). This surge of cultural critique broadly reflects an existential crisis of our contemporary form of social organization that is fraught with a preoccupation with morality in the political economy—perhaps also suggesting the profitability of such criticism. At a time when popular discourse is focused on the morality of powerful institutions and the system within which they operate, why is it easier to imagine an end to the world, as Žižek often goads, before the end of



capitalism? What might be stifling economic justice and the “possibility” of “utopian revolutionary emancipatory potential” stemming from social anxiety (Žižek, 2012, p. 40)?

In a networked society that exchanges information using social media tools, traditional elites—politicians, business leaders, and religious leaders—still command significant cultural influence in the public sphere. While prominent leaders across various spheres of social life frame the exploitative nature of neoliberal capitalism as a moral crisis requiring radical change, there are economic figureheads that offer perplexing reassurance. On the one hand, during the 60th commemoration of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 2008, the 14th leader of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso, called for the transformation of self-interested wealth gain to an inclusive perspective of interdependent freedom, justice, and equality:

The awesome power that economic institutions have acquired in our society, and the distressing effects that poverty continues to wreak, should make all of us look for means of transforming our economy into one based on compassion. . . . This constantly increasing gap between the “haves” and “have-nots” creates suffering for everyone. Concerned not only for ourselves, our families, our community and country, we must also feel a responsibility for the individuals, communities and peoples who make up the human family as a whole (Dalai Lama, 2008).

Another arbiter of morality couched in religious philosophy, Pope Francis, urged an ethical reformation of the economy in an apostolic exhortation:

The worldwide crisis affecting finance and the economy lays bare their imbalances and, above all, their lack of real concern for human beings. . . . This imbalance is the result of ideologies which defend the absolute autonomy of the marketplace and financial speculation. . . . A new tyranny is thus born, invisible and often virtual, which unilaterally and relentlessly imposes its own laws and rules. . . . I encourage financial experts and political leaders to ponder the words of one of the sages of antiquity: “Not to share one’s wealth with the poor is to

steal from them and to take away their livelihood. It is not our own goods which we hold, but theirs.” (Holy See, 2013)

Three years later, Bernie Sanders, a Democratic presidential candidate in 2016, was invited to the Vatican, where he echoed Pope Francis’s concerns: “The issue of wealth and income inequality is the great economic issue of our time, the great political issue of our time, and the great moral issue of our time. . . . It is an issue that we must confront in my nation and across the world” (Lapowsky, 2016). Though Sanders, a progressive politician, tempers his scorn for the capitalistic market compared to both religious leaders, they all frame economic inequality in moral terms.

Undermining the appeal for radical reform, however, is a striking wave of rhetoric for ethical profit-making that sounds as magical as the neoliberal vision of virtuous competition propped by an “invisible hand.” The production of moral discourse by the capitalist elite works to countervail their own methods of wealth acquisition. Aschoff (2015) examines the amplified voices of “prophets of capitalism” and neoliberal success, like Bill Gates and Oprah Winfrey, who are confidently reinforcing the mythology of meritocracy and social responsibility to construct an image of conscious capitalism. Even right-wing conservatives like Charles G. Koch, possibly the world’s eighth wealthiest individual (Kroll & Dolan, 2017), has joined the chorus, presenting an entrepreneurism that is neither coercive nor destructive but conscious of its responsibility to society. In step with the neoliberal prophets, he ensures the morality of profit-maximization by offering business-management recommendations for generating lawful, ethical gains with integrity: “By ‘good profit,’ I don’t mean high margins or high return on capital, or lots of

profit by just any means. . . . Good profit comes from making a contribution in society—not from corporate welfare or other ways of taking advantage of people” (Koch, 2015, p. 4). Koch’s rhetoric is part of a surge of accounts reframing capitalism for a public that is now deeply skeptical about its legitimacy and morality (Mackey & Sisodia, 2013; Nadella et al., 2017). By implicitly acknowledging the historic devastation of the ethic of profit maximization at all costs, Koch’s technique for surviving extinction in a postcrisis environment is to adapt his discourse to counter the anticapitalist discourse popularized by groups like Occupy Wall Street.

Mimicking social activism mobilized using social media, oppositional discourse today is reconfigured by elites to placate the public and detract from radical change. My project focuses on the way in which digital communication technologies are harnessed to retool progressive values in the interests of capital. I show how social media creates unique affordances for corporations and challenges for social activists. I look specifically at the corporate digital communication tactics and their means of shaping the values in our network society where technological, economic, and cultural electronic information intersect (Castells, 2012). In the face of a critique that re-articulated notions of a common good, such as Occupy Wall Street’s “we are the 99%,” I study how a powerful multinational corporation, like Unilever, employed i-CSR to win and sustain stakeholder loyalty.

### **The Do-Good Spirit**

In the post-economic-crisis era, I argue, the neoliberal spirit co-opts the language of morality actively produced online and anoints a new spirit that frames large-scale

actors as ethical citizens and retools progressive language in service of private interests. Not only are members of the public presented with how businesses are “doing good” for society, but they are pushed by these profit-maximizing actors to “do good” as citizen-consumers. This neoliberal propaganda is as harmful as it is alluring. By offering moral justification, an individual may reconcile the need for radical and meaningful structural change by accepting nominal change and placating themselves through an attitude of “at least they are doing something good.”

The data I have collected to answer my primary research question exposes a well-camouflaged discursive frame I call the “Do-Good Spirit”: an attitude adopted by the capitalist elite, purposed with blunting the moral values that *do* contrast sharply with the current form of democracy and capitalism guided by neoliberal spirit. Put differently, the Do-Good Spirit is a nuanced form of propaganda—deployed specifically for a society of networked citizen-consumers—that creates an illusion of progressive social change by the capitalist class to address the far-reaching failures of neoliberal capitalism. While CSR scholarship suggests that practitioners genuinely believe they are doing good, in reality I argue the Do-Good Spirit simply deflects attention from the real structural change that is needed.

From a critical media studies perspective, the goal of my dissertation is twofold: to examine the key sorcerers of the Do-Good Spirit and to identify their communicative strategies in constructing it. In my initial survey of the manufacturers of the Do-Good Spirit, it became clear that the rhetoric of morality and ethics has been co-opted by a group of powerful elites, of which multinational corporations (MNCs) are a significant

part. Though I find that the Do-Good Spirit is conjured by influential actors (such as billionaires, politicians, nongovernmental organizations, large-scale social entrepreneurs, benefit corporations, and the business press), in this project I concentrate on the MNC as an actor with expansive cultural power online and offline. I am interested in how the production, marketing, and consumption of “sustainable” products becomes a means of doing good. In particular, I focus on the MNC Unilever, because it is a pioneer and global leader in this trend. Using qualitative analysis to study Unilever and its Internet based CSR or i-CSR, I show how social media helps the MNC to create the image of a kind and responsible corporation.

In what follows, I present the theoretical tools underpinning my inquiry into the elite response to the crisis of 2008 amid public outcry and cultural critique, both of which provide the context for the rise of the Do-Good Spirit. Informed by critical political economy of communication, I show how the neoliberal spirit—which attacks democracy and the common good—transforms into the Do-Good Spirit by co-opting the language of morality and social responsibility. Next, I review the management literature undergirding CSR and the conception of the public as a stakeholder to ground my critique of CSR communication. Last, I briefly introduce the case study of Unilever’s i-CSR campaign from 2013 to 2017 to interrogate the strategies used to build the Do-Good Spirit.

Throughout the dissertation, I remain highly suspicious of the widespread adoption of CSR propping up the Do-Good Spirit. My case study provides the critical grounds on which to discuss the potential the Do-Good Spirit holds to naturalize the discourse of equality, justice, and social responsibility by large-scale business enterprises.

Ultimately, whether the Do-Good Spirit engenders a more conscious, less destructive, and less exploitative form of capitalism is not the fundamental issue driving my research. Rather, I focus on the way it hampers the potential for meaningful change by co-opting the progressive values at the center of social activism. The spirit survives by adaptation, absorbing cultural critique and harnessing the communicative tools that are vital for energized debate, cooperation, and civic participation within a democracy.

### **Critical Political Economy of the Do-Good Spirit**

Political economy is an approach to studying the conditions under which society is organized. Since its emergence in 18th-century Europe, the term has come to emphasize a wide-ranging tradition of research focused on the interrelationship between material production and social institutions. Early writers such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and Thomas Robert Malthus established the foundations for what is now referred to as the “classical approach,” wherein the economy is “situated” at the forefront within a broader context (Browning & Kilmister, 2006). The development of the field of economics traces back to this tradition and is distinct from political economy; the political and social questions in the former are absorbed and abstracted to answer the primary economic questions (Fine, 1999). For Browning and Kilmister, the deficiency of economics and classical political economy is their inability to see the economy as part of a social whole, instead offering an apparent economic reductivism and orthodox acceptance of defined principles of a model rational actor within an efficient market system. By contrast, *critical political economy* calls for a “radical revision of economic concepts in light of their inadequacy in dealing with the questions generated by that

context” (p. 2). The critical political economist does not reject economic ideas but recognizes the inextricable links between economic and social life and insists on their transformation.

As Browning and Kilmister go on to say, Hegel and Marx are foundational to critical political economy, though this approach is not limited to Marxist or Hegelian writers. Using the common method of *dialectics*, both thinkers acknowledge the contradictory nature of market relations. Capitalism—characterized by what Schumpeter calls an ongoing process of “creative destruction”—structures human relations around the cycles of material production (Harvey, 2005). From Marx, *class* emerges as an important tool to analyze the relations of *commodity exchange*, in which capitalists own the means of production and the working class sells its labor power for a wage (Artz, 2006). *Ideology*, a “system of beliefs, attitudes and ideas,” provides a lens to view social relations and resource distribution in capitalist society (Smythe, 1981, p. 171, cited in Fuchs, 2012). The tradition of critical political economy brings class struggle within the capitalist society into focus and finds emancipatory potential within the organization of resistance by the working class (Mosco, 1996). Thus, the driving question of my research seeks to interrogate the dialectical ideology of the contemporary market-exchange system, which maintains the pattern of creating and destroying values (of freedom, equality, justice, and responsibility) and perpetuates exploitative conditions for the working class (Jameson, 1991).

Since the ideological contradictions within material production also extend to cultural production, my project studies the process of communication—a complex site for

examining power, insofar as it reflects the practices and values of a society's relationship to the means of production (Artz, 2006). Since communicative texts do not simply "reflect" the interests of the elite, I study how they are constitutive of the current neoliberal era. In particular, I study how the Do-Good Spirit is produced and reproduced as a means to blunt structural critiques of capitalism. Critical political economy of communication analyzes "who can say what to whom within the process of cultural production, and how those meanings are translated to social action" (Garnham, 1990, p. 10). In other words, symbolic forms and media texts within the capitalist system produce "structures of feeling" that can influence the meaning, creativity, desire, purpose, and interpretive possibilities of the individual (Williams, cited in Garnham, 1990). This is not to say, as the lingering debate between cultural studies and political economy goes, that the capitalist mode of production determines meanings and practices without any regard for individual agency (Mosco, 1996). Rather, capitalist dynamics are seen as a central force, with structural characteristics (which may constrain some meanings while encouraging others) that shape the context in which cultural practices take place and meanings are negotiated (Garnham, 1995; Murdock, 1995). Since political economy is understood as one among a number of forces that constitute social reality, critical political economy of communication as Vincent Mosco argues, "*decenters* the media" by placing it within the larger analysis of "capital, class, contradiction, conflict and oppositional struggles" (Mosco, 1996, p. 104).

In summary, a critical political-economic analysis of the conflict between democratic values and capitalist values requires an interrogation of the moral rhetoric



constructed by powerful cultural producers within the broader ideological landscape. As noted earlier in the chapter, widespread social discontent since the economic crisis has been mediated through social movements, religious exhortations, journalistic investigations, scholarly research, artistic mediation, and other critical media texts. Despite ongoing economic injustice against the 99%, the elite's reassurance through moral rhetoric produces an illusion of conscious capitalism that is hampering political recourse and stunting radical structural transformation.

Drawing on Deetz's (1992) conception of corporations as an imperializing social institution, as well as Saussure's (1966) insistence on framing language as "a social fact" to be understood as a complex system of signs and meanings in a particular social setting, I select CSR as my "object of study." By placing CSR discourse at the center of my examination, particularly i-CSR, I put the communication tools and strategies used by corporations into focus, shedding light on the processes of and challenges to the manufacture of morality. I study both Unilever's i-CSR discourse and the responses by the public on social media platforms. The materiality and temporality of digital interaction creates a space both for i-CSR and responses by users who are actively negotiating and contesting corporate constructions of morality. While i-CSR is a recent development in the digital era, corporate morality has a longer history. It is to this history that I turn next in order to situate the neoliberal spirit and the logic of do-goodism.

### **Capitalism, Morality, and the Neoliberal Spirit**

**Evolving capitalist values.** How does the neoliberal spirit overrule the individual interests of the majority as well as the shared interests of a collective? Drawing on

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, Wilkis's (2017) contribution to the sociology of morality offers an answer. He provides an applicable framework for recognizing the relationship between morality and power embedded within the economy. Not to be confused with the moral economy—coined by Thompson (1971) to describe the extrinsic values of fairness opposing the capitalist economy—Wilkis's development of moral capital keenly underscores the social component of morality necessary for understanding the tenacity of the neoliberal agenda:

People are constantly measuring, comparing, and evaluating their moral virtues, because these virtues bestow a very specific kind of power. Possessing moral capital means having these virtues acknowledged. Meeting moral obligations, for example, can be a source of such recognition (Mauss 1966), and therefore a source of power as well. The moral component of moral capital thus depends on meeting social obligations in order to have one's virtues acknowledged by others. In this regard, moral capital creates a social ranking: the more of it you have, the more benefits you will reap in a given society. (Wilkis, 2017, p. 10)

Beyond morality's regulation of individual action alone, Wilkis examines moral capital as a performative social dynamic that bestows power within society, providing an important optic for examining the naturalization of neoliberal values. Since assessment of morality is also a social process, the observation of values socially acknowledged as "virtuous" can be perceived as a currency of power. When the ruling class can garner moral capital above all else, the values legitimizing their power can also become tools for social coercion and destruction. So, to uncover the moral capital energizing the neoliberal spirit today, the remaining discussion is organized around the evolving classical liberal values of individualism, market primacy, rationality reconfigured as corporatization, profit maximization, and personal responsibility—as well as neoliberal adaptations of

progressive liberal values, such as autonomy, creativity, diversity, and feminism (Fraser, 2013; Boltanski, & Chiappello, 2007).

Individualism, while a foundational neoliberal ethic, is not new within the history of capitalism. The concept has its origins within classical liberal Enlightenment philosophy and marked the shift from mercantilism to industrial capitalism. Anglo-European liberal thinkers in the 17th century, such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, began to grapple with the conception of individual human freedom embedded within any social contract between people and their ruling institutions. As Locke puts it,

Every one, as he is bound to preserve himself, and not to quit his station wilfully, so by the like reason, when his own preservation comes not in competition, ought he, as much as he can, to preserve the rest of mankind, and may not, unless it be to do justice on an offender, take away, or impair the life, or what tends to the preservation of the life, the liberty, health, limb, or goods of another. (Locke, 2010)

A central concern of early of liberal political theory was the natural inclination to preserve one's own life and liberty as a primary duty and then, by rational means, extend the individual duty to preserve the liberties of the greater society. In doing so, Duggan (2004) identifies how liberalism began to sketch the key concepts necessary for organizing the narrative of a democratic society, distinguishing the domains of private (the individual and family) and public (the state).

In the 18th and 19th centuries, classical liberal philosophers such as Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill developed theories of the private—correlating individual liberty with private property (a shifting conception afforded to white men as the right to own land and, at the time, slaves)—and a participatory government (Duggan, 2004). Amid the

shift from mercantilism to industrial capitalism, the nature of individual freedom and rational self-interest driving economic exchange led to the prominence of the “free-market order,” which could “spontaneously” organize itself, achieve harmony, and safeguard individual liberty from the power of the government: “By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good” (Smith, ([1776] 2000), p. 27). The market—governed by natural laws of supply, demand, and self-interest—is identified as the most effective arbiter of the mutual good in a society.

This idealized market system, fueled by individual-private pursuit, can only operate without any external interference from the state—or even the altruistic intentions of a merchant. Derived from Hobbesian contractualism, the classical liberal ethic in Smith’s account places morality, or “enlightened self-interest,” as the common driver of productivity in society because morality stems from a framework that supports individual freedoms and property, and individuals will find consensus to support a social system that will preserve individual freedoms and property (Gaus, Courtland, & Schmidtz, 2018). By situating the individual as a key unit at the center of a free-market system so that self-interest unintentionally supplies the common good and demands the cooperation of a democratic government, classical liberalism established a basic vocabulary dividing personal from collective interest.

The classical liberal values of individualism, rationality, and an idealized free market found new backing in the 20th century by a group of influential European

economists, further developing the conception of the self within a market-based society. The US variant of neoliberal thinking was concentrated at the University of Chicago. It was mainly founded by Friedrich Von Hayek and carried on by Milton Friedman and James Buchanan, among others (Kumar, 2011; MacLean, 2017). Though these thinkers contested the prefix *neo-*, Chicago School intellectualism traces its roots to a commitment to free-market arbitration of individual freedom, especially when threatened by collectivist political orders like the Social Security Act (Eagleton-Pierce, 2016; MacLean, 2017). The dominant perspective finds that human freedoms are preserved when participants, driven by individual self-interest, are left to compete in exchange without any form of regulation, taxation, or state-imposed restriction. The emphasis on “economic freedom”—expressed in terms of the consumptive power of consumers, creative power of producers, and choice of employment for laborers—stretches the emancipatory promise of private commercial activity to all areas of social life (Eagleton-Pierce, 2016). Moreover, Hayek (1978) exemplifies this reorientation of classical liberal values in relation to political institutions: “There can be no freedom of press if the instruments of printing are under government control, no freedom of assembly if the needed rooms are so controlled, no freedom of movement if the means of transport are a government monopoly” (p. 149). Neoliberal thinking of the post–World War II period reconfigured values of individual freedom around the liberating forces of the free market and delineated an oppositional relationship between state power and the market order. When neoliberalism was put into practice within a democratic society, the interplay between the constructions of individual-private and collective-public values began to

obfuscate ideals of citizenship. Furthermore, this emphasis on business interest as an extension of individual-private interest heightens the contradictions between neoliberal and democratic values.

Each US political administration from the 1980s on has subscribed to the “market ideology”—placed in opposition to inefficient government bureaucracy—while paradoxically nurturing a symbiotic relationship with business interests (Klein, 2007; Duggan, 2003; MacLean, 2017). Especially after the US abandoned the gold standard (established by the Bretton Woods agreement to manage the international monetary system in 1971), rising inflation and unemployment were exacerbated by the oil crisis of the 1970s. The Keynesian policies that had secured markets and state welfare after World War II were overturned and replaced with monetary and fiscal policies that were directly influenced by Chicago School economic thought (Kumar, 2011). The Reagan administration in the US and the Thatcher administration in the UK are both recognized as entrenching neoliberalism by deepening policies that aggressively pushed for deregulation, privatization, and tax breaks to corporations in the 1980s. The intellectual movement continued to develop through conservative think tanks and right-wing academics funded by wealthy elites; the ongoing incubation of neoliberal economic theory permeates all military and social policy, from education to healthcare (Klein, 2007; MacLean 2017). Regardless of the party at the helm, the valorization of market primacy, especially by the Clinton administration in the 1990s, has accelerated the “globalization” of “free trade,” which necessitated the scaffolding of institutional regulation of debt (Graeber, 2010). So while neoliberal rhetoric denounces big

government in the market, the “Washington Consensus”—a collaboration between the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the US Treasury—implements policies that are unabashedly “pro-corporate guarantors of private property relations” (Duggan, 2003, p. xii). In the post-9/11 era, neoliberal responses to political-economic crisis continue to support the privatization of public services and the expansion of the “free market” across the globe (Harvey, 2005). This persistent privileging of the capitalist class’s private interests, embedded within the regulatory framework of the last 40 years, elevates the corporation and the entrepreneur as legitimate (though unelected) actors in the political process.

So if preserving *human freedom* is a value that was initially inspired by classical liberalism, the contemporary neoliberal spirit shifts attention to the abstract intermediary of *economic freedom*: the neoliberal corporate actor and its profit-maximization ethic. The vision of liberating business—initially from the jurisdiction of the British monarchy and later from government regulation (Perrow, 2002)—has been a driving force behind the rising power of the corporation in service of its owners and managers. In the 19th century, state legislatures granted charters requiring corporations, like banks and transportation companies, to serve the public interest or risk having their charters revoked. However, revolutions in the legal system by the end of the 19th century contributed to the birth of the “modern corporation,” lifting state charter restrictions and the statutory requirement to consider the public interest. Justified by dreams of capitalist “prosperity and growth,” laws began to privilege corporate interests by conferring property rights with “the freedom to externalize costs” (Perrow, 2002, p. 45). As modern

corporations began to shape the organization and creation of wealth in US society in the 20th century, their power was still routinely kept in check by unions and social regulations (Bakan, 2004). Social activism in the 1960s, advocating for “new social regulation,” pushed for environmental policy, human rights, and consumer safety (Bakan, 2004, p. 102). These movements resulted in the legal recognition of stakeholders (environment, employees, and consumers) through the creation of Environmental Protection Agency, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and the Consumer Product Safety Commission in the 1970s. Carroll (1991) marks this shift as the first time “corporate executives have had to wrestle with how they balance their commitments to the corporation’s owners with their obligations to an ever-broadening group of stakeholders who claim both legal and ethical rights” (p. 39).

Despite the public policies to protect stakeholders, how has the neoliberal corporate actor cemented the moral obligation of corporations to preserve, first and foremost, the interests of its shareholders (Friedman, 1970)? Not only is corporate power ratified by pervasive Chicago School rationalism, but according to Stiglitz (2007) and Winkler (2018), corporations have been winning operational privileges through an expansive safety net of neoliberal legislation and constitutional rights and a historic pattern of favorable judicial rulings. Equipped with the power to influence the democratic rules of profit-making directly by lobbying, neoliberal modern corporations are in a “race to the bottom” to lower production costs. Mobilized by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in 1948, which was replaced by the World Trade Organization in 1993,



corporations courted developing nations with tax breaks and deregulation to access cheap labor and create new “free” markets (Stiglitz, 2007). The accelerating globalization of industrial production and finance is fueling the geographic scope and political prowess of the multinational corporate actor; however, without any transnational governing institutions to enforce responsible business operations, defining corporate citizenship is unchecked and voluntary (Banerjee, 2008). Moreover, claims of legal corporate personhood in the neoliberal era afford unforeseen rights to the corporation as if it were an individual citizen—such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press, religious liberty, due process, and freedom from unreasonable searches and seizures (Winkler, 2018). Unlike marches for civil rights by racialized groups, corporate rights have expanded through “judicial rulings extending fundamental protections to business, even in the absence of national consensus” (Winkler, 2018, p. 4). In *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, the Supreme Court overturned the McCain–Feingold Act that limited corporate campaign contributions, on the grounds of a corporation’s right to free speech, endowing the corporation with a “voice” to participate in the voting process. The neoliberal corporation’s engagement, now as a neoliberal citizen, does not stop with indirect monetary contributions to political candidates but, as my discourse analysis of Unilever’s online campaign illustrates, is further actualized by social-networking tools and validated by moral rhetoric adapted to communicate its CSR.

Even with the emergence of the corporation as an actor and citizen, human individualism has not been undermined by neoliberal ideology per se; rather, it is contorted to bind individuals to a neoliberal logic of causation. Popularized in public

discourse and codified in institutional policies, “personal responsibility” is a commanding neoliberal value that actively constructs the morals and the expectations of individuals, particularly wage-earners, participating in an advanced capitalist society (Eagleton-Piece, 2016). Presented in opposition to state welfare, personal responsibility focuses attention on the individual’s burden to participate in market activities for a proportional reward. In other words, responsibility will compel individuals to “take risks, compete and become competent utility-maximizers” (Masquelier, 2017, p. 70). From this perspective, neoliberal personal responsibility seeks to rationalize an individual’s impulse and internal sense of purpose using the language of free-market economics.

In spite of imposing compliance to the market’s alleged emancipatory and meritocratic forces (not the state), neoliberal personal responsibility is also closely intertwined with constructions of citizenship—a “dynamic, contextual, contested, and multidimensional” concept formulated on the basis of “status (membership), identity (feelings of belonging), civic virtues (dispositions, values, and behaviors), and agency (engagement, political efficacy and power)” (Schugurensky, 2010, p. 2). As early as Reagan’s (1979) candidacy announcement, ideas around individual accountability became yoked to the idea of a collective American identity: “A troubled and afflicted mankind looks to us, pleading for us to keep our rendezvous with destiny; that we will uphold the principles of self-reliance, self-discipline, morality, and—above all—responsible liberty for every individual that we will become that shining city on a hill.” For Reagan, if a citizen is unable to achieve success due to the oppressive conditions of inequality inhibiting her efforts, then it is not the fault of the state; rather, the individual is

to blame. Neoliberal personal responsibility not only appears as a “motivating discourse” to empower citizens struggling to improve personal conditions (Wacquant, 2012, p. 72), but also manifests within legislation. For example, as Eagleton-Piece (2016) points out, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 institutionalized the construction of individually responsible wage-earners by providing limited state welfare that was contingent upon mandatory employment. Stipulations for providing assistance for childcare, education, and livelihood to vulnerable groups, such as single mothers, were couched in “self-sufficiency” rhetoric (Brenner, 2017). When personal responsibility is repurposed in service of the market mechanism, citizens are defined by their capacity for employment as well as for consumption. After 2008, the Do-Good Spirit continues to redirect individuals to seek confidence in a neoliberal logic, despite its quantifiable failures, by constructing a personal-responsibility ethic that erodes the individual’s confidence in the capacity of the state to serve the common good. Ultimately, the neoliberal spirit benefits from nursing a type of alienation from the commons, or what Weber calls the “iron cage” of rational thinking, by stepping in to fill the void.

**The neoliberal spirit in theory, policy and praxis.** Drawing on Max Weber’s (2010) project for diagnosing capitalism’s creative/destructive pathology, the ideological force I call the “neoliberal spirit” helps trace the evolving value system guiding advanced capitalism, described by Treanor (cited in Harvey, 2005, p. 3) as an “ethic in itself.” With the intensification of inequality, economic injustice, and environmental degradation,

especially after the post-2008 crisis, this section shows how neoliberalism's contradictory logic is bolstered and legitimized by a set of policies and practices aimed at securing elite interests, and an evolving system of moral values safeguarding profit-maximization.

Since my purpose is to contextualize the Do-Good Spirit, my overview of the major currents of critical research on the neoliberal spirit puts into question the naturalization of "neoliberal values"—a set of moral principles guiding individual action and ethical principles guiding a group's interactions in the neoliberal era. Put differently, how do neoliberal values maintain an agenda that undermines the collective values needed to nurture an equitable participatory democracy?

Weber's (2010) sociological exploration of the tenacity of capitalism offers a compelling focus on moral and ethical values in the ideological dimension of the political economy. In order to understand the irresistible force of "economic acquisition [that] is no longer subordinated to man as the means for the satisfaction of his material needs," Weber (2010, p. 13) looks to the cultural ideas shaping the logics of profit and labor within industrial capitalist society. His inquiry finds that Protestantism's moral axioms, defined in rational material terms, assigns sacred significance to justify economic acquisition. By prodigiously dedicating oneself to an individual "calling" that yields a profit, a worker who subscribes to this reformed church doctrine is in effect performing an ordained social responsibility to earn divine grace. In time, Weber finds that the moral rationalization of profitable action, efficiency of labor time, and view of a common social purpose—ethics at the root of Protestantism—become separated from religious beliefs. He argues that the contradictory conditions born from this secularized "capitalist spirit"

create “a disenchantment of the world” in which bureaucratic structures and scientific information cage individuals, forcing them to accept the conditions of dehumanizing rationalization (Jenkins, 2000). Weber’s critical investigation of naturalized “ethics” driving the continuation of a deeply dehumanizing system remains as important today as it was during the rise of industrial capitalism. The metaphor of capitalism’s “spirit” provides a framework for understanding the pervading values and norms sustaining this system, especially through periods of crisis and transformation.

Though neoliberal theory stems from classical 17th-century liberalism, 21st-century neoliberalism is not to be understood as a “pure” intellectual practice but as a hybridized series of ideas and activities describing patterns within the process of capital accumulation over a period of time (Eagleton-Pierce, 2016), unleashed through policies adopted from the 1970s onward. Critical scholars converge around neoliberalism’s divisive role in organizing contemporary social life around an idealized “Western” conception of a “free market” that purports to distribute the needs of society through voluntary participation; in particular, they hone in on the way neoliberalism simultaneously exacerbates destructive social conditions and erodes the collective values that are vital for a participatory democracy (Giroux, 2008; Harvey, 2005; Duggan, 2003; Fraser, 2017; MacLean, 2017; Boltanski & Chiappello, 2007). When neoliberal theory, separating the market from government control, began to influence a new wave of economic policies under the Reagan and Thatcher administrations in the 1980s—advancing deregulation, privatization, and corporatization—it also laid the foundations for the uninhibited acceptance of neoliberal ideology by ruling elites (Harvey, 2005). For

nearly four decades, neoliberal ideology, since advocated by each subsequent US and UK administration, endures by following an order of “productive incoherence” (Duggan, 2004, p. 14). Like a dark code operating beyond direct scrutiny, it instructs a form of “statecraft” that secures business interests, scales back on state-sponsored public-welfare projects, and clamps down on collective organization—all while ruling elites “appeal and appease” the public of the system’s underlying “trickle-down” logic (Duggan, 2004).

Though neoliberalism’s serious social implications on all spheres of life are too extensive to examine here—including the debilitating indebtedness of vulnerable populations, widening wealth gap (Piketty, 2017), deterioration of workplace protections (Ross, 2010), exploitation of natural resources (Klein, 2007), and toxicity in life-sustaining resources (Pollan, 2016)—it is important to examine the roots of neoliberal destruction embedded within the policies directing the political economy. Harvey (2005) describes four overarching features of the neoliberal agenda in practice from the 1970s: privatization and corporatization, financialization, crisis manipulation, and state redistribution. First, federal subsidies and incentives generously accorded to corporations have led to the cannibalization of smaller firms in most industries, such as transportation, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, and telecommunications (Kumar, 2011). The clarion call for reduced taxes has also resulted in a massive divestiture of social welfare by the government, while the flow of corporate money to Washington has accelerated (Reich, 2008). Next, the deregulation of the financial system has given way to a wave of “innovative” financial instruments creating derivative and futures markets, and encouraging speculation, predation, fraud and outright theft. Capital has since been

redistributed upward into the hands of a concentrated few, while the majority remain dispossessed of their pensions and job security (Harvey, 2005). Martin (2002) calls attention to the “financialization” of everyday life with the rise of financial-planning firms, personal banking self-help media, investment services, internet investing, online banking, digitized debt, and overwhelming “calculating” attitudes guiding human behavior. Finally, natural and social crises, on a national and an international level, are managed and manipulated by the Washington Consensus, using economic shock therapy to redistribute wealth from poor to rich (Klein, 2007). Overall, critical scholars describe a pattern of neoliberal reforms in which governing institutions prioritize the creation of a climate that is ultimately “good for business” at the expense of the majority.

Shaped by this research exposing the enduring destructiveness of the neoliberal spirit, my project calls attention to the adaptability of capitalism, or as Boltanski and Chiappello (2007) describe the way it appropriates the critique produced by social movements. For instance, after the 1968 protests in France critiquing the security and justice of capitalism, Boltanski and Chiappello (2007, p.29) show how a reconfigured management style integrating “versatility, job flexibility and the ability to learn and adapt to new duties” was born that replaced the “possession of an occupation and established qualifications.” While the new management approach selectively addresses charges of alienation and bureaucracy, it does so superficially in order to placate wage-earners. Following the same pattern, the emerging rhetoric of morality after 2008, the Do-Good Spirit, also works to reconfigure profit-maximizing discourse to mitigate charges of greed, injustice, degradation and exploitation in order to safeguard elite interests.

However, as explained in the subsequent section, I also argue that the Do-Good Spirit is distinct from previous adaptations because of the affordances and limits of producing, co-producing, and negotiating moral discourse online.

**Adapting to progressive critique.** Critical scholars Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) call attention to neoliberalism’s ability to “adapt” to contemporaneous critique in a way that reverses forms of purported progress using moral justifications. In their historical analysis of business-management texts, Boltanski and Chiapello find influences from 1960s countercultural movements in the emergence of “liberating” values in French corporate workplaces after the 1980s:

This process is capable of conforming to societies with aspirations that vary greatly over time (but also in space, though that is not our subject), and of recuperating the ideas of those who were its enemies in a previous phase. . . . By adapting these sets of [critical] demands to the description of a new, liberated, and even libertarian way of making profit—which was also said to allow for realization of the self and its most personal aspirations—the new spirit could be conceived in the initial stages of its formulation as transcending capitalism, thereby transcending anti-capitalism as well. (p. 201)

The capacity for continuous contradiction and real-time adaptation to dynamic social norms and expectations is an ethic of Boltanski and Chiapello’s “new spirit” of capitalism. For example, when the rise in personal responsibility rhetoric was met with the post-industrial social critique of the workplace—such as the destruction of self-fulfillment and creativity—they find that the emerging management class developed new practices around “autonomy” and “flexibility” for the laborer. However progressive this may appear, the key argument is that neoliberal “freedoms” in fact cost wage-earners their employment security and welfare benefits and added additional responsibilities



without compensation. By studying the corporation and its CSR discourse, my analysis dovetails with Boltanski and Chiappello's (2007, p. 111) effort to trace the new grammars employed by a shape-shifting neoliberal spirit that "can win over forces that are hostile to capitalism by proposing to transcend it."

From a historical perspective, Fraser (2017b) examines this apparently progressive bent in 1990s US politics and identifies a developing subcurrent of "progressive neoliberalism" that borrows leftist ideals from authentic social movements. As far back as the Clinton administration, Fraser traces "a veneer of emancipatory charisma" that has been manufacturing "[i]deals like diversity and empowerment, which could in principle serve different ends" (Fraser, 2017b, p. 131). During this period of rampant globalization, Fraser identifies the adoption of "truncated" expressions of diversity, multiculturalism, environmentalism, and feminism circumscribed within idealized, nondiscriminatory free-market rhetoric by elite classes. As underrepresented groups are granted some access to the networks of power, the political augmentation of "lethal forms of financialization" in the economy and politics still redistributes wealth upward (Fraser, 2017b). Though these "progressive" neoliberal values appear to prize egalitarianism, each administration after Clinton has continued to abide by the neoliberal code—privatizing public goods, pruning state welfare projects, and debilitating collective organization. However, after the election of Trump, a conservative and anti-"progressive" candidate, in 2016, Fraser alludes to the end of "progressive neoliberalism" and a transformation toward a new reactionary populism. While it is not in the scope of my project to engage Fraser's (2017b) arguments claiming "the absence of any genuine Left"

to challenge the co-optation and adaptation of progressive ideals, I do not wish to dismiss the pervasiveness of “progressive neoliberalism” just yet. Even with its flexible nature during the ascendancy of Trump, I argue that the neoliberal spirit remains an influential arbiter of a type of morality that supports and exploits “progressive-like” values in service of the elite class. In other words, operating on an ethic of inclusion and diversification, any effort to draw the largest possible body politic will always ensure market growth and profit maximization.

I situate my project within the currents of “progressive neoliberalism,” which has historically subsumed marketable elements of progressive social movements while holding participatory democracy in its grip. By blurring values around public and private life, I argue that the neoliberal spirit is constructing a form of consumption that intersects with active citizenship in dangerous new ways. Building on the work by Boltanski and Chiapello (2007), my examination focuses on the role of CSR discourse as a response to the 2008 crisis and its relationship to oppositional discourse produced online. Applied to a digital context, the neoliberal spirit evolves into the Do-Good Spirit by taking advantage of the affordances and limits of social media communication. In order to adapt to the post-2008 climate of hyperconnected social discontent and skepticism, the neoliberal value of profit maximization is now intentionally eclipsed by a constellation of values with strong moral capital. Values, such as personal responsibility, autonomy, diversity, creativity, and feminism, are driving the widespread adoption of CSR. Though the fiduciary duty to “maximize share-holder value” can be disputed as a myth in service of short-term investments (Stout, 2013), the neoliberal corporate actor communicating

online, I argue, is a dynamic entity that designs rational methods to control the political, economic, and cultural meanings that will ensure its growth (in profits) in perpetuity. Through my research I find that unlike the previous periods of adaptation, the digital media terrain offers new capacities for real-time dialog and exchange between corporations and the public. However, the structures undergirding social media platforms mediating moral engagement are not impartial; they too are actively shaping morality to serve its own interests to commoditize social data. In the following section, I discuss the formation of CSR in theory and practice.

### **Corporate Social Responsibility and Stakeholder Theory**

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a contested theory and practice that lies in the crosshairs of stakeholder theory—a framework used in business management literature to organize the complex relationships between a business and the various actors affiliated with its subsistence. In theory, CSR frames a company’s perceived obligations to its publics. The 50 years of academic research on CSR mainly stems from a managerial perspective and adopts a normative perspective on stakeholder theory (Banerjee, 2008). In practice, CSR is performed through strategic initiatives that include philanthropic donations, private-public partnerships, and voluntary activity. There is also evidence of an emerging “CSR industry” composed of managers, consultants, communications professionals, firms, agencies, associations, and schools producing and disseminating information supporting and critiquing the “market for virtue” (Vogel, 2005). Although terminology varies in academic research and professional literature—such as, corporate

citizenship, stewardship, and sustainability—an analysis of corporate social-disclosure practices shows that *CSR* as an umbrella term is moving from the margins to mainstream (Perrini, 2005). Though the mainstreaming of *CSR* as a forward-facing representation of business ethics today may seem benign, I begin my critical examination of *CSR* by tracing its inherently problematic roots in the history of corporate involvement in public affairs, corporate ownership structure, and stakeholder theory. In particular, the reification of business purpose within stakeholder theory reveals the conflicting values and challenges that come with any study of *CSR*. Although the question of *CSR*'s legitimacy and authenticity still looms throughout the project, I channel the debate as a justification for interrogating the process of communicating *CSR*. Instead of adjudicating *CSR*'s merit in providing social aid, I argue for the need to examine *CSR* communication practices in their own right—not only as an instrument of corporate disclosure to stakeholders but as a form of social discourse that shapes moral and ethical values within society at large. An understudied area in critical media and communication scholarship, *CSR* communications is an inflamed battleground over meaning and cultural resignification.

**Historical survey of the business-society contract.** A brief historical survey of the business-society contract, especially during moments of publicized misconduct, reflects an ongoing struggle with societal expectations of businesses beyond profit-making. When President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1936) called “the old enemies of peace—business and financial monopoly, speculation, reckless banking, class antagonism, sectionalism, war profiteering” after World War I and the Depression, public approval rates of capitalism and corporations were dismal. In an effort to compete with New Deal

rhetoric and safeguard their legitimacy, “soulless” corporations successfully ignited public-relations and advertising agencies to help construct “friendly” new public images. By the end of World War II, the strategies that were successfully humanizing corporations, such as advertising campaigns, factory tours, and public exhibitions, also contributed to the perception of welfare capitalism as benevolent—a marked shift to adopt medical, housing and leisure policies for corporate employees (Marchand, 1998). Perhaps a precursor to formalized CSR, the concept of “corporate citizenship” developed further in the 1950s as legal barriers to corporate philanthropy were lifted (Kotler & Lee, 2005, p. 7; Vogel, 2005). During the social activism of the 1960s, pressure on corporations for more accountability and “new social regulation” to protect environmental, human rights, and consumer safety also renewed business’s interest in aligning corporate interests with public affairs (Bakan, 2004, p. 102). Many “progressive companies”—like Dayton-Hudson, Levi Strauss, and Cummins Engine—started to donate up to 5% of their pretax income to foundations and nonprofit organizations that were “objective” and unrelated to its core business (N.C. Smith, 1994). However, when publicity crises, like the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989, left corporations ill-equipped to confront irate environmentalist groups and the public, corporations deemed their philanthropic practices “unstrategic” (N.C. Smith, 1994). Today, the reason for adopting CSR initiatives and disclosure is largely that it is a proactive tool to manage public relations (Mirvins & Googins, 2006).

As information communication technology (ICT) developments advanced the reach of information amid neoliberal globalization, corporations were pressured to revise

corporate citizenship in the 1980s and 1990s. Although formal strides in CSR were made during the rise of neoliberalism, the ethic of the market's efficacy in organizing society has endowed firms with the power to define "corporate governance" strategically, leaving civil society organizations and governments without effective forms of intervention (Den Hond & De Baker, 2007). Governmental attempts to stimulate CSR, such as the Clinton administration's Apparel Industry Partnership in 1996 and the UK Blair administration's Ethical Trading Initiative in 1998, work to *reinforce* the primacy of market forces in organizing CSR (Den Hond & De Baker, 2007). Extragovernmental organizations, like the UN, and anticorporate social movements also began to call for responsible business activity. The movement toward public and private engagement with CSR surged around key moments, including the Forum for Sustainable and Responsible Investment in 1984, the Brundtland Commission's *Our Common Future* report on sustainable development in 1987, the introduction of the "triple bottom line" social-environmental-economic performance reporting method in 1994, and the creation of the UN Global Compact in 1999 (SustainAbility, 2007). However, the toothless regulatory environment supported by neoliberal governments has blunted the demands made by nonprofit groups, social activist organizations, and NGOs, which have "little bargaining power against firms" (Den Hond & De Baker, 2007).

**The development of a "stakeholder".** The emergence of CSR as a theory and practice has as much to do with larger political-economic conditions as with academic developments in examining corporate structure. Handy and Stiglitz both argue that the

tension of values between business and society begins within the business organization itself. Historical surveys ascribe major cultural shifts in business values to the changing ownership structures and legal frameworks supporting modern corporations (Handy, 2003; Stiglitz, 2007; Vogel, 2005). Handy writes, “The idea that those who provide the finance are a company’s rightful owners, rather than just its financiers, dates from the early days of business, when the financier was genuinely the owner and usually the chief executive as well” (2003, p. 73). By the 20th century, a pattern of “managerial capitalism” marked a separation between the owners and managers, prompting new explorations of business priorities.<sup>1</sup> Bounded by corporate law, the responsibility of managers has since been to act in the interest of their owners; the owners have since been liable for the “limited” amount of their financial investment (Stiglitz, 2007). Over time, the paternalistic nature of many corporations that once provided job security and generous benefits for their workers eroded (Bakan, 2004; Vogel, 2005). With the rise of “investment capitalism” (Vogel, 2005) or “stock-market capitalism” (Handy, 2003), accelerated by neoliberal globalization, the profit-making responsibility of a manager crystallized into a profit-maximizing fiduciary duty to increase shareholder value, as measured by stock price.

According to Handy (2003), the clash of values that stems from such structural changes increases the potential for misaligned incentives between managers (agents) acting on behalf of the shareholders (principal). Popularly referred to as the *principal-*

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<sup>1</sup> See Ronald Coase’s 1937 essay “The Nature of the Firm,” Adolf Berle and Gardiner Means’ 1933 *The Modern Corporation and Private Property*, and Peter Drucker’s 1946 *The Concept of the Corporation*, cited in Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 2003)

*agent problem*, company decisions made by a self-interested agent motivated by stock options and short-term payout—a symptom of the contemporary Anglo-American version of stock-market capitalism—may compete with the interests of the principal. Milton Friedman, however, vehemently objects to this negative assessment of ownership separated between managers and shareholders as a principal-agent problem:

In a free-enterprise, private-property system, a corporate executive is an employee of the owners of the business. He has direct responsibility to his employers. That responsibility is to conduct business in the accordance with their desires, which generally will be to make as much money as possible while conforming to the basic rules of society, both those embodied in law and those embodied in ethical custom (Friedman, 1970).

Although Friedman did not elaborate on how managers ought to conform to the social rules “embodied in ethical custom,” one could argue that there is room for reinterpretation here. As the culture and customs of free enterprise in society change, the rules of accountability follow. The omission of a critical discussion of ethics is a crucial weakness of Friedman’s argument—an omission that points to the legitimacy of misaligned incentives between principals and agents in today’s market.

Amid the principal-agent debate emerged the recognition of stakeholders in the operation of a firm. Initially introduced as a management concept by Freeman (1984/2010), *stakeholder theory* casts light on “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” (as cited in Pirsch, Gupta, & Grau, 2006, p. 127). Purposed with both explaining and guiding the structure and activity of a firm, stakeholder theory is widely merited as a legitimate framework for defining a corporation’s interaction within society. Though Freeman’s theory is vague and



does not specify any specific stakeholder, the theory is used to identify shared interests with an array of groups, such as suppliers, investors, customers, governments, employees, political groups, trade associations, and communities. Donaldson and Preston (1995) argue that stakeholder theory provides descriptive accuracy and an instrumental framework of a firm's behavior with clear implications for management. However, they note that stakeholder theory is fundamentally normative and based on the moral-fairness principle: "that stakeholders are identified by their interest in the affairs of the corporation and that the interests of all stakeholders have intrinsic value" (p. 81). Though they reject the principal-agent problem as a sufficient normative justification of stakeholder theory, they offer an explanation based on a pluralistic theory of property rights where multiple groups could have legitimate "stakes" in a business.

**Challenges to studying CSR.** There are challenges in examining CSR as an object of study. Foremost, the exhaustive list of definitions for CSR within management literature makes the academic production of CSR discordant with its reproduction by business actors. Academic and practical productions of CSR recast the principal-agent "problem" as an opportunity. In a foundational article within the field, Carroll (1991) uses stakeholder theory to develop a holistic definition of CSR by explaining that maximizing shareholder value need not stand in direct opposition to creating stakeholder value. Instead, CSR is constructed as a pyramid composed of economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities so that a firm may simultaneously "make a profit, obey the law, be ethical, and be a good corporate citizen" (Carroll, 1991, p. 43). Porter and

Kramer (2006) take a somewhat similar stance: that profits and social responsibility should not be pitted against one another in a “zero-sum game”; however, they criticize prevailing definitions of CSR as generic, with weak justifications. They advocate a firm-specific definition of CSR geared toward business managers that aligns business strategy and core competencies with shared values between stakeholders and shareholders. Even though they stress the interrelationship between business and society, their argument tactically reframes financial responsibility as a moral purpose, pointing out that “the most important thing a company can do for society, and for any community, is contribute to a prosperous economy” (Porter & Kramer, 2007, p. 91).

In an attempt to define CSR for practitioners, Kotler and Lee (2005, p. 3) outline the firm’s “commitment to improve community well-being through discretionary business practices and contributions of corporate resources”—clearly stating intentions to disregard the ethical and legal dimensions that are integral to Carroll’s (1991) CSR pyramid. This is a popular feature of many practice-oriented definitions, wherein CSR is defined to identify “new” social issues in the context of a firm’s “viable options” (Zadek, 2006). Campbell (2006) takes issue with this conventional type of CSR because it ignores statutory lapses or bad practices that produce negative externalities. To fill in this hole in stakeholder studies, Campbell sets CSR to a minimum behavioral standard in which a firm “must not knowingly do anything that could harm their stakeholders . . . if they do harm to stakeholders, then they must rectify it whenever it is discovered and brought to their attention” (p. 928). The theoretical elasticity of CSR and the resulting freewheeling

interpretations by MNCs make comparative studies difficult; however, the opportunities it creates for strategic instrumentation and manipulation demand critical attention.

