

**“Shopping for Change”:  
An Ideological Retelling/Retailing of Charitable  
Aid in *World Vision Canada’s* Charity Gift  
Catalogue**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

Since the early 2000s, a growing number of charitable organizations has introduced gift catalogues from which donors “shop” through tangible goods (e.g. livestock, mosquito nets) for recipients in need. Building upon the work of Susan Willis, I approach the charity gift catalogue as a form of ideological packaging. This thesis critically analyzes *World Vision Canada’s* gift catalogues to explore how the consumption-oriented language and format of the catalogue commodify charitable aid and its recipients. Specifically, I examine how the catalogue transforms charitable aid into “products” by a) standardizing quantities b) creating an appearance of use value and c) aestheticizing charitable aid as a “shopping” experience. This project aims to establish an understanding of “shopping” from a charity catalogue as more than a playful metaphor; rather, it is an ideological representation that may negatively shape the way in which donors conceptualize and participate in charitable aid in the long term.

**Keywords:** charity; *World Vision*; gift catalogue; commodification; ideology

## **Dedication**

To my academic soulmate.

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## List of Acronyms

ALS	Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis
CRM	Cause Related Marketing
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus



# Chapter 1.

## Introduction



**Fig.1.1. “Got Goat?” online banner advertisement**

Note: An online banner advertisement for *World Vision’s* charity gift catalogue, centred around a goat which is one of the most popular “products” in the catalogue. Untitled image [advertisement], by *World Vision*, n.d., retrieved from <https://blog.trekaroo.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/GotGoat.jpg>

My thesis begins with a question about a goat.

This is not any goat in particular, but a special kind of goat. This is a goat that has been chosen by a generous donor as a gift for an unspecified family living in poverty. For multiple years running, a live goat has been a top-selling “product”<sup>1</sup> in World

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis, I utilize scare quotes around terms such as “product” and “shopping” when referring to *World Vision’s* gift catalogue to emphasize the theatricality of representing charitable aid as a mock consumer catalogue and to signal my discomfort with this attempt to equate philanthropy with shopping.

Vision Canada's (henceforth World Vision) charity gift catalogue. The charity has sold over 51,000 goats through its catalogue since 2005 (Scrivener, 2010). Given the plethora of choices in the catalogue — from adorable pigs to vital medications — why it is the goat that consistently outsells other options is truthfully beyond me. The more harrowing question, however, is what does it mean to describe charitable aid — the act of helping someone put food on the table or his/her child through school — as a “Top Pick” or a “Best Seller”? What does it mean to have a donor “shop” through a catalogue of “products” to feed/clothe/educate a family as if the donor were browsing through a Sears catalogue? What does it mean to encourage donors to think about helping others through the lens of consumerism rather than, for example, that of traditional philanthropy or public policy?

According to *Charity Intelligence Canada*, in 2014, at least 21 Canadian non-profits published a gift catalogue featuring a range of “products” that donors could “purchase” for people in need. If the growing number of charities issuing catalogues each year is any indication, these catalogues are both popular with donors and lucrative for the non-profit organizations producing them. In 2010, *World Vision* projected revenue of \$21 million from its gift catalogue alone (Scrivener, 2010).

The novelty of the catalogue lies in its method of appeal — instead of soliciting donors for a general donation, the charity gift catalogue invites donors to “shop” through a selection of material goods such as livestock, mosquito nets, and school supplies to be provided to recipients in need. In this sense, the charity gift catalogue noticeably departs from more traditional fundraising approaches in a number of ways: first, it is the donor rather than charitable organization who picks which item(s) will be distributed to

recipients;<sup>2</sup> and second, the focus of the fundraising 'ask' is structured around the merits of the "products" rather than on the stories of the recipients. On an aesthetic level, the charity catalogue also closely mimics the language and structure of for-profit retail catalogues.

