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Dissecting and Critically Analyzing the Product RED Campaign

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Introduction

Richey, L. A., & Ponte, S. (2011). *Brand aid: Shopping well to save the world*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. 253 pp., \$18.95 (Pbk).

Brand Aid: Shopping Well to Save the World, by Lisa Ann Richey and Stefano Ponte, is an edgy, provocative, and well-researched analysis of the Product RED campaign and its effect on branding, aid, celebrities, and international development. The book raises a number of ethical concerns about the RED campaign and the broader concept of brand aid, that is, the union of brands, aid celebrities, and causes. For example, the authors pose ethical questions throughout the book to encourage readers to critically evaluate the role of compassionate consumption and its relationship to international development, the ethical profile of corporate brands that fail to significantly alter their business model, and the juxtaposition of sexy fashion models and worthy HIV/AIDS patients.

Having spent decades doing field-based research in Africa, Richey and Ponte bring a wealth of knowledge and experience with AIDS patients, healthcare providers, and business developers from South Africa to their critique of “compassionate consumption.” In the preface, they explain that the book “stems from a critical theory impulse and a moral dissatisfaction with product RED” (p. xii). From a methodological perspective, Richey and Ponte describe *Brand Aid* as an intermediary study based on an analysis of academic, popular, and practical business literature in addition to publicly available information from the RED campaign, including the RED Web site and Facebook page. The authors also collected data via participant observation in various shopping venues with RED products in the United States and the United Kingdom but did not conduct field research with the companies involved in the RED campaign.

In the introduction, Richey and Ponte provide background information about the RED campaign and the reinvention of international aid. Cofounded in 2006 by Bono and Bobby Shriver, RED “opened a new frontier for financing development aid” (p. 1) that unites branding, shopping, celebrities, and social causes. According to the official RED Web site (www.joinred.com), RED is “a business model to raise awareness and money for the Global Fund by teaming up with the world's most iconic brands to produce RED-branded products.” Corporate RED partners include Apple, GAP, Microsoft, Starbucks, and many others. According to Richey and Ponte, “consumption, trade, and aid wed dying Africans with designer goods” (p. 1). Basically, consumers are encouraged to shop to save AIDS victims in Africa.

The five main chapters of *Brand Aid* ask big questions about the role of celebrities in international aid, the visual representations of the RED campaign, the rebranding of aid in Africa, corporate social responsibility (CSR) based on hard commerce, and changing consumer behavior. The authors continually position RED in relation to other perspectives that force readers to critically evaluate the role RED has played in altering international development, CSR, and consumption. For example in the book's first chapter, “Band Aid to Brand Aid,” Richey and Ponte explain what they call the “red aid celebrity trinity” that includes Bono, Jeffery Sachs, and Paul Farmer—the rock star, the teacher, and the healer (p. 34). The authors note: “Some of the contentious issues are that aid celebrities close debate by embodying consensus on issues where there is none; they cannot represent complexity; they are celebrated because of a link to expertise in a ‘local’ realm that can only partially be translated to make sense in ‘global’ terms” (p. 53).

In chapter 2, “The Rock Man's Burden,” the authors tackle RED's representation of a negotiated and distant Africa that sells products through marketing difference between “us” and “them.” Richey and Ponte describe these representations as “deeply problematic, not simply in the ways that Africa is ‘reimagined’ and thus can be assumed by Western consumers to be suffering from some imaginative lack, but more fundamentally in the ways that AIDS in Africa is made into something that you can know from a distance” (p. 57).

In the third chapter, “Saving Africa,” the authors place RED in a broader context of trends and debates over international aid in Africa while arguing that the Global Fund is a politicized and controversial organization. Despite the \$160 million raised during the past five years, Richey and Ponte criticize RED for its lack of monitoring within the Global Fund. They write, “If RED is in fact so concerned with women and children, it should advocate better gender monitoring, representation, and integration of programs within the Global Fund” (p. 118). Thus, the public health issue in Africa is extremely

complicated and cannot simply be solved by shopping for RED products in the United States and United Kingdom.

The focus of critique shifts away from the RED campaign to the corporate partners in chapter 4, "Hard Commerce." Not only do Richey and Ponte briefly explain the concepts of CSR, corporate philanthropy, and cause-related marketing, they also thoughtfully analyze why the co-branding of RED products is a disengaged form of CSR because "RED does nothing to change or improve the normal functioning of business and trade" (p. 147).

Finally, in chapter 5, "Doing Good by Shopping Well," Richey and Ponte direct their critique to consumers and ethical consumerism. The authors reference a variety of theorists, including Adorno, Bourdieu, and Baudrillard, in their discussion about consumption, agency, symbolism, and postmodernism. The concept of "causumers" is also introduced in this chapter. Richey and Ponte describe causumers as "shoppers who seek to make the world a better place without knowing much about the social and environmental relations behind the products on offer" (p. 151). The authors suggest that RED facilitated a subtle passage from conscious consumption to compassionate consumption where "celebrities help manage and negotiate this affective element of international development and thus link consumers with their causes through iconic brands" (p. 175).

The concluding chapter summarizes Richey and Ponte's main arguments. Insights on branding, celebrities, consumers, and corporate responsibility are situated in response to the RED campaign and larger enduring issues related to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and international aid. For instance, can one benefit from and challenge exploitative relations at the same time? The authors point out that because "RED does not challenge elite bias along gender, ethnicity, or class division," consumers are led to believe "it is possible to have as much as you can without depriving anyone else" (p. 188).

Brand Aid is an intriguing, comprehensive, and significant evaluation of a popular campaign that has altered the way consumers and corporations view international development. Taken as a whole, the book would be a great addition to a graduate course on branding, CSR, or international communication. Furthermore, individual chapters could be assigned for upper-division undergraduate courses or graduate seminars that cover visual communication, social media, CSR, or media ethics. Overall, the book is timely and relevant, and it combines many concepts related to communication, business, and ethics.