Despite the prevalence of stakeholder theory today, a debate that occupies CSR research problematizing the correlation between ethics and profits resurrects the question of business purpose. Can a business still make a profit when it takes ethical considerations into account? “The rationale for many of these [CSR] studies is clear: to legitimate a broader conception of the firm’s role and responsibilities by integrating it with a narrower financial conception” (Vogel, 2005, p. 23). The general business case in support of CSR argues that a firm that behaves responsibly creates value for its stakeholders and, in the process, for itself. In other words, research that is premised on the positive relationship between responsibility and profitability rationally frames motivations for CSR as “doing good to do well”—a stakeholder view to enhance a shareholder model (Kotler & Lee, 2005; Lev, Petrovits, & Radhakrishnan, 2010; Margolis & Walsh, 2001; Perrini, 2005). Vogel (2005) explains that, though many studies show a positive correlation (perhaps in support of a growing CSR industry) between ethics and profits, there are still mixed and negative findings evaluating the social benefits of CSR across a variety of social issues, CSR practices, and performance measures. Citing the complexities of quantifying CSR, many scholars find that the overall evidence for responsibility and profitability is inconclusive (Perrini, 2005; Vogel, 2005). Vogel goes as far to say that the “market for virtue” may very well be a niche and not one that is best suited for the mainstream. Nonetheless, the ubiquity of moral rhetoric and

CSR discourse after the 2008 crisis may suggest a popular resolve in the profitability of *publicizing* CSR.

The challenges around CSR's legitimacy and authenticity are in large part due to voluntary methods for measuring and reporting its social impact. Entire industries are now dedicated to rationalizing business decisions using complex data analysis that integrates measures of social and economic performance. Whether produced by the firm or a third party, the complexity of accurately quantifying and reflecting social impact contributes to "a cacophony of self-appointed scorekeepers [that] does little more than add to the confusion" (Porter & Kramer, 2007, p. 81). An emerging demand for measuring nonfinancial activity for the purpose of "sustainability investing" or "socially responsible investment" has led to the development of multiple ratings and indices, like the Dow Jones Sustainability Indices and FTSE4Good Index (The Forum for Sustainable and Responsible Investment, n.d.). However, by reducing "sustainability" or "good"-ness to one number, these indices use heterogeneous assessment indicators and oversimplify the complex practices of publicly traded companies, further obfuscating the definition of CSR for the purposes of investors (Delmas & Blass, 2010). The costs, accessibility, and reliability of good data, along with difficulty in determining good proxies for social performance, are major impediments to CSR analysis. Even though they qualify a mode of CSR communications, I will not directly engage the management debates interrogating the quantification of CSR as a socially beneficial or a profitable practice, because of my interest in the naturalized values shaping public discourse. Instead, this ambivalence

around CSR assessment and the conflicting values embedded within its development inform the foundation of my critical engagement with CSR and its communications.

Though suspicion was the initial thrust for my inquiry into CSR discourse's prominence after the global economic crisis of 2008, it is not enough to dismiss CSR as "hypocritical window dressing" (Friedman, 1970). In fact, I concede that stakeholder consciousness may in fact result in better corporate practices. But whether kinder practices by corporations force corporations to "do good" or even present the appearance of doing good, CSR discourse and the Do-Good Spirit pose a serious threat to democratic citizenship, social imagination, and the potential for transformation of a system that survives on inequality. I embrace Vogel's argument that CSR cannot be "a substitute for effective government" (Vogel, 2005, p. 170). As of now, given the lack of a formal definition, measures, and regulations to enforce its accountability to society, CSR remains a tool serving a corporation's agenda. Comprised of gestures and articulations for improving the human condition, CSR also mimics the progressive liberal bent of the neoliberal spirit. For these reasons, the domination of CSR discourse by corporations, especially within online public interaction, requires immediate interrogation—for the sake of democracy, civil society, and a "well functioning public sphere" (Vogel, 2005, p. 170).

**CSR communication as discourse.** Along with the challenges to any CSR analysis, the body of CSR research also reveals a blind spot in academic studies: the communicative practices business actors and stakeholders use to negotiate expectations and values. A group of management and communications researchers have recently

recognized this deficiency and offer “CSR communication” as an opportunity for interdisciplinary study of the “corporate use of symbols and language” in its “attempt to negotiate its relationship to stakeholders and the public at large” (Ihlen, Bartlett, & May, 2011, p. 7). Presented as a “handbook” for practitioners in the field, Ihlen, Bartlett, and May’s compilation outlines a broad range of practices and tools—such as public relations, advertising, marketing, business reports, websites, press releases, news, awards, and media productions—to address the complexity of stakeholder demands. Drawing on tools of critical analysis, Grant and Nyberg (2011) develop the concept of *CSR discourse* as a process that is socially constructed by the production, dissemination, and consumption of all texts (spoken, written, or visual) related to CSR. From a methodological perspective (detailed further in chapter 2), examining CSR as discourse presents a rich opportunity for examining the dominant ideology and discursive practices with respect to alternative and oppositional practices (Fairclough, 1995).

CSR research has also made a recent foray into Internet-based communications. In the 21st century, corporations have moved beyond traditional static reports for stakeholders (Isenmann, 2006) and the corporate website (Kim & Rader, 2010) to promote more dialogic stakeholder relationships using Web 2.0 (Jo & Jung, 2005). Still, studies indicate that early efforts to communicate CSR actually maintain the traditional one-way model of corporate control over information (Isenmann, 2006; Jo & Jung, 2005; Moreno & Capriotti, 2009). Capriotti (2010) finds that two-way interactivity is underutilized and carries the potential to transform corporations’ relationships with stakeholders: “The Internet is generating a more complex public discourse about the

organization and contributing toward developing more corporate transparency and more corporate responsible behavior through aligning both of them” (p. 359). Capriotti’s (2010) assumption of causality—that public discourse on the Internet fosters transparency, legitimacy, and authenticity—must be called into question.

Rather than accepting interactive CSR communication on the Internet as mutually beneficial to stakeholders and corporations, my inquiry aims to critically unpack CSR discourse produced on the Internet to examine the ways i-CSR obscures the underlying profit motive at the core of the principal-agent problem. I develop the concept of i-CSR to distinguish the unique affordances and limits of CSR discourse produced on the Internet. Unilever—an influential multinational corporation at the forefront of publicizing CSR discourse in the 21st century—provides an important case for studying the cultural impact of CSR communications on the online public sphere. Shifts in Unilever’s i-CSR communication strategy began in 2009 on its corporate website and by 2013 it kicked-off a unique, long-term i-CSR campaign across social media platforms. Thus, Unilever’s corporate websites and i-CSR campaign from 2013-2017 provides an important case for understanding moral discourse produced by a powerful MNC with a global reach and the meanings that are negotiated in the process of interactivity. The data collected from Unilever’s social media engagement, and in particular from real-time oppositional discourse, shows that i-CSR discourse is an evolving adaptation. It is a work in process. Unlike CSR found in stakeholder reports, advertisements, and pamphlets, i-CSR is temporal and dynamic since social media platforms allow for interaction. My analysis

shows that Unilever's i-CSR during the period studied is an evolving system which offers an opportunity therefore to see the birth pangs of a new process.

### **Unilever's Online Corporate Personality**

Unilever, which is almost a century old, is a multinational corporation co-headquartered in London and Rotterdam, producing over 400 brands of the best-known food, beverage, personal-care, and household-care products sold in 190 countries. Unilever's hegemonic power in the marketplace extends to the internet: it started to use Facebook in 2009 and Twitter in 2011. Though Unilever is recognized for a legacy of corporate citizenship from its formation, its stakeholder approach to CSR has expanded its scope, responding to negotiated expectations of the role of business in society in the neoliberal era. Soon after its stock hit its lowest point after the economic crisis, Unilever hired a new CEO, Paul Polman, who has become the living face of Unilever and a visionary of virtuous corporate citizenship for the capitalist class. Under Polman's direction, Unilever launched an annual CSR online report, the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan, in 2010, and then a highly interactive online CSR campaign, "Project Sunlight" (later renamed "Bright Future") in 2013.

The primary data for my analysis of CSR discourse is collected from the Project Sunlight/Bright Future (PSBF) campaign—comprised of a PSBF website, a corporate Twitter account, a corporate Facebook page, and a corporate YouTube channel—from November 2013 to December 2017. Since research in CSR communication has not yet focused on CSR discourse negotiated online, I have, as stated earlier, developed a concept to distinguish internet-based CSR (or i-CSR) discourse as a means to examine



the entire body of digital texts generated by Unilever's long-term marketing campaign. I-CSR discourse, I show, is not simply a re-publication of CSR reports on a corporation's website but also comprises specialized digital content (audio, visual, text) shared on social-media accounts and on the website. To gain a richer understanding of the developing strategies of relationship management and social-media marketing, I bolster my discourse analysis with qualitative data gathered from informal interviews with six marketing professionals.

By evaluating the conscious efforts of marketing professionals in conjunction with discourse analysis, the purpose of i-CSR—to generate “brand value” through moral capital becomes clear. In the following chapters, I identify three digital communication strategies used to construct an “enlightened” corporation within a larger Do-Good Spirit: 360-degree branding, strategic storytelling, and crowdsourcing. The Unilever case study exemplifies the way digital communication in the 21st century maintains the objective of CSR as a communication tool for building strategic stakeholder relationships. However, it also does more. Digital media provide corporations with unique opportunities to realize CSR in more impactful ways. The affordances of Web 2.0 and social media provide the corporate presence a distinct materiality and temporality, even a tangible personhood. By conjuring a “living” brand identity and personality online, corporations hold a newfound capacity for dialogic communication and meaning-making that makes i-CSR a more powerful tool for corporations. As a social actor “sharing” interactive stories around sustainability and progressive values, the meaning, agenda, and standards for CSR are being negotiated to serve the neoliberal corporation in a setting that is intimate, like

talking with an online friend. Furthermore, when consumers are engaged not only as prosumers—or “producers” of content and meaning online—but also as citizens motivated by a sense of morality to participate in civic activity, the Do-Good Spirit can create insidious forms of participation. Seduced by opportunities for conscious-consumption and corporate-mediated-activism, weary citizen-consumers drawn to morality are mollified and circumscribed within the neoliberal logic.

While the flexibility of capitalism in the 21st century has been a grave concern across the social sciences, it is not enough to say that neoliberal ideology is too deeply entrenched or too evasive to pin down. As Jameson (1991, p. 98) explains, it as an opportunity for discursive struggle:

“The market is in human nature”: this is the proposition that cannot be allowed to stand unchallenged, and that is in my opinion, the most crucial terrain of ideological struggle in our time. . . . In the same spirit, I would want to add, to the formulations and tactics of Stuart Hall’s ‘discourse analysis,’ the same kind of historical qualifier: the fundamental level on which political struggle is waged is that of the legitimacy of concepts like planning or the market.

Jameson contests market rhetoric by challenging the language used to bolster the naturalized concepts of neoliberal ideology. To interrupt the acceptance of values that are destructive to democratic participation and social equality, we must understand how multinational corporations are actively distorting naturalized ideals around democracy, capitalism, and morality and doing so through digital media and seemingly personalized ways.

## 2. Unilever and i-CSR

All I see are beautiful trees  
 different sizes and colors  
 Behind this array of trees  
 I see a magnificent universe  
 I've never seen before  
 It's so special it has to be left untouched  
 Goodbye my secret garden  
 —Unknown, *Goldman Sachs Student Art Project*, 2016

Decorating the walls flanking the walkway to Goldman Sachs's glassy corporate office on the Hudson River in New Jersey is the Goldman Sachs Student Art Project, an annual outdoor exhibition of fifteen vibrant posters displaying artwork and handwritten poetry by Jersey City middle-school students. With this literal expression of corporate window dressing, Goldman Sachs greets employees, visitors, and the local public with environmental and social themes that extend from its CSR strategy. The colorful exhibit had drawn my curiosity since I moved to the neighborhood in 2009, but the most visible dissonance appeared in 2016, when the waterfront esplanade was wrapped with immense drawings of lush gardens, rainbow silhouettes of bodies in yoga poses, and eco-friendly messaging, such as "Serenity, Harmony, Peace" and "Let's Go Green" (Goldman Sachs, 2016). The lesson in environmental consciousness was an odd pairing for an international investment bank that was receiving media attention for agreeing to pay over \$5 billion for its role in the 2008 financial crisis (Kasperkevic, 2016). Despite Goldman's indictment for defrauding its investors over the sale of mortgage-backed securities from 2005 to 2007, the bank has continued to report growing profits—even breaking a record with \$13.3 billion in net earnings in 2009. In tandem with its post-2008 financial success, Goldman's CSR communication also morphed from a simple text-based report

documenting its environmental stewardship from 2006 to 2009 to an illustrated, interactive “Environmental, Social and Governance Report” on its website and inclusion within the Dow Jones Sustainability North American Index (Goldman Sachs, 2015). Goldman joined Facebook in 2009 and Twitter in 2012, and uses its social-media platforms primarily as “a PR tool” to inform the public about its CSR efforts, from its *10,000 Small Businesses* program, helping US business owners, to its *10,000 Women* program, supporting women entrepreneurs in India (Laurensen, 2013). Unlike the constructions of “greedy” villains of prior crises (Raja, 2014)—most have not been charged with any crime by the Justice Department—Goldman Sachs was “too big to fail” (Sorkin, quoted in S.A. Ross, 2009); now, it appears to be “too good to fail.” In the post-2008 period, powerful economic actors seek to accrue what Wilkis (2017) calls *moral capital* through communicating and co-opting the progressive values at the core of democracy and human rights.

Amassing moral capital through ostentatious alignment with progressive ideals is not a new strategy. Amid the rise of democracy, capitalism, and information communication technology, cultural production by the public relations (PR) and marketing industries structures feelings to prop up institutions of power and reinforce their hegemony in capitalist society.

Historically, the PR industry was developed to counter public fears of large business and concentrated sources of institutional power (Marchand, 1998; Ewen, 1996). In a study of corporate history, Marchand (1998) examines the late-19th-century US robber barons, such as the leaders of the oil, steel and railroad industries, and the way

they tackled public distrust as agrarian economies transitioned to a national market economy. Amid charges of cold, ruthless, and greedy business tactics, Marchand traces the rise of public-relations departments and their discursive constructions of corporate imagery around a “corporate soul”—publicizing paternalistic values, moral legitimacy, and civic responsibility instead of products—“as a safeguard against perceptions of soullessness” (p. 15).

As the demand for public consent increased with the rooting of democracy, Ewen’s (1996) examination of the professionalization of public relations also reveals the deliberate construction of the “common good” as an ideological apparatus engineered by the political and economic elite in the 20th century. Drawing on his interview with PR pioneer Edward Bernays, Ewen marks a paradigm shift in modern social consciousness as property rights and aristocratic relations moved toward democratic ideals. As the system of social rule that embedded ideals of allegiance, obligation, and inequality was challenged by collective values, the new elite required a compatible justification for power. The professionalization of the PR industry after the 1930s fine-tuned the propaganda techniques used to gain public support during World War I in order to legitimize sources of institutional power—particularly private interests. PR professionals like Bernays engineered tactics of “mass persuasion” rooted in social scientific research for “a public whose hearts and minds now bear the ideals of democracy” (p. 13). For instance, immediately after the Depression, they successfully used progressive iconography from the New Deal to paint private interests as public benefactors. Although the techniques used to persuade the public transform over time, Ewen’s work points to an

enduring progressive impulse manufactured by pro-business propaganda, deliberately applying the discourse of the “common good” in service of profit-makers.

With the rise of consumer culture and the professionalization of corporate communications in the 20th century, citizenship and consumption have developed a complex relationship. On the one hand, corporate citizenship is strategically framed by public relations professionals working to establish the virtuosity of a client during times of public disapproval. On the other hand, the values of citizenship are commodified by marketers working to sell products with social activism—a phenomenon Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012) call commodity activism. Moral appeals to buy “good” products and act as “good” citizens are particularly magnified in the post financial crisis moment.

Despite the efforts of producers of persuasion campaigns to apply market rationality to social behavior for private interests, critical cultural-studies researchers find that consumption and citizenship practices are indeed contested and messy; shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces, these concepts are “moral battlegrounds for competing values and ideologies” (Aldridge, 2003, p. 7). From this position, Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012, p. 6) offer a complex understanding of citizenship as a process historically forged *through* consumption. Refusing binary explanations “that position politics in opposition to consumerism” (p. 13), they argue that the formations of citizenship have evolved with consumption consistently and contradictorily throughout the history of capitalism. On the one hand, advertising campaigns after World War II called on the “citizen-consumer” by pushing patriotic action through “conspicuous consumption”—the overt display of goods to exhibit social status (Veblen, 1899 [2008]).

Later in the 20th century, citizen-consumers from disenfranchised communities led boycotts and “shop for change” campaigns to challenge discrimination and inequality. Consumption, Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser argue, is surprising and has presented opportunities for subordinated groups to reimagine subjectivity, reshape social relations, and even achieve political change.

By situating consumption and citizenship as formations with historical context, Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012) offer a critical, if sweeping, contribution to a broad understanding of publicized morality in the contemporary period. In their cultural analysis of activism after the 2008 crisis, they identify “commodity activism” as grafting “philanthropy and social activism onto merchandising practices, market incentives, and corporate profits” (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 1). In other words, activism, amid press reports of destructive capitalism and the paradoxical expansion of market rationality to all spheres of life, is being fetishized into a marketable commodity. Moving away from simplistic assessment of corporate hypocrisy or citizen virtuosity, they keenly observe how traditional practices and subjectivities for “‘doing good’ and being a good consumer collapse into one and the same thing” (p. 12). However, in a series of contemporary case studies—comprised of the financialization of “sustainability” investing, the celebrity branding of humanitarianism, the promotion of ethical goods, and the various manifestations of CSR—their wholesale grouping of commodity activism also flattens a range of practices into a single formation. While the concept of commodity activism throws into relief the “moral virtue” activism that surged after the 2008 crisis (p. 10), I argue that each mode is shaped by historical forces that require close analysis.

Although the commodification of morality is evident across these contemporary cultural sites, the strategies used to co-opt progressive values and reconfigure citizenship within CSR, I argue, are distinct and deserve in-depth treatment. Thus, my project seeks to distinguish CSR from various modes of commodity activism and build on Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser's efforts to grapple with contradictions around agency, resistance, and collective action in neoliberal times.

In this chapter, I present a case for developing a nuanced understanding of an emergent—and arguably the most formidable—mode of commodity activism: i-CSR, the CSR discourse constructed on the internet. To be sure, there are overlapping manifestations of commodity activism orbiting business institutions, such as cause-related marketing (CRM) and social entrepreneurship, that bear the moral valence of CSR. However, i-CSR is a distinct, sometimes overpowering application of commodity activism with severe implications for imagining revolutionary social change in a networked society. Before discussing Unilever's i-CSR campaign, I will briefly address CRM and social entrepreneurship to distinguish i-CSR as the most powerful mode of establishing the Do-Good Spirit. Here, I argue that the management framework guiding CSR and i-CSR, stakeholder theory (see chapter 1), is a pretext sanctioning the normative reframing of business purpose. Next, a historical overview of Unilever's global operations and its stakeholder approach to CSR supports the selection of this MNC for my project. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of my methods for collecting textual data from the i-CSR campaign led by Unilever from 2013 to 2017 and interview data from a group of advanced-career marketing professionals.



### **Modes of Commodity Activism and the Power of CSR**

Whether consumers are deciding to invest in publicly traded firms through the Dow Jones Sustainability Index, purchase RED-branded products to help eliminate AIDS in Africa, or shop for ethically manufactured products, commodity activism is communicated to the public using moral discourse. The range of practices understood as commodity activism appear similar; however, the circumstances of the production of values-based discourse vary according to the purpose and intent of each organization. The value-based discourse arbitrated by business organizations most commonly spring from a mode of commodity activism referred to as cause-related marketing (CRM) campaigns—often used to communicate CSR management strategy or corporate philanthropy. While CRM and CSR are visible in contemporary consumer culture, corporate philanthropy in the US is declining—charitable giving as a percentage of profits had been steadily dropping when Porter and Kramer (2002) reported the dilemma of managers “caught between critics demanding ever higher levels of ‘corporate social responsibility’ and investors applying relentless pressure to maximize short-term profits.” Alternatively, if the business organization is defined as a “social entrepreneur” or if it is a legally granted status as a benefit corporation (with stipulations for disclosing social impact measures), the value-based discourse is integrated throughout the business, starting from its founding mission statement. In this section, I distinguish CSR communication practices from CRM and social entrepreneurship (SE)—two modes of commodity activism that appear to be closely related to, and at times are confused with, CSR.

**Cause-related marketing.** Cause-related marketing (CRM), a promotional technique used to describe the actions a corporation takes to “contribute a specified amount to a designated cause when customers engage in revenue-providing exchanges that satisfy organization and individual objectives” (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988, p. 60), emerged in the 1980s as an advantageous mechanism to amplify a firm’s legitimacy among its stakeholders—most notably the consumer (Brønn & Vrioni, 2001; Maignan & Ralston, 2002). One of the most recognizable CRM campaigns that coined the term was the Statue of Liberty Restoration project spearheaded by American Express in 1983 (Adkins, 1999). Over a three-month promotional period, the firm spent approximately \$4 million advertising the campaign, in which American Express would donate a penny for each dollar charged by an existing card owner and a dollar for a newly registered customer. The president of the American Express Foundation, Mary Beth Salerno, shared the purpose of the CRM campaign:

People often ask why American Express supports so many charitable organizations around the world and what purpose such efforts serve for the company. The answer is easy—and it has been the same for the 150 years that American Express has been in business. We have a vested interest in the well being of our communities. Moreover, many of our major philanthropic efforts are tied directly to the company’s long-term business objectives. Finally, the company’s philanthropic activities have added enormous luster to our brand over the years. (Salerno cited in Kotler & Lee, 2005, p. 81)

Beyond sharing an interest in the “community,” stakeholder theory permits corporations to broaden the scope of their strategic business activity. Couching the CRM campaign within a history of corporate philanthropy, Salerno admits to the “luster” added to the corporate brand while addressing the “vested interest” in restoring a national monument.

As far as corporate managers are concerned, CRM is a legitimate form of generosity because the corporation's interest in its positive reputation, an intangible asset, can be achieved simultaneously by aligning generosity with stakeholder interests. Even though the American Express CRM campaign only raised \$1.7 million for the material restoration efforts (less than the total cost of the promotion), the "value added" for the corporation is rationalized as outweighing the liability accrued from skeptics.

CRM, like CSR, is wrought with suspicion around the moral legitimacy of an action attached to instrumental, self-interested gain (Raja, 2015). Both arbitrate a type of morality that constructs the Do-Good Spirit; however, it is important to note the distinctions between the instantiations of CRM, like that of American Express, and contemporary CSR communication, like that of Goldman Sachs. First, CRM is just one tool to publicize a discrete campaign focused on philanthropic donations, whereas contemporary CSR communication goes beyond any single project, nonprofit partnership, or cause. Next, unlike CRM, contemporary CSR communication spans a broad range of initiatives, integrates various media platforms, and may extend over a prolonged period. As Ihlen, Bartlett, and May (2011) evince, CSR communication is multidimensional in its practical form and its strategic rationale. It is operationalized across several organizational domains (such as management, marketing, and public relations) and presented through a variety of channels (annual reports, nonfinancial reports, websites, advertisements, press releases, etc.). Since CSR communication is predominantly voluntary, particularly in terms of legal reporting and disclosures, it offers the potential to maximize organizational goals (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010). Bartlett

(2011) elucidates a number of practical objectives for developing a CSR communication strategy that spans an entire organization. CSR messages may be employed to mitigate hostility toward a corporation's reputation, to legitimize its social activities, to indicate its operational compliance, or to generate workplace cohesion. The extensive resources allocated to communicating CSR magnify the longstanding debate about the social purpose of businesses and underscores CSR's significance as a cultural instrument intended to change "traditional" business practice (Hanlon, 2009).

Though the moral basis for CSR communication is as contentious as CSR's authenticity, its acclaim within the academic field of business management as a "phenomenal success" warrants critical attention (Crane, McWilliams, Matten, et al., 2008). Despite a handful of tactical studies suggesting that CSR communication may breed skepticism (Lindgreen & Swaen, 2010; Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005) and corporate hypocrisy (Wagner, Lutz, & Wetiz, 2009), the consensus forming among management researchers is that CSR communication is "inescapable" since "silence on the matter of CSR is also a form of communication" (Ihlen, Bartlett & May, 2011, p. 11). Researchers of management, communication, PR, and marketing are developing a cogent call to harness CSR communication to confront and shape social expectations (Bartlett & Devin, 2011; Ihlen, Bartlett & May, 2011; Brønn, 2011). The most common prescription, established using stakeholder theory, urges organizations to use "information disclosure and dialogue" to build accountability, transparency, and trust with their publics (Bartlett, 2011, p. 74). According to these studies, the ideal form of CSR is when responsibility remains voluntary and information is only shared to an "acceptable" standard. Both are

prerequisites for achieving long-term “trust”—also reified as a rational instrument that can extract value, like moral capital.

Academic acceptance of stakeholder dialogue generates a dominant approach to CSR communication research design which, as Eisenegger and Schranz (2011, p. 140) observe, predominantly advocates for the “opportunistic” use of CSR communication in order to create “positive” outcomes for the corporation. Though the self-interested “business case” for CSR can erode its ethical legitimacy (Matten & Crane, 2005), the surplus value derived from CSR communication, referred to as “brand equity,” is a justification that is gaining popularity. As a result, academic research encourages corporations to produce CSR communication and actively “engage” with government officials, nonprofit groups, civil rights advocates, and consumer-citizens to generate “compromise”—a progressive ethical value and prerequisite for social legitimacy (Hanlon, 2009). However, as reformist as CSR communication may sound in research and in practice, my research seeks to complicate this dominant construction of the positive, progressive, sacrificing efforts of corporate actors.

**Social entrepreneurship.** MNCs are not the only business institutions producing discourse that conflates values of consumption and citizenship in the political economy. Social-responsibility rhetoric and commodity activism are also operationalized by a growing variety of social entrepreneurs competing in the marketplace. Social enterprises or social entrepreneurs are businesses functioning with hybridized for-profit/nonprofit business models with a pronounced commitment to social welfare alongside, or even at the cost of, profits. Though the diversity of social businesses today is better understood as

a continuum ranging from “purely social to purely economic” (Austin, Stevenson, & Wei-Skillern, 2006), Martin and Osberg (2007, pp. 34–35) point to the social entrepreneur’s definitive “value proposition”:

The social entrepreneur, however, neither anticipates nor organizes to create substantial profits from his or her investors—philanthropic and government organizations for the most part—or for himself or herself. Instead, the social entrepreneur aims for value in the form of large-scale, transformational benefit that accrues either to a significant segment of society at large or to society at large. Unlike the entrepreneurial value proposition that assumes the market that can pay for the innovation . . . social entrepreneur’s value proposition targets an underserved neglected, or highly disadvantaged population.

Since the fundamental purpose of social entrepreneurs is distinct from that of traditional corporations, an analysis of its moral rhetoric requires a nuanced framework that is specifically attuned to the operational complexities of the variety of hybrid organizations within this continuum. While the social entrepreneur’s rationalizing logic of business acumen to create “effective, scalable solutions for a wide range of societal challenges” (Achleitner, 2008, p. 3) does warrant critical analysis by media-studies scholars, it requires a specialized research design to account for the organizational, strategic, and legal diversity within the profit/nonprofit continuum.

Even though my focus remains on the MNC as a hegemonic actor in the global economy and a producer of propaganda that mimics progressive social change, the moral and tactical elasticity of SE may relocate a firm’s position on the continuum. In other words, a social enterprise, often imagined as a small-scale operation, may encroach on the for-profit parameters occupied by traditional corporations when its size, scale, or economic viability changes. Murphy and Coombes (2009) find that these changes may

influence social entrepreneurs' social mission and outward presentation of social consciousness. For example, the promise of SE, as in SKS Microfinance's high-interest microloans to underserved poor populations, charmed the elite class, especially at gatherings such as the World Economic Forum (Davis, 2002). However, when SKS Microfinance decided to issue stock to the public in 2005, its central value of serving the poor transformed to serving "others"—in this case, shareholders (Yunus cited in Bahree, 2010). During the firm's expansion, Vikram Akula (2010), the CEO and author of *A Fistful of Rice: My Unexpected Quest to End Poverty through Profitability*, kept the prized title of social entrepreneur—even after making \$13 million by selling off his shares and holding \$55 million in stock options (Strom & Bajaj, 2010). Despite being idolized in the business press as the panacea for all social ills (Sahner, 2007), SE is now being recognized an "elite charade" for capitalists (Giridharadas, 2018). They use the moral capital it garners to purge the stigma of greedy profit-making while continuing to exploit vulnerable groups and undermine democracy. So, in order to avoid the complexity that often accompanies the dramatic scaling and revaluation of a social enterprise in the neoliberal era, I concentrate here on a well-established, traditional corporation and its formulation of commodity activism.

As discussed in chapter 1, since the theory and practice of CSR communication has been on the rise since the 1990s, there is a growing list of traditional MNCs producing CSR discourse, online and offline, that qualifies for my critical project. At first glance, companies in the extractive sector, like oil and tobacco, as well as global brands in the fashion industry, are conspicuous producers of CSR discourse and offenders of

CSR norms. As such, MNCs in these sectors have been obvious targets for scattered critical CSR research in fields that touch on human rights and business ethics.

Researchers often use case studies to interrogate corporate discourse that underscores the hypocrisy of CSR communication and transparency of business operations (Benson, 2015; Zalik, 2015), discursive struggles over social values (Livesey, 2002; Banerjee, 2008), and the role of corporations in shaping human rights and social movements (Walker-Said, 2015). However, critical CSR research lacks close analyses of long-term CSR campaigns by less objectionable industries and overlooks the distinct form of interactive CSR that permeates the online public sphere. My analysis of Unilever—a MNC that produces a wide range of personal care and household products, food, and beverages—and its online CSR discourse will contribute to this body of literature.

In the following section, I establish my case for studying Unilever and its strategic approach to stakeholder theory in order to legitimate its claim to commodity activism. In particular, Unilever's history since the 2008 global financial crisis and its innovative i-CSR campaign represent an emergent mode of commodity activism expanded by social media—an ideal example for studying how moral and ethical values shape consumer-citizenship in the 21st century.

### **Unilever's Operations and CSR**

The management, strategies, and culture that shape an MNC's decisions, communications, and actions over time are dynamic and complex (G. Jones, 2005). In what follows, I provide a panoramic view of Unilever's expansive economic and cultural position within the global economy to gauge the potency of i-CSR discourse in modern



life. Its longevity, scale of operations, and diversification of products make Unilever an influential economic actor within the national and global marketplace. Its CSR communications and engagement with stakeholders that affect its perceived “value” (beyond generating shareholder wealth) make Unilever a powerful social actor and a prime case for studying i-CSR discourse as a cultural force in capitalist democracies.

**Unilever’s global operations and management.** Unilever, almost a century old, is a multinational corporation headquartered in London and Rotterdam, with over 400 brands of the best-known food, beverage, personal care, and household care products sold in 190 countries today. Formed in the same year of the US stock market crash of 1929, Unilever was created through the merging of Lever Brothers, a British soapmaker, and Margarine Unie, a Dutch margarine producer. Believed to be one of the world’s first MNCs, Unilever was more than just an exporter of products to accessible colonial markets in the early 20th century—its early global operations included procuring raw materials, training workers, and building factories across West Africa, India, China, Japan, Indonesia, and Brazil. Even in the face of war and political crises during the mid-20th century, Unilever managed to withstand economic volatility through a consistent strategy of diversifying into new market segments and acquiring local brands. Its sheer geographic immensity and economies of scale in manufacturing, research and development, and marketing through the years have secured Unilever’s current position as the third-largest consumer goods manufacturer of everyday items (G. Jones, 2005).

Even as Unilever continues to battle for customers with Proctor and Gamble and Colgate-Palmolive in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) industrial sector (BBC News, 2000), its affordable product offerings and competitive advantages in the postcolonial era of globalization and deregulation allows the company to boast revenues of €53.3 billion in 2015 (Unilever, 2017). Within its growing portfolio, Unilever focuses its attention on thirteen brands with sales of over €1 billion: Axe/Lynx, Dove, Omo, Becel/Flora, Heartbrand, Hellmann's, Knorr, Lipton, Lux, Magnum, Rama, Rexona, Sunsilk, and Surf. While it has carved out a dominant share of the global market for detergent, ice cream, and tea sales globally (R. Jones, 2011), 70% of its volume and 58% of its 2015 sales comes from emerging markets—broadly understood as “developing countries that have liberalized their financial systems to promote capital flows and foreign investment” (International Monetary Fund, 2005). According to Unilever's Annual Report for 2016:

Unlike in developed markets such as the US, the number of people at middle income levels is expected to continue to grow [in emerging markets], with a further 800 million by 2020 generating higher levels of per capita consumption that will benefit FMCG companies. The continuing trend of urbanisation in emerging markets means there will be another 400 million people living in cities while an additional 300 million women are predicted to move into paid employment by 2020, supporting demand for FMCG products.

Middle-class growth translates to increased per capita consumption, urbanization translates to more kitchens and bathrooms, and a female workforce translates to more “express” meal solutions (Stephens, 2016, p. 8). Even in a sluggish global economy, Unilever assures investors that emerging-markets sales grew by 7% in 2016, with dividend payout for shareholders increasing by 7% per annum (Unilever, 2017, p. 22). To

help counter the waning sales growth reported in the business press, Unilever says it was able to raise prices worldwide by 1.8%—and 3% over a three-month period in markets like Brazil (Evans, 2015). As per capita incomes in many of the largest emerging markets have either stagnated or dropped, Unilever justifies prices increases by enhancing its products with attractive features, like hand soap that changes color after 10 seconds to signify that hands are clean (Evans, 2015). As the section on strategic storytelling evinces, the hypocrisy lies between the price hikes and the narratives of positive-social-impact programs for impoverished and vulnerable populations in emerging markets.

In addition to emerging markets in developing countries, Unilever's hegemonic power continues to extend to the internet, a lucrative space inhabited by a huge segment of prospective consumers. Unilever appraises the swelling spending capacity of the millennial generation, those born between 1980 and 2000, whose numbers are expected to reach 2.3 billion in 2025 (Unilever, 2017). They are most often characterized by their use of technology, mobile devices, and social media, and research on millennials points toward a progressive bent in social policy and civic consciousness. For Unilever, this translates to strategic growth in “categories such as foods with organic and traceable ingredients, free-from alternatives and personal care products with natural formulations and greater authenticity” (Unilever, 2017, p. 6). In just one year, Unilever acquired Seventh Generation (all-natural household detergents), Blueair (mobile air purifiers), the Dollar Shave Club (grooming subscription service), and Living Proof (scientifically patented hair-care products)—all emerging brands that align with millennial values. Unilever's portfolio brand recognition and domination of premium visual space, online

and offline, prevents disruptors and young competitors from surviving the competitive market for millennials' attention.<sup>2</sup>

Unilever's oligopolistic position in the marketplace enables an ideological approach to differentiate it from near-identical products in the marketplace. As one of the largest advertisers in the world (Johnson, 2018), Unilever manufactures "sustainability" as a cultural value that is embedded in its products, its practices, and its brand.<sup>3</sup> For consumers, the corporation deliberately emphasizes the cultural value of its products before their use value: "Our first priority is to the 2 billion consumers we serve every day with products that make them feel good, look good and get more out of life" (Unilever, 2016a, p. 8). For shareholders, Unilever publicizes its position as the sustainability leader in the Food & Beverage supersector of the Dow Jones Sustainability Indices (DJSI) for 12th consecutive year, targeting ethical investors that are also interested in "corporate economic, environmental and social performance, assessing issues such as corporate governance, risk management, branding, climate change mitigation, supply chain standards and labor practices—with a strong focus on long-term shareholder value" (Unilever, September 9, 2010). The DJSI is tied to "sustainability assessments" that factor in economic, environmental, and social criteria with financial performance developed from a survey of 3,400 invited publicly traded companies. In addition to self-reporting, the group overseeing the survey also conducts a "Media and Stakeholder

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<sup>2</sup> Unilever products are "always available, properly displayed and in the right recommended price bracket" for consumers (Unilever, 2017, p.9).

<sup>3</sup> According to Ad Age World's Five Largest Advertisers, Unilever is ranked fourth in 2017 (Johnson, 2018). Unilever's advertising budget was €7.7 billion (\$8.4 billion) in its 2016 Annual Report (Unilever 2017).

Analysis” that assesses the quality of a company’s PR by monitoring “news coverage of companies . . . on a range of issues such as economic crime or corruption, fraud, illegal commercial practices, human rights issues, labor disputes, workplace safety, catastrophic accidents or environmental disasters” (RobecoSAM, 2018, p.10). Therefore, investing in DJSI companies has as much to do with risk and reputation management as it does with material CSR programs. Yet, from an “ethical” investor’s standpoint, overall Unilever earnings have been “dropping by 1% year after year” (Walt, 2017), posing concerns for Unilever’s pledge to operate “sustainably” and maintain its profitability. I am not focused on interpreting the company’s financial health, which can yield numerous judgments given the dip in stock price after Brexit’s currency devaluation of the British pound and the 2017 takeover bid by 3G Capital, Warren Buffet’s partnering private-equity firm. However, Unilever is on record declaring its “hopes to cut \$1 billion” to assure shareholders of the company’s profitability (Walt, 2017).

Unilever’s manufacturing and distribution require suppliers, factory workers, and corporate employees. As of 2016, it operates a network of 306 factories and 400 warehouses around the world, transporting goods the equivalent of approximately 1.5 billion kilometers (Unilever, 2016). It is among the largest buyers of raw materials, including palm oil, cocoa, sugar, and soy, and reports that 67% of its suppliers passed a mandatory Responsible Sourcing Policy self-assessment. However, as I will discuss in the following section, organized critics are exposing Unilever’s lapses in procurement practices and in labor conditions at manufacturing plants, as well as issues with its advertising campaigns (Dupont-Nivet et al., 2017). Though it has received accolades for

pledging to cut its expansive operations carbon footprint in half by 2030, Unilever still aspires to achieve market growth without slowing its manufacturing.

The entire operation and management, spanning over 69 countries, is executed by 169,000 employees, a workforce that reflects a successful human-resource strategy of hiring and retaining leadership from local markets (Unilever, 2016). Also, aimed at attracting millennial employees driven by values of entrepreneurship and sustainability, Unilever sponsors highly competitive student competitions and cultivates an ethos of “untraditional” change within its organization. In 2016, Unilever’s Future Leaders’ League competition received 40,000 student applications worldwide, and its crowdsourced #PutItRight campaign (to redefine negative stereotypes) reached 9.8 million unique users (Unilever, 2016a). Unilever is now the third most searched company on LinkedIn, after Google and Apple, and was named the FMCG Graduate Employer of Choice in 34 countries in 2016.

At the helm of Unilever’s management structure is CEO Paul Polman, an active voice on university campuses, with an annual CSR speech slotted at Stanford’s School of Business MBA Global Speaker Series. Unilever allocates a significant portion of its resources to charming a distinct segment of the workforce in order to secure its longevity and relevance. As one Unilever communications executive puts it:

Millennials expect their individuality and diversity to be recognised [sic] both as consumers and in the workplace . . . they won’t accept slotting into a faceless corporate environment. For them, it’s all about passion, purpose and values: these have to line up, both in their roles at work and beyond. (Unilever, 2016b)

CSR discourse becomes a recruitment and human-resource management tool for creating a meaningful corporate culture to meet the moral and ethical expectations of employees.

**Unilever's stakeholder approach to CSR.** Though Unilever is publicly recognized for its early form of CSR (G. Jones, 2005), its stakeholder approach to CSR has expanded in scope in response to negotiated expectations of the role of business in society and global affairs. In its earliest phase, Unilever's CSR was focused on its direct engagement with its consumers and employees. The founding mission guiding the production of Lever Brothers' first product, Sunlight Soap, was "to make cleanliness commonplace; to lessen work for women; to foster health and contribute to personal attractiveness, that life may be more enjoyable and rewarding for the people who use our products" (Unilever, n.d.). In 1899, Lever Brothers extended its commitment to promoting better living standards to its employees through a "prosperity-sharing" business model with pensions and a 220-acre model village (Lever Brothers, 1905). Port Sunlight housed 3,500 English factory workers and families providing access to medical care, education, church, and art; today it is a relic, preserved by Unilever Trust as an heirloom that shows the company's inherent moral compass. While improving personal hygiene, labor efficiency, domestic cleansing, physical appeal, and paternalism were social values conducive to ideals of Victorian rationalism and social progress, McClintock's analysis of soap advertisements shows their implicit sexual, class, gender, and race politics during the rise of Britain's commodity culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The emergent middle-class values—monogamy (“clean” sex, which has value), industrial capital (“clean” money, which has value), Christianity (“being washed in the blood of the lamb”), class control (“cleansing the great unwashed”) and the imperial civilizing mission (“washing and clothing the savage”)—could all be marvelously embodied in a single household commodity. (McClintock, 1995, p. 129)

As benevolent as Unilever’s founding CSR initiatives appear, it is important to contextualize its early mission within the naturalized values of imperial conquest and capitalist progress, wherein the civilizing force of soap could “advance and brighten” a world dominated by wealthy white Christian men (McClintock, p. 33).

Unilever’s approach to CSR and its stakeholders evolved as the MNC began to expand and confront new global markets. Throughout Unilever’s 20th-century market expansion (to Africa, South America, and Asia in the 1930s and North America in the 1940s) and acquisitions (in the US it bought Pepsodent in 1943, Good Humor in 1961, and Lipton in 1971), it responded to local political economic conditions through charitable donations and product development (G. Jones, 2005). For example, during the Great Depression, Unilever introduced economical soap flakes and fortified margarine with Vitamin A and Vitamin D to boost nutrition in the US. Unilever has a long record for charitable donations, mainly in support of the arts and education, amounting to 2 million pounds in 1990 (G. Jones, 2005) and about 4.3 million euro in 2018 (Unilever, 2019a).<sup>4</sup> Though its corporate executives have historically adhered to a “strict” policy of political neutrality with regard to direct monetary contributions, Unilever employed alternative

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<sup>4</sup>According to the corporate website, Unilever’s 2018 contribution to “community investment” no longer adheres a “traditional model of charitable philanthropy.” Of the net 77.9 million euro contributed toward community investment, Unilever reports 5.6% is spent on charitable donations and the rest is spent on strategic activities and commercial initiatives in the community.



methods to influence policy-making on the local and national levels during its imperial expansion—and it continues to “voice” its interests to governing institutions (G. Jones, 2005). Membership in trade associations and business collectives, as well as advisory positions to nongovernmental bodies, such as the United Nations’ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, have increased its influence over economic and social policy. Unilever began to expand the purview of its social activity in the 1960s to “greening,” formulating internal guidelines for reducing waste from its packaging and manufacturing processes. However, its CSR efforts before the 1990s were reactive rather than proactive. In 1996, when Unilever published its first environmental report and partnered with the World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) to create the Marine Stewardship Council to promote sustainable fishing, it took a distinct turn toward strategic CSR communication.

Unilever’s adoption of active CSR communication is correlated with its strategic approach to branding. Its brand identity, as the parent of thousands of local brands, has remained veiled to the public for much of its history. Unlike US public relations departments in the early 20th century, which made concerted efforts to conjure corporate “souls” (Marchand, 1998), Unilever worked to keep the parent company’s name hidden from public scrutiny. However, in the 1950s, it was faced with European criticism and potential nationalization of ‘monopolistic’ companies; to counter the swirling disapproval, it commissioned a historian to write the company’s history and a press officer to build a corporate image (G. Jones, 2005). In the words of a Unilever PR employee in 1962, “The picture we are trying to project is of a business which is efficient

but liberal and humane” (Bailey cited in G. Jones, 2005, p. 324). That image was constructed, paradoxically, to communicate the organization’s devotion to neoliberal values of market rationality while deliberately casting moral expectations of businesses in capitalist society. Despite its activities to build external relations and philanthropy during the 1960s and 1970s, its efforts to generate name and image recognition in Europe and the US remained “weak”—even among opinion leaders (p. 325). Even after chief executives defended the MNCs’ role in economic development before the United Nations in 1973, Unilever’s subsequent efforts to develop an internal compendium of responsible principles and practices remained decidedly undisclosed to the public. When public perception of MNCs transformed from being “menaces” to being benefactors to society in the 1980s, Unilever reverted back to its “traditional low profile” by embracing public perceptions of its “dullness” (compared to the criticism faced by its competitor Nestlé) well into the 21st century (p. 330). Though it claimed that one in every two homes around the world possessed a Unilever product, the Unilever brand was never mentioned on the packaging of any product it sold to consumers before 2004. Although this approach enabled Unilever to pass through periods of critique through the 1990s, it took a toll on its ability to attract new employees and secure investors.

Unilever’s corporate image only began to take definitive form when it hired the renowned British ad agency Wolff Olins in 2005, in an effort to refresh its public appeal and cultivate favor with its primary stakeholders. In a featured testimonial disclosing some elements of the agency’s creative process, Wolff Olins admitted to the need to “bring Unilever out of the shadows” by designing a new logo and a unifying corporate

and CSR mission: “Adding Vitality to Life” (Wolff Olins, n.d.). Dripping with CSR imagery, the new blue-and-white U-shaped logo appeared on all packaging.



*Figure 1.* Unilever Logo. This interactive image describing the meaning of each symbol is found on the corporate website. (Unilever, 2019h)

The brand’s “face” on social media accounts is made up of 25 earthy symbols—such as a sun, rain, trees, fish, and ocean waves—that represent its most popular brands and CSR values. In fact, it is probably no mistake that the Unilever’s logo closely resembles the United Nations logo. Moreover, its newfound mission was applied for “designing workplaces, transforming the recruitment process, training employees and inventing new products” (Wolff Olins, n.d.). Perhaps it is no surprise that the company commissioned another independent historian to write its history from 1965 to 1990, which it titled *Renewing Unilever: Transformation and Tradition* (G. Jones, 2005). A corresponding internal transformation also included hiring Polman, whose popular image as an “enlightened” CEO catalyzed the start of Unilever’s epoch of active branding (also

memorialized on the corporate timeline from 2010 to the present as a period of “Sustainable Living”). As detailed later in this chapter, my data collection concentrates on Unilever’s most forward effort to fuse CSR communications with its brand identity through the i-CSR campaign launched in 2013.

Unilever’s CSR discourse in the 21st century addresses a network of stakeholders—such as consumers, investors, employees, suppliers, NGOs, charities, scientific institutions, and trade organizations—that directly or indirectly affect (or are affected by) its activities. The strategy of casting a wide net to include all publics indicates normative acceptance of stakeholder theory; however, in the case of Unilever, a stakeholder perspective on business practice seems to allow for tactical plasticity of business purpose. While *CSR* is a term applied in large part by corporations and industries (Ihlen, Bartlett, & May, 2011, p. 6), Unilever’s use of the term *sustainable* to describe its current social-impact activities actively blurs its business purpose. Finally, Unilever’s strategic stakeholder approach to CSR today is exalted as a shining example of “conscious capitalism,” to the extent that Polman half-jokingly claims to “represent one of the biggest NGOs” (Skapinker & Daneshkhu, 2016). While the company’s hundreds of ambitious commitments and many actualized achievements may be material, my objective is *not* to assess the efficacy of its claims to improve health and hygiene, reduce environmental impact, or enhance livelihoods. Instead, I study the techniques employed by Unilever to manufacture moral capital and analyze how these values are being contested online. Before detailing my data collection methods, I therefore contextualize the activity of critical stakeholders in shaping Unilever’s CSR communication strategy.

## **Organized Critique of Unilever**

In a critical examination of business-management scholarship's role in legitimizing CSR, Hanlon (2009) protests the dominant assessment of CSR as a transformative force challenging "traditional" business practice by embodying ethical values from "the left" (p. 157). Like Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012), Hanlon frames commodity activism and expressions of CSR as a form of commodity fetishism that "further embeds capitalist social relations and a deeper opening up of social life to the dictates of the marketplace" (p. 157). However, Hanlon's critical concentration on CSR practices within academic literature offers a generative position for examining corporate-led communication—with a particularly useful means for honing in on critics.

Hence today the leading firms on the FTSE [Financial Times Stock Exchange] or the Dow Jones write CSR reports, tobacco companies attempt to engage with public health officials and campaigners, all organizations claim to be environmentally friendly, and so on. Crucial to dialogue is concept of compromise, a willingness to see the other point of view. In this world dialogue is everything. Depending on the organization, it can be simply putting your CSR Report on the web, posting it to a set of "stakeholders," engaging in roundtable discussions with NGOs, it can be about exchanging knowledge and experience with other corporations, etc. (Hanlon, 2009, p. 165).

Drawing on Hanlon's reevaluation of dialogue produced by corporations, i-CSR and the affordances of social media technology become a way not only to "compromise" but to "tame" criticism. In business-management discourse, these critics are referred to as "the Other," which can be "the activist community" or "the oppositional stakeholder."