Beyond the visible differences between the charity gift catalogue and more traditional appeals, however, there is a more significant ideological shift that occurs in the pages of the catalogue. By re-framing charitable aid as a mock shopping experience, the charity gift catalogue ushers in an entirely new set of values, assumptions, and logic that shape the way in which donors understand and engage in philanthropic giving. In his analysis of the non-profit microfinance organization *Kiva*, Domen Bajde (2013) describes *Kiva's* entrepreneurial philosophy as not simply a market-oriented approach to addressing poverty (by crowd-funding micro-loans to small business owners) but as an "ideological retelling of poverty and philanthropy" (p.13). In *Kiva's* particular retelling, recipients in need of charitable aid are said to be able to lift themselves out of poverty by becoming entrepreneurs, and through the crowd-funding model, the most deserving entrepreneurs will receive the most financial support. In a similar vein, the aim of my project is to examine the ways in which *World Vision's* gift catalogue comes to ideologically retell and, given the catalogue format, *retail* charitable aid.

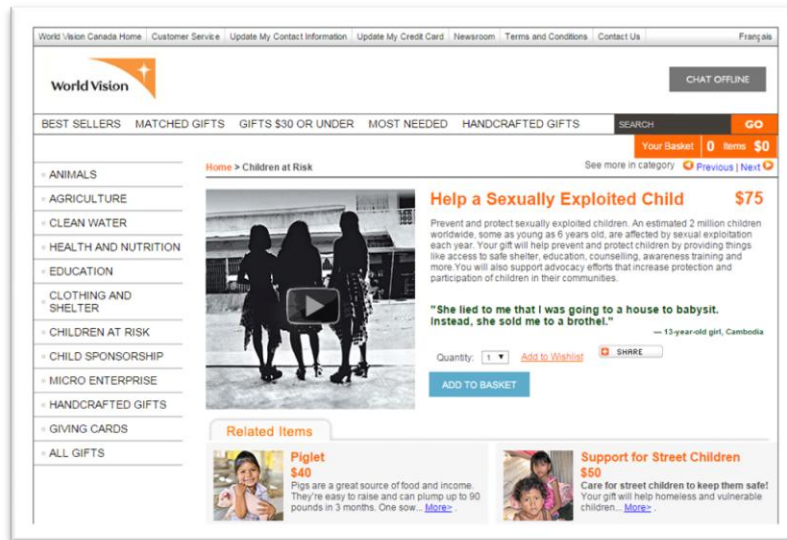
<sup>2</sup> There is some ambiguity as to how closely *World Vision* adheres to donors' choice of "products." For example, next to the offering for "2 hens and a rooster," the catalogue indicates in fine print: "[i]n countries where chickens are not appropriate or available, World Vision will provide poultry such as turkeys, ducks, doves or other fowl that can be raised and bred to help a family achieve self-reliance." Since *World Vision* provides aid to nearly 100 nations worldwide, some "products" and even their alternatives will not be suitable for all of the recipient countries. Goats, for instance, prefer dry climates. Similarly, most urban dwellers would not be able to benefit from farm or agricultural "products," even though livestock gifts dominate the pages of the catalogue. Thus, unless *World Vision* completely defies the donors' choice of "product" by using money for a goat, for example, to instead buy school books for city children (and the fine print does not suggest that this happens), then it is the donor who is largely in control of what items will be supplied, and by extension, which countries will receive aid.

Having spent many years working in the marketing departments of various non-profit organizations, I am the first to admit that the charity gift catalogue is an exceedingly clever approach to raising funds. It is playful and accessible and a refreshing contrast to the guilt-driven appeals that have characterized charity campaigns for so long (see Jefferess, 2007; Moeller, 1999). For organizations such as *World Vision* which already enjoy a high number of monthly donors, the gift catalogue is also a powerful tool for extracting an additional donation from these donors during the holiday season, making it a strong revenue generator.

The narrative that girds the gift catalogue is also a compelling one — particularly for the donor. Not only does the catalogue focus on material goods that address issues of poverty, but it is the donor who decides exactly which of the items his/her money will be used to procure, seemingly increasing the charity's accountability. It is also not a coincidence that year after year, *World Vision's* catalogue is front-loaded with “products” (mostly livestock) that theoretically empower recipients to provide for themselves. For example, pigs — highlighted as the gift that “keeps on giving” in the 2014 catalogue — are described as “a great source of food and income....One sow can produce a litter of piglets every year to sell at market. Bring *lasting change* with the gift of pigs!” (emphasis added). The dominant philosophy of the charity gift catalogue, thus, follows the logic of “teaching a [wo]man to fish” so that aid recipients are not dependent on donors indefinitely.

Despite the initial excitement for charity gift catalogues, I cannot seem to shake the feeling of discomfort that comes from trying to save people from malnutrition and disease by browsing through a catalogue. Moreover, I feel uneasy about saving a child from sexual exploitation by clicking the “Add to Basket” button next to the picture of a young girl's silhouette on the online version of the catalogue (see Fig.1.2.). And I am haunted by the idea that a person's access to clean water, vaccinations, and education are presented as equivalent options — simply a matter of consumer choice and popularity. It is these feelings of uneasiness that have prompted this critical enquiry. Without denying the lucrative nature of the charity gift catalogue and the good intentions behind them, this project aims to explore the charity gift catalogue as both a vehicle of

the ideology of consumer culture and a sign of a larger paradigmatic shift towards what I call “consumption-oriented philanthropy.”<sup>3</sup>



**Fig.1.2. World Vision Canada’s online charity gift catalogue**

Note: A screen capture of *World Vision’s* online gift catalogue which replicates the format of a typical retail shopping website, most notably by encouraging donors to select a “Quantity” from the drop-down menu then to click “Add to Basket.” Gift Catalogue [website], by *World Vision Canada*, n.d., retrieved from <https://catalogue.worldvision.ca/collections/all-gifts/products/2485>

## 1.1. Thesis Roadmap

The beauty of qualitative research is that it has the ability to tackle enquiries that resist quantitative measurement and rigid frameworks of understanding. In a similar vein, this thesis is organized in a somewhat unconventional manner in that the literature review follows rather than precedes the textual analysis of the *World Vision* catalogue. Instead of adhering to a more traditional template, I build each of the chapters around a

<sup>3</sup> Samantha King (2006) uses the term “consumption-oriented philanthropy” in her book *Pink Ribbons Inc.* but her use of the term corresponds to what I refer to as “consumption-based philanthropy.” I offer my own definitions of both terms in this and subsequent chapters.

specific question on the topic, namely the ‘what?’, the ‘how?’, and the ‘why?’ of commodified philanthropy.

Chapter two is dedicated to explaining *what* the commodification of philanthropy comprises and how it has manifest in recent years. It delineates and defines two streams of commodified philanthropy which I label as “consumption-based philanthropy” and “consumption-oriented philanthropy.” Consumption-based philanthropy is that which involves a third party for-profit company borrowing the name of a non-profit organization to generate sales. These partnerships commonly manifest as co-branded products of which partial proceeds are donated to the charity. Popular examples include (RED)-branded products that support HIV research, and pink ribbon-branded products that support a number of different breast cancer organizations. Consumption-oriented philanthropy, meanwhile, removes the for-profit component altogether by reformulating aid recipients or charitable aid itself into symbolic commodities. An example of this (and the main focus of my research) is the *World Vision* gift catalogue which theatrically<sup>4</sup> represents charitable aid as different “products” for sale — complete with product codes, prices, and a mail-in order — transforming the act of helping a fellow human being into a “shopping” experience. I ground this argument in a critical analysis of how the recipients of charitable aid are brought to symbolic equivalence and therefore become commodities. As a means to situate *World Vision* in its larger context, this chapter also provides some background information on the organization and on its major fundraising campaigns.