For the most part, Unilever's history with oppositional stakeholders targeting its practices and products has been reactionary and rhetorical, without consistently improving its procedures. Its ongoing lapses have been exposed by various groups to

pressure Unilever to improve its manufacturing operations, labor conditions, product ingredients, product packaging, and waste management (as discussed in chapter 4). Once a safety or environmental concern is publicized, Unilever's consistent strategy has been to address the issue within narrow limits and then revert to its low-profile PR strategy. For example, in the 1960s, when Unilever's Planta brand margarine introduced a new emulsifying agent that made 8,000 consumers in the Netherlands develop a skin rash, the company immediately compensated sufferers monetarily—without admitting any liability (G. Jones, 2005). Also during that time, rising concerns about pesticides (Carson, 1962) and consumer safety were putting pressure on MNCs to make changes. Soon after the Planta affair, Unilever introduced a new “clearance” protocol for all new food or chemical additives; however, internal studies in 1976 showed that these testing measures were followed “irregularly” if at all (G. Jones, 2005, p. 340). The commissioned historian also hastily alludes to environmental pressure groups in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Friends of the Earth, calling attention to the environmental consequences of packaging waste—particularly the plastics, aluminum foil, and aerosols used heavily by the FMCG sector. In response, Unilever created internal “guidelines” to “avoid over-packaging” and “to coordinate with municipal authorities responsible for waste collection” (p. 341). Blaming the “decentralized” nature of Unilever's management structure, Jones suggests that unilateral implementation was impossible because each subsidiary brand decided on packaging individually; the evasive language of the guidelines perhaps portended their faulty execution. A pattern for “communicating” and “remedying” lapses is apparent.

Another method, which may seem unremarkable given the history of corporate activism, is a forceful pursuit to influence political dialogue to oppose any form of regulation or restriction. Unilever has historically waited until it has been cornered to address issues—particularly those related to factory effluents and pollution. For example, in June 1972, when environmental concerns culminated in a United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Unilever offered to host staff preparing for the meeting; though Jones does not say much else, one can guess the level of informal access Unilever earned with this gesture. The same year, Unilever decided to include a section dedicated to “Conservation of the Environment” in its annual report to remain “publicly committed to best practice” (G. Jones, 2005, p. 341). With operations geographically widespread, there have been varying levels of public sensitivity and environmental regulation in each country, particularly in the developing world. Rather than strictly enforcing any uniform environmental policy, Unilever has opted to cater to “acceptable” standards on a regional level, relying on dialogue with “stakeholders” on a national and international level to control the policy debate. Unilever sought a “position of influence” by working with governments, consumer groups, and trade associations for the purpose of securing voluntary agreements. Still, when animal-rights protesters interrupted the 1982 annual meeting in London or when the “radical” Animal Liberation Front placed Sunsilk bottles filled with bleach on shelves in Britain in 1984, the parent company went undercover. The personal care brands in question addressed the resisters publicly and agreed to “reduce” animal testing “to an absolute minimum” (p. 344). Through the years, “stewardship,” for Unilever, has amounted to a capacity to “tame” the Other—such as

setting the rules for marking food expiration dates or defining “sustainability.” Its most insidious response to opposition is to define a *profitable standard for acceptability*—rather than an acceptable standard for profitability.

During the period of my i-CSR data collection, 2013 to 2017, there was a steady din as the press, NGO groups, activists, and consumers launched anti-Unilever attacks. The range of controversial topics Unilever directly confronted in the press and on its social media channels during my examination include: its unlawfully sourced palm oil from protected forests in Indonesia; its creation of a Business Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil; its defining *sustainable* procurement in broad and loose terms for the industry; its membership in a pro-Transatlantic Trade Investment Partnership (TTIP) lobby group FoodDrinkEurope; its campaigning to loosen sustainability standards on imports and exports; its unfair labor practices and human rights violations in Vietnamese factories; its price increases after the post-Brexit devaluation of the British pound; its sexist and pigment-biased advertising campaigns for skin-lightening creams in Asia; the mercury poisoning at its thermometer factory in Kodaikanal, India; its US lawsuit against competitor Hampton Creek’s vegan brand Just Mayo for false marketing of “mayonnaise”; its oversized deodorant-packaging class-action lawsuit in US; and its deceptive use of “all natural” on Pure Leaf Iced Tea brand to charge premium prices (Dupont-Nivet et al., 2017).

Though examining the validity of any of these accusations is not within the direct scope of my project, reports by critical stakeholder groups present glaring fissures between CSR communication and CSR legitimacy. For example, an undercover



investigation by Dutch journalists (Dupont-Nivet et al., 2017) reveals the haphazard process by which “certified” sustainable palm oil is often sourced from noncompliant plantations in Indonesia. Gaining access to nearly impenetrable operations along Unilever’s supply chain, the reporters find abuses including the underpayment of farm laborers below minimum wage, appropriation of villagers’ property, and porous boundaries of conserved rain forests. Despite the USLP’s public commitment to source sustainable palm oil by 2012, the reporters ultimately find a lack of inspectors enforcing the self-defined rules demanded by the Roundtable. Evidence of the company’s strategic cooperation with NGOs, government authorities, and the media throughout the report reinforces the hypocrisy of CSR when implemented voluntarily and marketed publicly. Thus, my review of critical reports and accusations fortifies my critical position regarding CSR legitimacy and the production of i-CSR discourse as a neoliberal shield granting the MNC “unassailable status” in the networked public sphere (Dupont-Nivet et al., 2017).

Still, CSR communication as commodity activism requires understanding the contested and contradictory interaction between corporate-led discourse and resistant discourse. My study thus includes analysis of negative comments posted by organized activist groups and individual users opposing corporate malpractice and i-CSR discourse. Of the controversies listed above, three topics emerge as lightning rods that channel anti-Unilever activism online: Unilever’s unlawful procurement of palm oil from protected forests in Indonesia, Unilever’s dismissal of toxic factory waste contaminating a town in India, and Dove brand’s racist and sexist advertising campaign. Each of these contestations was publicized widely by news media at the time, but their real-time

performance extended within Unilever's social media channels presents an important opportunity to study the contradictions and complex processes shaping neoliberal consumer-citizen subjectivity in the networked age. Damaging hashtags, such as #UnileverPollutes and #BoycottDove, provide new avenues for oppositional voices to revise the terms of the business-society contract. However, as my study indicates, MNCs' hegemony in online engagement allows them to redirect progressive discourse to serve their neoliberal ends.

In the next section, I will review the methods used to collect the i-CSR campaign data and the "good" values constituting "sustainability" that emerge within the coding process.

## **Methodology**

**MNC selection.** It was by sheer happenstance that I first encountered the Project Sunlight/Bright Future (PSBF) i-CSR campaign in December 2014, thanks to an unsolicited YouTube advertisement titled "Bright Speeches" (see chapter 4). By then I had already established an academic interest in the production and circulation of moral values within the political economy (Raja, 2014; Raja, 2015), but as a consumer, I did not recognize Unilever as a parent company of cleansing and personal care products that were sitting in my own cabinet. The only noteworthy recollection I had of the brand name Unilever was from my time as a part-time graduate intern of communications for the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) from September 2011 to April 2012. UN DESA's work includes "supporting policy-making bodies, facilitating major UN conferences, projecting trends in demography, publishing

top quality economic and social analysis, [and] helping countries develop national capacity” (UN DESA, 2019). I attended department-led affairs taking place at UN headquarters and published articles on the UN DESA news website (<https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news.html>) and social media accounts. During that time, UN DESA was organizing a major international conference on climate change to be held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 2012, called Rio+20. The conference was considered a critical follow-up to the first such conference, held twenty years before. It would be held in the same city, with representatives from 192 UN member states and select government, private-sector, and NGO leaders in attendance. As a member of the reporting team, I was immersed in the language, style, and symbols of the UN’s construction of “sustainability”—particularly, the way UN DESA framed the objective of Rio+20 as renewing the world’s commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals. In planning meetings, I was attuned to the consistent positive framing of the UN’s “partnerships” and “commitments” with the private sector, including Unilever and Paul Polman.

In January 2015, my advisor, Professor Deepa Kumar, came across the PSBF campaign and emailed me a link to the very YouTube ad I had watched in December 2014. From then, Unilever became an active subject of inquiry. One of my first explorations included the keywords “Unilever” and “Rio+20”—which yielded a striking headline deepening my grave concern about i-CSR as an apparatus of the neoliberal spirit. A *Guardian* article titled “Rio+20: Unilever CEO on the need to battle on to save the world” reports the highlights of Paul Polman’s speech at the conference: “The very essence of capitalism is under threat as business is now seen as a personal wealth

accumulator . . . We have to bring this world back to sanity and put the greater good ahead of self-interest” (Confino, 2012). After his address, Polman notes, “We are in an interdependent world where unfortunately the governmental processes are very local and to internalise these global problems at the political level is proving difficult.” Here, the UN’s discourse on the heroic role of “progressive” private-sector participation came into stark contrast with Polman’s paradoxical negation of the role of government—and in effect, democratic political processes. This is a recurrent theme in the discursive Do-Good Spirit—embedded within the language of the capitalist class is the isolation of amoral accumulation and the construction of virtuous profitability.

**I-CSR text selection and coding.** Once I decided on Unilever’s PSBF campaign as my case study, I began to develop a methodological approach to understand the interactive creation, negotiation, and opposition of CSR discourse online—a concept I would come to call *i-CSR discourse*. Research on online CSR texts is still very limited; however, one study of online CSR headings of Fortune 500 company websites finds that the language and parameters describing CSR online are evolving (Smith & Alexander, 2013). In 2013, 82% of companies in the study identified “community” and 79% “environment (or, more broadly, people and the planet) as prevailing social issues publicized on their corporate websites. Informing the development of my top-tier coding categories, Smith and Alexander observe that corporate websites are substituting terms such as *corporate responsibility*, *employee compensation*, *sourcing*, *citizenship*, and *green* with online headings that include *sustainability*, *ethics*, *diversity*, and *health/*

*wellness*. Dovetailing with the marked shifts in CSR terminology online, Cantó-Milà and Lozano's epistemological treatment of CSR as not a fixed and stable portrayal of reality but a discourse socially constructed in the *process* of communication also provides an important framework I extend to i-CSR:

CSR does not exist beyond what the involved actors define as CSR, and hence act in consequence. A discursive approach to CSR therefore reveals the processes of the concept's social construction. The experts and practitioners who work, deliver speeches, write and debate on CSR all contribute to the creation of a discourse on CSR. (Cantó-Milà & Lozano, 2009, p. 160)

When CSR texts—expressed in written, verbal, and pictorial signs—are produced, disseminated, and received, meanings are shaped in context and in connection with other texts. Although discourse can never be studied in its “entirety” (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 5), a discursive approach to studying CSR texts recognizes the “arena in which the relevant actors position themselves with their views and arguments” (Cantó-Milà & Lozano, 2009, p. 159). As CSR expands to Web 2.0, the field of CSR discourse is transformed beyond Cantó-Milà and Lozano's formulation. No longer limited to an epistemic community of “experts and practitioners,” i-CSR discourse is opened to an online public using social media. For that matter, distinct analysis of i-CSR discourse is required, since digital communication using social media applications is an ongoing, asynchronous process in which users have the capacity for semi-controlled contribution.

Before selecting the texts for my discourse analysis, I performed an initial survey of the basic structural design and Unilever's engagement with users online. Whether approaching the PSBF campaign intentionally, using direct search-engine functions, or unintentionally, through YouTube ad placement, trending social-media algorithms,

hashtags, and viral content sharing, “sustainability” is clearly the most prominent value Unilever publicizes online. While mapping a user’s journey from any of the Unilever social media accounts, I noticed that most posts included hyperlinks funneling users to the PSBF website and the “Sustainable Living” section of the Unilever corporate website. If a user (intentionally or unintentionally) lands on the PSBF website, the banner welcomes users with a real-time scoreboard “counting the acts of sunlight”—a tally of each visitor who “signs up” in support of the campaign. The campaign website features a “Stories” section of updated feature articles and media content, and a live “Media Wall” of select Twitter posts by engaged users. Users can also directly access the “Sustainable Living” section of the corporate website via hyperlinks in the PSBF articles, or by clicking on the “What is Project Sunlight” section of the PSBF website. Though the “Sustainable Living” section exists outside of the PSBF website and does not feature the PSBF iconography, it is still affiliated with the i-CSR discourse publicized in the campaign. Unlike the PSBF campaign, it remains largely static within the official Unilever.com website. (I have noted several revisions to the layout of the pages in this section and some minor adjustments to the text and visual content, particularly during the release of a new annual CSR report.) To understand the users engaged with the campaign, I performed a simple Twitter search for the hashtags #projectsunlight and #brightfuture; this sweeping survey of online interactions presented relationships with a wide variety of businesses, nonprofits, NGOs, media organizations, schools, public figures, celebrities, online influencers, and individual users. Also, the PSBF campaign retweets and mentions Paul Polman’s Twitter account (@Paul\_Polman) so frequently that his persona coalesces

with the corporation's image and the PSBF campaign. Once I charted the scope and parameters of the campaign, I formalized my data collection and coding methods for material produced by Unilever and the online engagement produced by participating users.

The findings presented in subsequent chapters draw from discourse analysis of the PSBF i-CSR campaign from November 2013 to December 2017. The campaign website and social media data were collected using screenshots and cut-paste functions at four separate times—June 2015, January 2016, January 2017, December 2017. Since the campaign's name was changed from Project Sunlight to Bright Future after May 2015, data from the first PSBF campaign website from 2013 to 2014 was collected from the public-access Wayback Machine internet archive (<https://web.archive.org/details/projectsunlight.com>). The most visible characteristic of the earlier website that no longer appears in the revamped website was the country menu: the options are Global, UK, US, Brazil, Indonesia, and India. If a user selects any of the last three country options, that country's content is featured and translated into its respective national language. Apart from the new name and the removal of the country selection menu, the aesthetic and content of the campaign website after May 2015 are very similar. Users looking for Project Sunlight are automatically rerouted to the Bright Future campaign website ([www.brightfuture.unilever.com](http://www.brightfuture.unilever.com)), which is divided into four main sections: Homepage, What Is Project Sunlight/Bright Future?, Stories, and Media Wall. Each page of the PSBF campaign website includes buttons linked to the @UnileverUSA Facebook and Twitter pages. Raw data from Facebook and Twitter posts was saved in digital documents to

allow for text search and coding at four periods—June 2015, January 2016, December 2016, and December 2017. All screen snapshots and text documents have been saved on a personal hard drive. Most of the YouTube videos featured on Unilever’s PSBF website are all archived on Unilever’s corporate YouTube channel (Unilever) and the PSBF campaign YouTube channel (ProjectsunlightUS), so they have not been saved. The annual USLPs, the published CSR report issued at the beginning of each year, is available on the corporate website’s archive and have been saved. When consulting the campaign during the writing of my analysis, I learned that the campaign was terminated in March 2018. Users were rerouted to the Unilever corporate website, where the featured PSBF content was included in its Sustainable Living section (<https://www.unilever.com/sustainable-living/>).

Most activity by the PSBF campaign and its online users took place on Facebook and Twitter. Though there have been forays into visual content on Instagram, Vine, and Snapchat during this period, there has not been sustained activity or a substantial following on any of these platforms. Highly visual, viral content in the form of articles, branded photographs, digital videos, and inspiring quotes are published on Facebook and Twitter at least three times a week. Though users can respond to PSBF content on the campaign website, all responses in this study are collected from social media pages.

Since “sustainability” broadly includes any economic, social, and ecological activity related to a business (Kirsh, 2005), I have excluded posts that are direct advertisements for products. Using grounded theory, I manually generated open coding categories for all posts separated by the producer of the message: Unilever’s posts are



classified by 36 categories for “sustainability” (or CSR discourse), and users’ posts are classified by 10 categories for response position.

Table 1			
<i>Open Coding Categories for Social Media Posts by Unilever</i>			
Level 1 - Type	Level 2 - Cause	Level 3 - Values	Level 4 - Solicited Action
Campaign	Business ethics	Altruism	Crowdsourced opinion/ reaction
Commemoration Day	Climate	Compassion	Crowdsourced experience-based answer
Conference/Event/ Festival	Education	Equality	Crowdsourced fact-based answer
Contests	Environment	Family	Crowdsourced video content
Live Chat	Gender Equality	Hygiene	Statement with no action solicited
Meme	Health	Justice	
Movement	Hunger	Love	
Partnership	LGBTQ Equality	Passion	
Stories	Moral Announcement	Patriotism	
Tip	Poverty	Recycling	
	Sanitation	Technological Progress	

	UN	Volunteerism	
	Youth issues		

The open coding categories indicated a range of characteristics and were subsequently categorized into three levels: type, cause, and purpose. Next each post was assigned at least one code from each level. Initially, the “type” of i-CSR post produced by Unilever distinguished the predominant subject and purpose of the message. Next, I categorized “causes,” such as business ethics, climate, education, environment, gender equality, health, hunger, LGBTQ equality, morality, poverty, sanitation, UN, and youth issues. Posts were then interpreted for at least one of 12 normative “values positions” constituting Unilever’s conception of morality. In many cases, one post could have multiple causes or value positions. Finally, I developed a category to identify solicited interactivity: crowdsourced opinion/reaction, crowdsourced experience-based answer, crowdsourced fact-based answer, crowdsourced video content, or statement with no action solicited.

Responses on Facebook are made as open-form “comments” using text, photo, video, hyperlinks, or emojis. Twitter responses are conveyed either symbolically, through a “heart,” or directly, through a 140-character text-based reply to @UnileverUSA. Given Facebook’s interface, user response around specific content is presented as a threaded dialogue, enabling asynchronous conversations between multiple users and Unilever. Many, though not all, users engaged with the PSBF campaign on social media graciously accept Unilever’s constructions of sustainability as authentic. Given my interest in

contested values, responses were initially coded by emotional valence. User comments are then classified by tone and position on Unilever's post:

Table 2	
<i>Open Coding Categories for Social Media Comments by Users</i>	
Level 1 - Emotional valence	Level 2 - Tone and reception
Positive	Elaborate enthusiastic support
Positive	Symbolic agreement/Like/Heart/Retweet/Emoji
Negative	Symbolic disagreement/Dislike/Emoji
Negative	Measured critique
Negative	Elaborate vehement disagreement
Neutral	Unbiased openness or Undecided Ambivalence
Neutral	Sustainability suggestion
Neutral	Sustainability content

Of all user posts coded in my study, an estimated one-third invoke a negative response to Unilever. There were two significant spikes in negative responses during my study: during the Kodaikanal viral campaign in August 2016 and the launch of the racist Dove ad in October 2017 (chapter 4). In fact, after the removal of the Dove ad, Unilever reduced its i-CSR discourse post frequency and quietly retired the PSBF campaign website in March 2018.

Overall, during my examination of websites and coding of social media data, I began to recognize the distinct ways the corporation worked to maintain website control and steer social media interactivity. This discovery guided the organization of my discourse analysis in two chapters: Unilever's controlled one-way i-CSR production

using strategic storytelling in chapter 3, and Unilever's interactivity using crowd-sourcing and co-production in chapter 4. Since interactivity did not always follow predictable outcomes, chapter 4 closely examines the negative responses made by users. Although every post in my study does not receive engagement, it does not diminish its influence over norms and expectations around CSR.

**Informal interviews.** During the collection and coding of my data, I also conducted informal interviews with six communication and marketing professionals between January 2015 to January 2017. Each individual interview session lasted approximately three hours and all selected participants agreed to participate in two interview sessions. These interviews took place in person either at my home in Jersey City, or at a local cafe. An estimated total of 40 hours of handwritten interview notes were logged, informing my examination of Unilever's online presence and PSBF campaign. Since all are former colleagues and business-school classmates from my social circle living in the New York City metro area, our well-established relationship facilitated the level of comfort required for candid conversation and critical reflection about corporate communication and marketing in the 21st century. The six participants' employment histories represent both internal and external approaches to corporate communications: two participants share a perspective as upper-level managers at full-service advertising agencies, three have worked in corporate communications departments at large-scale global firms, and one is a creative director at a new-media branding agency. Half of the participants had earned a master's degree in business

administration (MBA) from a top-tier business school. All participants remained available to answer follow-up questions that emerged during my textual analysis.

To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, I refrain from using participants' names, education affiliations, and places of current employment. When participants requested that I withhold the name of a campaign or client, I have done so and instead refer to the public profile or industry of the organization being discussed.

Participant 1 graduated with a bachelor of science in marketing. Her early career at Zenith Media concentrated on measuring and reporting online-marketing-campaign analytics for several Fortune 500 companies. Today, she is a midlevel manager at a marketing agency based in New York City. In our interviews she shared the agency perspective on the development and execution of data-driven campaigns targeting millennial consumers. My time with Participant 1 also included an overview of the performance measures and valuation methods of online advertising.

Participant 2 graduated with a bachelor of science in economics. His career in advertising sales and media management has taken place at a NYC-based subsidiary of one of the world's largest full-service advertising agencies for over 12 years. His current upper-management position involves the development, production, and distribution of all of US advertising for a major telecommunications company. Interview sessions focused on the negotiations between the media agency and the corporate client around branding and messaging for the 21st-century consumer. After my interview sessions with Participant 2, his personal critique of CSR communications became apparent. He

continued to offer details by phone and email of developing ad campaigns, especially for the 2017 Super Bowl, that involved a client's insistence on "moral" branding.

Participant 3 graduated with a bachelor of arts in marketing in 2002 and an MBA in marketing. She spent her early career in PR at Hill and Knowlton and marketing at MTV Networks. Today, she is a creative director at a digital media agency based in Los Angeles and New York, working extensively on millennial-focused campaigns for two high-profile Fortune 500 companies in the technology industry. She is also gaining expertise in her field and has been invited to publish articles in *Ad Age* and the Association of National Advertisers.

Participant 4 graduated with a bachelor of arts in anthropology and an MBA in finance. Though her 15-year career has largely taken shape in the nonprofit world—among the most formidable experiences are her time volunteering for the Peace Corps and co-directing an award-winning LGBTQ arts organization—our discussion revolved around her experience working on the communication management team of a venture-backed microfinance "social entrepreneur" in India. Her candid remarks during the company's expansion from 100 employees to 2,500 during its first two equity raises, and its controversial internal loan-collections operations, reveal the importance of discursive framing of "social purpose" for "stakeholders."

Participant 5 graduated with a bachelor of arts in theater production and an MBA in management. While his career began in theater and film, he later moved into corporate communications, with a focus on reputation management and PR, and has worked in that field for over 10 years. His experience in strategic corporate communications at Tom's of

Maine before and during its acquisition by Colgate-Palmolive in 2006 was the focus of the interview. Moreover, his activist work (for Occupy Wall Street) and political work (for the Green Party) are deeply connected to his corporate experience. Participant 5 offers important insights as an expert in strategic communications from both ends of the social-profit continuum—as an internal corporate PR manager and a nonprofit PR volunteer.

Participant 6 graduated with a bachelor of arts in communication and a masters in media studies. She has 12 years of television production experience in entertainment and news. Her role in the newsroom of a major news network transformed during the rise of social media from 2008 to 2015, shifting her focus on news production for Facebook and YouTube. Given the deteriorating labor conditions of news production, she joined a nimble digital marketing firm in 2016 and leads a team of social media producers. She is now involved in strategizing and creating digital marketing content for various brands. Participant 6 shares key trends in social media marketing, digital production for search engine optimization, and community building online.

Overall, the discussions provide an important overview of the practices and values shaping online marketing campaigns in the post-financial-crisis, social-media era. Each provides critical information regarding the forces shaping branding, content production, corporate culture, and communications strategy that focused my understanding of corporate values and marketing. The conversations also unveil a complex web of conflicting values at work within corporate marketing processes and practices. Extensive ethnographic research is required to understand how these practices propagate damaging

ideologies despite the internal value struggles of marketing professionals. However, the insights gathered from my sample of marketing professionals provides significant strength guiding my impulse to critically examine the CSR discourse now pervading the internet.

Rather than accepting the shift toward socially responsible business practice as a triumph for conscious capitalism, a critical examination of Unilever's i-CSR discourse signals an urgent need for scholars to remain both critical of CSR and sensitive to the values-based discourse emanating from social media. I will present and analyze my findings on the discourse emerging from the PSBF i-CSR campaign and contextualize them using the interview data. This case study shows how social media platforms can provide a deafening corporate mouthpiece to reconstruct neoliberal ideology as "sustainable" for the common good. The i-CSR discourse, operationalized through 360-degree branding, crowdsourcing, and strategic storytelling, enables values to be commodified as cultural goods. When these values-based cultural goods are consumed, they offer the potential to satiate an individual's desire for pursuing individual moral action and participating in the common good.

### **Unilever's First Interactive I-CSR Campaign**

From its earliest corporate website (Unilever.com), archived in 1996, Unilever's online corporate presence has spread considerably. It now includes YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and Vine. As of December 2017, Unilever's digital presence included 35 Twitter accounts and 85 Facebook pages that bear its brand logo. The various Unilever accounts—created by regional subsidiaries (Hindustan Unilever,



Unilever Nederland, etc.), and corporate departments (such as, Consumer Services, Human Resources, etc.)—have been excluded in this study. In contrast, Unilever’s i-CSR marketing campaign, PSBF, posts most frequently on its social media accounts (@UnileverUSA) and draws the most followers than any of the other Unilever social media accounts. At the same time, the PSBF campaign moves away from the traditional one-way communication model of reporting CSR online to exemplify the most recent forays of corporate advertising in the “interactive era” (Lane et al., 2010, p. 12). The free-form comment function vital to social media ecology provides MNCs like Unilever a new capacity to interact with every stakeholder group simultaneously, directly, and efficiently, without the limitations of paid media. Although millennials are the most active on these platforms, such social media activity draws the attention of the most influential advertisers and newsrooms.

From the moment @UnileverUSA joined Twitter in September 2009, it began tweeting thousands of announcements featuring new product lines and the activities of its freshly hired CEO, Paul Polman. Soon after the company’s stock price hit a 10-year low in 2009, Polman unveiled a CSR initiative called the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan (USLP), with a corresponding website ([www.sustainable-living.unilever.com](http://www.sustainable-living.unilever.com))—a precursor to its adoption of values-centric discourse online. Here Unilever began skillfully using *sustainability* as a catchall term to identify all corporate activities—financial and nonfinancial, current and future—as ethically driven.<sup>5</sup> The new website and

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<sup>5</sup>Though benefit corporations are held to legal standards of accountability, transparency and purpose, traditional corporations hold authority to define what is publicly reported as quantifiably and qualitatively “sustainable” in CSR reporting.

USLP were internally launched via webcast to offices in London, Rotterdam, New Delhi, and New York on November 10, 2010, in an effort to invigorate Unilever's thousands of employees. All stakeholders can engage with i-CSR discourse on the site, with specified pages for employees, customers, suppliers, and investors—and a frequently asked questions (FAQ) page addresses inquisitive or critical stakeholders. To mold its “sustainable” identity in a way that remains compatible with neoliberalism, the corporation reconstructs its original business purpose on the website, reaching beyond manufacturing consumer products to maximize shareholder value: “William Hesketh Lever and Samuel van den Bergh did not just create some of the world's first consumer brands; they also built a business with strong values and a mission to act as agents of social change” (Unilever, n.d.). Underneath this commitment is a “Sustainability Timeline” of the company's CSR legacy, from 1884 to the present, by decade, exhibiting its “new social contract” to help solve the world's social challenges. The corporate historians mark the “2010–present” period as “a turning point in history” in which the company will “develop our strategy of decoupling growth from our environmental impact, while increasing Unilever's positive social impact.” The language of social activism is retooled and commodified, selling the image of a MNC that goes “beyond business . . . creating a safer, fairer future.” The neoliberal logic of profit expansion and privatization remains steadfast, however, as Unilever publicizes its moral quest to improve society (see chapter 3).

In an attempt to “decouple future growth from environmental impact,” the company published a 24-page plan documenting its three major sustainability goals and

50 “material” targets for 2020, which it claimed that would help 1 billion people improve their health and well-being (Unilever, 2010). Unilever sees no conflict in being *both* sustainable and profitable while growing its business. Employees, implicitly circumscribed by this new logic, are invoked to embody a work ethic for the greater good. In the press release, marking a novel commitment by any traditional corporation, Unilever’s chief communications and marketing officer framed the corporation’s quest to “make sustainable living commonplace”—signaling the operationalization of CSR as a branding mechanism to expand its visibility as a sustainability leader.

We are currently in challenging and volatile times—but they are also times of powerful opportunities and the best time to lead for a better future. Marketers have a key role here: if we take the lead, we can create sustainable growth. But it requires us to think and act differently, and develop new business models if we are to make the sustainable growth agenda mainstream. (Unilever, 2011)

These marketing efforts require us to remain skeptical of the seemingly inclusive progressive agenda to promote the common good. Why is a global manufacturer of consumer goods spending billions of euros on advertising its “sustainable growth” values? As early controversies around CRM show, there is a history of corporations’ efforts to promote their social activism being disproportionate to the value of their actual contributions (Gottlieb, 1986).<sup>6</sup> While exact figures quantifying the costs and benefits of CSR initiatives are not easily accessible or calculable, Unilever is the second-largest

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<sup>6</sup> Cause-related marketing campaigns, such as American Express’s Statue of Liberty Restoration Project in 1983, have been criticized for spending more on marketing the corporation’s partnership with a cause than the actual donations. An executive vice president of American Express told a *New York Times* reporter, “The Judeo-Christian ethic holds that individuals, when they give, should give self-effacingly, without credit, waiting for a heavenly reward . . . Publicly held companies have a responsibility to the shareholders to spend the money in building the business and building profits . . . Cause-related marketing is not philanthropy. It is marketing in the public interest” (Gottlieb, 1986).

advertiser in the world, with an annual budget of approximately €8 billion.<sup>7</sup>

Communicating its leadership in “sustainability” is a competitive advantage garnering moral capital and a proactive shield warding off bureaucratic oversight.

Though the USLP and website use a one-way communication model, their list of constructive humanitarian and environmental goals spreads the culpability for capitalism’s destructive spirit, noting, for example, that “two-thirds of [Unilever’s] total greenhouse gas (GHG) footprint is caused by consumers heating water to wash or clean clothes using [its] products” (Unilever, 2010). Despite Edelman’s (n.d.) survey in 2010 showing public trust in business “sunk to historic lows” after the global financial crisis, blame for environmental degradation is tactfully assigned to stakeholder groups (especially consumers, suppliers, and businesses) throughout the USLP. Social shaming and corporate reputation management are major forces for legitimating Unilever’s strong moral and ethical “voice” on social media. Moreover, “sustainability” cannot be achieved by Unilever alone—it necessitates collective action from all stakeholders and an ethical leader to enlighten the rest. In the process of branding its own form of stewardship within the corporation’s reimagined social contract, Unilever circumscribes a branded form of civic participation that ultimately serves its own interest in gainful survival. It uses stakeholder theory to assign blame to a collective group of culprits, facilitating construction of moral grounds for consumption and ethical action for citizenship. Eventually, as the campaign became more interactive, the aggressive finger-wagging was replaced with a nonconfrontational form of guilt.

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<sup>7</sup> Unilever’s advertising budget was €7.7 billion (\$8.4 billion) in its 2016 Annual Report (Unilever, 2017).

This blurring of consumption and citizenship is a baleful maneuver reinforcing neoliberal ideology and was actively applied by Unilever when the interactive component of its i-CSR campaign launched in 2013. On the UN's Universal Children's Day (November 20, 2013), Unilever launched Project Sunlight, a tribute to its 130-year-old Sunlight Soap, as a motivational website and i-CSR campaign to inspire millions of adults and children "to get involved in doing small things which help their own families, others around the world and the planet" (Unilever, 2013). Though the USLP garnered support from the business management community and improved internal morale of employees, before Project Sunlight, it was largely overlooked by the mainstream media, which focused instead on the 2008 Greenpeace palm-oil campaign exposing its illegal procurement of palm oil from protected rainforests in Indonesia still lingered in media coverage. After the campaign launch, Unilever's CSR ambitions and progress were finally amplified by news outlets and online influencers for an active online public—not excluding children. While Unilever defends its standards for advertising to children, albeit vaguely for ages 12 and over, it has developed an insidious form of engagement with youth around its i-CSR campaign—a purposeful decision informed by commissioned research revealing children's power to motivate parents to make purchases based on sustainability values (Unilever, 2013). The campaign's relentless focus on building a "bright future" through direct online interaction reflects a new form of marketing and customer relationship management that engages even the youngest social media users to act not first as consumers, but as citizens.

Project Sunlight, tasked with building “momentum behind a positive movement for change,” posted shareable media on its social media platforms, directed users to its campaign website, and encouraged user participation. In the first version of this website, a ticker board counted “acts of sunlight,” with an option to “Join in.” Below the ticker, visitors could select a region to see local brand-specific stories in a national language, a live Twitter Media Wall from an official Unilever account, selected tweets from followers using the hashtag #brightfuture, and a Facebook page. The featured content on the campaign website was a YouTube short film, *Why Bring a Child into This World?*, by Academy Award–winning director Errol Morris and Bollywood celebrity narrator Shah Rukh Khan.

Within Project Sunlight’s first year, Unilever partnered with the international nonprofit Free the Children to sponsor California’s first WE Day Youth Service Event and digital news outlet Upworthy to share “rich content” with “highly influential, socially conscious” readers (Unilever, 2014). In November 2014, in time for the altruistic end-of-year season, Unilever aired its first ever Unilever-branded television and YouTube advertisement, “Bright Future Speeches.” Unilever shared the spotlight with eloquent youth activists making an appeal for living sustainably for a brighter future. In the same year, the chief marketing officer and leading spokesperson, Keith Weed, delivered a viral TED talk (branded TED@Unilever) on “responsible consumption”—his assessment of consumers’ response to constant news coverage of global calamities and growing appreciation of “sustainable living” (Brightfuture, n.d.). By May 2015, the name Bright Future replaced the Project Sunlight campaign and all traffic was redirected to a new

URL ([www.brightfuture.unilever.com](http://www.brightfuture.unilever.com))—still featuring region-specific stories, visual content, and social media activity from the @UnileverUSA Twitter and Facebook accounts. Pleased with David Agency and Ogilvy and Mather’s work on its first advertisement, Unilever launched its second commercial, “Farewell to the Forest,” before the UN’s climate change conference (Conference of the Parties, or COP 21) in Paris in December 2015. To continue its daily online stream of hope, philanthropy, encouragement, and optimism, it also announced specialized digital training programs to help its 5,500 marketing employees keep up with the pace of online participatory culture (Handley, 2017).

Overall, my analysis of the PSBF data collected in my study shows that i-CSR discourse is a corporate communications tool ultimately purposed for self-interested economic and cultural gain. To achieve this goal, digital communication tools are harnessed to carry out two functions: controlling the corporation’s image and values in Chapter 3 and dominating processes of meaning-making in networked neoliberal society in Chapter 4. In the chapters that follow, I have organized my analysis of the PSBF campaign around these functions. Chapter 3 focuses on techniques for manufacturing highly visual and values-centric media discourse, while chapter 4 focuses on the formation of a brand community and its interactions with critical stakeholders.

### 3. Unilever Shares Sustainability Stories: Corporate Subjectivity and the Aesthetics of Transparency

Unilever strives to be a trusted corporate citizen, and, as an integral part of society, to fulfil our responsibilities to the societies and communities in which we operate.

—Unilever, *Unilever.com*, 2019

On November 20, 2013, only a week from the start of the charitable-giving and retail season, Unilever introduced a new Twitter hashtag, #brightfuture (@UnileverUSA, 2013).



Figure 2. The first use of the #BrightFuture hashtag (@UnileverUSA, 2013).

This was the first of over 100 branded tweets and photographs by @UnileverUSA that day, coinciding with Universal Children's Day, to launch Project Sunlight (PSBF). The official press release announces Unilever's vague but righteous aspirations for the program:



Project Sunlight, which follows the sun by launching first at dawn in Indonesia, then India, the UK, and Brazil before culminating in the US, is designed to appeal to people everywhere, and in particular parents, encouraging them to join what Unilever sees as a growing community of people who want to make the world a better place for children and future generations . . . Unilever wants to help people SEE a brighter future by watching a film online. Unilever wants to encourage people to ACT by doing small things which, added together, contribute to a better society and environment . . . Ultimately, the company wants people to JOIN by registering on [projectsunlight.us](http://projectsunlight.us) to become part of a growing community of likeminded people and organizations who all want to play their part in building a brighter future. (Unilever, 2013)

The debut website, set up to “showcase the social mission stories of Unilever brands around the world,” is visually formatted as a blog. Updated with articles on education, hunger, poverty, clean water, and environmental preservation every month, the posts use embedded audio-visual content to encourage user interaction within the comments section (Unilever 2013, November 20a). Users who click on “ACT” or “JOIN” are asked to agree to the terms of the community—which includes acknowledging that Unilever is protected by a “good faith” disclaimer. Legally, the PSBF content “should not be relied on for any specific purpose and no representation or warranty is given as regards its accuracy or completeness” (UnileverUSA, 2016). Though the flickering scoreboard on the website’s banner showed the growing number of users registering in real-time during my study, the campaign website scarcely included any comments from these users. For that matter, the PSBF website functioned less as a “community blog” and more as an “institutional blog,” challenging the purpose of blogging. Karpf (2008), who has developed a political blogspace typology, finds that blogging is used for various ends. Community blogs, according to Karpf (2008), are a progressive tool for counterelites. Community platforms actively blur the line between producers and consumers of

information, enabling multilayered interactivity and open authorship for meaningful participation. Institutional blogs, however, are used as “a megaphone . . . to augment the mission of traditional elites” (Karpf, 2008, p. 373). Organizations that adopt elements of community blogging challenge the progressive conception of blogging as a tool for counterelites. Since most of the communicative engagement between Unilever and users takes place on social media—where the “good faith” disclaimer is not formally recognized by participants—the PSBF website acts as an institutional blog with minimal interactivity and closed authorship.

Over the course of my three-year study of the PSBF campaign, noticeable patterns emerged from the discourse produced by Unilever. The company’s newfound loquaciousness, amplified on social media, focuses almost entirely on “sustainability” values—or its greater social mission *beyond* its role as a manufacturer. My analysis presented chapter 3 and chapter 4 shows that Unilever’s discourse on “sustainability” values can be better understood as a *strategically deployable shifter*—defined by linguistic anthropologists as words that “allow people to communicate across social boundaries and vantage points” (Urciuoli, cited in Kirsh, 2015). As an instrument of corporate hegemony, CSR and in particular “sustainability” can host a broad range of divergent concepts related to economic, social, and ecological activity, while creating an impression of universality and shared understanding (Kirsh, 2015). For instance, one business-management textbook focused on CSR defines *sustainability* as any “development that meets the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs” (Visser, 2010). In the same way,

“sustainability” in the PSBF is designed to assemble a wide audience of “likeminded people and organizations” for the purpose of “making the world a better place” (Unilever, 2013); as a strategically deployable shifter, it is a term that is both ideologically open-ended and ethically anodyne. As I will explain in the following, Unilever orchestrates its unobjectionable “sustainability” by recounting captivating stories around a version of neoliberal CSR that strategically generates “ethical” profitability. Ultimately, its i-CSR discourse constructs a persona of “sustainability” that skews progressive values of transparency, environmental consciousness, social justice, and collective action.

The initial question guiding my analysis is: Why did Unilever choose to predominantly publicize its CSR, its partnerships with nonprofit organizations, its observance of days dedicated to social justice, its friendly ties to a range of influential public figures and celebrities, and its allegiance to progressive values using online social networking tools? Compared to publicly accessible posts dating back to 2012, before the campaign, @UnileverUSA’s Twitter and Facebook pages made a clear about-face within the first 24 hours of the PSBF launch; impersonal messages directly marketing the use value of personal care and household products transformed overnight into an active voice encouraging “a growing community” around sustainable living.<sup>8</sup> Within the first month, the campaign produced 5,083 posts and secured 3,578 Twitter followers on the @UnileverUSA account and 41,188 on @Unilever.<sup>9</sup> By June 27, 2017, the campaign produced 10,573 posts and grew to 14,747 followers on @UnileverUSA and 163,196 on

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<sup>8</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20131229125818/twitter.com/unileverUSA>

<sup>9</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20131229125818/twitter.com/unileverUSA>

@Unilever. The strategic production of i-CSR discourse clearly draws followers and engagement to Unilever.

To review, CSR refers to the wide range of material and immaterial activities related to an organization's moral and ethical directives to its stakeholders. I-CSR discourse refers to the digital production—audio, visual, and textual content—on the Internet that describes a corporation's social activities and values. Yet, i-CSR is more than simple “window dressing” or PR for the digital age, I argue. Rather, as I show in this chapter, the affordances of online discourse augments both corporate subjectivity as well as consumer participation creating a discourse that goes beyond one-directional PR.

The impulse to view i-CSR as PR for the digital age fails to recognize the manifestation of a living corporate entity enabled by Web 2.0 and real-time social media. It further minimizes the cultural power of values-based discourse enabled by a digital marketing technique that participants in my study referred to as “strategic storytelling.” Web 2.0 offers corporations a two-way platform to communicate with their stakeholders in real time and a compelling form of audiovisual narration to customize their CSR strategically. Unilever, once a “dull” parent company most often perceived in terms of objective economic valuation by shareholders and the managerial class (see chapter 2), now appears to be a 21st-century subject. It has a personality and an identity. Not only does the Web 2.0 enable corporate subjectivity, the PSBF i-CSR campaign highlights new processes for individual participation, creation, sense-making, and value exchange within lived reality performed online. As scholars have argued, new technologies allow simultaneously for the production and consumption of meaning or *prosumption*.

However, new-media users are “far from gaining decision-making power over the—old or new—media establishment” (Picone, 2017, p. 386). Thus, the question that guides my analysis is: What role do online interactions between MNCs and users play in the production and negotiation of i-CSR discourse? While chapter 4 closely unpacks these online encounters—specifically co-creation and opposition between the MNC and users—this chapter is focused on the MNC’s position as a hegemonic subject participating in networked society.

In the following, I argue that Unilever exemplifies CSR in the 21st century—a business practice that distinctly employs digital communication strategies to control the corporate image and values, or brand (Aaker, 2002), despite the opportunity for meaningful online engagement. As Klein (2000) finds, a brand is no longer directly attributed to a product, but to a set of values. First, I present the way Web 2.0 facilitates the implementation of normative stakeholder theory. The PSBF campaign challenges the academic assumptions that stakeholder dialogue establishes an equitable forum for negotiation. Next, I review the traditional forms of i-CSR discourse produced by Unilever. Here, Unilever begins to construct its form of sustainability around paternalism, environmentalism, and transparency that reproduces the neoliberal spirit. While i-CSR discourse includes digitally published CSR reports and disclosures made on the corporate website, the PSBF expands into the interactive spaces of social media in which stakeholders become prosumer-citizens called to collective action. In the third section, I argue that a major concern of i-CSR discourse is the presence of a “living” Unilever personality and identity enabled by social media platforms. While corporations continue

to remain objects purposed for wealth creation, the newfound corporate subjectivity—facilitated by an active voice and values-based discourse—seeks to legitimate an authentic form of participation within online culture. Finally, once legitimacy is established, I identify Unilever’s use of an online marketing technique called “strategic storytelling” to maintain closed control over its own virtuous image. By deploying universally appealing accounts of its “sustainable” business operations, environmental consciousness, and social justice, i-CSR discourse in the PSBF campaign normalizes neoliberal standards for CSR which naturalizes existing conditions of late-capitalism. By drawing on the key symbols constructing an individual’s value system, i-CSR can shape individual moral action and the ethics of responsible citizenship.

### **Problematizing Normative Stakeholder Theory**

When interrogating online interactions from the position of the MNC, the PSBF i-CSR campaign provides a rich space to problematize normative stakeholder theory, which treats participation through dialogue simplistically, presuming corporate intentions for upholding the public interest. Drawing on conceptions of dialogue across fields (see chapter 4), CSR communications research generally advocates for stronger forms of interaction and “symmetrical” relations with stakeholders (Morsing & Schultz 2006). However, there is little academic attention paid to the challenges of implementation when confronting the disproportionate power relations between corporations and other stakeholder groups. For example, Perret’s (2003) arguably naive conception of “stakeholder dialogue” is as an “ongoing and iterative” process “in which parties with different interests and values at stake in a particular issue work together towards mutually

acceptable solutions” (p. 385). Although Perret attempts to designate a typology and roles for “independent” forms of engagement, he admits that the organization that sponsors the dialogic process and the organization that makes the final decision are always fixed. Here, there is no further questioning or explanation of how a powerful “sponsor” or the “deciding” organization is left to operationalize the “hidden common ground”—an outright neglect of the self-interest guiding a corporation’s rational decision-making process (p. 386). Similarly, Foster and Jonker (2005) apply Habermas’s (1981) concept of idealized “communicative action” to demonstrate the positive outcome of “stakeholder engagement” in which a corporation initiates a process of “concurrent dialogue” for “mutual understanding as the basis of agreeable action” (p. 328). Yet they do not account for the fact that “agreeable action,” for an MNC, is *always* dictated by profitability. For that matter, much of CSR communication research does not adequately refute the most recognized neoliberal idiom opposing CSR, coined by Milton Friedman: “The business of business is business” (cited in Banerjee, 2008, p.60).

In addition to projecting a facile form of participation and inclusionary dialogue for CSR practitioners, some CSR research implicitly accepts and exploits these power imbalances. Maen, Lindgreen, and Swaen (2009) frame bilateral communication as a PR tool to mitigate external skepticism and an organizational tool to consolidate an internal CSR vision for employees. The dominant position of prescriptive research (see Capriotti, 2010), advocates two-way dialogue in order to build a community of transparency and trust—core CSR values. However, as Golob and Podnar (2014) find in their empirical study of interviews with leaders of two corporations and two NGOs, “The transfer of

principles into practice is not quite ideal and sometimes resembles more the ‘asymmetrical’ communication imposed by the stronger party” (p. 254).

At first glance, the PSBF campaign looks like a model case in support of academic recommendations for successfully generating interaction. Yet, following Golob and Podnar, I show that asymmetrical power relationships shape the dialogic process. In my study, the politics defining CSR are reflected and reinforced in Unilever’s interactions with the online public. Within the first three days of the PSBF launch online, a handful of users replied to the first campaign tweet and referenced a digital short film directed by award-winning documentarian Errol Morris, *Why Bring a Child into This World?*, featured on the campaign website that week.



Figure 3. Responses to the first PSBF campaign tweet (@UnileverUSA, 2013, November 22)



While many users that participate commend Unilever's perceived CSR efforts, some users, like @BostonMaggie (2013), are censorious—ready to put Unilever to task by posing critical questions regarding the intended meaning of its published i-CSR discourse. In the “dialog” above, Unilever replies graciously to posts that decode and answer Unilever's question in the dominant register; however, for the post that poses a critical question, Unilever remains silent (see Chapter 4 for analysis of interactions with critical stakeholders). Unilever mimics the affirmative speech of a community leader, but evades the opportunity to build “meaningful” dialogue idealized in academic CSR research (Capriotti, 2010). By side-stepping two-way communication with oppositional users, Unilever reinforces the primary function of the PSBF as a “monologic” tool to maintain one-way control over cultural production (Bakhtin, 1921,1981). Laying down the framework for semiotics and a study of dialogism, Bakhtin recognizes the asymmetries of dialogue when “socially significant world views have the capacity to exploit the intentional possibilities of language” by “attracting its words and forms into their orbit by means of their own intentions and accents” (p. 326). This is far from a Habermasian (Habermas et al., 1974) forum for generating debate and compromise with mutual understanding.

Despite the opportunities for dialog, Unilever evinces its intent to harness Web 2.0 to control sustainability values and meet its profit-maximizing objective. By charting the growing prominence of i-CSR discourse in the next section—from the margins before the financial crisis to center stage after 2008 on the corporate website—I identify the narratives of neoliberal happiness, paternalistic compassion, environmentalism, and


transparency constituting the Do-Good Spirit. Furthermore, an analysis of the frames used to construct sustainability on the static pages of the website also informs the analysis of the meanings encoded by Unilever during the interactive PSBF campaign.