Chapter three consists of a close reading of the *World Vision* gift catalogue as a means to understand *how* the catalogue commodifies charitable aid. I open the chapter with a discussion of the potency of representation as a source of shared meaning — one

<sup>4</sup> I borrow the concept of theatrical representations from scholar Susan Willis (1991) who explores historical theme parks and in-store bakeries as theatrical representations of manual labour in her book *A Primer for Daily Life*. I elaborate on Willis’ theory more deeply in the third chapter.

that shapes cultural understandings and expectations of philanthropy. Following in the footsteps of scholar Susan Willis, I approach this analysis through the lens of packaging — that is, I look at how charitable aid has been packaged or represented as “products for sale” by examining the basic functions of retail packaging including quantification, standardization, and aestheticization. Willis (1991) argues, moreover, that in addition to these basic functions, packaging is a form of representation that carries the logic of the commodity form and the values of capitalism. The *World Vision* gift catalogue is therefore shown to be more than just a light-hearted re-packaging of philanthropy as a “shopping” experience; rather, it is an “ideological retelling” (Bajde, 2013, p. 13) of charitable aid that subtly prescribes the market as the appropriate avenue through which to solve social problems.

Chapter four tackles the question of *why* it is important think critically about the commodification of philanthropy, drawing on existing literature on the flaws of “shopping for change.” I also situate the phenomenon within the context of neoliberalism<sup>5</sup> and argue that the commodification of philanthropy is precisely a product of, as well as a vehicle for, neoliberalization (Edwards, 2010; Farrell, 2014, Nickel & Eikenberry, 2009). While not discounting the popularity of consumption-oriented philanthropy and the monetary support that it has garnered in the short term, I raise questions about the way in which consumption-oriented philanthropy changes the identity of the donor into that of

<sup>5</sup> David Harvey (2007) defines neoliberalism as: “in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices” (p.2). Crucially, Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) add that “neoliberal society has reimagined not just economic transactions and resources but also social and individual relations, the dynamics of affect and emotion, modes of social and political resistance, and the terrain of culture itself. It is not simply that neoliberalism has seized realms of life hitherto sheltered from the relations of production but that neoliberalism reorganizes society and culture...” (p.9). With these definitions in mind, I approach the *World Vision* gift catalogue as a reflection but also a reinforcement of neoliberal values.

a donor-consumer hybrid, and about how that might affect the health of charities in the long term. Lastly, I discuss the possible negative ramifications of commodifying and aestheticizing philanthropy in both theoretical and practical terms for non-profit organizations. Drawing on scholarly arguments and my own experience in working in non-profit environments, I offer my view on how to curb and reduce the commodification of philanthropy through a conscious return to what I believe that non-profits do best: storytelling.

In addition to providing a roadmap of what I intend to accomplish in this thesis, it is equally important to iterate what I do *not* attempt to cover in my work. First, this thesis does not measure how public opinion of philanthropy has changed as a result of consumption-oriented philanthropy nor do I propose that such a change has fully taken effect. For the most part, I consider consumption-based and consumption-oriented philanthropy to still be in their early stages of growth. The goal, then, is to throw a proverbial wrench into the works of non-profits participating in the commodification of philanthropy, even before the long-term consequences materialize. Second, although I briefly explore *World Vision's* child sponsorship program to contextualize the commodification of philanthropy in the current environment, the focus of this thesis is instead on *World Vision's* gift catalogue campaign. Additionally, I have chosen to study the gift catalogue from *World Vision* not to demonize any particular non-profit organization but to provide an in-depth analysis of but one of the many charity gift catalogues that are currently in circulation. *World Vision's* catalogues are certainly not identical to those of other charitable organizations, but the style and language used in these catalogues are strikingly similar. Therefore, the *World Vision* gift catalogue serves as a good exemplar of a larger and growing trend in the non-profit arena.