### **Unilever's I-CSR Discourse on Its Corporate Website**

**i-CSR on the corporate website from 2005 to 2008.** Traditionally, corporations produce unidirectional messages to inform or persuade stakeholders of their “identity, values, products/services, and organizational values” (Capriotti, 2011, p. 361). CSR discourse is conventionally disseminated using mass-media advertising (like CRM), the CSR annual report, printed brochures, press releases, and conferences. With the rise of a networked society, an important development in corporate communication strategy is the corporate website, which targets stakeholders and publicizes the brand identity online (Verboven, 2011). The site’s images, layout, and text are designed to project the company in the manner *it* wishes to be perceived by its stakeholders—such as investors, suppliers, employees, activists, consumers, and the public (Esrock & Leighty, 1998). In 1998, a sample of *Fortune* 500 websites showed that 82% of companies mentioned CSR (Esrock & Leighty, 1998); by 2006, Luo and Bhattacharya (2006) find that nearly 90% of Fortune 500 companies were presenting CSR programs on their websites. Most recently, Smith and Alexander (2013) find that 98% of Fortune 500 describe CSR in written and visual texts within their corporate websites, although the online headings have shifted away from the phrase “corporate social responsibility” and toward community, environment, sustainability, ethics, diversity and health/wellness. Overall, empirical CSR research attests to the benefits (favoring the corporation) of publicizing i-CSR discourse on its

website because it allows corporations to unilaterally, quickly, and efficiently set their own CSR agendas without external regulation (Esrock & Leighty, 1998; Maignan & Ralston, 2002; Capriotti & Morento, 2007; Chaudhri & Wang, 2007).

Unilever's current corporate website adheres to contemporary CSR norms in terms of its focus on sustainability; however, its i-CSR discourse has expanded and now reaches beyond an isolated CSR section to the entire website. This process began in 2009. Archives of past Unilever homepages show that i-CSR discourse is not featured on the homepage or separated into a clearly labeled section until 2009. Before 2009, Unilever was focused on constructing a narrative of neoliberal happiness on the homepage while social responsibility discourse was pushed to secondary and tertiary pages of the website. For instance, within samples of Unilever homepages from 2005, shown in Figure 4, and 2008, shown in Figure 5, Unilever's social reporting appeared as an understated CSR link on the homepage or within the "Our Values" section.



feel good, look good  
and get more out of life

**Our brands**   **Our values**   **Our company**

Search  »

① What's in our products? (EU home & personal care products only)

**Brand information**  
- Select brand - ▾ »  
[Can't find it?](#)

**Unilever websites**  
- Select country - ▾ »

**Reports & publications**  
- Select publication - ▾ »  
[Download library](#)

**Fast track on this site**

- ▶ for investors
- ▶ for journalists
- ▶ for job seekers
- ▶ for CSR analysts

**Coping with stress**  
Learning to relax will help you enjoy life more and it will be better for your long-term health. Whatever your age or lifestyle, small steps can lead to big changes when it comes to heart health.

- ▶ [Coping with stress](#)
- ▶ [Healthy summer skin tips](#)
- ▶ [How to refresh your style](#)
- ▶ [How much fat is in your favourite foods?](#)

**Ice cream's great**  
Scientists have confirmed it - ice cream really does make you happy.

- ▶ [Ice cream's great](#)
- ▶ [New Environmental report](#)
- ▶ [New Social report](#)

**AXE**   **Becel**   **Flora**   **BERTOLLI**   **BlueBand**   **Doriana**

Figure 4. Unilever.com homepage in 2005. This image is a partial screenshot from a Wayback Machine archived website. (Unilever 2005)



Figure 5. Unilever.com homepage in 2008. This image is a partial screenshot from a Wayback Machine archived website. (Unilever, 2008).

In contrast to the discourse after 2009, i-CSR discourse was not a defining trait of Unilever's corporate identity in 2005 and 2008. Evidently, Unilever's brand did not frame its social role as a steward promoting collective action to address problems of inequity or injustice. Rather, Unilever was focused on constructing the "good life" in the neoliberal age with individuals enjoying personal time free of stress and filled with nature, flowers and good health. Its photography and text content in 2005 and 2008 presented playful images of women and children across racial groups. The values that it promoted during this period are clearly associated with its brand portfolio of products such as skin care,

food, soaps and ice cream. At this point, there is no focus on collective values and CSR reports are tucked away in a corner of the website.

The good life presented here is in line with the portrayals of “progress” examined by McClintock (1995) and Boltanski and Chiapello (2007), Unilever’s imagery here signifies naturalized forms of contemporary neoliberal progress in which middle-class life is characterized as clean, leisurely, and racially diverse. The corporate slogan, “Feel good, look good and get more out of life,” constructs Unilever’s business purpose as a quest to support individuals’ existential pursuit of happiness in neoliberal terms.

According to Ahmed (2010), variations of the phrase “more to life” are morally charged and appear within a “genealogy of happiness.” Prompted by the way “happiness” narratives materialize in modern society, Ahmed traces ethical formulations of “happiness” and its association with material accumulation. Before capitalist expansion, an individual’s “fortune” was understood as one’s future, determined by happenstance (Ahmed, 2010). By the early capitalist period, Adam Smith’s ([1759] 2000) characterized an individual’s “fortune” as the outcome determined through self-discipline, hard work, and virtuosity. Here, happiness is understood as an economically stable “good life” that is generated through moral action (Ahmed, 2010, p. 36). As utilitarian ideas of maximizing happiness and human progress expanded to include wealth accumulation and purchasing power, the modern impulse to measure “happiness” as an empirical object grew. Despite the problems that arise from such a project, applying rationalizing techniques to studying “happiness” in a society guided by neoliberalism decouples the conception of positive experience from wealth. The empiricism also gives way to “more to life” narratives that

frame the promise of more “happiness” as an idealized psychological state and “life” as an individual’s moral quest to overcome anxiety (Ahmed, 2010, p. 8). When Unilever frames its purpose in support of “getting more out of life,” it paradoxically constructs “happiness” as a value that is beyond wealth while ignoring the precarity of social well-being in neoliberal society. The corporation fetishizes middle-class life outside of economic activity, while selling products that support its vision of righteousness. In other words, if an individual aspires to get more “happiness” out of life—a moral pursuit—she must “feel good” and “look good”; to achieve these goals, she should purchase Unilever products.

Even though Unilever adopted a moralizing frame for constructing happiness during this period, the term *sustainability* was absent on the homepages in 2005 and 2008. In this period, before the global financial crisis, i-CSR discourse was tucked away in peripheral areas of the website. In Figure 4, under the heading “Ice Cream’s Great” and an image of children rolling in the lawn with popsicles in hand, Unilever tucks away hyperlinks to two downloadable CSR reports—“New Environmental Report” and “New Social Report.” In 2008, Unilever’s CSR partnership with World Food Programme, providing students in Kenya with lunches, appears in the center of the page. Although the corresponding image was not available in the Wayback Machine archive, this initiative is only given one-third of the central content box on the homepage (Figure 5). Finally, in Figures 4 and 5, the “Fast tracks” subheading found in the bottom right column is an option for specified stakeholders to jump directly from the corporate homepage to other areas of the website. The list includes “Investors,” “Journalists,” “Job Seekers,” “CSR

analysts,” “Food Service Professionals,” and “Suppliers”; assuming that the list also reflects the corporation’s stakeholder prioritization, CSR analysts are identified as a distinct audience, ranked fourth after prospective employees. In 2005, the hyperlink for CSR analysts jumps directly to an “Environment and Society” page that is located as one of five options nested below the “Our Values” section (Figure 4). The remaining four options are: “Purpose and Principles,” “Science and Technology,” “Nutrition, Hygiene and Personal Hygiene,” and “Our people.” By 2008, the CSR analysts are directed to a page similar to the “Environment and Society,” but renamed as “Sustainable Development” with a link to a CSR report called “Sustainable Development Report 2007.” Although “Our Values” covered a range of CSR values, activities (biodiversity, climate change, economic development, education, environment, health, packaging, transport, and waste), and published CSR reports, Unilever’s i-CSR discourse before 2009 appears as a secondary and tertiary topic within the hierarchy of the website.

**I-CSR on the corporate website from 2009 to 2017.** As shown in Figure 6, the Unilever homepage on February 1, 2009, marks an expansion of i-CSR discourse. It is not a coincidence that shift occurred after the global financial crisis of 2008, which arguably played a part in the placement of i-CSR discourse on the homepage.



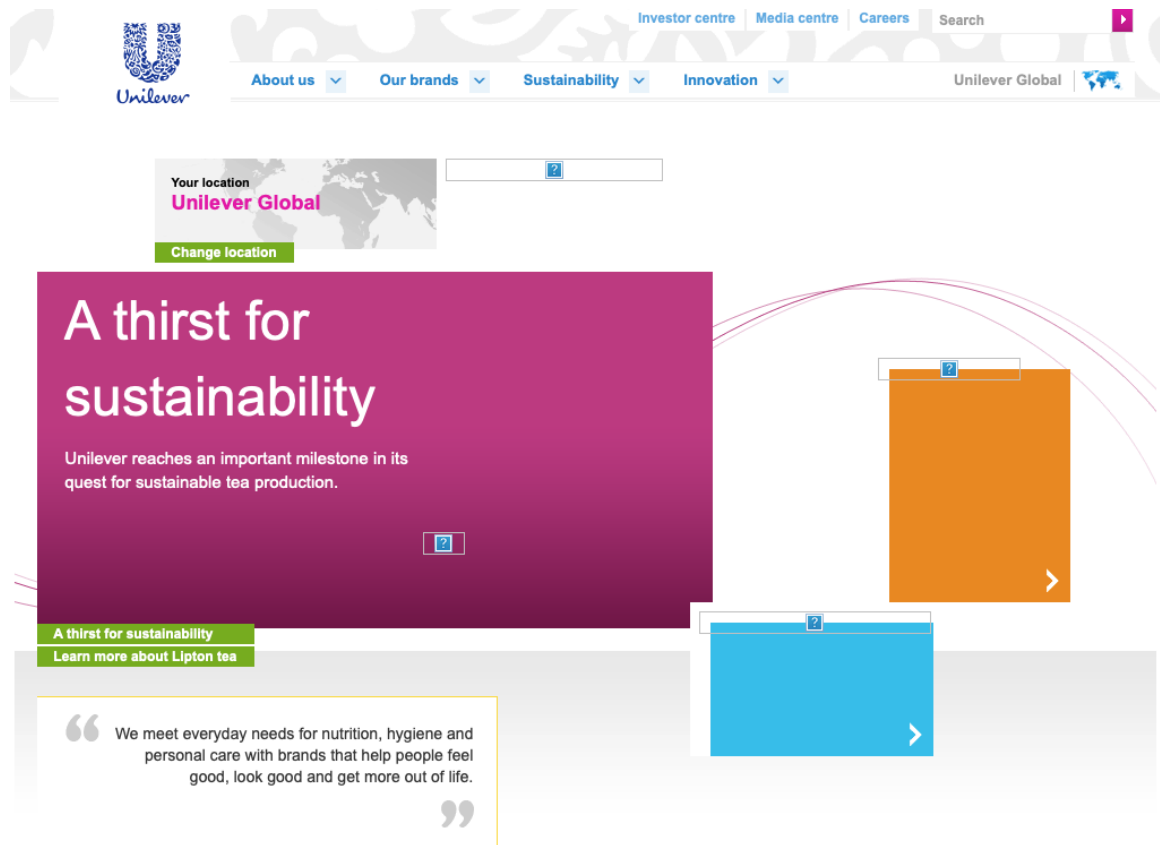
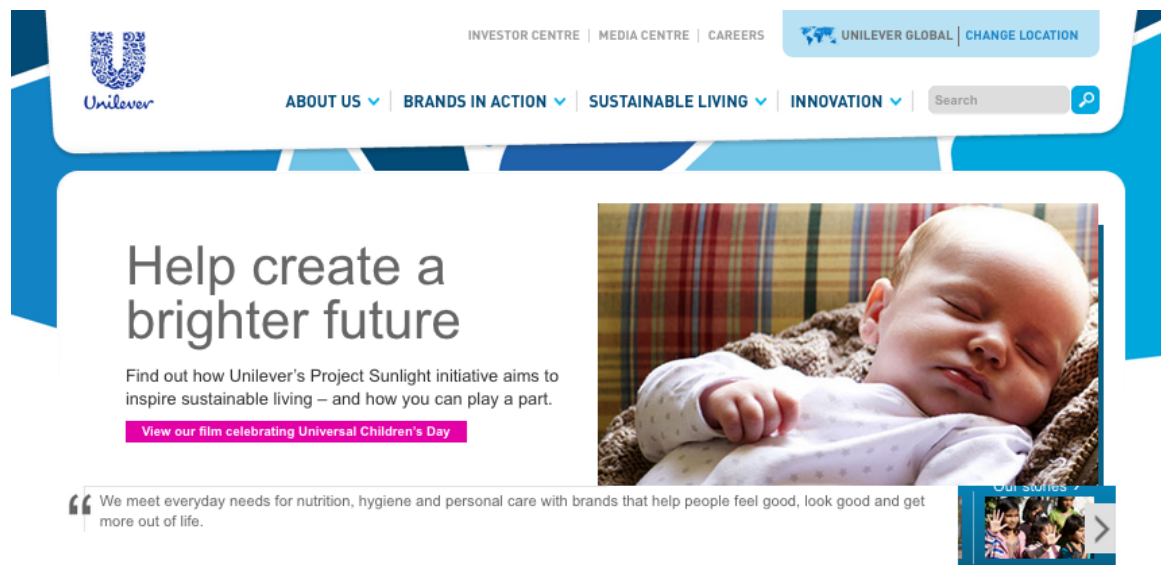


Figure 6. Unilever.com homepage in 2009. This image is a partial screenshot from a Wayback Machine archived website. (Unilever, February 1, 2009)

First, the revamped Unilever homepage includes a “Sustainability” option on the homepage menu bar and receives users with the slogan, “A thirst for sustainability: Unilever reaches an important milestone in its quest for sustainable tea production” (Figure 6). (The smaller orange and blue content boxes in Figure 6 feature business-related headlines for a new liquid detergent and a *BusinessWeek* award naming Unilever one of the “most influential companies.”) Just below the largest magenta box featuring i-CSR discourse, a quote expands on the previous slogan: “We meet everyday needs for nutrition, hygiene, and personal care with brands that help people feel good, look good and get more out of life” (Figure 6). By prefacing “feel good, look good and get more out of life” (Figures 4 and 5) with “everyday needs for nutrition, hygiene and

personal care,” Unilever deliberately reframes neoliberal progress toward the common good. Before the crisis, Unilever positioned itself as a provider of individual “happiness” through its food and personal care products. After the crisis, Unilever began to establish itself as a social activist, addressing global issues of hunger and sanitization activating the logic of the do-good company. The revised homepage expands the MNC’s purpose in collective terms, deliberately using “we” to suggest inclusivity and a broader concern for humanity.

Convergence of the Unilever brand and its i-CSR discourse on the corporate website especially intensified after the PSBF campaign was launched in 2013. After November 2013, the moment a user landed on Unilever.com, the i-CSR discourse was the topical focus of the homepage in image and text (Figures 7 and 8).



*Figure 7.* Unilever.com upper-third of homepage in 2013. This image is a partial screenshot from a Wayback Machine archived website. (Unilever, 2013b).

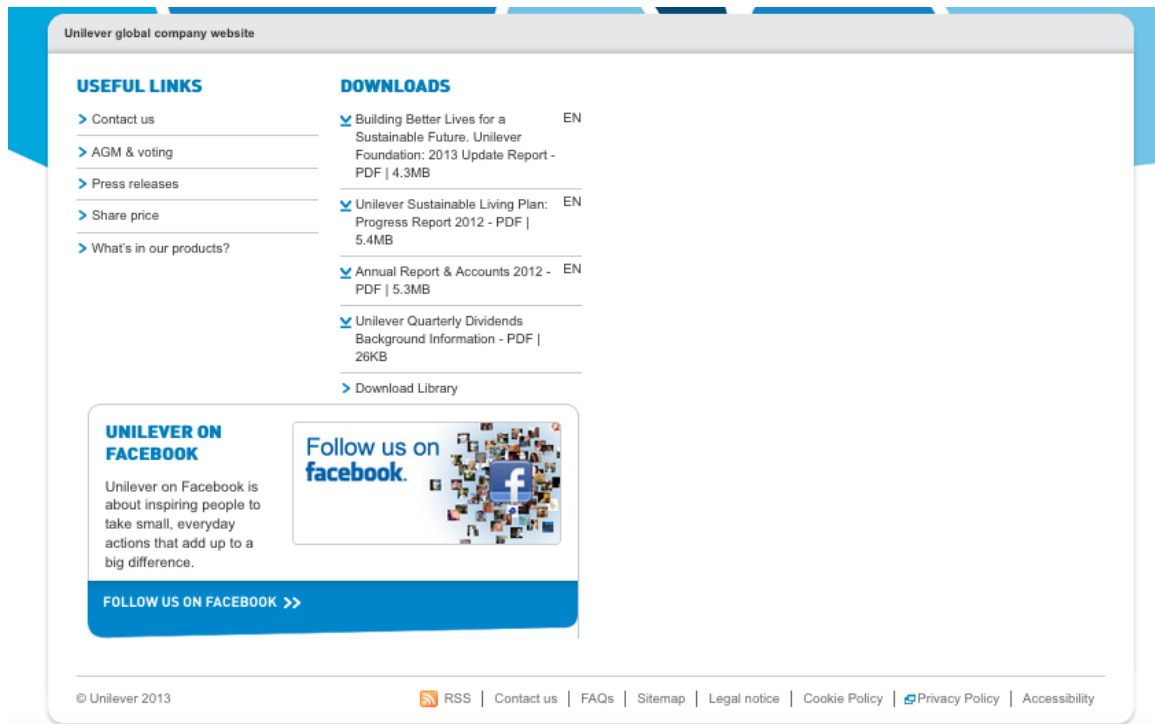


Figure 8. Unilever.com lower-third of homepage in 2013. This image is a partial screenshot from a Wayback Machine archived website. (Unilever, 2013b)

In the upper portion of the website menu bar in 2013, two of the four options are crafted in terms of i-CSR discourse—“Brands in Action” and “Sustainable Living” (Figure 7). The PSBF campaign is also featured front and center with the slogan, “Help create a brighter future” (Unilever, 2013b). Underneath the slogan, a photograph of a resting infant exuding innocence and peace with a halo-like glow, is the largest textual element on the entire homepage. The corresponding hyperlink takes users to the PSBF website, debuting the short film *Why Bring a Child into This World?* in celebration of Universal Children’s Day. Unilever’s discursive production and dominant placement of the PSBF campaign on the homepage frames the corporation in terms of its moral values instead of its market value.

In 2013, users arriving on Unilever.com were heavily encouraged to find Unilever’s i-CSR discourse on Facebook rather than the “Sustainable Living” section of the corporate website. The corporation’s substantial focus on its Facebook presence points to the way i-CSR discourse is used to blur material responsible activity and immaterial self-aggrandizing, or branding. Along the bottom of the homepage, the enlarged headline “Follow us on Facebook” is repeated twice (Figure 8). The corporation frames its business purpose as leading social activism: “Unilever on Facebook is about inspiring people to take small, everyday actions that add up to a big difference.” As a leader, Unilever is doing its part by “inspiring” its followers; it also suggests that each user has a responsibility to take “everyday actions” that will amount to social transformation. Instead of detailing its material CSR initiatives as a ubiquitous multinational manufacturer of goods found in 190 countries, it immediately thrusts responsibility for moral action onto the user. The mere production of i-CSR discourse on Facebook is rendered as material CSR action.

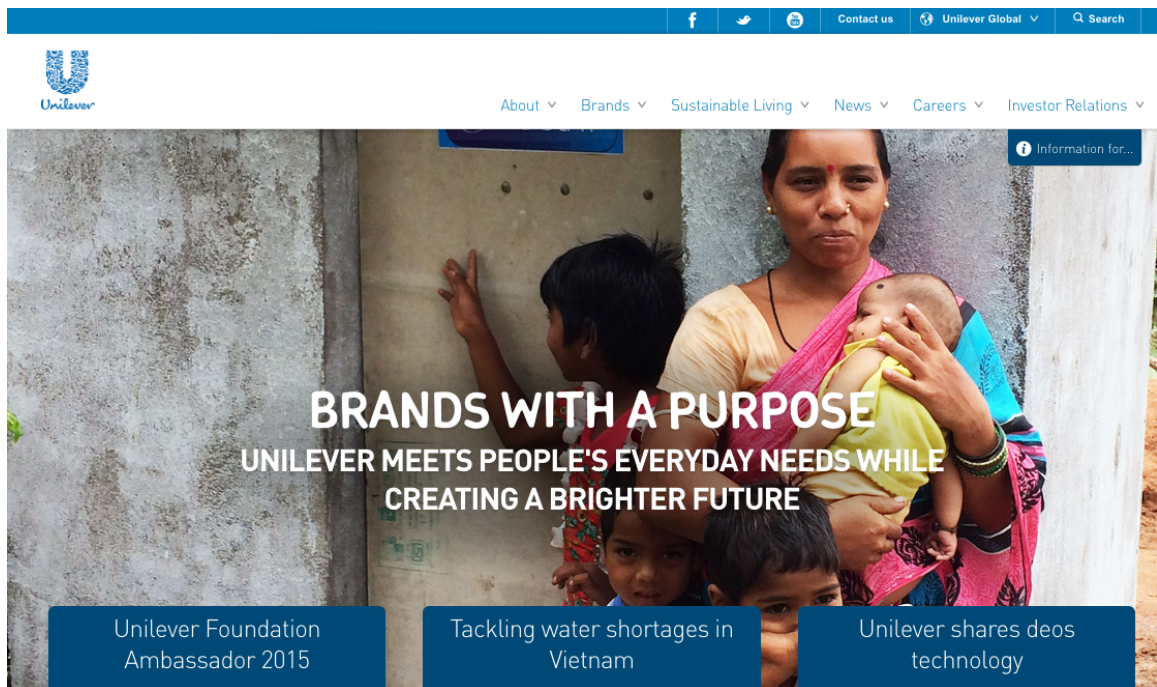
Unilever’s adoption of i-CSR discourse is also symbolically represented in the PSBF logo, appearing on the PSBF website and Facebook pages, which are linked directly on the 2013 homepage (Figure 3.8).



*Figure 9.* Project Sunlight logo in 2013 and Bright Future logo in 2015. These images are found on Unilever's Facebook Page Profile Photos archive. (Unilever, November 20, 2013, and April 28, 2015).

Although the name of the campaign changes in 2015, the logo remains the same—a cloned Unilever logo with the top quarter of the *U* colored brightly in golden yellow (versus the original logo, which is all blue). During the period of my study, the PSBF logo was used as the main profile image for Unilever's official Facebook and Twitter pages; it also appeared on various television advertisements and published CSR reports. As evinced in the following sections, the PSBF logo abbreviates Unilever's purpose for producing i-CSR discourse online—to collapse aspirations for creating a brighter future into action toward progressive change.

After the first year of PSBF, i-CSR discourse is not only given visual prominence on the corporate homepage but it cements the option to engage with PSBF social media from any page on the website. For example, in 2015 (Figure 3.9) and 2016 (Figure 11), the fixed blue toolbar in the top header provides users with direct links to the PSBF campaign's flagship social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube; in 2016, Unilever added the company's LinkedIn page, also rich with i-CSR discourse.



*Figure 10.* Upper third of Unilever.com homepage in 2015. This image is a partial screenshot from a Wayback Machine archived website. (Unilever, June 1, 2015)



*Figure 11.* Upper third of Unilever.com homepage in 2016. This image is a partial screenshot from a Wayback Machine archived website. (Unilever, June 2, 2016).

This top menu bar is found on every page throughout the website, encouraging users to make a detour during their visit. The availability of social media hyperlinks throughout the site presents users with an opportunity to interact with a “living” corporation by way of i-CSR discourse (see next section).

Rather than focusing on user action alone, from 2015 onward Unilever begins to fine-tune its i-CSR discourse by framing its own progressive morality and social action. On the homepage archived in June 2015, a large format photograph of a low-income, South Asian woman standing outside a modest concrete structure is the single largest component (Figure 3.9). Surrounded by children, her pursed lips convey her grit amid hardship. Superimposed on the photograph, the slogan “Brands with a purpose: Unilever meets people’s everyday needs while creating a better future” appears boldly and is even larger than the Unilever logo. Paraphrasing the slogan from Figure 6, Unilever drops the “feel good, look good and get more out of life” directed at its middle class consumers in the global North and makes a shift towards working class and poor people in the global South. It further moves away from its neoliberal construction of individual happiness and constructs a common good. The company is now presented as helping to create a brighter future for *all* on a global scale.

By June 2016, i-CSR discourse on the homepage began to focus on major stakeholder groups—NGOs and activist organizations, journalists, consumers, employees and investors. Instead of creating “Fast tracks” links for specific stakeholder groups (Figure 4), all users are funneled to the CSR section of the website by clicking on any of the four photographs on the homepage’s center carousel (Figures 11, 12, 13, and 14). The



photo gallery automatically rotates through four images: a group of black children in uniform receiving a cooking lesson (Figure 11), a female factory worker in a pristine white uniform observing food moving across an assembly line (Figure 12), a young white female cyclist playfully pushing a cart of ice cream on a boardwalk (Figure 13), and a group of male workers in hardhats observing trash bags on a conveyor belt (Figure 14). Each photograph exhibits a different facet of “transparency” and stewardship for major stakeholder groups: NGOs and activist organizations in Figure 11, investigative journalists in Figure 12, consumers in Figure 13, and employees in Figure 14.



*Figure 12.* Upper third of Unilever.com homepage in 2016. This image is a partial screenshot from a Wayback Machine archived website. (Unilever, June 2, 2016).



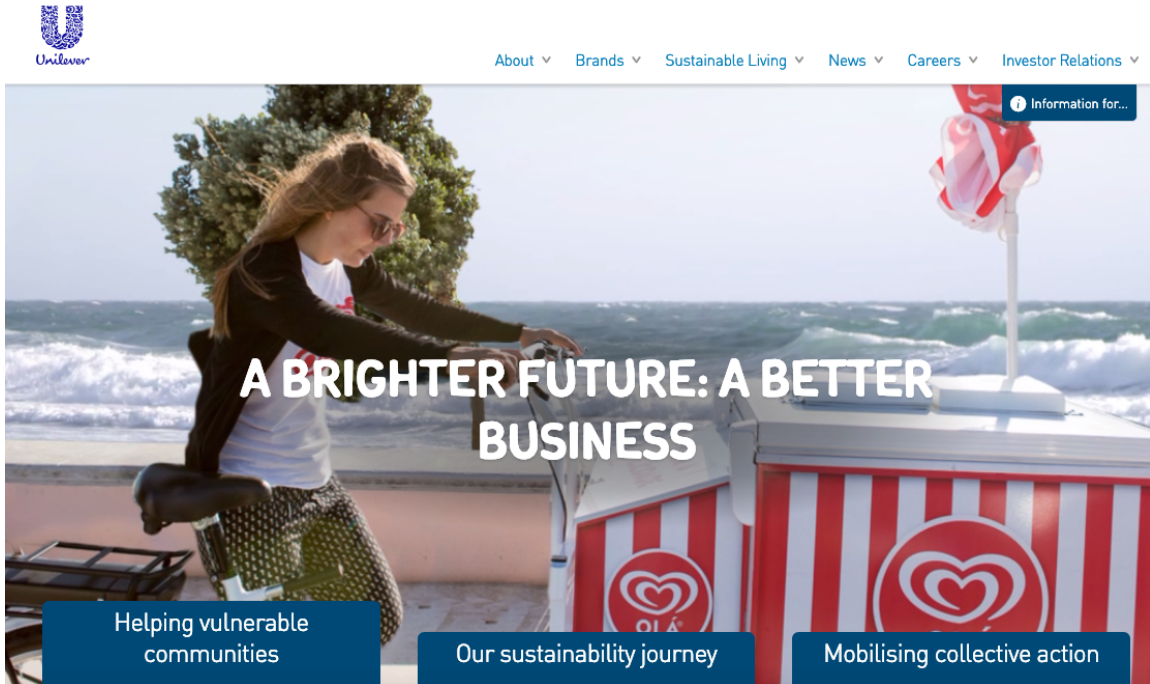


Figure 13. Upper third of Unilever.com homepage in 2016. This image is a partial screenshot from a Wayback Machine archived website. (Unilever, June 2, 2016).

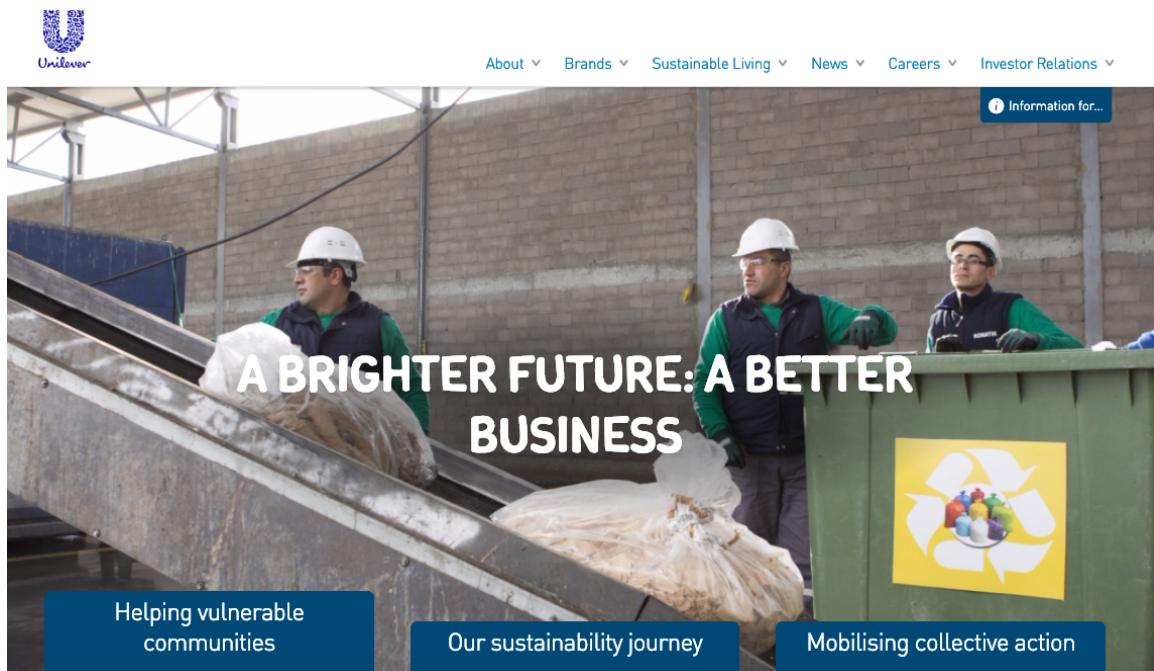


Figure 14. Upper third of Unilever.com homepage in 2016. This image is a partial screenshot from a Wayback Machine archived website. (Unilever, June 2, 2016).

Although shareholders may seem understated, with “Investor Relations” appearing as the last option on the top menu bar, there is a real-time graphic depicting the share price directly underneath the rotating CSR photo gallery. As discussed in chapter 2, since growth in CSR demonstrates a “market for virtue” (Vogel, 2005), even in the financial sector with “sustainability” investing, shareholder interests are ever-present in i-CSR discourse. Furthermore, as sustainability is accepted to be a key factor of long-term business “success” (Kuosmanen & Kuosmanen, 2009), I argue that shareholders will never be marginalized and are always a primary stakeholder group.

**The “Sustainable Living” section of the corporate website.** Unlike many Fortune 500 companies’ websites, in which i-CSR discourse is nestled under the “Our Company” or “Investors” sections without homepage visibility (Smith & Alexander, 2013), after 2009, Unilever created a top-tier CSR section on the homepage menu called “Sustainable Living.” This section is robust—by the time the PSBF campaign launched, it included 6 top-tier areas, 22 second-tier pages, and hundreds of in-text hyperlinks to separate pages within other areas of the corporate website and the PSBF campaign website (Figure 14).

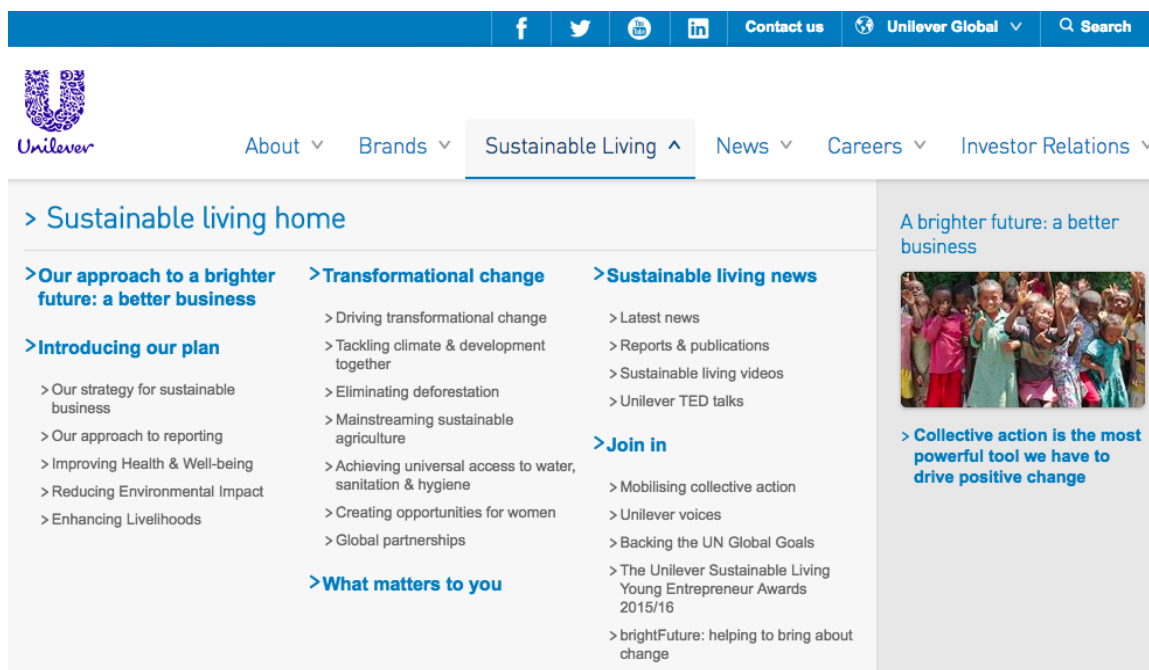


Figure 15. Unilever.com “Sustainable Living” drop-down menu on homepage in 2016. This image is a partial screenshot from a Wayback Machine archived website. (Unilever, June 3, 2016).

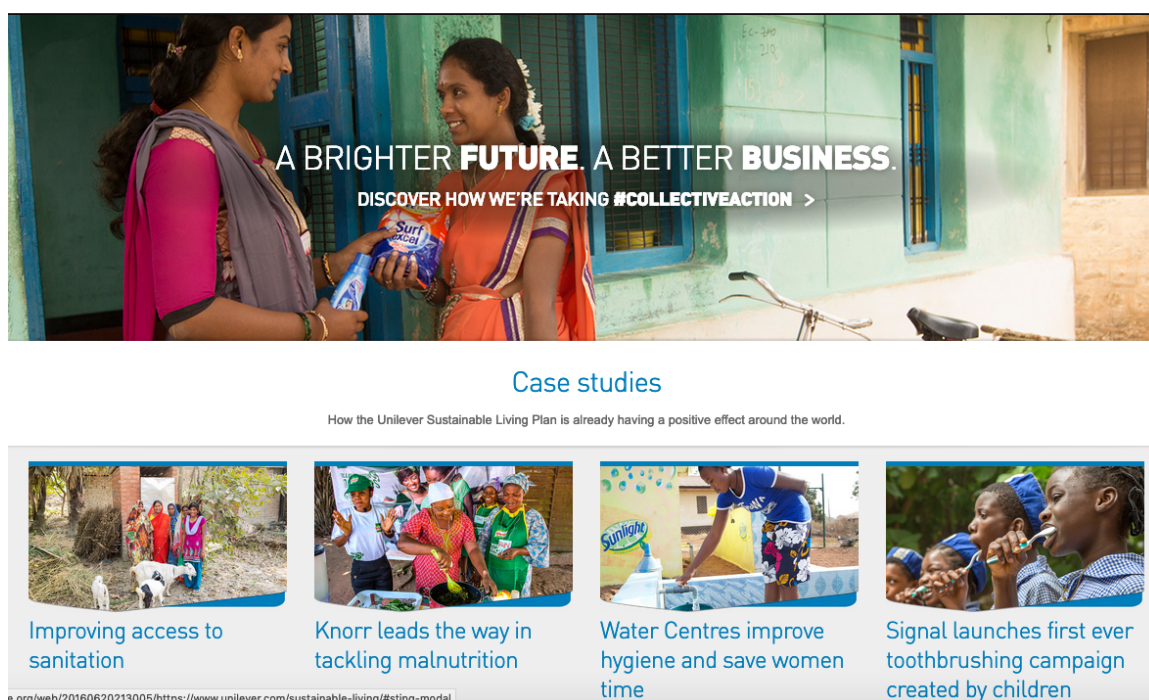


Figure 16. Upper third of Unilever.com “Sustainable Living” page in 2016. This image is a partial screenshot from a Wayback Machine archived website. (Unilever, June 3, 2016).

Similar to the Unilever homepage, the “Sustainable Living” landing page repeats the welcome slogan along with a subheading featuring a hashtag appropriated by the PSBF campaign: “Discover how we are taking #CollectiveAction” (Figure 16). By co-opting #CollectiveAction, Unilever intercepts larger public engagement around progressive social values and channels it toward its CSR campaign.

What we see in Figure 15 is a menu breaking down the “Sustainable Living” section into six areas; the menu represents Unilever’s attempt to target all its major stakeholder groups. For the consumer, who is not familiar with CSR, the “Our approach to a brighter future” page offers a basic summary of Unilever’s approach that walks them through its narrative using colorful infographics and bold typeface to simplify the message. For instance, on the center of the page is photograph of Paul Polman standing at a lectern in mid-sentence with large all capitalized letters, “THERE IS NO BUSINESS CASE FOR ENDURING POVERTY” (Unilever, 2016c). Underneath are graphics and statistics corresponding to Unilever’s three CSR goals— “improving health and well-being,” “reducing environmental impact,” and “enhancing livelihood.” Those more sophisticated in CSR, like NGOs and activists, are offered more detail in the “Introducing our plan” area. Alongside narratives describing its “visionary” strategy and its methods for reporting, this area includes a downloadable link to a digitized CSR report called Unilever Sustainable Living Plan (USLP). Shareholders and activists may be the intended audience for the “Transformational Change” area, which features CSR initiatives that Unilever selects to exemplify successful interventions tackling poverty, economic development, deforestation, sustainable agriculture, sanitation, and women’s

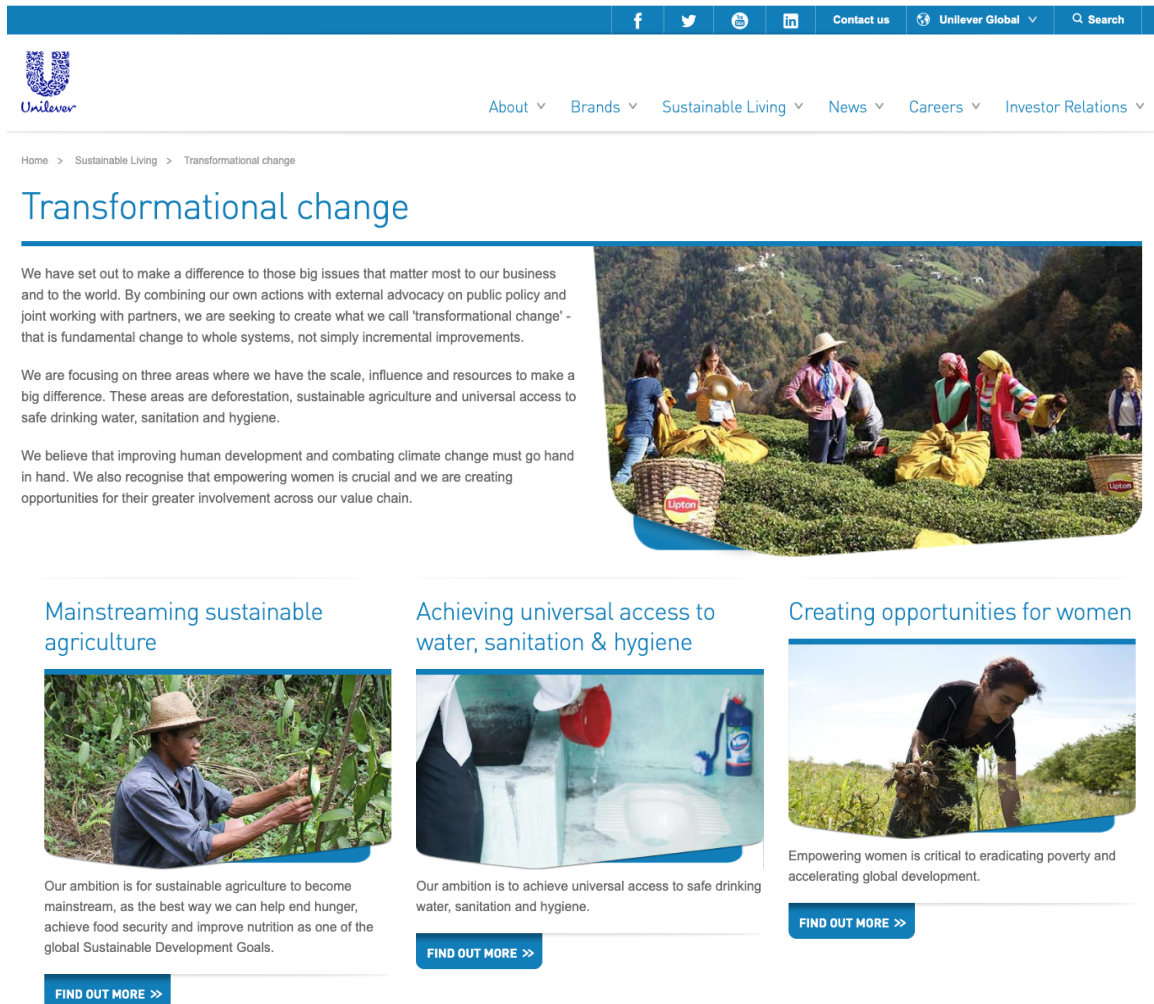
empowerment. For skeptics, Unilever preemptively addresses controversial questions by funneling users to a “What matters to you” area. Among the alphabetized list of 27 issues, the palm oil, Kodaikanal, and human rights pages appear as subjects of oppositional discourse during the PSBF campaign (see chapter 4). For journalists, Unilever offers an area called “Sustainable living news” which includes a high resolution photo gallery of CSR programs, press releases of brand-related CSR activities, TED style video lectures by Unilever executives, and published interviews. Finally, the “Join in” provides opportunities for any stakeholder to participate, given the poll question “Where do you feel you could make the most difference through collective action?” (Unilever, 2016d). There also appears to be clear call for employees and suppliers, as the imagery on the page includes individuals with Unilever volunteering t-shirts and an interactive maps for exploring the global smallholder farmer network. Thus, each major stakeholder—NGOs and activist organizations, journalists, consumers, employees, and critics—are addressed in each area.

The “Sustainable Living” section displays the value-based frames designed to persuade stakeholders that Unilever can be trusted to oversee its CSR without regulation. Unilever adopts a progressive semantic system (Smith & Alexander, 2013); terms such as *community, environment, ethics, fairness, diversity, health, and wellness* appear frequently throughout the CSR section after 2013. As noted, after 2009, the term “Corporate Social Responsibility” is omitted—perhaps due to increased scrutiny and debate over independent social auditing, government regulation, and the financial crisis. Instead, the construction of “sustainability” allows Unilever to present its unchecked

intentions and lofty goal of “decoupling our environmental footprint from our growth and increasing our positive social impact” (Unilever, June 6, 2016). The motto “We believe in doing well while doing good” is repeated, with slight variation, throughout the website and campaign (Unilever, August 26, 2016). Both “growth” and “doing well” are euphemisms for “profit,” favored because they signify an elevated form of surplus value accrued from the moral capital of “doing good.”

Throughout the “Sustainable Living” section in 2009 through to 2013 (see Appendix A for screenshots), a combination of text, high-resolution photography, and bright graphics are used to obfuscate the creative/destructive pathology of global capitalism. For instance, i-CSR discourse on the corporate website is skewed toward projects launched in developing regions that the MNC has colonized and exploited over the past century. Imagery on every page shows the people (brown or black) and the environment (farms, schools, villages) in the Global South being revived by Unilever brands. Logos, like that of Lipton Tea, stand out against photographs saturated with hues of brown and green (Figure 17).





*Figure 17.* Upper third and lower third of Unilever.com “Transformational Change” page, nestled under the “Sustainable Living” section, in 2016. This image is a partial screenshot from a Wayback Machine archived website. (Unilever, June 6, 2016).

Donned in local garb, harvesters are often at center stage (Figure 17), mimicking the politicized canon of rural paintings by artists such as Millet, Seurat, and Van Gogh (Figure 18).



Figure 18. Jean-François Millet (1814–1875), *Gleaners*. (Millet, 1857).

By selecting the work of rural peasantry as a subject for artistic study, these artists are “dignifying the act of labor, gleaning, by locating these poorest of the rural workers in the foreground in a monumental painting about social relations in modern capitalist agriculture” (Pollock, 2013, p. 43). When Unilever adopts this canon to depict the subjects of “sustainable” production and labor, it provokes sympathy toward the “gleaners” along with a moral virtuosity associated with socio-economic upliftment. This type of paternalism, particularly toward poor rural communities in developing regions, is closely related to the imagery of jolly rural workers idealized by sustainable-development organizations like the United Nations (Figure 19).





**UN Photo/Riccardo Gangale** | Grace, a farmer from Kipilat village, and a leading member of the forest community in Ainabkoi, Kenya, planting a tree in 2012.

*Figure 19.* Photograph on the “Sustainable Development” page of the UN.org website. This image is a partial screenshot from the website. Photo by Riccardo Gangale. (UN, 2019).

When Unilever adopts this framework, it simultaneously publicizes its own paternalistic compassion and blurs its business purpose away from cold, neoliberal rationality.

Moreover, the construct of romanticized labor in industrial production is an enduring frame, evinced in Lipton Tea’s advertisements in British newspapers during the colonial period (Figures 20 and 21). Although Lipton was acquired by Unilever in 1971, founder Thomas Lipton, like the founders of Unilever, had early access to colonial markets for raw materials and cheap labor. Lipton was also an early engineer of supply-chain economics, working to remove all “middlemen’s profits” from tea harvested in South Asia to lower the costs of production. The acquisition of tea plantations by colonial entrepreneurs also included a process of driving tribal communities off of native lands and employing locals in serflike arrangements under harsh working conditions. After

purchasing tea estates in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, to produce tea from start to finish in 1889, Lipton expanded his business, and was selling “one million packets of Lipton Tea” a week in Britain by 1892 (Visram, 2002). The advertisements in Figures 20 and 21, both with the slogan “direct from the gardens,” offer a romanticized, paternalistic depiction of colonial enterprise. Further, the depiction of smiling workers indicates their happiness and acceptance of the exploitative business model set in place by Lipton.



Figure 20. Printed Lipton Tea advertisement, *Illustrated London News*, 1897. (Unilever 2019e).



Figure 21. Printed Lipton Tea advertisement, *Illustrated London News*, 1892. Published in the British Library's online collection. (Thomas J. Lipton Co, 1892).

In Figure 20, dark-skinned laborers carry heavy loads and work the fields as a British man in light clothing oversees the plantation. Figure 21 features an illustration of a presumably South Asian woman enjoying “apparent wealth as a plantation worker, contributing to an image of Lipton’s as a moral business” (Nasta, Stadtler, & Visram, 2017). A lot can be said about the European features of the woman, her opulent jewellery, and her headscarf to illustrate how women from the Middle East and South Asia are constructed as a composite of exotic characteristics; the tilt of her head and open lips represents an early form of marketing “sex appeal” (D’Antonio, 2010). The point here is that a smiling woman enjoying a cup of tea implies consent to and pleasure in the Lipton plantation. Absent in this image are the harsh realities of tea-leaf pickers’ lives in the colonial period: poor wages, long hours of physical labor, penal contracts, and severe punishments (Sharma, 2009). Instead, the advertisements construct public consciousness

of the tea business in moral terms, by presenting British industry as able to tame, organize, and support the livelihoods of rural people.

Since research shows that “progressive” human resource strategies also have a direct impact on “business outcomes”—or profitability—employees are also considered vital stakeholders (Koys, 2001). In a recent examination of CSR produced online from the field of behavioral economics, Hedblom, Hickman, and List (2019) show that CSR discourse has a positive effect on employee morale, and reduces costs by recruiting more job applicants who are highly motivated and willing to work for lower pay. In other words, i-CSR discourse exploits individual morality to optimize an organization’s labor costs. Unilever weaves a tapestry of “transformational change” and “fairness in the workplace” throughout the CSR section on its website to generate an image of its internal corporate culture. Performing overtures of its own righteousness (usually before expanding on any specific CSR activity), Unilever poses as a progressive leader of the vulnerable and disenfranchised:

We have set out to make a difference to those big issues that matter most to our business and to the world. By combining our own actions with external advocacy on public policy and joint working with partners, we are seeking to create what we call “transformational change”—that is fundamental change to whole systems, not simply incremental improvements. We are focusing on three areas where we have the scale, influence and resources to make a big difference. These areas are deforestation, sustainable agriculture and universal access to safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene. We believe that improving human development and combating climate change must go hand in hand. We also recognise that empowering women is crucial and we are creating opportunities for their greater involvement in our value chain. (Unilever, 2019i)

The deliberate use of plural personal pronouns when referring to Unilever signifies harmonious agreement in the company’s organizational structure—implying concurrence

between executives, managers, employees, suppliers, and migrant laborers. The appeal to improve whole systems and not isolated issues appears equally logical and honorable. Using progressive language to deploy a form of neoliberal sustainability, Unilever manufactures a culture of collectivity while strategically disregarding corporate accountability for destruction.

While Unilever establishes a loose correlation between its “actions” and its ability to affect “big issues,” such as deforestation and industrial agriculture, it willfully ignores the causality of corporatization and economies of scale in magnifying social and environmental destruction. In fact, Unilever frames its increased agricultural production as an act of benevolence addressing global issues around population growth and poverty:

To meet growing demand, world food production will need to increase by 50% by 2030. According to the World Bank, in emerging markets three out of four low-income people depend directly or indirectly on agriculture for their livelihoods. . . One way we wish to respond to some of these challenges is through support for smallholder farmers (SHFs) as a way of providing wider food security in the future. . . “There is a business argument as well as a moral case for this,” says Pier Luigi Sigismondi, our former Chief Supply Chain Officer. “Working with our smallholders to ensure that they and their families stay healthy through good nutrition and hygiene drives economic development and helps us to meet our goals on sustainable and profitable growth.” (Unilever, 2016e)

Side-stepping crucial labor issues around industrialized agricultural production, Unilever’s turns attention to its small-scale rural farming programs to legitimize its profits as moral.

In fact, this publicized approach to publicly address smallholder farmer livelihoods after 2013 comes after a series of complaints over Unilever’s agricultural labor practices that are collected by nongovernmental institutions and filed with the

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), an intergovernmental world trade organization (Unilever, 2009). In one case, Unilever's neglect for living wages, fair working hours, contract labor lapses, and collective bargaining were leveled by South Asian tea laborers with the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IAF). During a period in which profits and management stock options grew, IAF accused Unilever for undermining the OECD provisions protecting fair compensation of contracted laborers. In 2009, the IAF demanded Unilever Pakistan management end its retaliation against casual workers seeking job security at the Lipton factory in Khanewal, Pakistan:

Since Unilever has set about deliberately impoverishing Action Committee members through employment discrimination, many have been forced to supplement their starvation wages with work in the countryside, either as agricultural labourers or as helpers on construction sites. The meager extra revenue this provides is still not enough to support the workers and their families, many of whom have been forced to borrow money and are sinking into debt. (IUF, 2009)

Here, precarious workers are deliberately denied a livelihood for joining the Action Committee and raising complaints through the union. Breaches have also been exposed by Oxfam, an international NGO focused on poverty alleviation, through reports such as the Labor Rights in Unilever's Supply Chain Report (Oxfam, 2013).<sup>10</sup> In the 2013 report, based on research conducted at Unilever's factory operations in Viet Nam and data

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<sup>10</sup> The first time Oxfam worked with Unilever to assess Unilever's operations in Indonesia, the report revealed compliance issues and mistreatment of its contract laborers in Indonesia. Moreover, it is interesting to note that the business press moved past the early stigma that Unilever and Oxfam make "strange bedfellows" (Maitland, 2005); instead, as the mouthpiece to the Do-Good Spirit, the business press praised Unilever for partnering with Oxfam and opening up its operations for the shared mission of poverty reduction. Since then, Unilever and Oxfam have been jointly funding reports assessing its global labor practices.

provided by Unilever management, Oxfam subtly addresses the discrepancy between Unilever's moral discourse and practice: "Unilever gives every sign of wanting to behave responsibly," however, "competitive advantage is still in practice pursued through downward pressure on labour costs, which pushes costs and risks onto workers" (Oxfam, 2013, p. 91). Despite prior and ongoing attacks challenging its compliance of labor rights regulations, Unilever responds indirectly using i-CSR discourse to draw public attention to its elevated ambitions—"We consider our dialogue with trade unions very important and will continue to engage and learn from best practices" (Unilever, 2015).

**CSR reports on the corporate website.** Another key facet of i-CSR discourse produced on the corporate website is the downloadable remediation of annually published CSR reports, modeled after the framework for disclosing corporate accounts and finances. The CSR report (often referred to as environment, social, and governance, or ESG, reports) presents the corporation's method of social (or sustainability) reporting: the voluntary practice of disclosing the financial and nonfinancial aspects of its CSR activities (Hendriques, 2013). In the 1950s, only a few large companies provided information from voluntary "social audits"; by the 1970s, however, independent social auditors were beginning to provide an independent view of social-impact measures (Hendriques, 2013). By the 1990s, think tanks and social institutions were developing systematic methods for measuring social impact, as seen in the Body Shop's first social report, published in 1996 (Hendriques, 2013). A significant development in social reporting is the increasing number of firms adopting the "triple bottom line" (TBL)

accounting method, which simultaneously measures economic, social, and environmental profits and losses—popularized by the mantra “people, planet, profits” (Elkington, 1997). A firm’s TBL is considered “sustainable” if it conforms to societal expectations *and* reduces (or eliminates) negative environmental impacts without any financial detriment. Independent nonprofit groups like Global Reporting Initiative have been collaborating with the UN since 1997 to systematize the measurement and auditing of subjective ESG indicators; the goal is to develop comparable sustainability reports for MNCs, governments, industry groups, and NGOs worldwide (Global Reporting Initiative, 2018).

Gill, Dickinson, and Scharl’s (2008) content analysis of downloadable CSR reports from Fortune 500 corporate websites shows that methods for interpreting and reporting social impact initiatives are not uniformly adopted or geographically enforced, presenting serious issues around the transparency and credibility of TBL disclosures. The firms publicizing TBL indicators in the study show that social reporting is driven primarily by shareholder and employee expectations, and there is an obvious bias in selecting positive results (Gill et al., 2008). Even though arguments condemning TBL as a reductive methodology (Greenall & Yachnin, 2001) are evident, the dominant theme in CSR communication research is emphatically the positive outcomes of social reporting: improving brand reputation (Bernhart & Slater, 2007), stakeholder trust (Dean, 2003), and legitimacy (Kolk & van de Weteringen, 2001).

Though Unilever projects a commitment to social reporting with “transparency,” there are considerable exclusions and limitations to voluntary assessment that require ongoing scholarly attention beyond the discourse analysis performed in this study. Since



my purpose as a critical media researcher is to interrogate the moral rhetoric constructed by powerful cultural producers within the broader ideological landscape, not the verity of CSR claims in reports, my analysis concentrates on the tools and strategies used to reconfigure the business–society relationship. Specifically, my project sets out to examine the language and signs that enable the acquisition of moral capital in a networked society. From this position, my examination of the “Our approach to reporting” area within the CSR section uncovers a narrative approach to delimit transparency to suit Unilever’s interests. Explanations of reporting methods on the corporate website, PSBF website and social media platforms, creates the aesthetics of transparency—a discursive tool that helps Unilever to steer stakeholders to accept voluntary CSR as sufficient.

Since 1999, Unilever has outlined its social reporting methods and shared an archive of digital CSR reports on its corporate website. The firm’s social reporting was irregular until it was formalized as the annual USLP in 2010. Inspired by the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals, “which seek to tackle seventeen of world’s most urgent challenges . . . [and] create market opportunities of at least \$12 trillion a year” (Business and Sustainable Development Commission, 2017, cited in Unilever, 2018a), the USLP declares “Big Goals”—to improve health and well-being, reduce environmental impact, and enhance livelihoods—and “material commitments” and “target dates” for achieving these goals (Unilever, 2018b). From 2013 to 2015, the USLP was between 20 and 25 pages long, presented with bright photographs, charts, and text on each page. However, in 2016 the report was dramatically condensed, to five pages, with abbreviated summaries of program progress and sections separated by a validating

statistic. The USLPs consistently present a positive gloss: “[W]e are progressing well toward our goal of helping more than 1 billion people take action to improve their health and well-being. By the end of 2015, we had succeeded in reaching 482 million people” (USLP, 2015, p. 11). This is consistent with Gill et al.’s (2008) findings that selected statistics reflect a positive bias. The strong narration of the report, discussed in more detail in the strategic-storytelling section below, offers highlights of implemented CSR programs that have, according to the company, yielded positive social outcomes. For example, a story titled “Knorr Tackles Malnutrition in Nigeria” describes a project to treat anemia through a new iron-fortified product line and nutrition lessons; “Sunlight: Freeing Time for Women, Winning Market Share” describes a less-sudsy laundry detergent launched in South Africa, which Unilever considers an exemplary advance towards water-efficiency. Both advantageously “improve” the livelihoods of neoliberal subjects while growing the MNC’s profits (USLP, 2016). At other times, when Unilever is unable to realize its objectives target dates are quietly pushed back. In fact, its explanation of the 6% increase of greenhouse gas emissions since 2010 includes a specific reference to “consumer use,” in order to spread accountability and justify the need to campaign consumers to live sustainably (USLP, 2015, p. 12). Thus, the goal “to halve greenhouse gas impact” of Unilever products, once set for 2020, is now 2030 even while the language used is positive about its “intent” to “pursue innovations” and “refine commitments” (USLP, 2015, p. 12).

In an effort to present a “sufficient” level of transparency for informed stakeholders versed in CSR assessment (Unilever Basis of Preparation, 2014), Unilever

also publishes addenda to USLP—such as a “Basis for Preparation” report, an independently audited “Assurance Report,” and a peer-review panel “Observations and Recommendations” report. The intended audience may be journalists, employees, CSR agencies, and watchdog organizations. Each report works to showcase Unilever’s effort to vet the “quality, rigour and credibility” of data presented in the USLP (Unilever, 2019c); however, its construction of transparency projects a more rationalized form of CSR window dressing that appears data-driven but is ultimately riddled with selection bias. For example, following the International Auditing and Assurance Standards Board framework for evaluating nonfinancial disclosures, Unilever has been publishing PriceWaterhouseCoopers’ independent audit since 2011 to provide “limited assurance” supporting the quality of the “selected key performance measures” disclosed in its voluntary CSR report (Unilever, 2019c). Meanwhile, some CSR commitments have *not* been selected for the yearly audit: Health and Hygiene, Waste, Sustainable Sourcing, Fairness in the Workplace, Opportunities for Women, and Inclusive Business. These exclusions are not explained.

Despite the lengths to which Unilever goes to have independent third-party evaluators vet its USLP, it still only provides a controlled level of certainty for its data collection methods, calculations, and results. The language in these downloadable documents is crafted to stand up to attorney review, while the website overstates positive results. For instance, the “limited assurance” audit performed on the selected commitments is admitted to be “substantially less in scope” than a “reasonable assurance” (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2016). The reasonable assurance audit requires

“evidence to reduce engagement risk to an acceptably low level” and additional risk-assessment procedures, such as close evaluation of internal controls (IAASB, 2011, p. 18). Exclusions and assumptions are cavalierly stated in order to distance Unilever from any legal culpability or critical censure: “We exclude product groups for which it is not possible to acquire the required data with sufficient accuracy” (Unilever, 2019d). Even the downloadable peer-review report, drawn up by a panel of three university professors, one research consultant, and a water specialist from WWF, asserts: “It was not possible to undertake a detailed review of all the aspects listed above due to the limited documentation available.” Yet the overview provided in the CSR section fails to contextualize this stipulation and instead features the panel’s concluding praise: “We consider Unilever’s approach to be sound and appropriate” (Unilever, 2019d). Thus, Unilever’s circumscribed level of confidence in the claims made in the USLP is not transparent in service of the public good—rather, “transparency” is a painstakingly crafted “risk reduction device” in service of the corporation (Nadesan, 2010, p. 253).

Critical analysis of i-CSR discourse on the website, CSR reports, and downloadable documents reinforces my ambivalence around voluntary CSR assessment, without any framework for government or public-policy enforcement. Although management research applauds i-CSR discourse, particularly online CSR reports, as an effort to address information asymmetries, Nadesan makes a compelling case that voluntary forms of “transparency” disclosure are in fact a cornerstone of neoliberal CSR, which favors nonbinding, unenforceable forms of self-reporting. Studying the formulations of transparency in regulatory frameworks in the capitalist period, Nadesan

finds that fiscal transparency—initially framed as a release of financial information to ensure corporate accountability for shareholders—became a solution to “protect” the public from corporate labor and environmental lapses. From this neoliberal formulation of transparency, CSR strategies emerge to exploit motions toward information disclosure.

Although corporations have a vested interest in maintaining transparency in supply chains in order to protect product quality, they may simultaneously have vested interests in obscuring the labor conditions of their supply chains. The evidence suggests that corporations often prefer voluntary labor and environmental regimes over mandatory ones that enforce transparency and compliance . . . Of course, some corporations take social responsibility seriously, but to date few institutions exist that can assist stakeholders in sorting out the committed from those intent on misleading stakeholders through misrepresentations and selective reporting. (Nadesan, 2010, p. 269)

On the grounds of preserving competitive advantage as well as an idealized “free market” of rational agents, corporations have used “the illusion of transparency” in the neoliberal era to resist government regulation and delegate the enforcement of financial disclosures to private and semiprivate organizations. The global financial crisis, in part offset by rating agencies condoning insecure housing assets, is one case that underscores the reality of rational markets as in fact “opaque, blind, and self-interested” (p. 260). The democratic value of “transparency” as information openness has been retooled to serve the creative/destructive neoliberal pathology, which subsists on the preservation of laissez-faire attitudes and rational self-interest.

Following Nadesan’s assertion, Unilever’s voluntary social reporting is rife with i-CSR discourse that constructs a selective, strategic, and paternalistic form of “transparency” and “sustainability.” If selection bias, deliberate obfuscation, and misrepresentation are left unchecked in CSR discourse, the naturalization of market-

determined standards of “transparency” will continue to preserve the interests of the elite. Without autonomous bodies for enforcing socially acceptable standards for transparency and compliance, effusive rhapsodies of corporate “intent” are moot. In the following section, I apply Nadesan’s understanding of neoliberal “transparency” to i-CSR discourse to outline how corporate subjectivity is mobilized.

### **Corporate Subjectivity and Web 2.0**

**The MNC as “living” subject and the prosumer-citizen stakeholder.** As the embedded Facebook and Twitter links on the top menu bar of each page of the corporate website suggests, Unilever’s i-CSR discourse is no longer limited to publishing reports or static pages on the corporate website—its i-CSR discourse is performed in real time on its social media accounts. Moreover, consumer insights projecting the influence and growing purchasing power of media-savvy millennials have given rise to the widespread adoption of multiplatform interactive online campaigns by MNCs, regardless of size (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2010). Pepsi’s Refresh Project in 2010, Liberty Mutual’s Responsibility Project in 2011, and Starbuck’s #RaceTogether campaign in 2015 are only a few examples of companies experimenting with new ways to communicate their socially conscious identities using social media. The distinct flavor of Unilever’s approach to branding using i-CSR discourse to develop a personality is gaining ground in the expanding quasi-public spaces on the internet, like Facebook. Before turning to my argument about the living Unilever personality, a few points are in order about the complexity of i-CSR discourse via the concept of the “media user” and the “prosumer.”

Picone has argued that online user activity across media forms, devices, application platforms, and socio-spatial contexts creates the notion of a “media user” (Picone, 2017). Further, although the levels of engagement may still be skewed toward consumption online (Couldry, 2011), older concepts of the “audience” or the “consumer”—both characterized by reception—are inadequate frameworks for the “messy, unpredictable, hard to locate” media practices of today (Livingstone, 2015, p. 441). Picone (2017) offers “media user” as a concept that acknowledges activity across devices and platforms by individuals, who are also members of imagined global audiences, “more than merely receivers of content” (p. 381). As corporate presence grows beyond the corporate website and paid online advertisements, I would argue that the concept of “media use” can be expanded to include the activities of organizations within the areas of “messy” one-to-many and many-to-many interactions. Moreover, when examining i-CSR discourse outside of the traditional spaces of corporate discourse online, it is important to recognize that organizations—with usernames and avatars—are afforded the same capacities for interaction as embodied individual users.

It is also important to recognize that i-CSR discourse generated on social media platforms “is not closed,” since cultural meanings are negotiated in interactions between Unilever and participating users (Participant 3, 2016). The concept of the “prosumer” highlights the opportunities individual users have to simultaneously create and receive digital texts. On one hand, the blurring of the producer and consumer positions identifies the convergence of “spectacle” and “surveillance” afforded by information communication technologies—“making it *possible* (and for some people even *desirable*)

to see and to be seen” (Grinnell, 2009, p. 587). With online trends signaling a movement toward open information access and freedom of exchange, optimists find that the emergence of the “prosumer” also carries the promise of an online political-economic system that values democratic ideals, or even utopian “cyber-libertarianism.” Prosumers are the participants creating the online public with the potential to “stand opposed to capitalist organizations that seek to control and exploit” (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010, p. 23). However, Ritzer and Jurgenson treat these revolutionary prospects with caution, arguing that the distinct forms of control and exploitation of the prosumer internet are “trending towards unpaid labor and towards offering products at no cost” (p. 14). When transposing stakeholder theory to the presumption-based online political economy, the interactions stakeholders initiate with corporations bear economic value, mostly at the cost of prosumer time and effort (for examples, see chapter 4). Unlike the scarcity of resources necessary for industrial production, the data created through these stakeholder interactions is a unique commodity that can be mined, sold, copied, remixed, and synthesized to generate a new stream of profits for the corporation...as will be discussed in the conclusion? Or in chapter 4?. In this section, I show how i-CSR discourse in the PSBF campaign creates Unilever as an active subject with a personality and an identity. What follows is that Unilever’s subjectivity, as exemplified in its sustainability discourse, then interpellates the user as a “prosumer-citizen,” driven by shared values.

The subjects I interviewed for this project all classified the activities performed by corporations on social media as *branding*. Quart (in Childress, 2014) describes this as “360-degree branding,” in which marketing is “embedded in everything”; it is no longer



limited to advertisements and is increasingly experiential. Extending from the area of marketing that is forged in and through affective and cultural communication, social media branding is a new format for sharing the corporation's image and identity—it is a place where “corporate values are being lived” (Participant 3, 2016). Marketers now take a holistic approach to branding that is comprised of a unique “voice” and “persona,” consistent across all media platforms (Participant 6, 2016).

Companies are using social [media] to project their ethos. Maybe they are all about being some hipster cowboy that fights for the underdog. It becomes a persona. It's all about sharing their passion points in an authentic voice that people can connect with. (Participant 6, 2016)

Social media enables new facets of corporate subjectivity to surface and permeate lived reality. The personality created for online interaction affords organizations to develop social relationships with individual media users and the greater public. Authenticity, a “prerequisite to building trust,” can be practiced and reinforced through sharing “quality content,” “frequently” (Participant 3, 2016). According to Participant 1 (2015), users “don't want you to be fake with them.” Echoing Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser's (2012) argument, authenticity is a cultural commodity that also guides social media interaction. Drawing on these insights, I find that Unilever extends its i-CSR discourse to social media to gain legitimacy as a subject. Unilever choreographs a “living” personality of sustainability in two ways: by developing an active voice and by constructing grounds for active participation in online culture. As Unilever establishes an authentic personality, it is well positioned to convince stakeholders of its neoliberal sustainability values.

Unilever's new social media strategy is geared to making the company a living person with a voice and a commitment to sustainability. Prior to the PSBF campaign, Unilever used social media as a loudspeaker, announcing products, promotions, and corporate press releases. For instance, on Twitter, @UnileverUSA directly promotes its Suave brand of hair-care products and provides a shortened URL to a three-minute YouTube video demonstrating the use of Unilever products to produce volume (UnileverUSA, 2012, December 27).



*Figure 22. Product promotion in 2012*

It is only after the campaign that we begin to see the emergence of an amiable personality, voice, and tone motivating the online community to act in accordance with the corporation's defined moral and ethical values. Unilever transformed into an effervescent, chummy companion sharing healthy recommendations (@UnileverUSA, July 19, 2014) as seen here:



*Figure 23. Healthy recommendations from Unilever.*

Its personhood, as a beacon of moral righteousness, manifests in first-person plural pronouns on social media (@UnileverUSA, September 4, 2014):



*Figure 24.* The corporate first-person plural.

An abstract entity, the corporation uses digital communication tools as an interactive medium, engendering a living avatar that animates a traditional, static brand strategy into a dynamic brand personality. Unilever’s PSBF campaign defines the platforms and parameters through which it embodies a living corporate personality, using social media to refashion CSR to meet its neoliberal mandate—the relentless increase of consumption, profits, and market share.

Unilever’s online personhood is also performed through its convergence with the discourse produced by its CEO, Paul Polman. As a survivor of the “life-changing” Mumbai terrorist attack in 2008 (Hope, 2009), Polman embodies neoliberal CSR discourse, infusing Unilever’s i-CSR discourse with the language of “purpose, passion, and positive attitude” (@PaulPolman). Not only did he found the annual USLP report but, according to the corporate history, Polman also ushered Unilever’s current era of “sustainability” when named CEO in 2009. Whenever he delivers CSR speeches at international forums such as the United Nations, World Economic Forum, and business schools, his language, image, and persona—captured as shareable digital content—inspires Unilever’s real-time online presence. Lauded in the business press as a “Hero of

Conscious Capitalism” and “enlightened self-interest” (Schawbel, 2017), his moral considerations are usually retweeted by official Unilever social media accounts. In addition to projecting CSR values in person, his active communication on social media reconfigures the neoliberal values yoked to destructive capitalism to construct a more conscious veneer of capitalism. Polman (2017) invokes the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism to offer moral validity to the Do-Good Spirit: “As the Dalai Lama reminds us; if you seek enlightenment for yourself simply to enhance yourself and your position you miss the purpose. If you seek enlightenment for yourself to enable you to serve others, you are with purpose.”



Figure 25. Tweet by Paul Polman (2015, October 28; see also Polman 2017, September 29).

By casting off the greed embedded within conceptions of rational self-interest, Polman frames the primary purpose of business in moral terms, as humble service of society—a role similar to Adam Smith’s vision that presumably enables the common good while working for individual gain.<sup>11</sup> Over the three-year period of my study, the consistent retweeting and sharing between Unilever and Polman gave Unilever a face—the face of an individual who appears mindful in pursuit of a moral purpose.

However, Polman is just one part of the moral facade created by the company. To present itself as a heroic voice galvanizing social change, Unilever applied an evocative tactic--anxiety creation. At the launch of PSBF, Unilever’s first five-minute digital film *Why Bring a Child into This World?* begins with a fatalistic outlook about the planet that creates anxiety (Morris, 2013). The words “Having a child / one of the most uncertain moments in life,” are superimposed on a blue screen while the melancholy melody of “Where Is My Mind” by the Pixies plays in the background (Morris, 2013). In the following sequence, 10 expectant heterosexual couples from around the world share their fears, not about the responsibilities of parenting but about the world of pollution, hunger, and war into which their children will be born. Rather than hurling outright accusations at consumers, as it did back in 2010 with its i-CSR reports and webpages discussed earlier, the corporation evokes guilt in more subtle ways implying that consumers and citizens have been negligent due to inaction. In a cinematic montage of children eating, playing,

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<sup>11</sup> In Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, the conceptual “invisible hand” driving the free- market is energized by self-interest: “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages . . . As it is by treaty, by barter, and by purchase, that we obtain from one another the greater part of those mutual good offices which we stand in need of” . . . (A. Smith, 1986, p. 17).

and bathing in the sun, the narrator's enlightened tone assuages the fears of the teary-eyed parents:

Everyday food is being grown with a revolutionary method: care. Technologies will make clean drinking water available to hundreds of millions . . . And illnesses will be prevented by simple everyday products . . . Our children will have a better chance of meeting their great-grandchildren than we ever did. Breathe calmly. Bring your child into this world. There has never been a better time to create a brighter future for everyone on the planet, or those yet to come. (Morris, 2013)

Thus, the enlightened corporations not only produces food products and other goods but does so in ways that can save the world. A grandiose self-representation, Unilever is careful not to shoulder all the responsibility for creating a “brighter future,” but invites its audience to participate. Before the film comes to an end, the words “Take action to make a difference. Projectsunlight.com” appear on the blue screen with the new Unilever logo. Thus, the strategic use of anxiety and panic serves to both present Unilever as the champion of goodness and the steward of social progress and to invite collective social action. Social action, as defined by Unilever, starts by registering on its campaign website and ends with purchasing its “simple everyday products.” Through consumption meaningful change is possible.

The construction of a bleak future is central to Unilever's solution, a neoliberal vision for a “bright future.” This vision relies on projecting Unilever as a beacon of hope in hopeless world. In the introductory sections of the USLP of 2013, Unilever details the presiding conditions of “a world where temperatures are rising, water is scarce, energy expensive, food supplies uncertain and the gap between rich and poor increasing” (Unilever, 2014, p. 1). Unilever calls its vision a “Compassion strategy,”

declaring its heroic commitment to drive sustainable growth for its business and its stakeholders (Unilever, 2014, p. 2). Having constructed itself as a “good” corporate citizen, and via its persona as a social media personality, Unilever then intervenes in discussions around social issues such as Peace Day.

On September 15, 2015, @UnileverUSA tweeted a GIF animation of its U-shaped logo morphing into a peace symbol and the text: “Happy #PeaceDay. We’re proud to support the @UN #GlobalGoals for a #BrightFuture. Learn more: <http://unilever.us/PeaceDay>.” The linked article sets the stage legitimating Unilever’s call to action:

In an increasingly volatile and uncertain world—with conflicts such as Syria causing unimaginable suffering and upheaval—the call for peace, in our lifetime, has never been stronger . . . That’s why Unilever is asking everyone, everywhere to support Peace Day on 21 September. This annual day of ceasefire and non-violence addresses both armed conflict and the violence that takes place in our homes, schools, workplaces and communities . . . You can pledge your support online. (Unilever, 2015, September 21).

In a broad sweep that incorporates violence within the public and private spheres, Unilever sets out to act as a transnational force for peace beyond the politics of war, empire and the activities of states and non-state actors. Peace Day, as communicated by Unilever, the parent brand, is inherently confusing—what material contribution is Unilever making toward peace by asking its online followers to “support” its support of Peace Day? Beyond “pledging support” for an abstract idea of peace, it not clear from the website if Unilever is doing anything concrete to address violence. The appropriation and branding of “peace” is one of the most vivid examples of commodity activism during the PSBF campaign.

While “the politics of visibility” is understood as a productive process giving a platform to groups marginalized by the media, Banet-Weiser (2018, p. 23) describes a contemporary shift in “the economies of visibility” in which visual representation within digital culture “becomes the beginning and the end of political action.” Unilever’s operationalization of the horrors of war in order to visibly represent “peace” is an end in itself—rather than a means to advocate against human rights violations such as those committed by ruthless political leaders in Syria. In fact, when responding to inquiries by the Securities and Exchange Commission (2010) relating to revenues from Iran, Syria, Sudan and Cuba reported in 2009, Unilever’s lawyers drafted a response assuring them that the organization was adhering to the “material support” laws banning the support of terrorist organizations but would not stop selling its products in these markets.

The Unilever Group’s 20-F discloses that the Unilever Group has operations in Cuba, Iran, Sudan and Syria and it sells products in nearly all countries throughout the world, and thus investors, consumers and analysts are aware that the Unilever Group has operations in Cuba, Iran, Sudan and Syria and might have operations in other countries identified as state sponsors of terrorism.

While Unilever has to declare its profits and risks from doing business in Syria to shield itself from litigation by the Securities and Exchange Commission and investors, in its social media presence it hides its operation within these markets. Its alignment with Peace Day is set up not to promote peace, but to bolster its moral capital, brand value, and material profitability. Unilever’s Peace Day communications advocate for one day of ceasefire, but do not require Unilever to withdraw its product distribution from regions devastated by state-sponsored terrorism. In short, Unilever is making a gesture, albeit a



top-down corporate paternalist gesture, without any intention of jeopardizing its ongoing profit from these lucrative markets.

Similarly in 2014, the Axe brand—notorious for its stereotypical construction of heteronormative hypermasculinity (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012)—launched a three-pronged campaign around Peace Day with a special edition product fragrance called Axe Peace. Other parts of this campaign included a Super Bowl “Make Love Not War” commercial, reenacting a fictitious violent military operation, and a #KissforPeace social media campaign to celebrate its partnership with Peace Day. On the PSBF website, the story of Axe Peace is celebrated as a contribution to “sustainability” efforts:

Whether it gets your pulse racing, or slowly melts away your troubles, a kiss can fill you with energy, passion, or quite simply, peace. When it seems like the world will never be free of war and suffering, it’s all too easy to feel powerless over the big things, but we can all take back the power and make a change through simple and meaningful actions . . . In a world filled with conflict, we know sometimes the most powerful weapon is love . . . In the US Axe is encouraging people to share photos kissing for peace: Find a willing partner to kiss, snap a photo of the moment and share it on twitter with #kissforpeace for the chance to have your photo featured on a billboard in Times Square, NYC! (Unilever, 2017, June 29a)

By depoliticizing war and drawing on a 1960s-style countercultural notion of peace and love, Unilever constructs an individualistic neoliberal form of activism that does little to impact the structures that produce violence. Such a notion of peace activism, which is easy to do and self-focused and self-involved, captures the Do-Good Spirit and positions Unilever as the embodiment of a pacifist corporation. Further, such a principled position, as Boltanski and Chiappello (2007, p. 16) by the “spokesmen for capitalism” work to “stimulate an inclination to act and provide assurance that the actions thus performed are morally acceptable” and even make a difference in the world. The prosumer-citizens is

asked to take a picture of kissing, post on twitter with the hashtag #KissforPeace, purchase Axe Peace products, and world they are told will become less violent. Thus, the twenty-first-century stakeholder is invited by Unilever to be a partner in the desire to “take back the power” through empty and hollow gestures. Enabled by Web 2.0, prosumer-citizens and Unilever can cooperate and advertise their joint support for a contrived neoliberal banner of peace. As circumscribed by its i-CSR discourse, active civic participation for Unilever is defined as inspiration and awareness; for the prosumer-citizen, it is defined as a specified engagement with the brand.

When a corporation summons human calamity and political movements as a call to activate prosumers, it frames citizenship through consumption. Unilever’s newfound “personhood” as a progressive social leader online allows it to respond to current social issues and appeal to prosumer-citizens. As explained by several participants working on marketing strategies with clients in the wake of a natural disaster (such as a hurricane) or a publicized political event (such as the legalization of marriage equality), this corporate tactic is devised through the logic of the Do-Good Spirit.

In a discussion on social media marketing strategies, Participant 6 (2016) describes the online practices of brands aligning with popular causes using new capabilities on social media platforms:

Social [marketing] lets our brand easily support trending causes and hashtags that fit with the company ethos. That’s good for us and it’s more real[ . . . ] If the user is stoked about the same thing, then maybe we can create brand awareness in the heat of something viral.

Even though its mimicry of prosumer-citizens is guided by the intention of generating “brand awareness”—a prerequisite for sales or investment—the corporation can achieve legitimacy as a “more real” participant in online culture. Similar to an individual wearing a “This Is What a Feminist Looks Like” T-shirt flattens the struggle for gender equality to a visual representation instead of political action (Banet-Weiser, 2018), participants in digital culture—even corporations—are legitimized and privileged when they adopt the dominant frames for “visibility.” By actively “liking” posts by nongovernmental organizations and using hashtags that draw on collective democratic values, such as #GlobalGoals and #AgentsOfChange, Unilever’s moral “visibility” is established by simple association with social activism. Since social media tools are designed to amplify visibility as an end, rather than a means to political action, the participation of corporations in the economies of visibility creates new opportunities for conspicuous ethical prosumption (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

The calculus for constructing an authentic moral subjectivity and a loyal prosumer-citizen around newsworthy social events is not always as “easy” as Participant 6 suggests. Recalling a controversial Pepsi advertisement in 2017, Participant 2 (2017) critically recounts a conversation with a client, the chief communications officer of a national telecommunications company, during a brainstorming session for a new multiplatform advertising campaign. The Pepsi advertisement enacted a street protest in which Kendall Jenner, a white brunette woman, brokered peace, offering a soda can as an olive branch to riot police. The source of the public outcry this ad generated on social media included the commodification of sexuality and racial tension to sell soda—

especially against national news coverage of Black Lives Matter street protests in response to the most recent instances of police brutality toward black citizens.

I was surprised when [the client] said that it was “too bad that Pepsi dropped the ball.” But then he said he wondered how Bono made it work for AIDS . . . I guess he was trying to figure out why Pepsi failed and the RED campaign works to get consumers to buy into a cause . . . I think it was social media that got Pepsi to pull it off the air right away. (Participant 2, 2017)

By interrogating what “works” to get consumers to “buy into a cause,” Participant 2 suggests that corporations draw on progressive, democratic values—such as human rights, racial justice, inclusion, free speech, and collective action—to motivate consumers to make purchasing decisions. In this specific case, the affordances of social media created more autonomy or “room to maneuver” for prosumer-citizens’ oppositional interpretations to rise above the public din and force Pepsi to remove the commercial (Castells, 2012, p. 129). However, as more companies actively seek to market their brands as morally and ethically responsible and to convince prosumer-citizens of their heroism by aligning with progressive causes, the Do-Good Spirit can begin to naturalize corporate defined collective action—like the RED campaign, led by a celebrity musician.

The PSBF campaign reproduced popular civic-minded causes and hashtags in its Twitter posts, such as #EarthHour2015, #GlobalHandwashingDay, #WomensEqualityDay, and #GivingTuesday. By impersonating prosumer-citizen activity on social media and tracking viral activity around collective action, Unilever establishes its personality and legitimacy as a sustainability leader in online participatory culture. Another way in which Unilever establishes a do-good persona is through the use of strategic storytelling. In the next section, I discuss this strategy and explain how it is

primarily monologic communication tool used to construct neoliberal transparency around environmental consciousness, social justice, and collective action.

### **Strategic Storytelling and Transparency**

As Unilever animates its personality in the PSBF campaign, it also cultivates brand loyalty and siphons online participation by devising highly interactive “strategic stories”—a marketing innovation used to describe an online communication strategy used for branding. Columbia University Business School’s online course description for a workshop in strategic storytelling substantiates how this technique is used to retool neoliberal ideology for the online environment.

Research in neuroscience and cognitive psychology has shown that stories are typically more effective at changing people’s minds than rational argument. This means that people—leaders in particular—need to view the world in narrative terms, not as a thesis to be argued or a pitch to be made but as a story to be told. Because stories provide a structure for reality and a key to understanding, because they play to the emotions and rely upon empathy, narrative thinking is a powerful tool. (Columbia Business School, n.d.)

As I investigate the operationalization of strategic storytelling in the PSBF campaign in this section, I present how the value of transparency is commodified for emotional exploitation of the prosumer-citizen. Though neoliberal ideology idealizes the rational decision-making of *Homo economicus* (the self-interested agent), strategic storytelling uncovers the way affect and morality is legitimized and ultimately applied as a tool for ideological coercion. By revising the rational-agent conception of the consumer to that of a prosumer-citizen with moral and ethical values, the PSBF campaign reveals how Unilever constructs strategic “transparency” stories around its commitment to responsible business practices and civic participation.

The term *strategic storytelling* was initially introduced in my interviews by four participants to describe an industry trend that is influencing their own work in messaging, content creation, and brand strategy geared for the online “conversation economy,” in which digital dialogue on social media has economic value (Participant 6, 2016). As traditional forms of advertising are effectively being “tuned out” (Participant 1, 2015), my group of practicing professionals explained that businesses are now interested in forging deeper stakeholder ties along shared values by “sharing”—or communicating with more transparency—and “storytelling”—using narrative form to convey detail about a process. The participants suggest that the rise of strategic storytelling satisfies corporations’ desire to present “transparency and meaning to more connected and more critical consumers” (Participant 2, 2015). Moreover, Participant 3 (2016) explains,

People love stories and when they can be part of it, it leaves a powerful impression. If we [advertisers] can create a bond with them [consumers] using strategic storytelling, we can make memories together and that is what adds to a brand’s value.

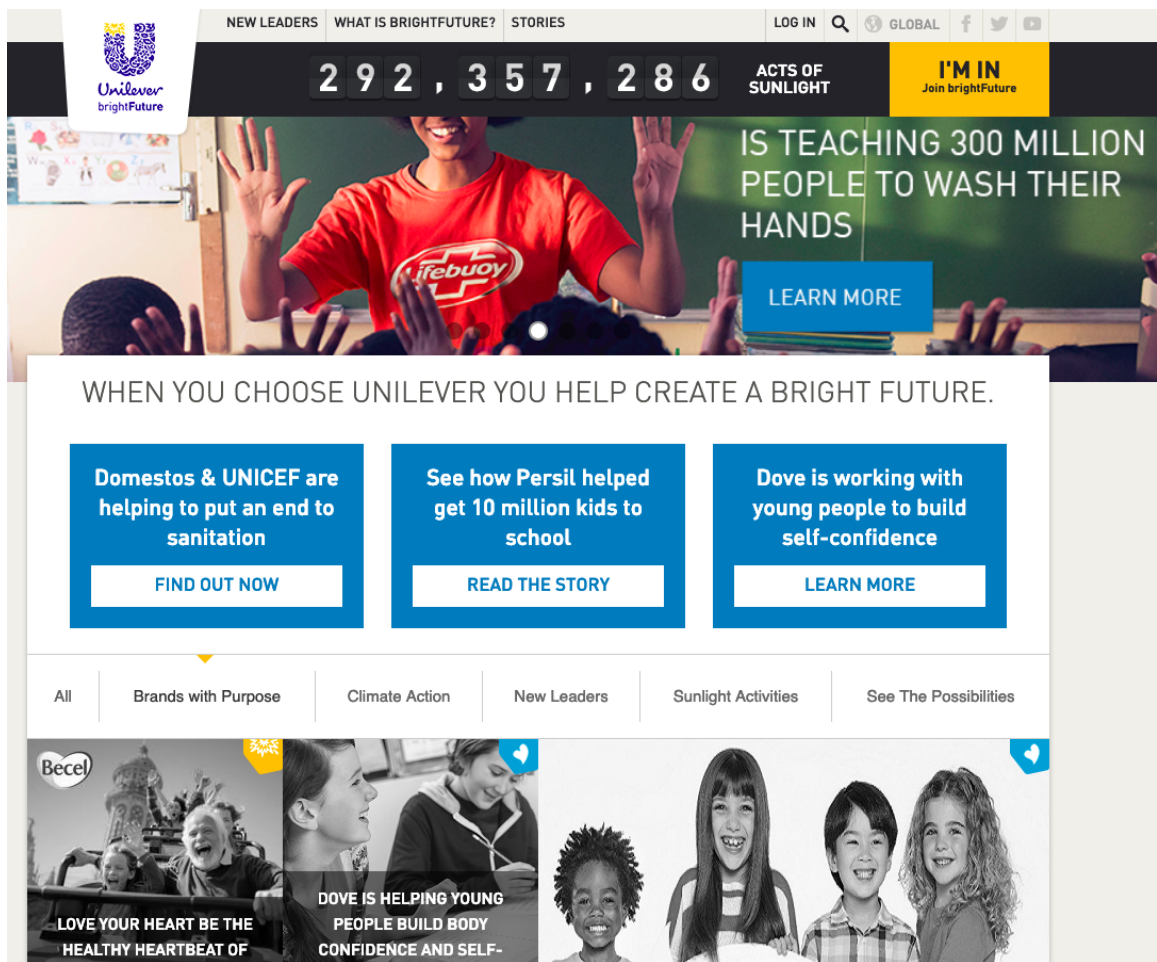
The interactive and temporal allowances of social media applications allow corporations to act as users in the process of constructing shared meanings, experiences, relationships, morals, and ethics through narrative storytelling (see chapter 4). Ultimately, strategic storytelling is a long-term strategy to build “brand loyalty” that is capable of withstanding reputation crises. According to Participant 3 (2016), the moral value of transparency and trust are causally related:

People have always used stories to talk about our hopes, feelings, and beliefs . . . We live our lives in stories. Moment by moment, consumers are sharing their personal stories across social platforms—a Facebook Live video, an Instagram

*story. To earn the trust of the consumer, brands need to behave like consumers and be vulnerable enough to tell their real stories.*

So far we have seen how Unilever adopts an individual persona either through Polman's own story and social media presence or its role as a social commentator and do-gooder. Next, I turn to how it behaves like a person, or a consumer as participant 3 notes, and makes itself vulnerable enough to tell stories. Needless to say, such faux vulnerability is driven by the intention to appear sincere and transparent for profitable ends. As corporations face the challenge of overcoming secrecy and scandal, especially after the 2008 global financial crisis, transparency remains a vital component of CSR discourse. In the remainder of this chapter, I show how PSBF campaign exemplifies the "living" corporation's use of strategic storytelling to construct the *appearance* of honesty, sharing and transparency in its CSR values and practices.

**Corporate transparency.** Unilever's approach to transparency is to use the style and format of online news feature stories—composed with vibrant photography, evocative videos, and narrative descriptions of CSR participants and events—to induce trust with the brand's social purpose. For instance, the PSBF website is structured around "Stories"—an option on the campaign website menu bar. Gripping headlines using Unilever brands and statistics of social impact read as follows: "See how Persil helped get 10 million kids to school," "Pepsodent is teaching 68 million children to brush their teeth," "Dove has helped more than 19 million young people build self-esteem," "Domestos is helping 5 million people access toilets," and "Lifebuoy is teaching 300 million people to wash their hands" (Figure 26).



*Figure 26.* Bright Future website in 2017. This image is a partial screenshot from a Wayback Machine archived website. (Unilever, 2017, June 29b).

The visual vocabulary used in each “story” bears strong resemblance to UN reports (also publicized as “stories”) in which racially diverse subjects appear with halo lighting and cheery smiles to validate Unilever’s positive intervention towards advancing the common good across the world.





*A young family member in Ayacucho, Peru holds a sign that says "Sustainable Development Goals" in the indigenous language of Quechua. © UNDP Peru / Mónica Suárez Galindo*

**Figure 27.** Photograph of a Peruvian family holding a sign saying “Sustainable Development Goals” in Quechua. This image is part of a “story” on the United Nations Development Programme website (UNDP 2019).

In many stories, Unilever’s direct partnership with a nonprofit organization is depicted by merging the Unilever logo with the nonprofit organization’s logo—a representation of blurring profit-making with social purpose. While corporate partnerships have a visible legacy of positive social contribution, such as the J. D. Rockefeller’s grant to build the United Nation’s New York headquarters and Bill Gates’ quest to eradicate malaria, Roy (2014, p. 27) urges us to remain highly skeptical of corporations and corporate-endowed philanthropic organizations in their opaque interventions to shape social, economic and political policy: “There’s are a lot of money in poverty, and a few Nobel Prizes too.”

Providing evidence of the insidious control corporations have over some NGOs in India,

Roy (2014, p.33) alerts us to the strategic mandate of corporate funded-NGOs to “further the project of corporate globalization, not thwart it.”

The corresponding 500 to 600-word articles and short videos on the PSBF website animate development statistics, describe related CSR programs, and feature individuals from the community in which Unilever claims to have achieved a material social impact. Resembling the images of paternalism from its imperial past, Unilever’s contemporary efforts to narrate its work to improve rural economies revises imperial racism into a logic that Kumar (2016), building on scholarship on colonial feminism in the 19th century, calls “imperial feminism.” Within this neoliberal spinoff of feminism is the implicit superiority of Western progressiveness. Neoliberal imperialism is based on a belief, at least in name, in “democracy, human rights, secularism, women’s rights, gay rights, freedom of speech, and. . . other liberal values,” which is then juxtaposed to the Global South seen as “barbaric, misogynistic, driven by religion, and illiberal” (Kumar, 2016). For example, “A Cut Above the Rest: Helping Women Gain Independence” is a strategic story narrating Unilever’s initiative to address poverty and opportunities for women in India:

Few realise that, whilst 66% of India’s workforce consists of women, 1 in 3 of these women face economic difficulties that are detrimental to their livelihoods. The Sunsilk Beauty Safar programme is helping to change this! . . . The initiative takes women through a two-month long programme with a focus on beautician skills and business etiquette, leading to certification. Once qualified, the new beauticians are provided with a Sunsilk ‘starter kit’ that allows them to set up and run their own salon right away . . . Sunsilk ambassador and beautician trainer, Shweta Sapra, had given up on her dreams of an education due to financial limitations. She is now not only able to support her education, but her whole family too. All while helping other women in her community gain financial independence. (Unilever, 2017, January 7a)

Strategic stories of heroic CSR activities with reported cases of success are publicized to help Unilever validate its corporate intervention in social issues. Its contribution to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals—in this case, by training beauticians to sell more Unilever products—extends its corporate imperialism under the facade of feminism. Furthermore, without social reporting standards or any governing institution for objective validation of claimed CSR impact, strategic storytelling is used to simulate transparency of CSR initiatives for marketing effect and convincing the conscious user of Unilever's moral values.

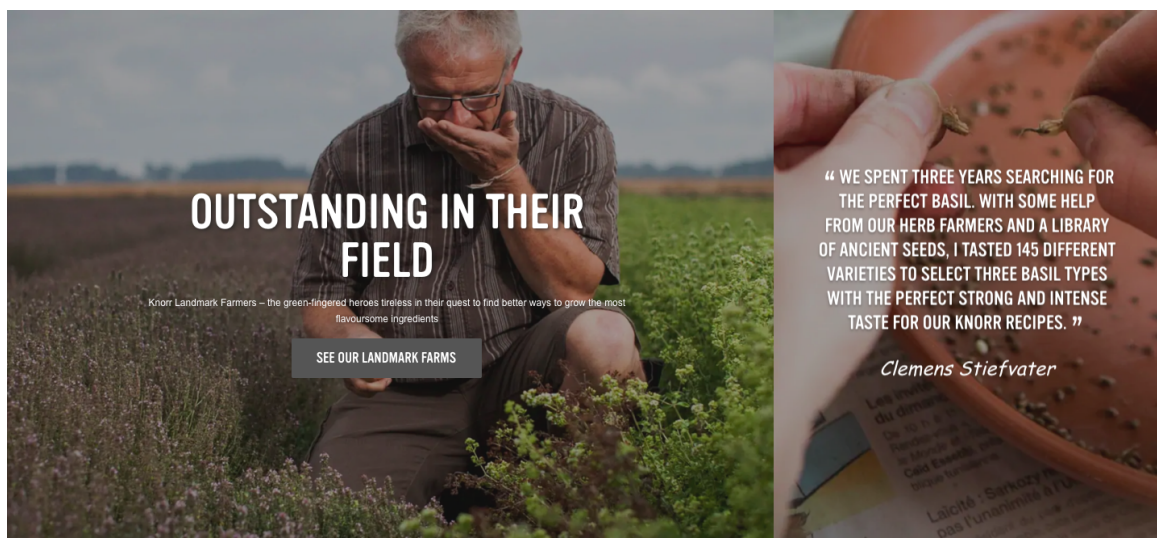
Furthermore, strategic stories construct the aesthetics of transparent business practice and convey a fantasy of nondestructive, industrialized manufacturing and the compassionate corporation. Corporate-commissioned consumer research showed that one-third of 20,000 adults surveyed from five countries make purchasing decisions based on social impact (Unilever, 2017). The findings were expanded in the “Making Purpose Pay” report explaining how “sustainability” was a coveted social value that required more clarity on packaging and marketing to aid consumer decisions about product purchases. In response, strategic storytelling is employed by Unilever to create the aesthetics of transparency for its manufacturing in which cinematic photography, working-class biographies, and process-related description create an impression of “sustainability” suitable for the Do-Good Spirit. Rather than clearly establishing and communicating responsible business practices throughout its entire business, transparency stories in Unilever's i-CSR discourse are limited only for selected “sustainable” brands. For

example, the Knorr brand website narrates romantic “little stories” of mindful farmers growing tomatoes in Turkey, tarragon in France, and pumpkins in Australia (Knorr, 2019). The brand articulates its dedication to sustainability:

Our story of sustainability isn't just one story, it's a thousand little ones that all come together to make the world a better, tastier place. Farmers, suppliers, and chefs—everyone has their own tale to tell, and they're all doing their bit to help us source all of our agricultural ingredients sustainably by 2020.