## Chapter 2.

### The (Good) Business of Charity: The Commodification of Philanthropy

*On a recent trip overseas with World Vision, I helped deliver a goat to a family....This is a great way to **shop** and know you've made a difference.*  
— Rick Campanelli, celebrity testimonial in *World Vision's* 2014 catalogue (emphasis added)

The Canadian charitable and non-profit sector is one of the largest in the world, accounting for over 7% of the country's GDP (Statistics Canada, 2009). As government funding for non-profit organizations continues to decrease in stability and monetary value in this era of neoliberalism, non-profits are increasingly turning to their for-profit business counterparts for fundraising strategies and ideas (see Bajde, 2013; Cameron & Haanstra, 2008; Eikenberry, 2009; Wirgau et al., 2010). The result is that, while maintaining their not-for-profit mandate, charitable organizations not only look increasingly like businesses but often find themselves competing in the marketplace — an arena to which charities do not traditionally belong. This chapter explores the dominant trends in the commodification of charitable causes in the last several decades. The aim is to establish a theoretical understanding of commodification and to identify instances of commodification in the non-profit arena, with a particular focus on *World Vision Canada (World Vision)*. Although commodified philanthropy manifests in many different forms — from charity-affiliated credit cards to child sponsorship programs — I broadly group them into two categories: consumption-based philanthropy and the more recent phenomenon of consumption-oriented philanthropy. At the end of the chapter, I also provide a brief overview of *World Vision*, its child sponsorship campaign, and its charity gift catalogue (the latter of which is the focus of this research).

Philanthropy and more specifically, charitable giving, is certainly not the first or only aspect of everyday life to undergo commodification, but it is perhaps the most telling

example of the dominance of market logic in Western societies. This is not to suggest a simplistic “Us vs. Them” or “good vs. bad” dichotomy between non- and for-profit organizations. As Susan Strasser (2003) aptly reminds us, the boundary between non- and for-profits is a historical construct, and it is, moreover, one that has shifted over time. Nonetheless, this boundary, however flexible it may be, is currently undergoing a significant change — a moment(s) in the history of philanthropy that is worthy of critical attention.

While the boundary is more fluid than it may appear, at the most basic level, non-profits are defined by a *raison d’etre* that is the opposite of that of a for-profit business, and as such, non-profits have the ability to take on projects that for-profits cannot pursue and vice versa. In fact, in the USA, the legality of corporations making charitable donations was challenged up until the 1950s: it was a 1953 ruling in the New Jersey Supreme Court that finally established that a corporate donation from *A. P. Smith Manufacturing to Princeton University* did not constitute a misuse of corporate funds (King, 2006). Despite the legality of corporate donations today, Muhammad Yunus (2003), founder of the micro-loan organization *Grameen Bank*, explains that because corporations are legally bound to their responsibility to pursue profits for their stakeholders, corporations are still unable to knowingly take on money-losing ventures in the name of philanthropy. Yunus (2003) stresses, therefore, that it is important to have non-profit organizations to pursue causes that are important to a community but not financially profitable.

It is all too easy to point to the adoption of certain marketing or promotional techniques by non-profits as being a sign of commodification. However, the practice of presenting oneself in the best light — that is, marketing a cause, an organization etc. — is not and has never been the exclusive domain of for-profit companies. Non-profit organizations have always tried to win the favour of the public, and there has always been a need to capture the attention of donors in order to garner support. And yet there is something decidedly different about the current mode of representation that is dominant in the non-profit arena. What is different is the extent to which the language of consumerism (of shopping) is used by non-profits. What is different is that donors or potential donors are invited to participate in philanthropy as consumers, encouraged to

browse through the various “solutions” or recipients in need before selecting their favourite. What is different is that charitable aid — the people in need or basic necessities like water or medicine — are readily offered to donors as if they were an assortment of products for sale. Meanwhile, Philip Kotler and Gerald Zaltman (1971) warn critics that the proliferation of market principles in the non-profit arena “will not disappear by ignoring it or railing [sic] against it” (p.3) — and they may very well be correct. But Kotler and Zaltman’s insistence that incorporating business marketing techniques to social causes is a “natural” development is based on an unexplained presumption that a fully commodified world is inevitable. A critical analysis of how philanthropy is being commodified is neither meant to dismantle capitalism nor is it a nostalgic lament for the way things used to be. Rather, it is an attempt to unravel this purportedly “natural” development and to encourage charitable organizations to look beyond the short-term benefits of adopting market principles and instead, think critically about the long-term consequences of making charitable giving look and feel like shopping. Finally, it is an opportunity to understand commodified philanthropy not just as a clever appeal to a consumerism-hungry society but as an “ideological retelling of poverty and philanthropy” (Bajde, 2013, p. 13), one that subtly prescribes the right and wrong ways to address social issues.