Expansive panoramic visuals, films, and corresponding text outlines the stories of “responsible” farmers taking tremendous efforts to ensure biodiversity is preserved, water is used efficiently, and pests are reduced humanely.

The aesthetics of transparency frame responsible farming as well as employment in the Unilever enterprise. Up-close and personal photography is used to demonstrate the “love and dedication” of its Knorr Landmark Farmer program—a sustainability initiative to select farmers to innovate land use and improve the flavor of the produce grown for Knorr products. In Figure 28, two simple farmers are seen in verdant fields without any sign of mechanical tools in the frame.



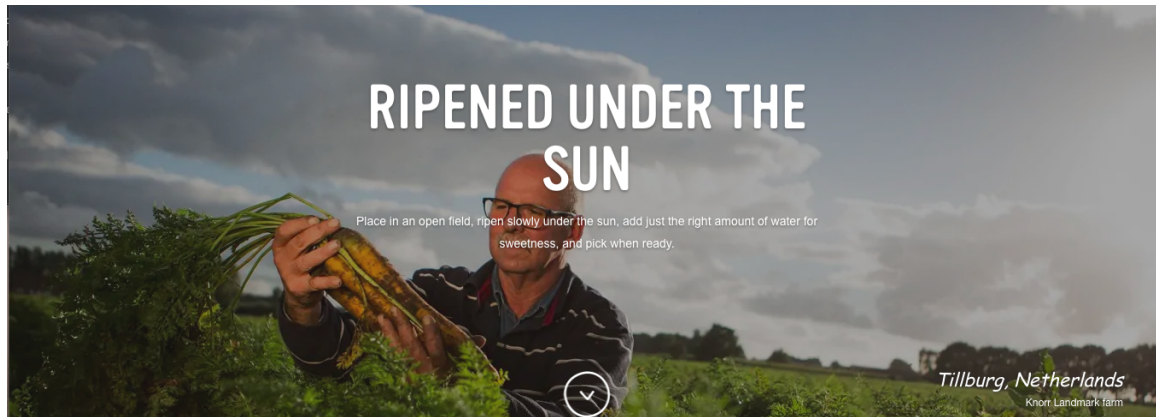


Figure 28. Knorr website (2019).

In order to illustrate an image of sustainable farming that is anti-industrial and homegrown, Unilever uses close-up photography to construct an emotional connection between the farmers and the produce. The farmer kneeling in a field of herbs conveys an attentiveness used to “find the perfect basil” and the farmer uprooting carrots by hand conveys the work ethic used to grow high quality ingredients. Unilever personifies the collaboration and personal satisfaction of employees using short-films and quotes from employees working together to meet Unilever’s sustainability goals. The text box in Figure 28 presents a quote from a food specialist at Knorr, Clemens Stiefvater: “We spent three years searching for the perfect basil. With some help from our herb farmers and a library of ancient seeds, I tasted 145 different varieties to select three basil types with the perfect strong and intense taste for our Knorr recipes” (Knorr, 2019). The quote demonstrates the commitment and cooperation amongst individuals, such as farmers and recipe-makers, within the production process. Similarly, integrated on the same Knorr webpage, is a short-film titled, *The Story of the Parsley Farmer Who Wanted to go Fishing*. In under two minutes, the film documents a Knorr Landmark Farmer growing herbs for the company in Ferme de Fremingy, France. The film captures the endless ochre

fields and family life of provincial farming as the farmer reveals, in French with English subtitles, an endearing memory of his grandfather:

When I was younger I tried to go fishing with my grandfather. He fell in the pond that day! We started to restore the pond about 3 years ago. We completely knocked down the borders to soften the banks, and allow the animals to come and drink. I'd like to be able to fish here again with my own children and relive what I did with my grandfather, without falling in the pond! (Knorr, 2019)

The story does not describe the transparency of production process; rather, it uses cinematic film techniques to construct a gripping story of the deep fulfillment enjoyed by Unilever employees who are given an opportunity to work towards individual hopes and dreams. In the PSBF campaign, strategic-storytelling by the Knorr brand is used to avoid constructing transparency as a quantifiable measure of operations and governance; instead, the aesthetics of transparency are used to elicit an emotional response by depicting “passionate” farmers and employees. As strategic storytelling about romanticized industrial production becomes a dominant narrative in corporate mediated spaces, the illusion of conscious capitalism becomes potentially more difficult to oppose or amend.

Beyond the magnification of select CSR initiatives and business practices, the most detrimental element of i-CSR strategic storytelling is that it is executed in ways that exploit the participatory culture and the value of collective action afforded by social media (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Throughout the analysis of the PSBF campaign, strategic stories are constructed to provide a specific type of opportunity for participation in a “sustainability movement” stewarded by Unilever. Unilever summons users to take (embodied and disembodied) social action at the end of each strategic story.

A regularly updated strategic story featuring the Ben & Jerry's ice-cream brand (still publicly recognized for its socially active founders' CSR practices, even after Unilever acquired the brand in 2001, and as the only subsidiary holding benefit-corporation status), models the formulaic call to action. After detailing another compelling case of moral righteousness as proponent of global climate change and social justice agenda, Unilever seeks to broker civic participation:

Ben & Jerry's are actively working with farmers to reduce methane emissions and their carbon emissions across the business, and have even built The Chunkinator in the Netherlands—a machine which enables the brand to power their factory from ice-cream byproducts. Who knew? The only way to bring climate justice is to take action now. Click here to sign the Avaaz petition now and help Unilever and Ben & Jerry's make history. (Unilever, 2017, January 7b.)

The disembodied action to support the climate-justice movement by signing the online petition is coupled with a call for consumption:

We created a flavor to bring attention to this historic issue and to send out our own SOS for our planet. It's called Save Our Swirled, featuring raspberry ice cream, marshmallow and raspberry swirls, plus dark and white fudge ice cream cones. (Ben & Jerry's, 2015)

One can save the world, eat icecream and help reap profits for Unilever.

Not all strategic stories included new product lines. In other cases, Unilever constructs stories in order to persuade users to join the corporate-led activism. Strategic stories provide the testimony that legitimizes the Unilever-branded advocacy materials such as downloadable branded toolkits with activities and guidelines for parents, teachers, and community leaders to imitate a grassroots nonprofit organization. For example, the PSBF story describing the “Dove Self-Esteem Project” campaign to help young people build body confidence claimed in 2017 to have reached “over 19 million







lands on a separate ‘Free Being Me’ webpage with an appeal in large bold typeface:

“Empowering girls through improving body confidence and self esteem. Join our global body confidence revolution! Share your ‘Free Being Me’ story” (Free Being Me, 2014).

Underneath the call for participation is a collection of photographs submitted by participants. Many of the photographs in the collection were similar to the image in Figure 29 and included an individual or group of smiling girls holding up a sign of workshop completion. The aesthetics of transparency are used to validate the project’s impact by collecting images of glowing confidence and selecting stories that exuberantly attest to the success of the workshop.

Furthermore, users who are convinced by the stories of universal support by the participants the “Dove Self-Esteem Project” are offered four options for action within the PSBF story.

Visit Dove’s parents page and download the Uniquely Me activity workbook to explore topics and articles that are relevant to your daughter. They are written and endorsed by experts and champions of girls’ body confidence.

Watch & share the Dove Legacy film to help raise awareness about how sensitive children are to their parent’s body confidence and belief systems.

If you’re a teacher, Dove has a selection of free session tools available to use in school. This is a UK PSHE- endorsed curriculum-resource for teachers. Dove also offers schools a free teacher-training workshop to learn how to deliver the content with confidence. Visit the teaching resources page to find out more.

If you’re a youth leader or mentor you can download activities, such as the Mindful Me Activity Guide for Girls—a mindful approach to boosting self-esteem and body confidence, developed by Dove’s experts. (Unilever, 2017, July 8.)

Here, Unilever encourages action that directly enhances brand awareness through the distribution of branded materials. Unilever asks users to share the Dove Legacy film and

use Dove generated workbooks for community outreach. As a proxy mediating socially responsible action, Unilever not only engages the user as a citizen-prosumer but commodifies meaningful civic participation. The last line of each strategic story on the PSBF website is: “When you choose Unilever, you help to create a bright future.” In other words, the consumption of any Unilever product or the activity of signing a petition is translated to meaningful civic action.

Of the dozens of strategic stories of sustainability coded during my data collection period, the Grow With Us initiative within the PSBF campaign exemplifies Unilever’s unique effort to use strategic storytelling as a camouflage for accountability in business practices and to exploit participatory culture online. Under the banner “Good from Farm to Fork,” Unilever’s Hellmann’s brand set up a livestream from a tomato farm in Talca, Chile, for two weeks in January 2015. Using cameras placed around the farm and in the farmers’ hats, users could interact with farmers, ask questions, and “adopt” tomatoes that would eventually be used to manufacture Hellmann’s ketchup (Figure 30).



The interactive form of strategic storytelling in the Grow With Us initiative represents an immersive form of digital marketing in which the aesthetics of transparency are choreographed for citizen-prosumers. The campaign curates a spectacle of tomato farming, allowing users to supervise and collaborate with the corporation to construct a narrative of sustainably sourced agricultural production. In two weeks, Unilever trivialized its social responsibility for sustainable farming by providing users the illusion of agency to the music for the plants, an inessential component in the mass manufacturing of ketchup. While Unilever purchases 2% of the world's supply of tomatoes from 50,000 growers worldwide, The Grow With Us campaign designs a compelling vision of one farm; moreover, it serves as a diversion from Unilever's noncompliance and negligence of fair labor provisions for agricultural laborers across the world. Under the guise of transparency, interactive strategic storytelling embezzles authentic social engagement, colonizes public spheres online, and exploits the scarcest resource of all—our time. A steady stream of links to these congratulatory CSR vignettes is disseminated on social media as a way of shaping the social imaginary around wholesome CSR and favorable images of corporate-led sustainable development. However, I maintain my fear of naturalization of CSR as a favorable solution to social challenges that have long been exacerbated by neoliberal capitalism.

## **Conclusion**

The Unilever case study exemplifies the way digital communication in the 21st century maintains the objective of CSR as a communication tool to forge stakeholder relationships. Yet I find the affordances of Web 2.0 and social media provide corporate

presence a distinct materiality and temporality. By conjuring a brand personality online, corporations hold a newfound capacity for dialogic communication and meaning-making that signals cause for concern. With the growing adoption of i-CSR at the center of its corporate communications strategy, the meaning, agenda, and standards for social responsibility are being negotiated in favor of naturalizing CSR as a benign corporate practice erecting the image of the MNC as a compassionate actor in the global economy. Furthermore, the power of i-CSR discourse commodifies moral and ethical values in a manner that obfuscates citizenship, consumption, and business purpose to strengthen the neoliberal logic of conscious capitalism—a kinder, less destructive version of a rapacious system.

The message communicated in different ways throughout its i-CSR campaign is: “Unilever strives to be a trusted corporate citizen, and, as an integral part of society, to fulfil our responsibilities to the societies and communities in which we operate” (Unilever, 2019f). Its programmatic participation on social media platforms in topics such as climate change and deforestation; water, sanitation and hygiene; and sustainable agriculture and food security presents an identity moratorium in which the corporation actively revises the social contract of businesses at a time when public distrust of economic institutions is heightened (Edelman, 2017). In the process of rebranding its role in society, Unilever’s i-CSR discourse embodies a distinctly values-centric character. The commodification of morals and ethics in the PSBF campaign reveals the neoliberal logic undergirding the Do-Good Spirit, in which i-CSR discourse is employed as a defensive *and* offensive communications strategy. While the

commodification of values is used to mitigate stakeholder reprisal, it is also used to define profitable industrial standards for sustainable business operation in order to maintain the corporation's oligopolistic position in the "free market" and fulfill the growth mandate of neoliberal globalization.

Unfortunately, Unilever is not an exclusive case—there is now a concerted effort by the largest corporations to publicize CSR and business purpose. So if a corporation's ethos as a trusted citizen helps differentiate its products from competitors' nearly identical products, what does it lose from publicizing its good intentions and steps toward improving the social issues within its purview? More specifically, what is the harm if Verizon champions its role as the "network of choice" for emergency responders in an integrated advertising campaign? Or if Bank of America changes its logo to a rainbow flag to support the #LoveHasNoLabels movement against "social bias"? Or if Starbucks produces *Upstanders*, a two-season documentary series on the Amazon Prime and Facebook Watch streaming services, to uncover "inspiring stories about people who are fearlessly standing up for others to create positive change"? Or if Mars, Inc., uses the hashtag #ProudlyMars as it partners with the UN to improve global farming conditions and nutrition policy? The problem of the commodification of morality and ethics in i-CSR discourse is the incessant undermining and paralysis of activism; ultimately, this ensures neoliberal ideology and the primacy of consumption. For Boltanski and Chiapello (2007, p. 313), the problem is that "critique loses its point of application and is condemned to constant modification or vain overstatement." With the mainstream adoption of CSR by MNCs and i-CSR discourse dominating dialogue in the public sphere

online, the PSBF case study supports the urgency of remaining vigilant. Using social media to personify a “living” brand, crowdsourcing to communicate a virtuous identity, and storytelling to construct transparency, MNCs like Unilever are colonizing the quasi-public spaces online and shaping public dialogue in their favor. By supporting new forms of stakeholder engagement with the corporation, i-CSR discourse has the capacity to redefine standards for ethical business practices, the purpose of the corporation in society, and the meaning of civic participation.

During the study period, the corporate malpractice issues unearthed by the press, NGO groups, activists, and consumers provide significant context for understanding the contested values embedded within the neoliberal Do-Good spirit. Each violation points toward a correlation between reputation management of its brand identity and its CSR communication strategy. However, closer scrutiny is needed to understand the logic for constructing a values-based corporate identity online and an interactive i-CSR campaign to engage all users—even critics, as explored in the following chapter.

Unilever’s online marketing strategy presents how i-CSR discourse is situated within the disjunctures between business purpose and social responsibility, public perception and social expectation, corporate practice and corporate aspiration, monetary value and cultural value, and language and meaning. Because of the imperial prowess of MNCs to colonize lived reality, especially through the co-optation and commodification of values, I maintain my skepticism and promote critical debate about CSR. The values-centric discourse adopted by MNCs on social media platforms is often deeply contradictory and generates conflicting interactions with the stakeholder groups that

choose to participate. Ultimately, the dialogue between the living-corporation and the online public uncovers the fissures within neoliberal CSR discourse. Quasi-public online spaces are cultural battlegrounds in which individual values of “being good” and collective social values of the common good are being negotiated on the grounds that the corporation is an active citizen. The disjunctures of i-CSR discourse blurs business purpose, citizenship, and consumption to the extent that our public sphere, our health, our ideals, and our imaginations are under siege. Ultimately, the efficacy of resistant grassroots social movements, innovative business models, and alternative economies is at stake.



#### 4. Engaging Unilever's i-CSR discourse—Interaction and Resistance

Digital technology is allowing people to create large communities of interest, share information faster and drive to action sooner. We have seen this with movements like Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring and Istanbul's Gezi Park demonstrations. They use Facebook to organise, YouTube to show the world what they are doing and Twitter to communicate their progress. As these examples show, many mass movements organised through social media are protest movements, demonstrating against injustice or opposing regimes. But a growing number are about positive change. . . . The challenge for companies like Unilever is how to harness the positive relationships enjoyed with consumers and channel them into consumer movements for positive change.

—*Unilever Communications, Brand and Sustainable  
Business Team Report, 2014*

In the previous chapter, my analysis of Unilever's expanding i-CSR discourse presents the way corporate hegemony functions within the prosumer marketplace, garnering moral capital as a conscious citizen within the corporate website and beyond. Although Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) raise the prospect of revolutionary social change by prosumers—active producers and consumers of information in networked society—the PSBF campaign exemplifies how corporate subjectivity, strategic storytelling, and the aesthetics of transparency are instruments of control characterizing i-CSR discourse. As introduced in chapter 3, i-CSR discourse is a distinct form of commodity activism manufactured by corporations which interpellates users as “prosumer-citizen stakeholders.” Building on this analysis, this chapter demonstrates the complex and contradictory interactions between prosumer-citizens and the MNC, ultimately transforming agreeable participants into ambassadors of the neoliberal Do-Good Spirit.

An examination of i-CSR discourse is incomplete without understanding the distinct meaning-making process within a networked environment. Applying Hall's (1999) theory of resistant spectatorship to the current "commoditized digital environment," Tewell (2016, p. 291) acknowledges that the "media is [sic] decoded in culturally situated contexts and that one's interpretation of a message is necessarily dependent upon one's personal identity and lived experiences, including race, class, gender, and sexuality." Any form of interaction with the PSBF campaign requires that texts be "appropriated as meaningful discourse and be meaningfully coded" by the user (Hall, 1999). At the same time, Andrejevic (2008) finds that digital interactivity does not promise reciprocity or empowerment for the user. Since user data is a commodity and user interaction is free from labor costs, all interaction generates value for an organization. Thus, it is vital to examine user interaction with the MNC while keeping in mind the forces shaping social media interactivity. Using data collected from marketing professionals and the Project Sunlight/Bright Future (PSBF) campaign's social media channels, this chapter examines the economic, cultural, and moral values formed during the discursive process—particularly how users oppose the hegemonic form of neoliberal "sustainability" constructed by Unilever.

As the above *Unilever Communications, Brand and Sustainable Business Team Report* (Aldwinckle, 2014) reveals, the corporation purposefully modeled the campaign's engagement strategies after progressive social movements. Brand managers expose the corporation's concerted effort to counter the pervasive feeling of social discontent in the post-financial-crisis era by harnessing the shared desire for social change and justice. To

assemble an active “community” of common interests, Unilever studies and implements the very tools and values used to organize large groups of disaffected and vulnerable individuals. The managers of the PSBF campaign reveal the ultimate intent of amassing a community of morally charged citizen-prosumers: to “harness” disillusionment and the propensity for positive social contribution in order to foster brand loyalty. Hidden behind the banner of “positive change” is the co-optation of social-activist discourse to serve the MNC’s financial objectives.

My analysis in this chapter is guided by two objectives: to situate the discursive practices between prosumer-citizens and the MNC within commercial social networks, and to unpack the meanings around i-CSR discourse that are being sincerely accepted, vigorously negotiated, and valiantly resisted within this ideological domain. I begin by examining social media to argue that it is neither an innocent nor an impartial platform. In the remaining sections, I organize my discussion around the intended and unintended reactions to i-CSR discourse. I show that Unilever’s adoption of crowdsourcing, a digital marketing strategy, is used to build a brand community around a neoliberal version of CSR. However, when faced with unexpected opposition from users, either individually or affiliated with activist organizations, Unilever’s interaction exposes the underlying profit-maximization ethic guiding its i-CSR discourse.

### **The Politics of Engagement on Social Media**

Social media as a technology facilitates real-time, audio-visual, and text-based information exchange for individual users and organizations in a digitally networked society. Although I employ discourse analysis to unpack the messages between Unilever

and users, McLuhan's (1964) focus on the medium as a key factor transforming collective experience is helpful when applied to social media engagement. From this position, interactivity on social media is dictated by software as well as political economic forces. In this section, I discuss the way a social media platform structures the meaning-making process between users and a corporation.

First, as discussed in chapter 3, social media users can be viewed as prosumers—participants in a complex process of producing and consuming cultural texts. The enabling of audio-visual and symbolic messages, such as memes and emojis, gives prominence to visual information. Banet-Weiser (2018) finds technology enabled symbolic communication amplifies visibility as an ends rather than a means to material action. Although social media enables communicative potential to users, Andrejevic (2008) points to the paradoxical nature of digital interactivity. Rather than reducing users as either passive or active, Andrejevic (2008) identifies the ways in which users participate in community-building and creative production while being exploited for generating marketable information at no cost.

In order to unpack the meanings of i-CSR discourse by prosumer-citizens, it is important to interrogate the “engagement” process mediated by for-profit social media platforms. Social media platforms and corporations wield control as cultural custodians with high financial stakes in the process of “public engagement”:

A platform is a product of the company that runs it, so there is a certain logic that it should be the company's values and interests that determine what is acceptable and what should be removed. But these values do not exist in a vacuum. Nearly all social media platforms are commercial enterprises, and must find a way to make a profit, reassure advertisers, and honor an international spectrum of laws.

For social media platforms, what ends up standing as “our values” is not some moral core that exists beneath these many competing pressures. It is whatever solution can resolve those pressures—perhaps presented in a language of “the right thing to do,” but already accounting for the competing economic and institutional demands these platforms face. (Gillespie, 2018, p. 11)

The “values” publicized by large-scale social media companies—or, for that matter, any corporation—are cloaked in the discourse of virtuosity and common goodness; “our values” is a neoliberal euphemism for a competitively defined code that establishes the parameters of the firm’s limited liability to the public. For a commercial social media platform, permissible and forbidden engagement are not based on preserving a universal moral code for free human expression. Rather, by offering a service to host worldwide digital information exchange, commercial social media firms base moral determinations on their underlying interest in profits.

Although the founders of networks like Facebook conjure visions of an open society in which participants can form communities and join in spirited democratic debate, Gillespie (2018) reminds us that “public engagement” is quantifiable and marketable. Moreover, the power of corporations is amplified on social media; MNCs are personified as users and privileged as advertisers. From this position, my evaluation of the meanings that emerge from “engagement” considers the strain a resistant user endures when competing with the discourse of a hegemonic group. In other words, within a commercial social media platform, corporate discourse by advertisers is privileged over conflicting views of “sustainability.”

### **Progressive Values Adopted by Marketers and CSR Researchers**

Despite its underlying quantitative bent, “engagement” from the perspective of digital marketing is described with language associated with shared collective values (Participant 1, 2016; Participant 6, 2016). Technically, social media engagement is comprised of any combination of text-based, or symbolic communication that conveys layers of meaning in context. Marketers often describe “engagement” using quantifiable metrics that include an individual user’s visit frequency, click-rates, user growth rate, user retention, interactions with any content or digital artifact, content reach and content shares (Participant 1, 2016). During a focused discussion of social media metrics, Participant 1 explains that quantitative markers of engagement allow corporations to constantly “fine-tune” their online discourse in a way that can “cultivate a loyal brand community of followers, because that’s what keeps a brand profitable.” According to Participant 6, “engagement” is a key element of digital marketing because “the conversation economy works for the common good. The public wants to come together to share and talk . . . [and] brands can join the conversation or be the topic of conversation.” In several interviews, I noted that participants, all practitioners in the field of marketing and communication, referred to social media users across all platforms as “the public”—no longer an audience. The concepts of “the public,” “brand community,” and “the conversation economy” represent the way collective online participation is exploited for marketing purposes, in which brand-user interaction, user-brand interaction, and user-user interaction around the brand can be funneled for eventual consumption. So, while successful “engagement,” according to Musk (2018), is the attainment of “limbic

resonance,” or a mutual emotional connection on a deeply human level, my participants reinforce Gillespie’s thesis that social media “engagement” bears cultural value (moral, ethical, emotional) that is *always* tied to economic value. When a brand like Unilever constructs its subjectivity and encourages civic engagement using i-CSR discourse, values around democratic participation become commodities. Thus, my analysis in this chapter is premised on the understanding that social media engagement facilitates an online faux-public sphere in which free speech, collective values, and the common good have a price tag.

In addition to marketing professionals constructing social media “engagement” in terms of its potential collective value instead of its economic value, I also find a convenient convergence with normative academic formulations of “stakeholder dialogue” as an effective method for building “mutual understanding” with a collective (Foster & Jonker, 2005). In other words, academic constructions of “dialogue” appear progressive, but are still steeped in neoliberal ideology. Although dialogue is not directly articulated within the definition of CSR, it extends from an application of stakeholder theory; within management literature, “dialogue” is used by firms seeking legitimacy and social acceptance (Maen, Lindergreen, & Swaen, 2009, p. 7). “Stakeholder dialogue” is a central tool offered by CSR communication researchers as a means to cultivate two-way business-society relationships and manage stakeholder expectations. Kaptein and van Tulder (2003) suggest that stakeholder dialogue carries the potential to create trust, resolve outstanding issues, and avoid future incidents. From this position, ideal stakeholder dialogue incorporates progressive values such as transparency (Maen,

Lindgreen, & Swaen, 2009), cooperation (Kaptein & van Tulder, 2003), and inclusivity (Pedersen, 2006) in order to support a corporation's objective. Despite the valorization of genuine symmetrical dialogue, the goal often framed by CSR researchers is to strategically employ stakeholder dialogue as a means to avoid litigation stemming from public issues and protests (Golob & Podnar, 2014). Thus, the normative position in CSR communication research tends to ignore the way self-interest drives all corporate activity.

Moreover, when stakeholder dialogue is advocated as a strategic tool, researchers often overlook or underestimate the extent to which power asymmetries determine its efficacy in practice. Heath, Pearce and Shotter (2006, p. 342), argue that dialogue is used “uncritically as a panacea without questioning, for example, its potential to disguise covert agendas or power relations.” Even though Perret (2003) seeks to distinguish information-giving or information-receiving from the two-way process of dialog, his research still advances an uncritical strategy for balanced dialogue in which firms and stakeholders “work together toward mutually acceptable solutions” (p. 385). Similarly, Pederson (2006) also recognizes the practical difficulty in effective participation of stakeholders, yet neglects to critically address the challenges toward achieving two-way dialogue characterized by “inclusion, openness, tolerance, empowerment, and transparency” (pp. 140–42). Moreover, Golob and Podnar's (2014) qualitative study of stakeholder dialogue in practice exposes the deep contrast between corporate and stakeholder expectations regarding motivation for engagement, rules for collaboration, the transparency of information, and the approach to implementation. In the interviews, corporate and NGO respondents convey the inherent contradiction of a mutually



beneficial “win-win” solution, especially when corporate profits are challenged by “subordinate” stakeholder interests (Golob & Podnar, 2014, p. 245). Despite glaring asymmetries of power and the misaligned values, Golob and Podnar reinforce the potency of stakeholder dialogue while signaling the need for more research assessing the cost-benefit ratio of misaligned stakeholder dialogue.

When examining stakeholder dialogue applied to Web 2.0, I draw on Andrejevic’s (2008) critical exploration of Internet interactivity in which user participation is not equated to empowerment. In order to revisit “the binary opposition between complicity and subversive participation” among users (Andrejevic, 2008), I pay close attention to text-based responses to unpack the context around responses. For that matter, my critical approach to examining online engagement as an extension of “stakeholder dialog” or CSR dialogue addresses an understudied area in CSR research. By remaining cognizant of the power imbalances that are reified in the process, as well as the commercial interests that are embedded within the technology, my discourse analysis maps the contested values and hegemonic meanings that may be naturalized during i-CSR engagement. As discussed in chapter 3, Unilever exhibits a unidirectional monologue in order to keep the meaning and form of CSR within its “orbit” (Bakhtin, 1921, 1981); its foremost strategy, presented in the previous chapter, is to employ a deflection strategy to maintain control over the narrative and conversation of “sustainability.” Still, when corporations perforate the faux-public sphere in an effort to build a “brand community” around shared values (Participant 1, 2016), they encounter varying forms of “intended and unintended” interpretations of online corporate discourse

(Participant 6). While Unilever has mostly sidestepped two-way interaction, remaining decidedly unresponsive to negative user reactions, this chapter is focused on the meanings that emerge from “intended” as well as “unintended” interactions with users.

The social media data from the PSBF campaign analyzed here was collected from the @UnileverUSA Twitter page and UnileverUSA Facebook page from November 2013 to December 2017. The codes that were assigned to the selection of relevant, English language comments during my analysis are summarized below. The emotional valence of a comment points to its identification as intended (positive) or unintended (negative).

Table 2	
<i>Open Coding Categories for Social Media Comments by Users</i>	
Level 1 - Emotional valence	Level 2 - Tone and reception
Positive	Elaborate enthusiastic support
Positive	Symbolic agreement/Like/Heart/Retweet/Emoji
Negative	Symbolic disagreement/Dislike/Emoji
Negative	Measured critique
Negative	Elaborate vehement disagreement
Neutral	Unbiased openness or Undecided Ambivalence
Neutral	Sustainability suggestion
Neutral	Sustainability content

While I found that a majority of user posts represented intended forms of engagement, an estimated one-third of all user posts in my collection invoked unintended, negative reactions: an angry emoji, a few words of scornful displeasure, a lengthy scolding, and even a call for resistance. Of these negative responses, many users associate with official

organizations, like SumOfUs, or unofficial networked movements galvanized by hashtags and social media sharing, like #UnileverPollutes and #BoycottDove. Thus, as I present forms of invited interaction such as crowdsourced initiatives, as well as unintended resistance such as the anti-Unilever Kodaikanal #UnileverPollutes campaign, I explain the alarming ways MNCs are leveraging their market power on social media to reconfigure the progressive, collective values at the core of networked culture and participatory democracy.

In the following sections, I find that idealized stakeholder dialogue is untenable online because the asymmetries of power shown to constrain embodied stakeholder interaction also extends to the online faux-public sphere. Through examples of social media engagement, I observe how Unilever maintains discursive control over the meaning of CSR online, even amid counter-currents of resistance. First, the PSBF campaign solicits highly structured forms of engagement, like crowdsourcing and co-creation, encouraging users to act as citizen-prosumers. Interestingly, a significant number of users take the opportunity to participate, produce, and share content in a way that appears to embody collective action; however, in so doing, they serve the corporation's need for a closed narrative around CSR. Next, I select three major currents of "unintended" opposition during the PSBF campaign to show the paradoxical nature of CSR dialogue in action: the SumOfUs palm-oil attack, the Kodaikanal attack, and the Dove advertising attack. Several activist groups launched persistent and visible attacks directly at Unilever and its CSR enabled by the participatory nature of Web 2.0. However,

the manner in which Unilever responded to such critique exposes the subversive purpose of i-CSR discourse as a potent new ethic of neoliberalism.

### **Crowdsourcing Intended Forms of Engagement**

**A brand community.** Two-way communication has a strong tradition in academic inquiry as a complex process of sense-making. From the philosophical tradition, “dialogue” emerges from Plato’s rejection of one-sided rhetoric in favor of a process-driven method to arrive at a reasoned position (Pearson, 1989, cited in Golob & Podnar, 2014). A distinction between intentionality and power relations in both forms of communication is further developed within the context of semiotics, communication, and public relations. With a focus on literary criticism, Bakhtin (1921, 1981) introduces the conception of heteroglossia and how a speaker engaged in dialogue reflects her social position and intentions for the receiver. As technologies for mass communication developed, communication scholarship also focused on the contrast between monologic versus dialogic communication, noting that the former is often driven by self-interest and aimed at persuasion while the latter is concerned with the needs of the participants involved (Johannesen, 1971). With the rise of public relations, a profession specialized in building relationships between an organization (or an individual) and the public, dialogue was conceptualized by researchers as a “system” striving for mutual understanding (Pearson, 1989, cited in Golob & Podnar, 2014).

A vital characteristic of Web 2.0 is the ability to participate in two-way communication between multiple users. Crowdsourcing is a specific online communication practice that allows for an open call for voluntary participation in which

the undertaking of a task requires the participant to bring “work, money, knowledge and/or experience” and “always entails mutual benefit” (Estellés-Arolas & González-Ladrón-de-Guevara, 2012, p. 9). In the same way, academic research guided by stakeholder theory frames the development of CSR initiatives as a “vested interest,” encouraging the framing of CSR activities in ways that are mutually beneficial for corporations and the community (Kotler & Lee, 2005, p. 81). Furthermore, applying stakeholder theory to CSR communication online, Capriotti (2015, p. 372) advocates the use of crowdsourcing “to let stakeholders suggest CSR activities or give their opinion about CSR activities.” Once again, CSR research does not critically examine the way crowdsourcing genuinely shapes managers’ corporate CSR decision-making processes and policy.

The marketing professionals in my study also frame crowdsourcing as a two-way communication method in service of a firm’s vision of neoliberal CSR—profitability through ethical growth. Again, interview data shows the way collective values are overstated while self-interested values are concealed within progressive discourse. According to Participant 3 (2016), crowdsourcing is a strategy that allows companies to assemble a “brand community,” in which the practice of “sharing” can build relationships of loyalty and trust between users and the brand.

People want to see companies being real. We study social media influencers and see that people follow them because they present themselves as real people. They make themselves vulnerable by posting with an authentic voice, frequently. They start up conversation and get people involved in their lives . . . like crowdsourcing ideas for their next recipe. If big companies want to be part of this community of sharing, they need to share quality content . . . When you get a loyal group of followers, you have a brand community . . . And loyalty is a prerequisite to building that trust. (Participant 3, 2016)

Collaboration and reciprocity are understood as values driving engagement within an online community. Thus, when a brand seeks to build community, “loyalty” and “trust” nurtured through online engagement translates into sustained profits for the long-term.

In a separate interview, Participant 6, with a focused career on digital marketing, also emphasizes how the process of “talking and listening” carries a potential for building communal experience and cultural meaning, even when messages are oppositional:

The public wants to come together to share and talk, so in some ways, the conversation economy works out for everyone. Brands can join the conversation or be the topic of conversation. When you’re listening to the public on social media, brands know there are intended and unintended comments they make. Sometimes it’s like “Kumbaya, we all like the same things.” But even if they don’t like what somebody is saying, they are able to use the information on social media to become more relevant, more involved in culture. (Participant 6, 2016)

Here, it is evinced that marketers (and firms) recognize the risks of crowdsourcing; however, the perceived benefits of soliciting and analyzing insightful data are seen to outweigh the overall costs of negative backlash. Engagement around popular and timely topics is understood as rewarding for the users due to its capacity to nourish a desire for common social connection, and for the firm due to its capacity to reflect market trends.

While the participants in my study and CSR researchers adopting stakeholder theory laud collaborative communication forming “brand communities” online, they either overlook or avoid discussing how users produce valuable information “at no cost” (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010, p. 14). The unspoken purpose of engagement is the continued expansion of profits. Thus, crowdsourcing can also be understood as an instrument of “limbic” exploitation, manufacturing and assembling users around cultural values in order to fine-tune a corporation’s strategy for profit growth. In the remainder of

this section, I present examples of the way the PSBF campaign deliberately employs crowdsourcing to create brand communities. Unilever's crowdsourcing technique co-opts and co-creates "sustainability" values, which in turn manage to draw a community of prosumer-citizens willing to act in accordance with the neoliberal spirit.

**Crowdsourcing as co-optation.** Throughout the PSBF campaign, there is strong textual evidence pointing to Unilever's use of crowdsourcing as a communication method to exploit the moral values and collective action of impassioned online communities. At least once a week, Unilever attempted to generate dialogue with influential users by presenting open-ended questions around values-centric topics. Most often, benign questions on Twitter received the intended reactions: symbolic acknowledgment through the "heart" feature and sharing by retweeting. Open-form reactions on Twitter, constrained to 140 characters before 2017 (now up to 280 characters), only offer abbreviated exchange. Unilever presumably prefers this over crowdsourcing, since Facebook comments, with an 8,000-character limit, permit deeper and more complex discussion (Constine, 2011). As a result, unsolicited negative reactions and resistance to Unilever's messages are found mainly on Facebook.

While most questions posed to Twitter users are seemingly unobjectionable and uncontested, Unilever methodically works to build engagement around an abstruse form of "sustainability." For example, during the PSBF launch, Unilever posted a photograph of a boy reading a book with the message: "How many books have you read this summer? Donate old books to give the gift of a good book to others."

#100SummerDays” (@UnileverUSA, August 16, 2014). Recommendations for a range of do-it-yourself, values-centric family activities included a broad discussions of conscious lifestyle choices: “Being green at home is as easy as 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4. What else would you add?” (@UnileverUSA, September 7, 2014). As a steward, Unilever offers friendly encouragement: “Don’t forget about those #brightfuture resolutions. :) How are you making a difference so far?” (@UnileverUSA, January 17, 2015). Users participating positively in these conversations often express agreement using a “heart”, an emoji, or a brief affirmative response. Some questions even invoke play: “Quick! What’s the first word you found in our #ReimagineThat word scramble?” (@UnileverUSA, June 19, 2015). The word-scramble tweet received 67 retweets and nine comments. A “brand community” between the corporation and users is generated as eight participants shared answers to the puzzle. Of the nine comments, Figure 31 shows a selection of intended responses and the only unintended remark generated by the benign question:



Figure 31. An oppositional response to UnileverUSA’s word-scramble tweet.



As a form of small talk, crowdsourcing topics are intended to remain uncontroversial. However, when generic crowdsourcing posts are met with isolated moments of opposition, like the accusation of animal testing by Darcey Mussey (@Yessumyecrad, June 23, 2015), Unilever remained undeterred in its overall engagement strategy. Most often, it ignores the oppositional comment and continues to adopt an encouraging and exemplary position.

Still, most users who did engage with these general prompts displayed forms of intended alignment, responding with a “heart,” retweeting posts, and at times, articulating an agreeable response. These prosumer-citizens are the target constituents for Unilever’s brand community and the prime stakeholders for idealized two-way dialogue. For example, in a partnering crowdsourcing post with @Dove, @UnileverUSA retweeted: “On our 60th birthday, we asked ‘How will you continue to #RaiseTheBeautyBar?’ The responses will inspire you” (@Dove, January 24, 2017). Meticulously crafted, the post directed users to share individual aspirations that contribute to the common good—markedly abstaining from seeking stakeholder input on future CSR projects. Nearly 80 of the 89 text responses embodied an earnest response, receiving a reciprocal response from @Dove:





*Figure 32. Dove responds to supportive tweets.*

In Figure 32, TheAbnormalAbby (@TheAbnormalAbby) and Human Cat (@MovieMonkee) answered the question with sincerity. Here, TheAbnormalAbby's wish for resilience amidst social pressures received a heart and positive reinforcement from @Dove; she was acknowledged as a member of the "Dove community." A different user, Human Cat, wished to extend "equality" to all women and girls and noted the serious impediments preventing "equal access" to the fundamentals of life such as health, education, and safety. In line with the dominant register, the corporate brand @Dove, responding on behalf of the parent company, gives the impression of symmetrical communication and values co-creation (discussed later in this section). After joining the user in honoring "equality," @Dove indicated it was "listening" and integrating the crowdsourced ideas into its CSR programs—a gesture resembling the inclusion, openness, and empowerment needed for participatory dialogue (Pederson, 2006, pp. 140–42). A few days after responding to Human Cat, @Dove validated the participation of positively engaged users and recognized their membership in "our Dove community."

Of the 89 text responses, there are also a handful of critical responses, specifically pressing the corporate actor to stop animal testing. Again, Dove and Unilever were not distracted. For these few responses, they aborted dialogic engagement by simply providing a link to the FAQ page on the CSR section of the Unilever website, which formally and concisely outlined Unilever's commitment to stop animal testing at a future date.

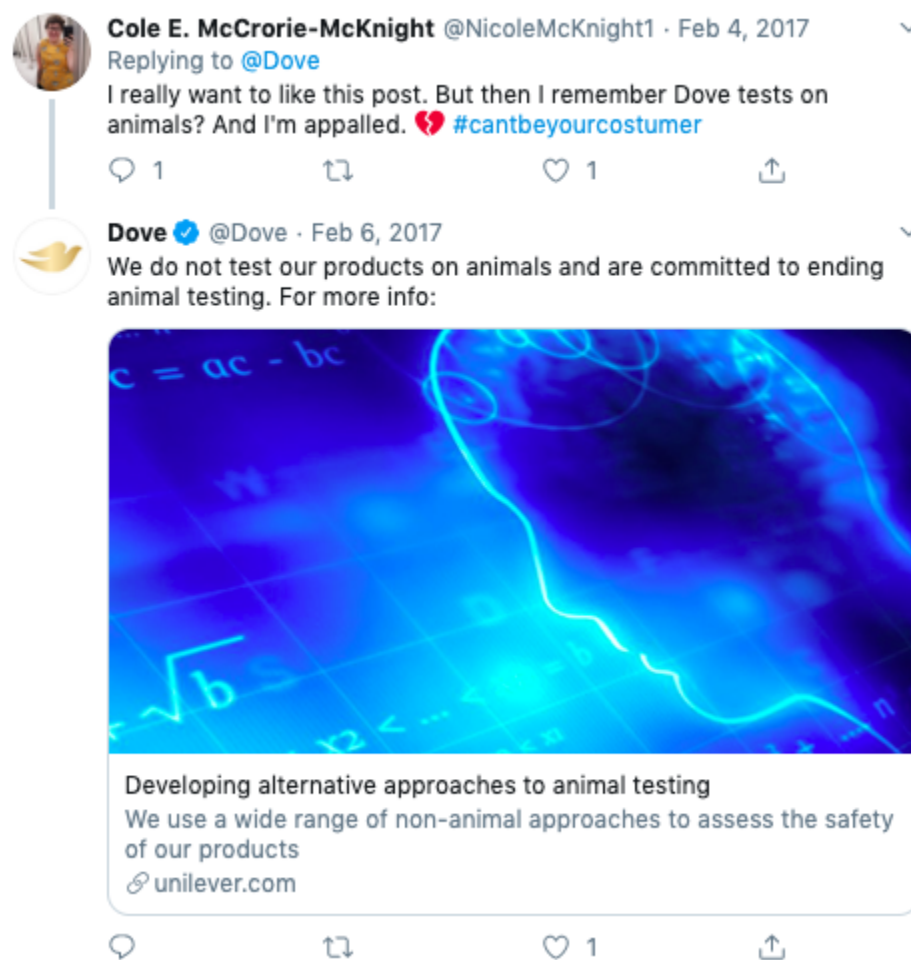


Figure 33. Dove responds to oppositional tweet.

The deeply conflicted user, Cole E. McCrorie-McKnight (@NicoleMcKnight1) expressed opposition in an emotional and personal way. In stark contrast, Dove's response was cold

and authoritative. Directing the user to the closed website, the conversation for Unilever was over.

At times, Unilever’s open-ended crowdsourcing questioning takes place during a pre-scheduled real-time “chat” or #TwitterParty with influential users by way of specialized hashtags. During the PSBF campaign, Unilever coordinated six chats with nonprofit organizations and “digital influencers” (non-media specialists who have amassed a large, loyal social media following, according to Participant 3), revealing a parasitic instinct for popularity and righteousness. For example, during a live chat on the topic of sustainability with social entrepreneurs, Unilever asked: “Q1) What are the biggest challenges to sustainable living in your community? #SustLiving #SocEntChat” (@UnileverUSA, July, 21, 2014). When a user showed an institutional affiliation or high follower count (such as the UN-affiliated University for Peace Centre for Executive Education, @UPEACECentre, which had 3,500 followers as of September 2018), Unilever was sure to respond:

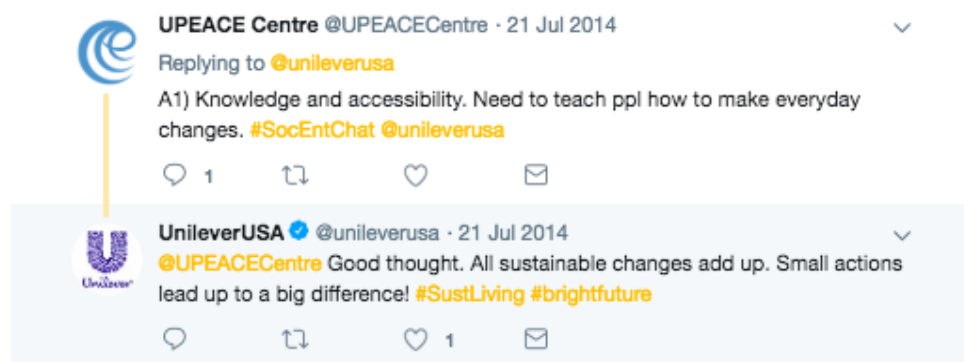


Figure 34. UnileverUSA responds to a tweet from the University for Peace Centre for Executive Education.

As seen in Figure 34, the MNC lunged toward a position of stewardship and association with socially conscious organizations. However, when critical responses interjected, @UnileverUSA, did not engage:



*Figure 35. An oppositional tweet to UnileverUSA.*

The user, Jessica Josephson (@jjj5819), with 171 followers (as of September 2018) challenged Unilever’s commitment to water conservation and its legitimacy to mediate a discussion on sustainability living on the regional level. Throughout the PSBF campaign, Unilever aligned itself with the most virtuous, influential, and “positive” users to build “meaningful” community, yet mostly retreated into silence when held to account.

What value does Unilever accrue from prompting small talk about books, DIY projects, and yearly resolutions, given the risk of public rejection? Crowdsourcing open-ended responses to build relationships with users around individual values, such as self-improvement and charity, provides a means to co-opt trending cultural values for corporate research. With nearly 100 employees qualitatively and quantitatively analyzing social media data, Unilever is becoming “a social pioneer,” mastering the art of “listening” within noisy social spaces online (Cairns, 2015). Social media marketers, studying data created around a brand, offer a convincing appeal for corporations to recognize new opportunities in terms of a “return on relationships”—the (perceived and real) brand value accrued over time through “loyalty, recommendations and

sharing” (Rubin, 2011). Crowdsourcing becomes a method for tapping into swelling focus groups and equipping internal marketing departments with valuable information about lifestyles, values, and beliefs—all free of charge. While analyzing the MNC’s attempts to participate in online sociality, Andrejevic (2010, p. 83) argues for “an explanation of how a theory of exploitation might apply to the conditions under which user-generated content creates (commercial) value.” As Unilever collects seemingly trivial information regarding its primary role as a manufacturer of consumer goods, it systematically exploits users and extracts cultural values that motivate individual decision-making, with the purpose of influencing consumption.

**Crowdsourcing as co-creation.** In addition to co-optation, crowdsourcing enables “co-creation”—a dialogic process in which stakeholders and firms concurrently construct shared meanings and values to develop CSR initiatives (Foster & Jonker, 2005). Co-creation, in CSR research, involves encouraging participation and collaboration with stakeholder groups. According to Participant 3 (2016), co-creation on social media allows MNCs and users to “make memories together and that is what adds to a brand’s value.” From a critical perspective, Klein (2000, p. 29) describes this process starting with a brand “thirstily soaking up cultural ideas and iconography” through co-optation, then “projecting these ideas and images back on the culture as ‘extensions’ of their brands.” When applied to social media, co-creation enables Unilever to exhibit its partnerships with virtuous social actors and users to partake in simulated social change. The following two examples—the Bright Speeches #ShareAMeal online ad and the WE Day event—

show how Unilever manufactured social activism by creating a forum with passionate youth leaders and earnest users. Overall, Unilever's extension of the brand identity through co-creation was successful. In both cases, Unilever maintained control over i-CSR discourse while garnering attention, participation, and mostly positive responses around "shared" values.

The Bright Speeches #ShareAMeal campaign was a cornerstone of the larger PSBF campaign because of its extensive presence online, in comparison to television (Voight, 2015). The central media text was a YouTube video ad called "Bright Speeches," distributed in purchased advertisement spots on content-streaming sites and as a "film" shared virally. On YouTube, it was pushed in front of targeted users, labeled as an advertisement, in between screenings; on Facebook, it was shared as a "film" on the @UnileverUSA page by verified user Josh Duhamel, a Hollywood actor and partner of the PSBF campaign: "To celebrate Universal Children's Day, watch this film from Unilever that celebrates New Leaders fighting hunger in America. #ShareAMeal" (Duhamel 2014).



*Figure 36.* Josh Duhamel shares the Bright Future video on Facebook.

The celebrity-endorsed film post received 89 comments and 7,201 positive symbolic reactions. Within a year, it was shared by 882 Facebook users and viewed over 230,000 times. Also, the ad/film featured a hashtag, #ShareAMeal, which drove viewers to engage with the publicized cause, nonprofit partner, and corporate citizen.

As the parent brand's "first corporate television and digital campaign" (Elliot, 2014), the ad was well received by the marketing industry, despite the blaring co-optation of historic imagery from the civil rights movement and the insidious co-creation of youth activism to construct its own "sustainability." The first 10 seconds feature black-and-white footage of Martin Luther King professing, "I have a dream," and Mohandas Gandhi



declaring, “I regard myself as a soldier of peace.” Superimposed on the screen are the words “Their speeches changed the world” (Carey, 2014). The next clip shows a tractor adding to what seems to be a pile of surplus squash with the words, “Today we have new challenges.” Immediately the scene cuts to a setting with charred debris, a dwindling flame, and a silhouette of a stranded and destitute boy peering into the hazy gray distance. The next scene begins with applause and a girl walking to the center of the stage. The words “We need new speeches” appear on screen. The transition introduces a new voice speaking, declaring, “No person should face the indignity and injustice of digging through the trashcan to find their next meal.” When the boy’s face appears in the frame, he is identified on screen as “Elijah King, a hunger activist.” The next scene spotlights “Meesha Gandhi, environmentalist,” a girl with an Indian accent, saying, “Be the change you want to see in the world today.” Two more youth volunteers focusing on poverty and education in the developing world are briefly depicted. The last scene introduces a young girl on a stage as “Grace Jones, school influencer” on the screen. As the camera closes in on her profile, a streaming light in the top right corner grows brighter as the girl articulates, in a British accent, “We waste tons and tons of food on a daily basis. Take that choice that you have. Don’t let it slip through your fingers. We need to turn our feeling into action.” Against a golden horizon and an uplifting piano melody, the words “Follow new leaders. Unilever is turning their feelings into action” appear on screen, with a logo denoting Unilever’s partnership with the organization Feeding America to help end child hunger. Feeding America is among the most influential

nonprofit organizations in the US, reporting \$2.7 billion in total public support and revenues in 2017 (Feeding America, 2017).

At the outset, the juxtaposition of surplus squash and smoldering pollution with the voices of historic social leaders presents the modern dilemma from a particularly self-serving lens—the “old” problem of civil rights is now replaced with a “new” problem of pollution. In fact, the images signal the causes of pollution narrowly, as food waste and consumer excess. While environmentalist movements focusing on ethical consumption recognize both as issues, Unilever does not acknowledge the role of industrial manufacturing in environmental degradation and waste. The landscapes in the ad lack any association to corporate environmental degradation. Furthermore, at the end of the ad, Unilever promotes its identity by projecting the logos of its select “sustainability” brands and the partnering nonprofit organization, Feeding America: an intentional projection of CSR values, rather than its entire brand portfolio, and a deliberate showcasing of its affiliation with nonprofit activity. Although a marketing executive at Unilever said that the ads would be evaluated on “how well they advance its corporate reputation as well as how much they do to advance hunger relief” (Neff, 2014), Unilever does not publish an assessment of its efforts on child hunger in the US. Research has shown that Unilever donated 30 million meals over five years to Feeding America’s food pantries (Neff, 2014)—however, this amount appears insignificant with respect to its global advertising budget. If Unilever’s intention was to feed the hungry, it could have spent this money directly on food pantries rather than on advertising.

The tactical selection of youth activists instead of adult leaders is also purposeful. As one of the oldest MNCs, Unilever seeks to cultivate loyalty among the next generation of what CSR considers key “stakeholders”—consumers, employees, and social influencers. By casting youth leaders—particularly those who coincidentally share the last names of the historic figures King and Gandhi—Unilever conjures a feeling of hope as they echo a call for moral action to overcome social turmoil. The Unilever logo at the end of their speeches implies the corporation’s guardianship, amplifying their voices and providing a platform to these budding leaders. This depiction of Unilever co-creating social activism and civic duty with youth leaders successfully captured attention on social media in support of the MNC’s version of progressive social change. Many users were motivated to join the youth activism platform constructed by Unilever and participate in a plea to motivate the brand community to “listen” and “follow” the children—and, by proxy, Unilever.



**Anna Maria Casoria Hartman** very powerful to me.

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · 3y



**Corrie Oskam** Inspiring Josh.

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · 3y



**Josephine Sholobela** Good job

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · 3y



**Marcia Queen** Spend less of our money for war and more for humanitarian purposes.

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · 3y

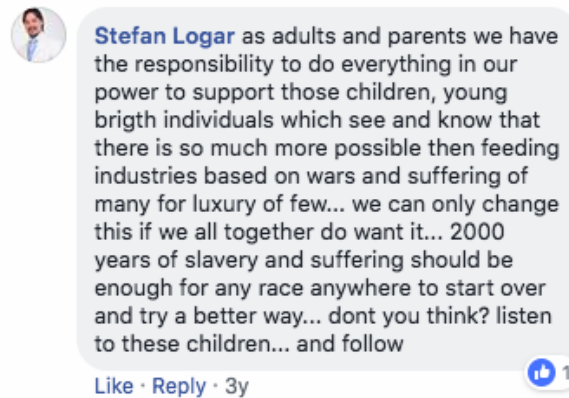


Figure 37. Discussion in Unilever's Facebook brand community.

Stefan Logar's appeal reflects a common negotiated position which presents a contested justification for social inequality while ultimately adopting Unilever's intended message of supporting children. On the one hand, the user blamed economic injustice and the wealth gap on policies of capitalist exploitation; paradoxically, he did so without disputing the hegemonic role of corporate actors. Many of the negotiated positions coded in my study ultimately lean toward the MNC's intended position.

The potency of revolutionary words by young activists and exemplary stewardship by Unilever energized users to join the call for collective action and circulate the hashtag.



Figure 38. Unilever responds to a supportive user on Facebook.

Here, Jen Wilson Faust advocates values of compassion and kindness and carries out Unilever's intended awareness campaign by tagging #ShareAMeal. On such viral posts, Unilever makes a concerted effort to team up with its advocates, in this case cheering, "You speak the truth, Jen!"

Unilever utilized the jetstream of attention from viral posts by keeping the issue of child hunger and hashtag #ShareAMeal in play for several weeks, and did so again in subsequent years. The PSBF campaign reproduced a similar opportunity for co-creation in November 2015 and November 2016. The Unilever manager leading the partnership with Feeding America said in an interview, "For every action taken on social—whether it is a share of a personal throwback [photograph], participation in the #ShareAMeal challenge we're hosting on Flipagram, or simply a like on one of ours—we'll donate one meal" (Ellett, 2016). This is an ingenious way to get social media users to engage with the campaign. This call for engagement—crowdsourcing user photographs and retweeting the corporate post—creates an image of the company driving positive change. It is a corporate-initiated, corporate-driven social movement.

Over the next two years, Unilever exploited the collective value of images of youth activism directed toward alleviating child hunger first introduced in the Bright Speeches ad in 2014. As seen in the #ShareAMeal campaign image published in *Forbes* (Ellett, 2016) and circulated on Twitter (@GiantEagle, November 9, 2016):



*Figure 39. A #ShareAMeal campaign image on Twitter.*

In this image, Unilever framed the issue of poverty in terms of child hunger. It depicts harrowing statistics—“1 in 6 children in America face hunger”—with a winsome child resembling the fictional character Oliver Twist with his iconic bowl. It takes the cruel treatment of orphan children in mid-19th-century England in Charles Dickens’s novel and turns it into a story of what an enlightened corporation in the 21st century can do.

Unilever discovered a lucrative formula for composing a high-engagement post: a moral issue exempted from corporate culpability, an instrumental partnership with a well-established nonprofit, and a hashtag for organizing participation.

Endorsements from influential celebrities also ramp up participation from prosumer-citizens, especially when given an opportunity to take virtual action with material consequences. For instance, US-based celebrity Nicole Richie (@nicolerichie), amplified the call for co-creation through engagement on Twitter: “Joining @Unilever to #ShareAMeal! Each RT/LIKE=1 meal donated @FeedingAmerica. Learn more @UnileverUSA” (NicoleRichie, November 11, 2015). This post received 256 retweets and 657 hearts, and 27 out of the 30 comments were coded as positive. In defense of engaged users sharing Richie’s post, the campaign did construct a compelling opportunity

for generating moral capital without much effort—Unilever donated one meal for each positive interaction. While prosumer-citizens participating in #ShareAMeal may have reaped the satisfaction of limbic resonance from action contributing to a shared interest in progressive change, they simultaneously amplified the dominant meanings of neoliberal i-CSR discourse.

**Crowdsourcing youth activism.** Crowdsourcing as both co-optation and co-creation is also exemplified in Unilever’s #GrowWithUs (also an example of “strategic storytelling,” discussed in chapter 3) and WE Day social media discussions. Such discussions reflect a communicative process in which the user gains the satisfaction of participation, acceptance, and online visibility through brand association, while Unilever cultivates its return on relationships. Below, I detail the WE Day event and its extended online posts (understood to be part of the PSBF campaign) and reveals Unilever’s method for using crowdsourcing to co-opt and co-create youth identities for its own ends.

In 2014, the first year of PSBF’s launch, Unilever joined a group of “sustainable brands” as a sponsor for California’s first WE Day celebration of youth change-makers. The WE Charity is described as a cause-agnostic movement by its founders, who imagine it as an extension of their international charity Free The Children, in which young students are given the “tools to change the world” (WE, n.d.). The nonprofit organization’s annual event, WE Day, launched in 2007, is a stadium-sized youth concert to celebrate the power of service—or as Unilever put it on Facebook, “It’s not just a show. It’s a movement of young global citizens coming together to change the

world” (UnileverUSA, August 17, 2015). Geared toward youth over 12, WE Day is celebrated in 14 cities across the US, UK, and Canada. Tickets are free, but students can only claim them by reporting their service activities. The event is webcast to online users; since 2015, it has also been televised. Globally, WE Day brings together over 100,000 students a year; the WE Movement Facebook page ranks among the top nonprofit pages on social media, with nearly 3 million followers (as of October 2019).

Unilever’s i-CSR discourse was most effective during and shortly after the annual WE Day celebration. Its Facebook activity around WE Day (in 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017) received the highest positive engagement insights compared to other posts collected during my study. WE Day posts earn thousands of likes, hundreds of shares, and mostly praiseworthy comments. Nearly all integrate an opportunity for users to share their wishes for a bright future using the hashtag. For instance, the 55-second video “We Day California Kids Share their Wishes for a #BrightFuture,” posted to Unilever’s Facebook almost three weeks after the first hosted WE Day 2014 received 1,131 likes, 40 comments, and 145 shares (Unilever, May 9, 2014). Starting with the wishes of Gina Boswell, Executive Vice President of Personal Care Marketing at Unilever North America, the video collected the rosy visions of young WE Day attendees wearing bright blue T-shirts with the words “Bring out the good” on the front. The last screen featured a standardized call for WE Day engagement: “Share your vision for a #BrightFuture” with the URL [www.projectsunlight.us](http://www.projectsunlight.us). Although Unilever’s support of WE Day is to “recognize and encourage” the efforts of young leaders, the high social media engagement measures show WE Day’s potency as a “sustainability” spectacle (Unilever,



February 22, 2016). Observing the power of persuasive images in reflecting and producing an illusion of reality, Debord (1977) writes: “The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.” Similarly, the production and high engagement around WE Day manufactures an image of an active brand community and its valiant corporate leader.

Most of the WE Day 2014 imagery included panoramic views of the stadium event, which reported to convene over 20,000 youth participants in California. Photos and videos of the participants and award winners sharing inspiring messages to end child hunger, poverty, and violence appear across social media channels (Unilever, April 14, 2014) and the PSBF website.



*Figure 40.* The first WE Day sponsored by Unilever in 2014.

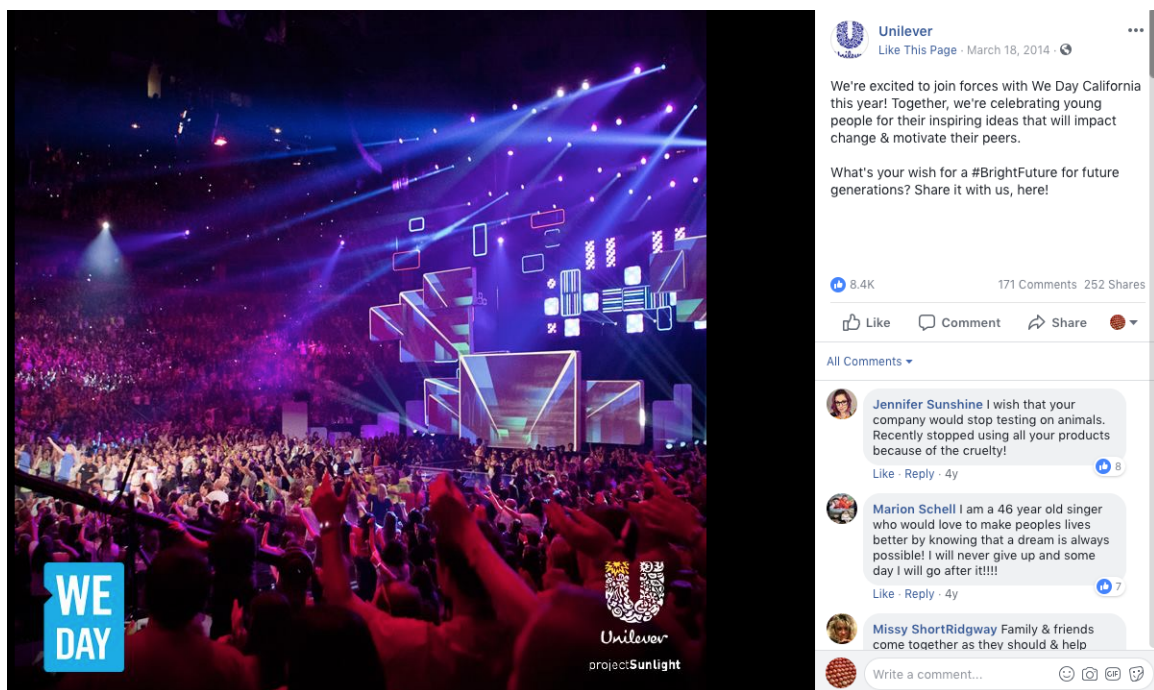
These images magnified Unilever's self-portrait as a socially responsible leader and patron of youth activism. Co-sponsoring WE Day and the Unilever Project Sunlight Bright Future Grant allowed the corporation to literally and figuratively share the stage and spotlight with youth leaders. As described by Klein (2000), this form of cultural expansionism using school and community events is used to make "the logo the central focus of everything it touches." The young winners accepted the award and shared an inspirational message as a Unilever logo hung behind them on the stage. In a press release marking Project Sunlight's first anniversary on Universal Children's Day, Unilever shared its intent to support youth leaders:

People have always looked to adult leaders as inspiration for change. But when they are no longer around, who will we listen to then? We need to nurture a new generation of young leaders who, with their endless optimism and enthusiasm, will shape our world for the future . . . We have been inspired by eight children in particular who are tackling age-old problems in their own communities. People like Rene in Brazil who, with Unilever Project Sunlight's help, is creating a greater awareness of water and hygiene issues, and Kylee in the US who is providing food to almost 170 children each week. And they are doing it in ways we couldn't have previously imagined. (Unilever, 2014, November 20)

Youth leaders exemplify morality, creativity, and promise—valuable traits within the Do-Good Spirit. By naming individual activists and featuring their work on the community level, Unilever gained credibility as a social leader and facilitator of grassroots change. It also co-opted activism, channeling it in directions that don't challenge corporations and the capitalist priorities that produce the problems these activists seek to alleviate. The implication of corporate sponsored community events is that "we become collectively convinced not that corporations are hitching a ride on our cultural and communal

activities, but that creativity and congregation would be impossible without their generosity” (Savan cited in Klein, 2000).

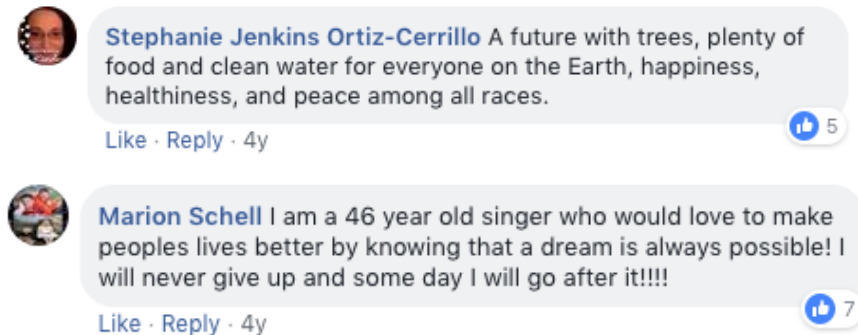
Before Unilever’s first WE Day 2014, it solicited general responses from the online public: “We’re excited to join forces with WE Day California this year! Together, we’re celebrating young people for their inspiring idea that will impact change and motivate their peers. What’s your wish for a #BrightFuture for future generations? Share with us here!” (Unilever, March 18, 2014).



*Figure 41.* Unilever announces support for WE Day on Facebook.  
(Unilever, March 18, 2014).

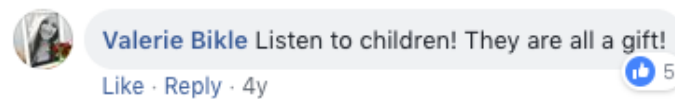
This post generated 171 Facebook user comments in one week and accumulated 252 shares and 8.4K likes. Overall, 120 comments (70%) were positive, responding directly and sincerely to Unilever’s question. By prompting users to fantasize about a utopian future, Unilever collected progressive dreams, like Stephanie Jenkins Ortiz-Cerrillo’s

wish for environmental protection and universal standards of living, as well as more personal dreams, like those of Marion Schell:



*Figure 42.* Users respond to Unilever's Facebook post.

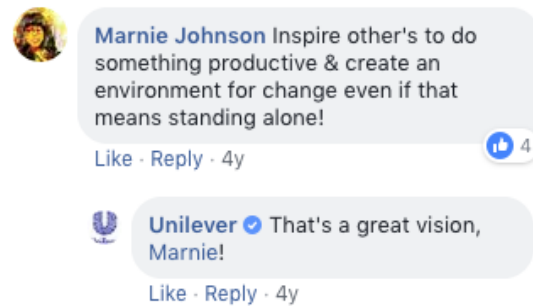
Positive responses also emanated exuberance in response to youth activism contributing to the common good:



*Figure 43.* Valerie Bikle responds positively to Unilever's WE Day post.

Posts that expressed enthusiasm for civic contribution were influential and often received affirmation from the brand community and corporation:



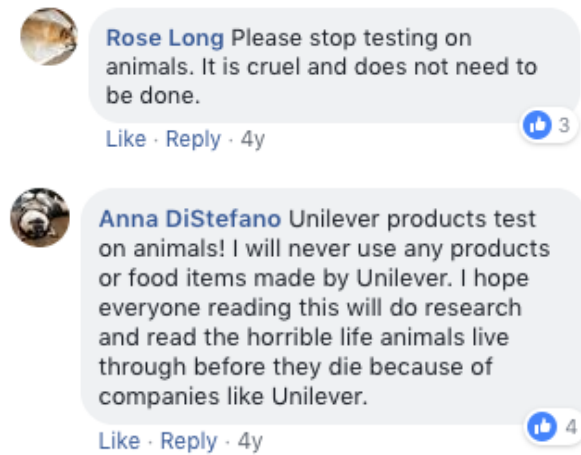


*Figure 44.* Unilever responds to positive comments from users on Facebook.

Each of the users above received four likes for their calls for inspiration and proactivity. For many of the responses encoded in this dominant register, Unilever presents its support and implied collaboration with the user. By hosting an open call for responses, Unilever assumed that agreeable and passionate users would dominate the discussion and fuel the co-creation of values for social progress. When the positive comment was general enough and aligned with the neoliberal version of sustainability, Unilever endorsed the ideological frame applied to the discourse.

However, not all users answered the crowdsourced question with Unilever's intended vision of utopian peace, moral righteousness, and universal prosperity. On this post, I coded 37 negative comments (22%) expressing suspicion and alleging corporate malpractice. Most of the oppositional responders pointed to public accusations of animal testing and sourcing palm oil from protected rainforests.





*Figure 45.* Oppositional Facebook comments about Unilever’s animal testing practices.

Many of oppositional users respectfully appealed the corporation to refrain from inhumane activity, like Rose Long and Jennifer Sunshine. Several, like Anna DiStefano, directly addressed the brand community with a reference to “research” and a plea to reassess Unilever’s construction of sustainability. Although these users received several “likes” from the brand community, Unilever did not respond to most negative comments, posted by seemingly disparate individuals without a group affiliation.

An important pattern is the repeated occurrence of a link to a page about Unilever on the website of SumOfUs, an activist organization collecting online signatures for a petition to stop Unilever’s most egregious lapses. Although negative posts will be treated in more depth in the following section, it is important to note that on this particular post, several oppositional users share links to an active SumOfUs petition to stop the deforestation of Southeast Asian rainforests, which is depleting the population of endangered orangutans. Although Unilever does not respond to all of the oppositional comments by SumOfUs supporters, it selects six and replies with an automated response:

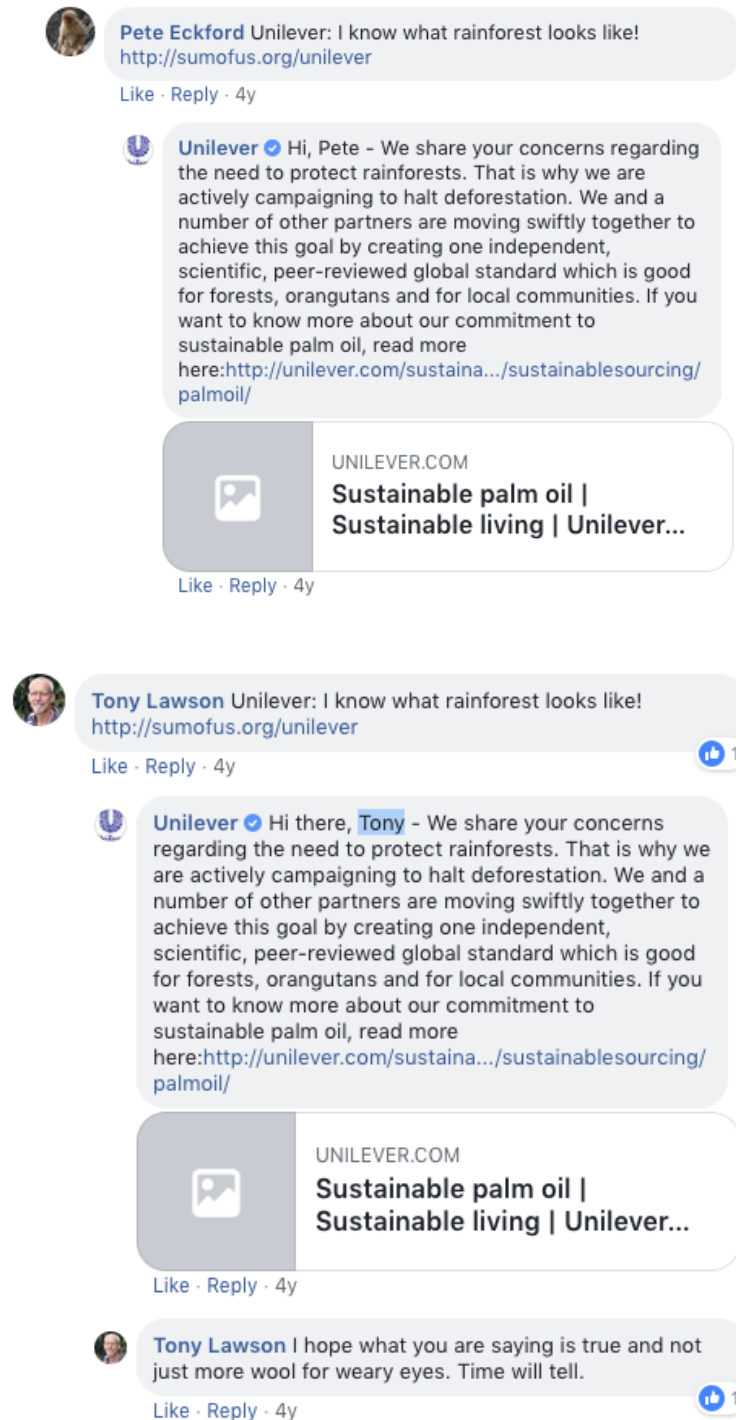


Figure 46. Unilever's templated response to oppositional comments from SumOfUs-affiliated users.

While still presenting a cordial tone, Unilever abandons its congeniality for a sterile, templated response with a link to its CSR section on the corporate website.

In under 2,000 words, the linked CSR page describes Unilever's self-defined "Sustainable Palm Oil Policy" and its development of the intragovernmental body Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, setting standards for the palm oil industry with "growers and buyers, as well as mill operators, commodity traders, nonprofit environmental and social groups, and other influential organisations" (Unilever, 2019g). As discussed in chapter 3, the corporate website is fixed and closed, signaling Unilever's desire for control over i-CSR discourse. After Tony Lawson, a resistant user, expresses his skepticism to the i-CSR discourse on the corporate website, Unilever immediately disengages and abandons its publicized commitment to stakeholder dialog. The corporation's treatment of unintended comments reveals its underlying strategy for stifling authentic dialogue in order to control the meaning of sustainability and social change. From this example, and others discussed in the following section, the surge of positive comments to PSBF posts still overrides the isolated criticism tacked onto posts with high engagement statistics.

Unilever obfuscates ethical profit-making by assuming guardianship for the material actions of youth activists. In fact, using children and youth to boost social media engagement is a deceptive loophole to skirt advertising standards set up to protect children from harmful advertising messages. On the one hand, the CSR section on the Unilever corporate website clearly states its commitment not to "exploit a child's imagination or inexperience" and "only use cartoon characters and celebrities on and in association with products that meet Unilever's Highest Nutritional Standards" (Unilever, May 13, 2016). It also declares Unilever's adherence to the International Chamber of



Commerce code for legality, decency, honesty, and truthfulness and its voluntary pledge to uphold self-defined standards for advertising and marketing for children under age 12. Although this may appear progressive, Bright Speeches/#ShareAMeal and WE Day are an insidious form of advertising, using i-CSR discourse to “inspire” impressionable youth around a neoliberal form of sustainability. While it is difficult to determine the extent of direct teenage interactivity on Facebook and Twitter, the overall strong positive engagement around youth activism reveals the power of moral capital.

Overall, by constructing crowdsourcing opportunities around WE Day posts, Unilever expands its brand-community engagement and successfully yields a strong positive response from users. The dialogue it has constructed around WE Day provides Unilever a valuable opportunity to co-create ideals of global citizenship with enthusiastic and potentially active users. It successfully utilizes crowdsourcing to generate a community of “sustainability” yea-sayers by co-opting enthusiasm and co-creating “sustainability” activity that mimics social activism. Unilever intends to cultivate social trust among its brand community by positioning itself as a moral and ethical guardian of the common good. By participating using the corporation’s intended register, a brand community of citizen-prosumers begins to naturalize the role of the MNC—a moral agent ushering in social progress while harmlessly earning profits.

### **Unintended Resistance to I-CSR Discourse**

**Identifying oppositional users.** Although most Unilever posts garner the intended agreeable forms of engagement presented in the last section, Unilever’s i-CSR

discourse also generates unintended reactions within the faux-public sphere. The negative responses that provide the crux of my analysis in this section are text-based comments on Facebook. Symbolic negative responses to a post are not available on Twitter; however, an option for symbolic disagreement, depicted by a red-faced angry emoji, became available on Facebook in October 2015 (Oremus, 2016). In the PSBF data collected from 2013 to 2017, the charges against Unilever posted in social media comments include its unlawfully sourced palm oil from protected forests in Indonesia; its creation of a Business Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, defining “sustainable” procurement broadly for the industry; its membership in pro-Transatlantic Trade Investment Partnership (TTIP) lobby group FoodDrinkEurope, loosening sustainability standards on imports and exports; its unfair labor practices and human rights violations in Vietnamese factories; its price increases after the Brexit-fueled devaluation of the British pound; its sexist and pigment-biased advertising campaigns for skin-lightening creams in Asia; mercury poisoning at its thermometer factory in Kodaikanal, India; and its racist and sexist Dove advertising campaign. The ongoing investigations by activist organizations interrogating Unilever’s supply chain, labor conditions, manufacturing, and distribution indicate continued irresponsibility in its global operations. Here I focus on explaining the role of oppositional discourse in resisting and shaping i-CSR discourse.

While it was challenging to systematize the various manifestations of text-based resistance dispersed throughout the PSBF campaign, I have uncovered a few significant patterns among oppositional users. I found that there are two types of oppositional users. The first, which constitutes the majority, acts independently. The second is associated

with a group or organization that carries out an organized attack against the MNC. At times, these organized attacks are launched by recognized activist organizations; however, there are also instances of informal cohorts of resisters drawing attention to the hypocrisy of i-CSR discourse, using social media techniques to maximize viral distribution. In what follows, I show how individuals and groups resist but also highlight the formidable challenges that resisters face when they go up against a hegemonic discourse.

**Opposition by independent users.** In 2016, Unilever posted an image of two children hugging on Facebook with the words, “A year ago Love Has No Labels sparked a movement to embrace diversity. Take a look at some of the amazing progress we have made. #LoveHasNoLabels” (Unilever, 2016, February 11).

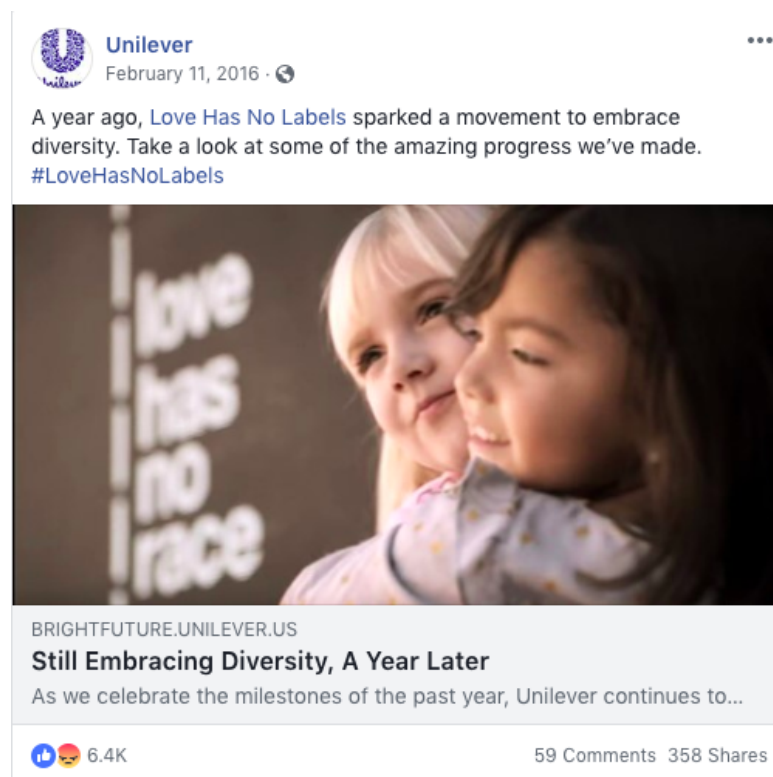


Figure 47. Anniversary #LoveHasNoLabels post on Facebook.

The #LoveHasNoLabels hashtag was produced by the Ad Council for a campaign to generate an uncontroversial form of “diversity and inclusion.” The Ad Council was founded in 1941 as a nonprofit organization coordinating the advertising industry to drum up public support for World War I (Ad Council, 2018). Today, the organization identifies as a “non-commercial, non-denominational, non-partisan” group that produces public service advertisements with the pro bono services of advertising agencies and distributes them across 33,000 media outlets to foster public support and action (Ad Council). The #LoveHasNoLabels campaign, launched on Valentine's Day, February 14, 2015, was conceived as a “movement to promote acceptance and inclusion of all people across race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age and ability” (lovehasnolabels.com). The campaign’s debut video was the “2nd most viewed video on Facebook in 2015;” set in an unnamed cosmopolitan city square, the video showed a group of visually “diverse” volunteers stepping behind an enlarged X-ray screen to exemplify the universality of skeletons (Unilever, 2016, March 2). It is important to note that the campaign’s message to “rethink bias” by pairing individuals that visually conform to gender, race, age, and sexual orientation stereotypes is superficial.

The campaign’s popularity and broad construction of diversity aligned with Unilever’s strategy for intended engagement. For example, in Figure 44, Unilever’s celebration of the campaign’s anniversary included a link to the popular viral video which helped draw attention to Unilever’s Facebook page. The post received 6,409 likes, 4 angry emojis, 358 shares, and 59 comments. The photo, showing a brown and white girl

in an embrace, was linked to a page on the corporate website that detailed Unilever's yearlong participation:

Since Unilever joined forces with The Ad Council last year for Love Has No Labels, the world has seen tremendous strides toward equality. Perhaps the most celebrated achievement was the US Supreme Court's historic legalization of same-sex marriage, which gave millions of Americans the equal rights and dignity they deserve. But there were other equally important milestones as well, especially in gender equality and advancement in transgender visibility . . . Even with the progress we've made, there's still more to be done: approximately one-in-five adults still report that they themselves are prejudiced or discriminatory.

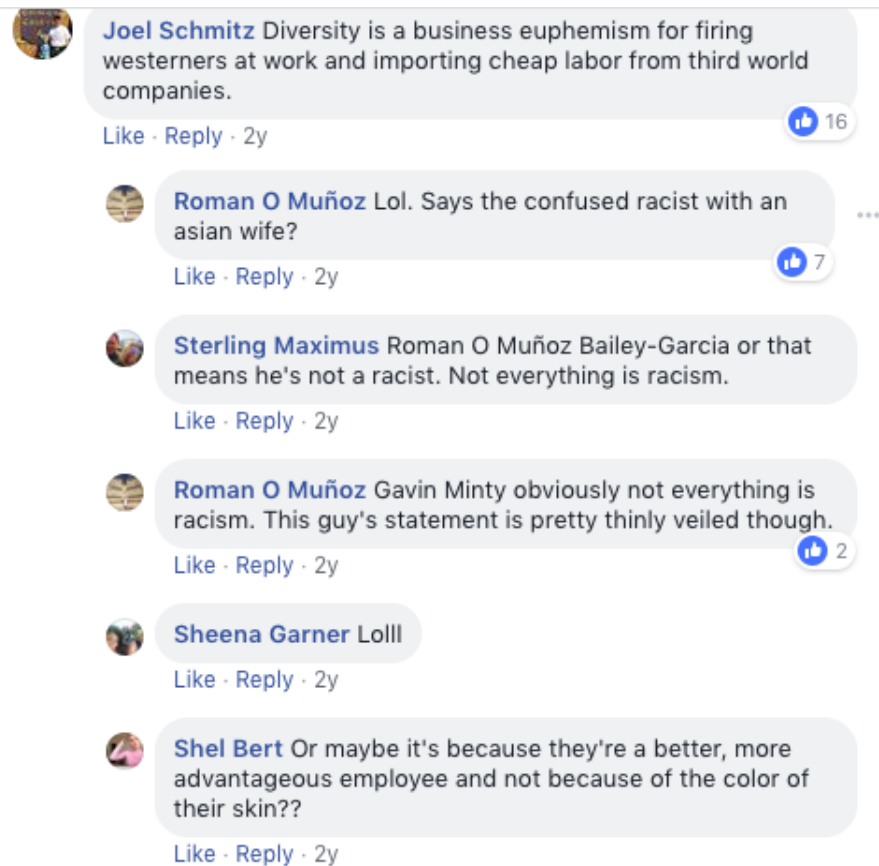
Here, the MNC has co-opted progressive the values of diversity, equality, and inclusion for its self-serving construction its do-good brand identity. Since the Love Has No Labels campaign does not represent substantive engagement with the complex political and economic issues that must be addressed to create any meaningful efforts towards social inclusion, it was compatible with Unilever's vacuous construction of diversity.

The #LoveHasNoLabels Facebook post in 2016 received 59 comments, of which 19 (32%) were oppositional. Of these negative comments, thirteen users appeared to engage in finger-wagging without any overt affiliation to a group or movement. The majority of negative charges of misconduct were produced by individual users acting independently. For example, these users insert their disdain for publicly recognized lapses as follows:



*Figure 48.* Oppositional comments from users on a #LoveHasNoLabels Facebook post.

These users passionately attack Unilever’s animal testing, pollution, morality, outsourcing, and overall CSR hypocrisy. Often, independent resistant comments are posted without any indirect relevance to the corporate post and span a range of misdeeds. Concise critical comments made by independent users in the PSBF share a tone of disgust and even receive positive reinforcement from the community, such as the like symbol marked on Alastair McTavish’s comment. There are times when individual users are able to draw stronger engagement from the community. For instance, Joel Schmitz decodes the “diversity” discourse constructed by Unilever from an oppositional position. His critique of overseas outsourcing and cost savings from lower wages points to a critique of neoliberal globalization. His negative comment received 16 likes and five comments from the brand community.



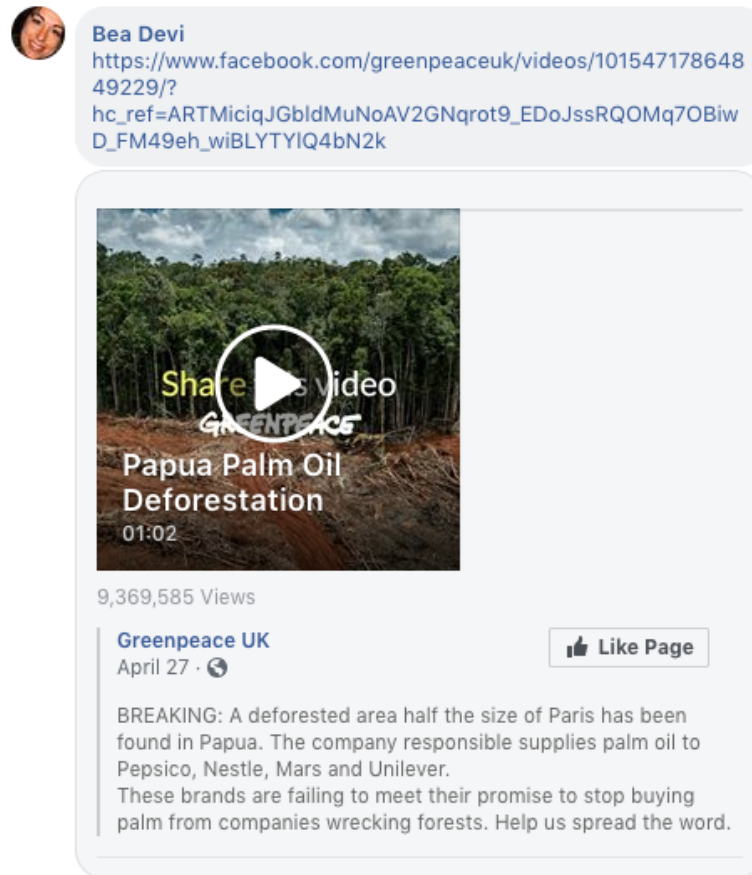
*Figure 49.* Brand-community users respond to oppositional comments on Facebook.

The threaded discussion represents a negotiation of meanings around i-CSR discourse, challenging conceptions of race and ethnicity in the workplace. The discussion opens up an opportunity for critical reevaluation of “diversity in business” by users in the brand community. However, the hegemonic meanings still preside. When another user, Roman O Muñoz, quickly undermines the critical charge against Unilever, he is encouraged, receiving seven likes on his comment. Aiming to weaken the credibility of the oppositional user, he points out Joel Schmitz’s marriage—likely deduced from the user’s profile picture at the time, depicting an interracial couple—as an example of the same form of labor exploitation as Unilever. Other users participating in the discussion, like Sheena Garner and Shel Bert, do not stand in direct opposition to Unilever. In fact, Shel

Bert's comment can be understood as an indirect alignment with Unilever in support of corporate outsourcing, not as a cost-saving measure but as a way to hire a "better" employee. Although Unilever does not weigh in, its loyal brand-community members step in to weaken the opposition and indirectly defend the corporation. Thus, the challenges faced by critics on the Unilever Facebook page are scattered responses across a wide range of corporate misdeeds and the pack of positive brand-community users policing the discourse in favor of Unilever. And even though Unilever publicizes its effort to "expand the conversation" around inclusion and diversity (Unilever), it retreats to its strategy of silence when confronted.

**Opposition by affiliated users.** Some users present an affiliation with an activist organization or online movement, particularly using links to organization petitions, hashtags, and repeated images. In fact, hundreds of users during the PSBF campaign extended the efforts of formally recognized activist organizations, like Greenpeace, by sharing links to investigative reports online (Unilever, March 29, 2018).





*Figure 50.* User Bea Devi shares a link to a Greenpeace report about Unilever’s palm-oil suppliers.

Critical users like Bea Devi, whose response links to a Greenpeace report exposing deforestation and irresponsible palm oil sales, use the comments section to circulate resistant discourse. A growing list of corporate watchdog groups, environmentalist groups, and human rights organizations are actively investigating and exposing Unilever for its malpractice on social media. For example, the Organic Consumers Association’s (2017) report exposes toxic pesticides in Ben & Jerry’s “natural” and “sustainable” products; Rainforest Action Network’s (2018) study reassesses Unilever’s procurement of unsustainable palm oil from noncompliant suppliers; and Amnesty International’s (2016) study showing Unilever’s continued child labor exploitation. Yet, of the in-depth activist

reports posted in Unilever's Facebook and Twitter comments, few receive strong engagement from the brand community. Moreover, other critical stakeholder groups, such as the undercover Dutch journalists who interrogated Unilever's featured "landmark" farmers in Belgium, palm oil suppliers in Indonesia, and the legitimacy of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, appear not to engage Unilever's i-CSR discourse directly (Dupont-Nivet, 2017).

On the other hand, data collected from comments on the Unilever Facebook account does indicate that oppositional users who project an affiliation with SumOfUs, a nonprofit organization, receive high engagement from the brand community. SumOfUs is an online global consumer-watchdog activist organization "fighting for people over profits" by generating awareness campaigns and collecting names for petitions. Oppositional users frequently post links to SumOfUs petitions. During the PSBF campaign, there were three active SumOfUs petitions which collected about 200,000 email addresses: a petition to stop greenwashing and deforestation in Southeast Asia for palm oil (SumOfUs, 2016), one against Unilever's participation in TTIP (SumOfUs, 2017), and one to clean up the mercury poisoning in Kodaikanal (SumOfUs, 2018). These organized attacks successfully shifted focus away from the hegemonic discourse by repeating a common message. In the WE Day example in the previous section, resistant users cut and pasted a templated message: "Unilever: I know what rainforests look like," with a link to the SumOfUs petition.



*Figure 51.* An organized attack by SumOfUs-affiliated users.

The linked petition’s headline reads: “This company wants to call killing orangutans ‘sustainable’: ‘Greenwashing’ is too nice a word for this” (SumOfUs, 2016). This particular petition, appeared frequently in Facebook comments and urged Unilever to withdraw from a study attempting to redefine the measure of “high carbon stock” rainforests that would require protection from production. Since the WE Day posts received high engagement statistics, Unilever responded to a handful of oppositional users using an automated response, as detailed in the previous section. On the linked website, Unilever details its role in founding the Business Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, which claims to establish “the only globally recognised certification standard, to help drive sustainable production” of palm oil (Unilever 2019d). Yet, oppositional discourse findings show that the Roundtable is “a shield which deflects greater scrutiny” so that “palm oil companies can continue to clear land with impunity, as long as the symbolic pieces of High Conservation Value remain untouched” (Dupont-Nivet, 2017). Within the controlled space of its website, two-way communication and oppositional discourse are barred. However, the frequency of this comment on social media promoted

unified resistance around one case of corporate malpractice offering users an opportunity to amplify critical discourse.

**The #UnileverPollutes attack.** During the PSBF campaign, the oppositional discourse generated by the #UnileverPollutes attack exemplifies the strength of a cohesive cause. This decentralized social media attack by grassroots activists in India received the most visible global media attention of any attack in my study. The activists delivered an exacting and focused challenge to the Do-Good Spirit.

On July 30, 2015, Jhatkaa, a grassroots organization based in Bangalore, uploaded a music video on YouTube titled “Kodaikanal Won’t” featuring a feisty Chennai-born rapper, Sofia Ashraf, confronting Unilever’s hypocrisy in India. The organization shared the link to the video on Twitter, using the hashtag #UnileverPollutes (@Jhatkaa, 2015):



*Figure 52.* Jhatkaa’s tweet announcing the “Kodaikanal Won’t” video.

In the video, the punchy hook, “Kodaikanal won’t step down until you make amends now” is set to the chart-topping song “Anaconda” by a popular US artist, Nicki Minaj. Against the backdrop of Unilever’s thermometer factory amid the Kodaikanal Wildlife

Sanctuary in southern India, Ashraf looks squarely into the camera and exposes Unilever’s failure to clean up the 1.3 tons of toxic mercury waste it discharged in 2001 (Chennai Solidarity Group et al., 2018). In under three minutes, the video campaign provides an overview of Unilever’s failure, mounting concerns of human rights breaches, and ongoing contamination of the environment for over a decade. At the end of the video, users are asked to sign an online petition hosted by Kodaimercury.org to force Unilever to take responsible action immediately.

According to a company specializing in social media analysis for communication and PR specialists, engagement with the music video was low in the hours immediately after its debut (Parsons, 2015). Jhatkaa’s Twitter activity indicates that the video was gaining momentum on Reddit. However, when Nicki Minaj retweeted *XXL* magazine’s link to the “Kodaikanal Won’t” video to her 20 million followers, commenting, “Wow,” there was a sudden spike in engagement (@NickiMinaj, 2015).



Figure 53. Nicki Minaj retweets the “Kodaikanal Won’t” video link.

The celebrity endorsement promoted the viral distribution of the video, resulting in over 3 million YouTube views and 60,000 tweets over the course of two weeks (Visibrain, 2015). The hashtag #UnileverPollutes was used 5,417 times on Twitter during the first two weeks (Visibrain, 2015). Interestingly, a related hashtag, #PolmanPollutes, traced back to an individual resistant user, cast a wider net to include the corporate persona @PaulPolman (@RFalcon, 2015).



Figure 54. An oppositional user tweets the hashtag #PolmanPollutes.

Before August 2015, this issue had not come under wide public scrutiny. In a matter of two weeks, Unilever was confronted with an online and offline public relations crisis regarding its “sustainability” discourse.

The #UnileverPollutes campaign was not the first time that Unilever has confronted such accusations of mercury contamination. In 1983, the previous owner,

Chesebrough-Pond, moved the manufacturing plant from Watertown, New York, to Kodaikanal, Tamil Nadu, due to its inability to comply with environmental laws in the US (Hiddleston, 2010). The Indian factory was acquired by Hindustan Unilever Limited (a subsidiary of Unilever) in 1998 and, despite aging and hazardous equipment, the corporation continued to produce nearly 10 million thermometers a day. However, after broken thermometers were discovered in the forest in 2001, the factory workers' union and Greenpeace organized a protest that shut the factory down. Studies reported that parts of the forest contained 53 mg/kg of mercury in the soil and 1.32 mg/m<sup>3</sup> of mercury in ambient air—levels considered dangerous by environmental groups (Community Environment Monitoring, 2015). Unilever negotiated decontamination procedures of the land and factory equipment with the Indian government in 2003, in which the standard for cleanup was set “to a high, residential standard known as the ‘Dutch standard’” or until there was no more than 10 mg/kg of mercury in the soil (Unilever). This was later renegotiated and downgraded to “22.4 mg/kg for soil remediation” (Unilever) by 2014—a level that remains “ecologically unacceptable” (Chennai Solidarity Group et al, 2015). In addition to independent studies providing evidence of the ongoing environmental danger, 550 factory workers reported severe health conditions resulting from mercury exposure. Even after a public interest group took the case to the Madras High Court in 2006, Unilever maintained its innocence, refusing to uphold stricter remediation standards for the site or to compensate workers for their deteriorating health (Hiddleston, 2010). In August 2015, when the video went viral, Unilever had not come to an agreement regarding the compensation or the extent of remaining cleanup. Yet, on

September 19, 2015, Polman was named the United Nations' Champion of the Earth for "leading the private sector toward sustainability, both in his role as Unilever CEO and as a tireless advocate for more sustainable business models" (UNEP, 2015).

Several weeks after the video went viral, the hashtags and video both appeared as negative comments flooding Unilever's Twitter and Facebook pages. The inundation of resistant users displaying affiliation with the campaign, particularly during its first two weeks, is a powerful countercurrent to i-CSR discourse within the brand community. In these two weeks, oppositional users affiliated with the Jhatkaa video overpowered those defending the corporation. The corresponding press coverage compared Unilever's industrial disaster to Union Carbide/Dow Chemical's Bhopal gas tragedy in 1984 and helped add momentum to resistant discourse. So powerful was the attack that Unilever's PSBF activity on Facebook and Twitter was suspended in early August 2015. The interruption may have been due to the removal of posts by the corporation or a temporary halt in all PSBF social media activity. This attack illustrates the potency of resistant discourse deployed in unison.

Oppositional users, particularly those in solidarity with the Kodaikanal attack, found ways to amplify critical discourse during this period of corporate reticence. A high volume of negative comments appeared on backdated Facebook posts from August 1 to August 14, 2015. For instance, before the Jhatkaa video went viral, affiliated oppositional users flocked to an otherwise benign recommendation to ride bikes and inundated the post with negative comments (Unilever, July 13, 2015). This post reflects 2,344 likes, 1 angry emoji (a function not available on Facebook until several months after the post), 52



shares, and 136 comments. Since dates for likes are not publicly available, I interpret the likes to represent positive reactions, likely accumulated before the viral #UnileverPollutes campaign. Of these comments, four (3%) are coded as positive and 132 (97%) negative.



*Figure 55.* Users respond to a Unilever post with angry emojis on Facebook.

While most negative comments are associated with the Kodaikanal contamination and appear between August 1 and August 8, 2014, there are several independent users criticizing Unilever’s support of Planned Parenthood and several affiliated with SumOfUs posting the TTIP and Sustainable Palm Oil petitions. The negative users affiliated with the Kodaikanal attack—using the hashtags #UnileverPollutes and #PolmanPollutes, the link to the “Kodaikanal Won’t” YouTube video, the link to the

Jhatkaa petition, or the open-text box—all receive positive engagement (indicated by the like).



*Figure 56.* Oppositional user comments discussing the Kodaikanal mercury pollution campaign.

By launching a simultaneous attack around a single issue, oppositional users are able to shame the MNC. In this case, Unilever did not respond to any oppositional users launching assaults against its i-CSR discourse.

Unilever's social media silence does not indicate the corporation's willful ignorance. Its response to the #UnileverPollutes attack and attempt to reclaim any lost moral capital was publicized from the safety of its corporate website. Facing pressure from oppositional users on social media and negative attention from the international press, Unilever was cornered and forced to respond formally. On August 3, 2015, Unilever constructed a blameless narrative around this controversy on a page nested under the CSR section of its website, titled "Kodaikanal, India: The Facts":

Hindustan Unilever Limited (HUL) did not dump glass waste contaminated with mercury on land behind its factory. Glass scrap with residual mercury had been sold to a scrap dealer about three kilometres away from the factory, in breach of our guidelines. HUL immediately closed the factory and launched an investigation. There were no adverse impacts on the health of employees or the environment. This has been confirmed by many independent studies. There was limited impact on the soil at some spots within the factory premises which required remediation. With the necessary permits from the US and Indian governments, the recovered glass scrap was sent to the US for recycling in 2003. (Unilever 2019b)

Below the narrative, Unilever presented a timeline summarizing its actions, the Indian government's response, and third-party reporting from 2001 to 2014. The defensive tone underscores Unilever's attempt to distance itself from its "former thermometer factory," which had breached "our guidelines." Moreover, this example of i-CSR discourse in practice indicates the subordination of "accountability," esteemed as a core ideal in CSR research, to neoliberal self-interest.

Since Twitter affords abbreviated dialogue with strict character limitations, Unilever and the CEO finally chose only this platform to respond to the public. The MNC

posted from its @Unilever Twitter account—not its PSBF campaign Twitter handle, @UnileverUSA—on August 4, 2015:



Figure 57. Unilever tweet thread responding to the #UnileverPollutes campaign.

Apart from Unilever's initial response to Jhatkaa.org, the remaining fifteen comments on Twitter are negative, blaming Unilever for its hypocrisy. Rather than issuing an apology, Unilever combatively transfers blame for its inaction to "local authority." In fact, a day later, this argument was repeated in the CEO's contested tweet, in which he too responded using the #UnileverPollutes hashtag.



Figure 58. Paul Polman responds to Jhatkaa about the #UnileverPollutes campaign.

Paul Polman's responses received higher engagement than Unilever's post. Deliberately responding in choppy, incomplete phrases, he first accused activists of "false emotions," then blamed the government for its "slow progress." Both Unilever and Polman's responses echoed neoliberal arguments about the inefficiency of government bureaucracy in comparison to the optimization of private industry. When Unilever was directly confronted by Jhatkaa.org on Twitter, it retreated from two-way dialogue and directed attention to its controlled construction of "facts" on the HUL website. Polman indirectly responded to Jhatkaa.org in a separate tweet on August 6, then immediately disengaged from addressing the controversy again on social media. Once again, by shutting down dialogue with the oppositional group leading the attack, the MNC displayed its withdrawal from its commitment to meaningful communication with its stakeholders.

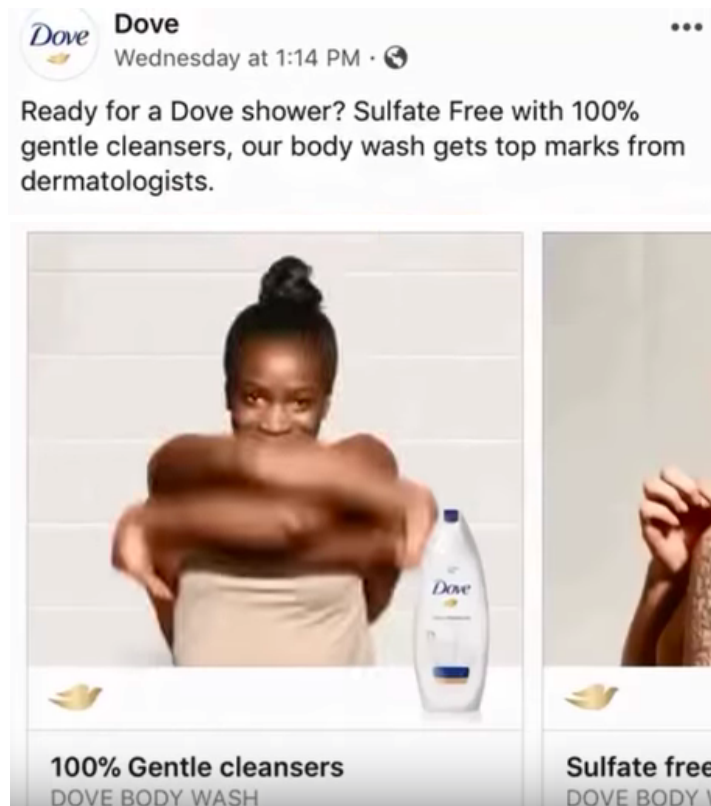
Furthermore, it is important to note that the Twitter account associated with the PSBF campaign, @UnileverUSA, was suspended—its public activity from August 1 to August 9, 2015 is not available. On Facebook, the PSBF page shows that Unilever stopped publishing new content between July 15 and August 20, 2015. It is possible that the posts may have been removed by the corporation. Or perhaps it chose to refrain from social media activity while it was trying to plan its response to the international attack. With the passage of time, the PSBF campaign resumed its activity of rallying users around its upcoming WE Day celebrations (@UnileverUSA, August 21, 2015). By November 10, negative comments affiliated with the Kodaikanal attack petered out and positive engagement not only made a comeback but skyrocketed. For example, the Facebook post "Help Clean Energy win!" garnered massive positive engagement (86,815

likes and 15,855 shares). “Take climate action for a #brightfuture by signing Ben & Jerry’s and Avaaz’s petition demanding that world leaders commit to 100% clean energy by 2050 at the Paris Climate Summit. <http://bit.ly/JoinTheClimateMovement>” (Unilever, November 20, 2015) Without any mention of Kodaikanal on social media again, Unilever reclaimed its do-good identity in time for its end-of-year #ShareAMeal campaign.

The solidarity exhibited during the Kodaikanal attack is an important example of the complexity and efficacy of organized discursive resistance. To date, the resistant discourse on social media has contributed to several material successes for Kodaikanal victims, such as a monetary settlement with 591 former mercury-affected employees on March 4, 2016 (Unilever 2019b). Plans for soil remediation at the factory site are still in negotiation between Unilever, the community, the government, human rights, and environmental groups. Although the PSBF did regain discursive control and manage a neoliberal retooling of a sustainability “social movement,” my assessment attests to the cumulative value of resistance in the corporate curated faux-public sphere. For a brief period, it became a real public sphere with the hegemonic corporation unable to set the terms. The following case of resistance, organized around the #BoycottDove hashtag, further validates the capacity of oppositional discourse to upend the neoliberal spirit and the hijacking of sustainability.

**The #BoycottDove attack.** On Friday, October 6, 2017, Facebook users decoded an abbreviated seven-second Facebook advertisement for Dove body lotion (clipped from a longer advertisement) as racist. The full ad is available on Youtube (Celebrity Central,

October 9, 2017). Harkening back to the racist ads of the Victorian era (McClintock, 1995), the Facebook ad shown in Figure 56 included a black woman (perceived as “dirty”) taking off her T-shirt to reveal a white woman underneath (perceived as “pure”).



*Figure 59.* Still image from the controversial 2017 Dove advertisement originally appearing on Facebook. The original ad is posted as a video on Youtube.

This 21st century ad is a reproduction of themes articulated at the highpoint of colonialism around race, cleanliness and the white man’s burden. The Advert for Pears Soap (n.d) in Figure 59 illustrates a black child using a bar of soap to wash of his dark complexion and revealing a white body after his bath.





*Figure 60.* An image of a complexion brightening soap advertisement printed in a British magazine in the 19th century. This is a digital reproduction of the Advert for Pears Soap available from the Wellcome Collection.

During the Victorian era, McClintock (1995, p. 211) argues, “Soap was credited not only with bringing moral and economic salvation to Britain’s ‘great unwashed’ but also with magically embodying the spiritual ingredient of the imperial mission itself.” Much like the ad from the 19th century, the Dove ad implies that its soap brightens dark complexions. In the rush of resistant discourse appearing on Unilever’s social media posts after October 6, 2017, oppositional users galvanized around the appalling reproduction of racism in soap advertising and pressure Dove to remove the campaign. Moreover, while the PSBF attempted to employ a strategy similar to the one it used during Kodaikanal attack, my findings show that Unilever was unable to recuperate the same way.

The popular rage around the Dove ad bears some similarities to the Kodaikanal attack. Even though oppositional users were not organized by any single organization, the resistant discourse was unified by a single media artifact. Opposition first appeared in the comments on the Facebook ad (Slawson, 2017). The day it was released, an independent Facebook user and influential makeup artist (with over 53,000 followers as of December 2018), Naomi Blake, posted a screenshot of her comment on the ad and Dove's unapologetic response, made within the hour (NayThe MUA, October 6, 2017a).



*Figure 61.* Dove responds to makeup artist NayThe MUA on Facebook.

Dove deflects the charge and regurgitates its standard i-CSR discourse—an imitation of progressive values that co-opt conceptions of “natural,” “inclusivity,” and “diversity.” Blake also separately posted screenshots of the ad itself that afternoon (NayThe MUA, October 6, 2017b); this post received over 10,000 shares and thousands of comments over three days (Schallon, 2017).



*Figure 62. NayTheMUA posts stills from Dove's ad.*

Comments on Blake's Facebook post call into question the intended meaning of the ad, the diversity of the marketing executives, and the history of racism in soap advertisements. The anger extended to Dove and Unilever social media accounts during the weekend, often using the screenshot photograph or the #BoycottDove hashtag.

Unlike the #UnileverPollutes attack, this controversy resulted in an apology by the Dove brand a mere day after the ad's debut. Reverting to its age-old strategy of recoiling from public attention (G. Jones, 2005), Unilever willfully refrained from

responding to the social media criticism altogether. Instead, Dove posted an apology on its Twitter account:



*Figure 63.* Dove's tweeted apology for its ad.

Even after the removal of the ad from Facebook, hundreds of users bombarded the Unilever and Dove accounts with negative comments in response to the ad and the apology. In the weeks following, Unilever reduced its i-CSR discourse post frequency and quietly unplugged the PSBF campaign website in March 2018.

Thus, a notable distinction between independent oppositional users and those who project an affiliation (with a collective) is the potency for actively renegotiating meanings. While there are intermittent opportunities for dialogue between individual users (as analyzed in the threaded discussion prompted by Joel Schmitz), my study shows that organized oppositional attacks present a more visible countercurrent to the corporate hegemony of i-CSR discourse. While organized attacks may originate from formal organizations, like SumOfUs, others emerge from informal and community-level activists. Virally circulated images (memes) and hashtags, at times without a clear origin, unify resistant users around a single issue. The comments formed around the

#UnileverPollutes and #BoycottDove hashtags exemplify an affiliated, though decentralized, form of opposition in which the hashtag and a corresponding meme appear repeatedly as negative comments throughout the PSBF campaign. Both examples show the potency of oppositional discourse as well as the deep-rooted naturalization of i-CSR discourse.

## **Conclusion**

As a strategic communication tool, i-CSR discourse animates the neoliberal Do-Good Spirit in an attempt to convince stakeholders of the “corporate soul” (Marchand, 1998). When i-CSR discourse is produced beyond the website, particularly on social media, it acquires a temporal dimension that permits immediate responsiveness and rapid distribution. Furthermore, the two-way interactivity permits both intended and unintended responses, which have serious implications for the naturalization of neoliberal CSR.

Throughout my analysis of engagement around i-CSR discourse in this chapter, I find that neoliberal subjects animated by the Do-Good Spirit, whether the user as citizen-prosumer or the MNC, are driven by the desire to acquire moral capital—the cultural gain accrued from perceived goodness by society. For Unilever, engagement involves building a “brand community” with citizen-prosumers around resonating neoliberal CSR values—a moral currency that can eventually be converted into economic value. For citizen-prosumers, engagement involves the perceived satisfaction associated with participation, collective action, and shared values. As Banks and Humphreys (2008, p. 412) argue, the voluntary labor performed during participation and co-creation online may provide a

“social benefit” and communion for users. However, as Ippolita, Lovink, and Rossiter (2009) note, “Herein lies the perversity of social networks: however radical they may be, they will always be data-mined. They are designed to be exploited.” My study shows that crowdsourcing works as an effective tool for exploiting citizen-prosumers through the co-optation and co-creation of progressive values in favor of the corporation. By consistently championing its sustainability commitments, even amid sporadic negative comments, Unilever’s i-CSR discourse creates a potent moral shield that distracts and redirects stakeholders’ skepticism to accept corporate goodwill and social transformation through neoliberalism.

Engagement by oppositional users within the faux-public sphere is complex and paradoxical. Oppositional messages offer new meanings around business-society relationship for the brand community to grapple with. Even though most negative comments do not elicit a reaction from Unilever, at times they do draw the attention of other users and lead into threaded dialogue nested below the corporate post. The #UnileverPollutes and #BoycottDove attacks were productive sites to reveal the latent power of resistant discourse, especially after that discourse gained viral attention on social media. In both cases, Unilever apparently suspended its social media activity and retreated from its participation on the faux-public sphere. Still, as the PSBF shows, the potency of resistance discourse can eventually dissipate in an environment that is inundated with hegemonic discourse by a fleet of Unilever marketers and supporters and curated by Facebook to encourage distraction, with a dashboard of constant limbic stimulation. Whether a user is posting negative responses as an individual or as a

participant in an organized group, the surge of positive comments eventually overrides the often disconnected span of negative comments on posts with high engagement statistics. So, despite corporations' awareness of the lingering "risk on social media . . . exposing the brand to unpredictable reactions" by users (Participant 6), social media professionals likely find that the benefits outweigh the costs of building a community around i-CSR discourse. Unilever's recent announcement against social media platforms further advances Gillespie's (2018) argument concerning the role of private interests shaping the norms of "public engagement" online.

All in all, in my study of Unilever, I find resounding evidence of i-CSR discourse's insidious role in retooling equality, justice and responsibility to serve the 1% or the capitalist class. MNCs purposeful co-option of progressive values and prominence on social media networks work to dilute the communication of authentic opposition and is degrading the ideals at the core of a democracy. There is an urgency to oppose voluntary CSR and the discourse produced by large-scale corporations to blur consumption and citizenship. As Roy puts it, "Capitalism is destroying the planet. The two old tricks that dug it out of past crises--War and Shopping-- simply will not work (Roy, 2005, p. 46).

## 5. Conclusion

Facebook was not originally created to be a company. It was built to accomplish a social mission—to make the world more open and connected. . . . We think the world's information infrastructure should resemble the social graph—a network built from the bottom up or peer-to-peer, rather than the monolithic, top-down structure that has existed to date. We also believe that giving people control over what they share is a fundamental principle of this rewiring.

—Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook Founder and Chief Executive Officer),  
*Letter to Investors 'The Hacker Way,' 2012*

My analysis of Unilever's i-CSR discourse during the Project Sunlight/Bright Future (PSBF) campaign from 2013 to 2017 reinforces Boltanski and Chiapello's (2007) thesis regarding capitalism's adaptable nature. Despite a history of destruction and exploitation, the "new spirit" of capitalism manages to energize social actors and institutions to accept moral justifications of its legitimacy. When confronted with crises or critique, it transcends it by appropriating the language used by the opposition. The cultural critique of capitalism after the 2008 financial crisis witnessed the manifestation of what I have called the "Do-Good Spirit" manifested in i-CSR discourse that articulated a form of moral profit maximization. Its main objective is to establish legitimacy and trust around a voluntary form of CSR. Although Unilever calls it "sustainability," my larger argument is that the Do-Good Spirit of the neoliberal era is an attempt to subsume and neutralize any and all progressive values and critiques of the system.

Unilever is one significant example of a larger trend among corporate actors that summon the Do-Good Spirit to secure the social order in the neoliberal era. In the excerpt above, Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's founder and chief executive officer, constructs the purpose of social media technology not in terms of profits, but instead in terms of the common good. In an address to potential investors during Facebook's \$5 billion dollar



initial public offering, Zuckerberg's sales pitch doctors the progressive ideals of hacker culture and packages them for an elite audience (Wired, 2012); his vision to make the world more open and connected through a bottom-up process will be, rather paradoxically, orchestrated by a single corporate actor also committed to generating dividends for its shareholders. In this concluding chapter, I offer some reflections on the possibilities of resistance and the limits of online activism.

In chapter 3, I uncovered two monologic methods—strategic storytelling and the aesthetics of transparency—that Unilever uses on its websites and social media accounts to maintain control over its neoliberal version of profitable sustainability. As a living corporate subject intercepting sociality on the Internet, Unilever seeks to accrue moral capital by delivering a picturesque narrative of its elevated ambitions and social impact programs. In so doing, Unilever reverts to a familiar colonial position—a paternalistic benefactor taking on the responsibility to uplift developing countries, poor people, and low-wage laborers. While i-CSR discourse continues a recognized capitalist trend of cultural appropriation and commodification, the complex issues stemming from digitally mediated communication become clear upon studying the interactions between users and the MNC.

In chapter 4, I problematized the notion that social media engagement is a form of meaningful stakeholder dialogue by studying interactivity between the MNC and users during the PSBF campaign. Facebook and Twitter posts show that there are more users that respond positively, rather than negatively; however, the entanglement between MNC and users resembles a game of tug of war in which progressive values are being

contested. On the one hand, I show how the MNC imitates grassroots social activism on the Internet by creating opportunities for participation in corporate-defined collective action around values such as equality, volunteerism, social justice and peace. Here, the MNC uses crowd-sourcing and co-creation to engage the users as prosumer-citizens, or individuals who are motivated to respond to moral and ethical discourse. To that end, I find i-CSR discourse is a powerful corporate tool that builds a brand community of loyal users who defend Unilever at no cost to the corporation. However, from my close study of negative responses to Unilever's i-CSR discourse, I also found that oppositional users who resist neoliberal sustainability and launch viral online attacks pose a noteworthy threat that can force a hegemonic actor like Unilever to retreat. In the weeks after the #BoycottDove campaign in October 2017, Unilever suspended its social media activity; by March 2018 the PSBF website was taken offline and integrated into the "Sustainable Living" section on the corporate website.<sup>12</sup>

By one measure, the oppositional attacks via social media were successful enough to halt Unilever's social media discourse momentarily. Nonetheless, Unilever's overwhelming position as a hegemonic corporate actor and as a leading fast-moving consumer goods manufacturer with a multi-billion dollar marketing budget has not been diminished. For that matter, the Unilever case study substantiates my ongoing concern that the widespread adoption of i-CSR discourse by the capitalist class does present a serious obstacle for progressive social change. Specifically, the imperializing power of

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<sup>12</sup> Although Paul Polman, the CEO of Unilever, led the company through an attempted hostile takeover in 2017, mounting cultural and economic controversies concerned shareholders and may have been a major factor confirming Polman's resignation by November 2018 (Abboud & Hodgson, 2018).

technology firms and black-box algorithms structuring our networked society poses challenges to activists and to free speech.

Thus, it must be stressed that resistance to i-CSR discourse via social media is data—a raw material that informs coders and machine-learning algorithms to help companies better respond to and subvert anti-corporate discourse. According to Participant 2 (2017), social responsiveness informed by data analytics is part of an emerging digital marketing strategy: “They [corporate clients] want to talk about societal issues. They want us to think of strategic ways they can be responsive to issues that are keeping everyone’s attention. . . like health, privacy, free speech, equality and sustainability. . . Content-scraping helps us listen and learn and deploy a response.” Market research tools provided by firms like Google and Dumbstruck, an emotion analytics company, give marketing and communication professionals the ability to “scrape” the social web to identify patterns from banks of user-generated data. As a result, corporations are able to take advantage of “low risk” cultural trends that will generate moral capital and brand equity (Participant 2, 2017). The collection and manipulation of data is a lucrative business; when guided by the Do-Good Spirit for more nefarious purposes, the use of emotional analytics can counter and even neutralize progressive values.

In what follows, I lay out some concerns about technological imperialism from the Unilever PSBF campaign with particular attention to Facebook. In 2014, Unilever set up a partnership with Facebook to help fabricate a walled-up version of the Internet called Internet.org for Indians with a mobile phone. The program, cloaked in i-CSR

discourse, I argue, requires us to remain vigilant of the Do-Good Spirit and its interest in framing technological expansion in terms of the common good. The key focus here is to highlight the power that applications using machine-learning algorithms have to quietly study human emotions and weaken moral decision making. In short, while my dissertation has pointed to the potential for resistance, as the following example in India will show the limits of such resistance in avenues where codes and algorithms function to serve neoliberal agendas.

### Imperializing India with i-CSR discourse

On February 24, 2014, Unilever announced a partnership with Internet.org, a Facebook led nonprofit initiative working to give mobile users free access to part of the Internet.



*Figure 64.* Unilever's tweet announcing its partnership with Facebook.

In response to the announcement, Matthew Cleveland (@MattPCleveland) connected the dots and articulated the intended meaning behind Unilever's sustainability—Internet

access is a basic human right and should be free. Blurring the for-profit, non-profit objective, Internet.org is part of a global program that was introduced in India in 2014 and expanded to sixty countries by 2017. Facebook's publicized mission was to provide Internet access to the billions who could not afford the cost of data (Vaidhyathan, 2018).

According to the press release linked to the tweet, Unilever's role was to help Facebook conduct a comprehensive study of the Indian market "to inform the development of a series of on-the-ground projects with the aim of improving lives in rural India through better connectivity" (Unilever, 2014, February 24). Unilever, an imperial actor dominating the Indian market for over a century, was well-equipped to provide the local level support to Facebook. For instance, in an interview with the ad agency Ogilvy and Mathur at the Cannes Film Festival, Unilever's chief marketing and communications officer, Keith Weed (2014), boasts about a clever sustainability program customized for a village in rural India:

Well, mobile is incredibly exciting. In the end of the day, it's a very personal thing. You have it in your pocket and you take it everywhere. . . .It's peoples' remote control for their life. It connects the virtual and the real world together. . . . In India, I was just talking about it earlier, in media dark areas—so these are areas where there is no TV, there's no radio— life is quite tough because you don't have much entertainment. I've been to villages where they have no sanitation, openly defecating. They have no drinking water, you know, piped into their houses or anything. They have electricity for two hours a day. But virtually *every* house had a mobile phone. So what we did is we basically set up our own [mobile] radio station. . . .So you can either hear Bollywood stars singing songs or telling jokes. And within that you then have interspersed laundry and shampoo ads. Now this is a *real* value exchange, you know.

First, Weed praised mobile technology for its ubiquity and power to control people. His enthusiasm during the interview signals Unilever's excitement at the prospect to dominate the next frontier. The colonial framing of rural India as dirty and Indian people as "openly defecating" allows Weed to frame any corporate intervention as an improvement. If that wasn't enough, he unabashedly stated that Unilever's "sustainability" program that offered free Bollywood entertainment with ads to farmers, who have been committing suicide in record numbers due neoliberal policies, as "*real* value exchange."

At the time of Unilever's Internet.org announcement, one of Facebook's largest user base was from India; out of a population of over 1.2 billion people, 130 million people from India were active Facebook users (Mozur, 2015). In India, Internet.org partnered with local wireless telecommunications company, Reliance Communication. The application-based service was set up to work on any mobile device by marking data used for pre-selected websites with a "zero rating" (Vaidhyathan, 2018). In other words, Bing, women's rights services, employment services, Wikipedia, weather information, and, of course, Facebook were all free. By October 2015, one million people were using the service.

Throughout the initiative, Facebook and Unilever both framed its work with Internet.org in ethical terms. However, by partnering with one telecommunication firm and favoring only a limited set of websites, Facebook was in direct violation of net-neutrality. Free speech advocates, technologists, and Indian entrepreneurs waged fierce criticism using social media activism. Bhatia (2016) identifies a viral video by young

Indian comedians, All India Bakchod, as an influential tool that galvanized more than a million people to petition the government against Internet.org. By April 2015, the issue was brought before parliament. To drum up more users and quell criticism, Zuckerberg organized a trip to New Delhi in October 2015 and publicly discussed the program with the newly elected prime minister, Narendra Modi. At the event held at India's Institute of Technology, the altruism of Internet.org (rebranded as Free Basics) was foregrounded by Zuckerberg: "We all have a moral responsibility to look out for people who don't have the Internet" (Mozur, 2015). Despite the lobbying and PR efforts made by Facebook in the following months, the surge of net-neutrality advocates actively shaped the public conversation. The regulators identified the varying prices set for downloading content as illegal, and in February 2016 Telecom Regulatory Authority of India officially banned Free Basics. Unilever's reaction during the controversy and the ban was muted, without any mention of Free Basics on its website or social media.

The silent self-serving motive of the Free Basics program became even more pronounced after the ban. Juxtaposed against the bottom-up vision invoked in Zuckerberg's letter to investors, Marc Andreessen, Netscape co-founder and Facebook board member, exposes the imperial ambitions underlying neoliberal CSR. Soon after the ruling, he tweeted a flippant remark: "Anti-colonialism has been economically catastrophic for the Indian people for decades. Why stop now?" (Vaidhyathan, 2018). Andreessen comment, later deleted from his account, is a redux of the white man's burden. This is a clear warning to remain skeptical of the insidious partnerships between corporate actors looking to harvest data—a thriving commodity—from the most

vulnerable regions. In the following section, I explore the way social and psychological data shapes adaptive algorithms that may create and perpetuate forms of exploitation.

### **Machine-learning and morality**

Today, the public increasingly relies on social media technologies to access information that will help them make sense of the world. Elon Musk's (2018) conception of a 21st-century company provides a complex view of the social, technological, psychological, and economic entanglements shaping the process of meaning-making in networked society:

A company is essentially a cybernetic collective, of people and machines . . . We are all plugged in as nodes on a network, like leaves on a tree. We are all collectively programming the AI . . . in a giant cybernetic collective. This is true of all the social media networks. They are all cybernetic collectives . . . The success of these online systems is a function of how much limbic resonance they are able to achieve with people. The more limbic resonance the more engagement. (Musk, 2018)

As a technologist and an entrepreneur, Musk describes the interaction between people and companies as a “a giant cybernetic collective” in which the social media network mediates human productivity and intellectual activity. His vision introduces the social media network as a social actor, permitting people to keep constantly connected to each other and to corporations. He also describes social media platforms as technological instruments farming psychological information achieved through building “limbic resonance,” or deep connections to human emotion, desire, and impulse. Finally, Musk admits that “successful” psychological connection, or measured “engagement” on social networks, is directly tied to economic value. In other words, limbic data, a commodity with exchange value, becomes an input for machine-learning algorithms that he predicts



will lead to the outsourcing of human morality and ethics to the logic of artificial intelligence.

Given his immersion in the technology and engineering sectors, Musk foresees the development of an algorithm that can analyze social data and map cultural values in order to build a system that will mimic human psychology and decision-making. Tewell (2016, p. 295) finds that hegemonic technology companies, with “a near-totalizing point of view” on search and social relationship data, are massaging social data and designing machine-learning algorithms that are not neutral. As substantiated by Participant 2 (2017), the commodification of artificial intelligence around social data is underway. For any given project, he explains, there is a process of developing a responsive digital strategy. First, his agency works with a data analytics company, like Google, to engineer a customized machine-learning platform that will identify words and map emotional reactions to discover cultural trends for a client. Next, he leads the construction of a responsive campaign that will offer a client low reputational risk and positive brand visibility. Finally, he teams up with a company that uses algorithms to profile users in order to test campaign messages and snatch photographs of facial expressions without a need for focus groups.

Musk’s prediction of an emerging artificial morality that will automate human decision-making puts the presumption of machine rationality and neutrality into serious question. His apprehension of artificial intelligence directs attention to the ideological forces embedded within technology such as a Facebook that may enable or constrain communication practices and subvert meanings. Information technology research is

uncovering the ideological imperatives of commercial information producers, search engines, and social networks dominating the visible, indexed portion of the internet (Lessig, 2000; Introna & Nissenbaum, 2000; Vaidhyanathan, 2011; Tewell, 2016; Gillespie, 2018).

Lessig (2000) points to the commanding role of software design and its capacity for structuring human freedoms:

This code, or architecture, sets the terms on which life in cyberspace is experienced . . . But no thought is more dangerous to the future of liberty in cyberspace than this faith in freedom guaranteed by the code. For the code is not fixed . . . The code regulates. It implements values, or not. It enables freedoms, or disables them. It protects privacy, or promotes monitoring. People choose how the code does these things. People write the code. Thus the choice is not whether people will decide how cyberspace regulates. People—coders—will. The only choice is whether we collectively will have a role in their choice—and thus in determining how these values regulate—or whether collectively we will allow the coders to select our values for us.

In other words, software engineers are architects who use code as an ideological instrument. However, the code is also dynamic and can change. While it may enable liberties, such as the freedom of speech, Lessig also cautions against the ascent of commercial interests promoting their values through the code. Similarly, Introna and Nissenbaum (2000) describe the internet information infrastructure as giving prominence to the most “popular, wealthy, and powerful site at the expense of others” by building algorithms for ranking, crawling, and indexing for a fee (p. 54). While “influence” and “visibility” online are directly related to economic prowess (Introna & Nissenbaum, 2000), Tewell (2016, p. 289) finds that search engines and other corporate owned media intentionally frame technology “as politically neutral and unencumbered with human

values.” Studying the processes of information access, discovery, and retrieval in a library setting, Tewell shows that the rhetoric of technological neutrality is invoked to “prevent the questioning of hegemonic political and economic forces.” Thus, the social network platform must be understood as unfixed software that may perpetuate the power distortions manifest in society by privileging the economic prominence and popularity of users and texts within its code.

Despite Zuckerberg’s hacker code of ethics and liberatrian conceptions of the Internet as the great equalizer, “cyberspace” is also another realm for imperial conquest. Corporate actors, that have the resources to study the geography (data analytics) and build the architecture (algorithms), are able to create and legitimize environments that safeguard elite interests. Technological advancements, such as machine learning algorithms, are capable of subverting human agency and morality. If these actors are able to successfully summon the Do-Good Spirit and lull anti-capitalist activism, oppression and exploitation will become harder to recognize and oppose. Recent research, such as Noble’s (2018) *Algorithms of Oppression* exposes the embedded bias that perpetuate racism and sexism. But there is more research that needs to be done to understand oppressive values coded within software and the mechanization of ethics using predictive-algorithms. Ultimately, new critical media studies research should provide a case for engineers and designers to create opportunities for contestability—ways in which the users can see, comprehend and adjust the algorithms structuring our decisions and our societies.



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## Appendix A

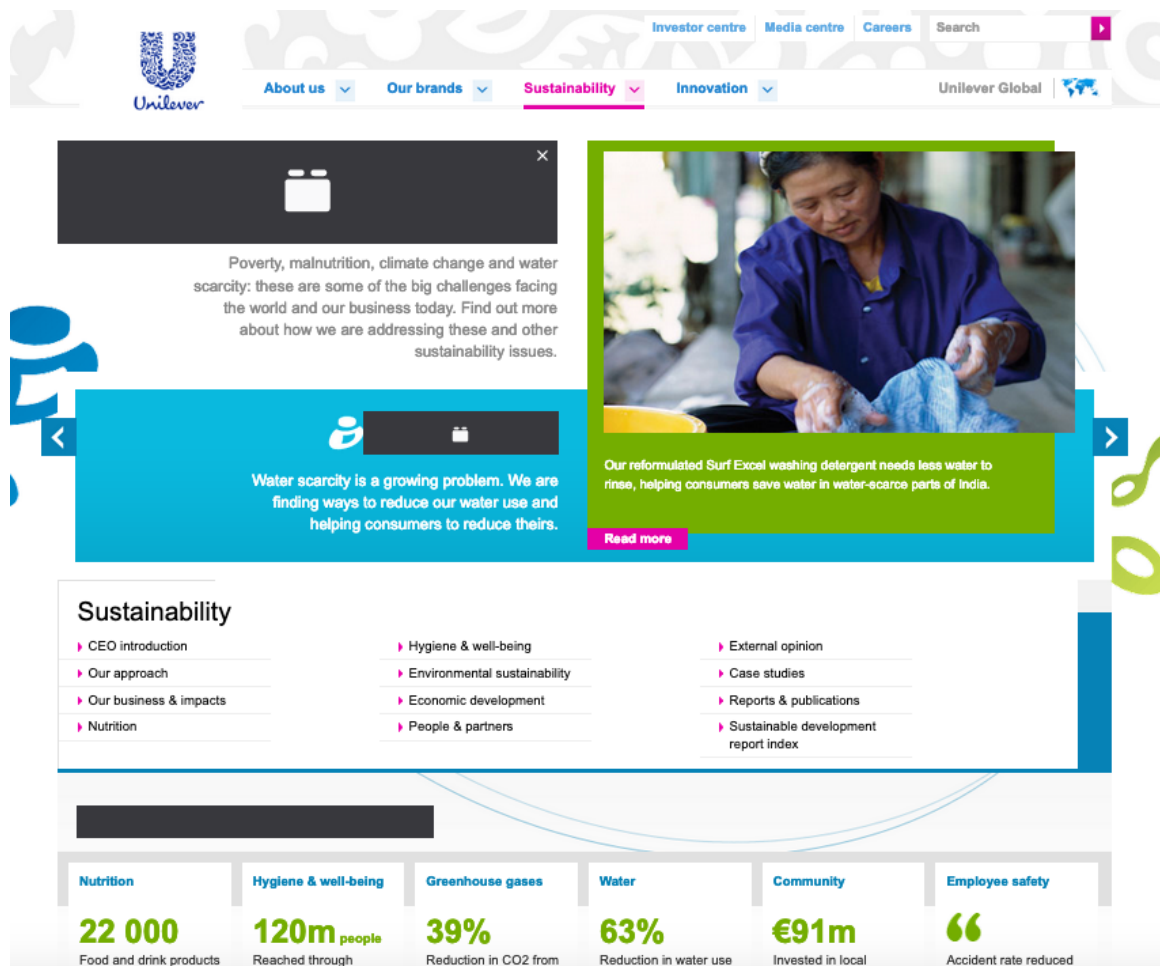


Figure 65. Upper half of Unilever.com “Sustainability” page in 2009. This image is a partial screenshot from a Wayback Machine archived website. (Unilever 2009, December 13).

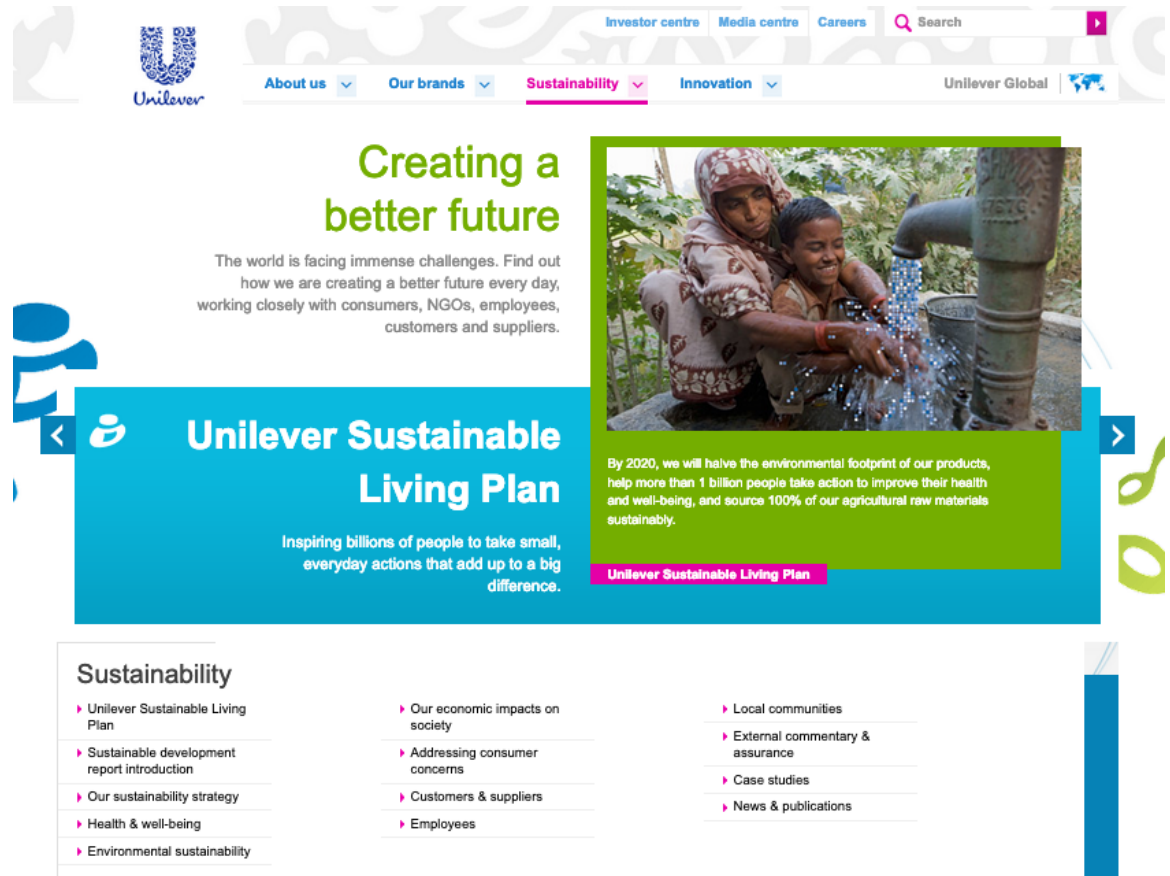
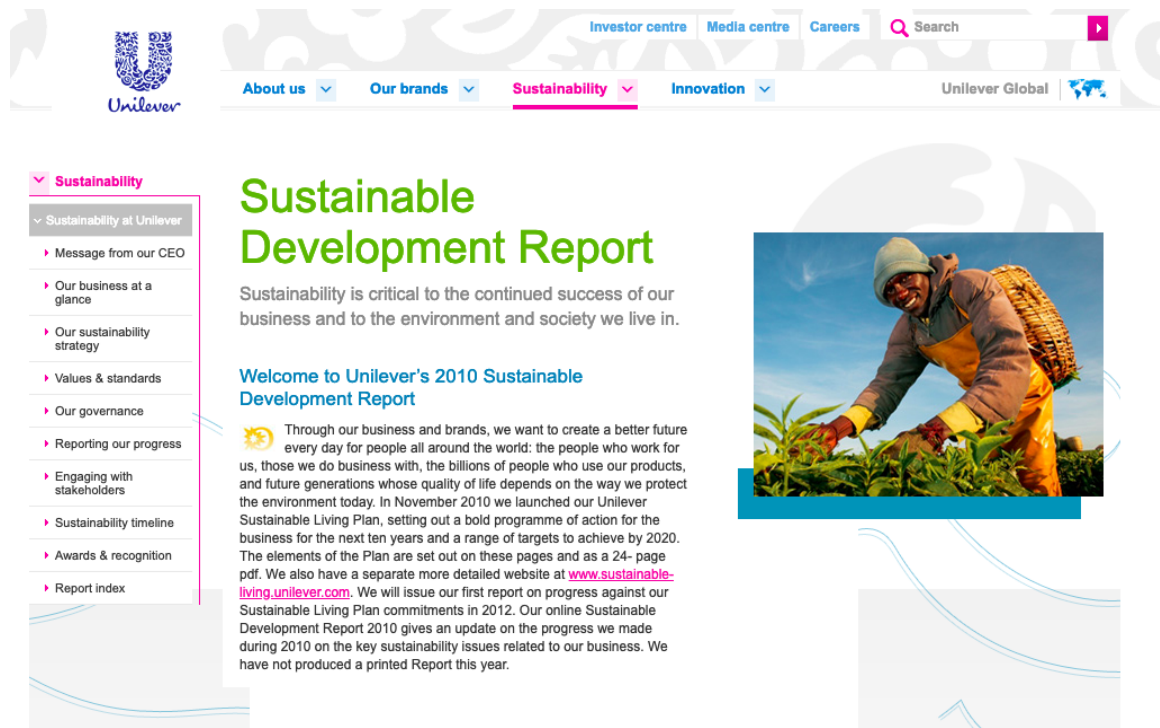


Figure 66. Upper half of Unilever.com “Sustainability” page in 2010. This image is a partial screenshot from a Wayback Machine archived website. (Unilever 2009, December 13).



*Figure 67.* Upper half of Unilever.com “Sustainability at Unilever” page, nestled under the “Sustainability” section, in 2011. This image is a partial screenshot from a Wayback Machine archived website. (Unilever 2009, December 13).



[INVESTOR CENTRE](#) | [MEDIA CENTRE](#) | [CAREERS](#)

[UNILEVER GLOBAL](#) | [CHANGE LOCATION](#)

[ABOUT US](#) | [OUR BRANDS](#) | [SUSTAINABLE LIVING](#) | [INNOVATION](#)


**SUSTAINABLE LIVING**

**BETTER LIVELIHOODS**

[TARGETS & PERFORMANCE](#)

[MAKING OUR PRODUCTS MORE AFFORDABLE](#)

[UNDERSTANDING OUR ECONOMIC IMPACTS](#)

[TAX POLICY & TRANSFER PRICING](#)

## Better livelihoods







Our business generates wealth and creates jobs in the communities where we operate.

### Supporting economic development

Employees, governments, investors and many others benefit economically from our activities. A growing opportunity for us is to meet the needs of low-income consumers in emerging markets. Whether it is through new distribution channels, using smaller, more affordable formats or creating new products, we are trying to develop business models to reach new consumers. We seek to raise the skills and productivity of the farmers and small businesses we work with so they can increase their incomes and improve their standard of living. As part of our Sustainable Living Plan we have set the following target: by 2020 we will engage with at least 500,000 small-scale distributors in our supply network.



► **Targets & performance**



Improving livelihoods for thousands of small-scale farmers and distributors.

► **Making our products more affordable**



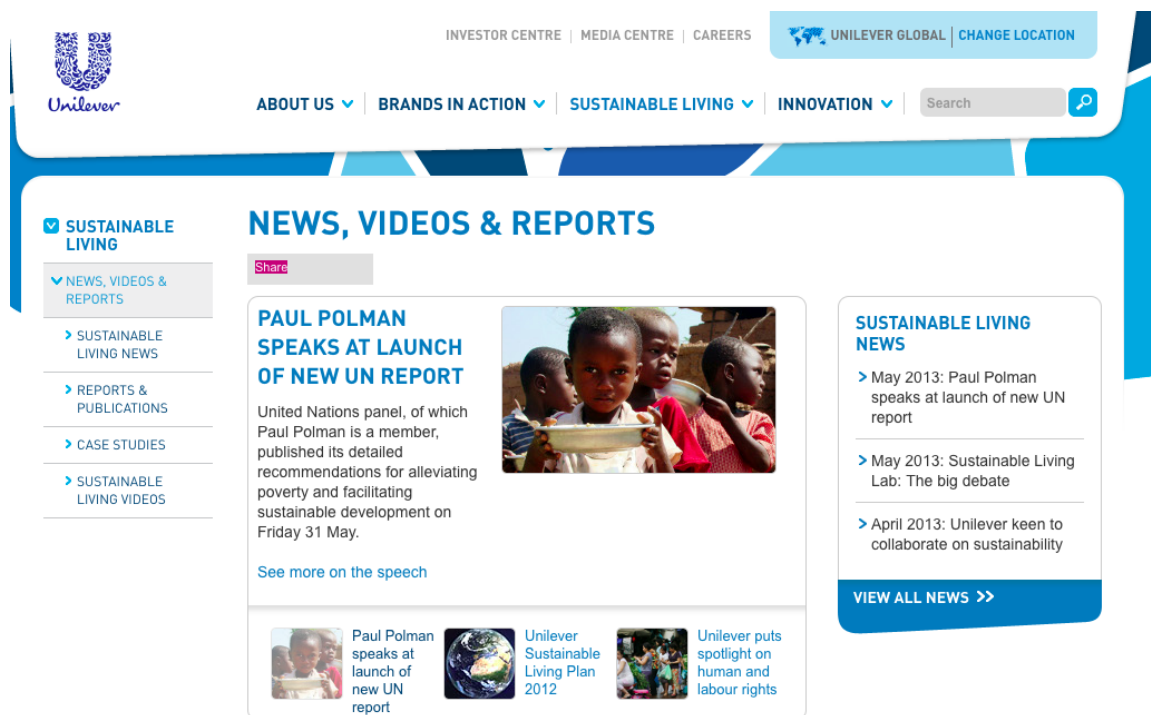
People everywhere, whatever their income level, aspire to use high-quality and innovative products.

► **Understanding our economic impacts**



Our business impacts in Indonesia, South Africa and Vietnam.

Figure 68. Upper half of Unilever.com “Better Livelihoods” page, nestled under the “Sustainable Living” section, in 2012. This image is a partial screenshot from a Wayback Machine archived website. (Unilever, 2012, April 25)



*Figure 69.* Upper half of Unilever.com “News, Videos and Reports” page, nestled under the “Sustainable Living” section, in 2013. This image is a partial screenshot from a Wayback Machine archived website. (Unilever, 2013, August 16).