The commodification process is neither simply defined by the exchange of money nor by the pursuit of revenue. In Marxian terms, commodification involves the transformation of use value into exchange value whether or not money is the medium of exchange. While Marx was primarily interested in commodification in terms of the production of goods for the purpose of exchange rather than subsistence, this research focuses on the symbolic aspects of commodification — namely the way in which charitable aid is represented as if it were a commodity in the marketplace rather than actually being for sale. For example, donors looking to sponsor a child through *World Vision* understand that their \$39 monthly donation does not *purchase* the child. Nonetheless, the way in which *World Vision*’s website showcases these children — their profile pictures, hobbies, likes and dislikes etc. — looks and feels eerily similar to the way an online merchant might display sweaters for sale.

Marx's theory of equivalence helps to illuminate how these children in need of sponsorship become commodities without ever actually being for sale to donors. Marx describes exchange value as an abstraction of use value, and it is through this process of abstraction that disparate use values can come to equivalence and therefore be exchanged in the marketplace. In other words, abstraction converts the qualitative characteristics of different items (characteristics that determine the use value) into quantitative terms (exchange value) to facilitate exchange. Returning to *World Vision's* child sponsorship example, for \$39 a month, a donor can sponsor *any one* of the almost 2,000 children featured on the website because all of the children have been brought to symbolic equivalence (see Fig. 2.1.). From a consumer point of view, this equivalence likely feels quite natural — after all, when shopping for a sweater online, it is not unusual to be able to browse through different size and colour options, all with the same price tag. In much the same way, the over 1,900 children who are spread across over 100 different countries and who have individual stories and circumstances that contributed to their life of poverty, all of that is abstracted into an exchange value that, without necessarily making them identical, makes them interchangeable.



**Fig.2.1. World Vision Canada's Child Sponsorship Website**

Note: A screen capture of *World Vision's* website, showing the biography of just one of the 1,953 children (as indicated below the child's picture) whom the donor is encouraged to evaluate before selecting a child to sponsor. Sponsor a Child [website], by *World Vision Canada*, n.d., retrieved from [https://children.worldvision.ca/sponsorship/Forms/Child.aspx?direct=Y&lang=EN&mc=4328076&\\_ga=1.224716370.938383971.1442292167](https://children.worldvision.ca/sponsorship/Forms/Child.aspx?direct=Y&lang=EN&mc=4328076&_ga=1.224716370.938383971.1442292167)

As Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson (1996) explain, “[e]quivalence thus means that the quantitative value of things becomes dominant, to the neglect of that which is individual, personal, and specific” (p.22). It is through commodification that qualitatively different human beings can be brought to equivalence, then neatly repackaged in a language and format that appeals to a consumption-driven audience. Thus, human beings — in this particular case, those in need of charitable aid — are transformed into interchangeable commodities displayed on a website.

Commodification, moreover, does more than create symbolic commodities; as Marx observed, it creates a topsy-turvy world in which social relations emerge between inanimate objects while material relations exist between people. Marx developed this theory based on issues of labour and production, but this same contradiction emerges in a simplified manner in *World Vision’s* charity gift catalogue. In the catalogue, human needs are translated into material solutions that have been assigned a price. For example, a donor is asked to purchase “2 hens and a rooster” for \$150 to help alleviate the hunger of a family. Here, both poverty and charitable giving, which are social relations of inequality between the donor and recipient, are translated into, and replaced by, a material “product” in a catalogue. By virtue of assigning an exchange value (in this case, a dollar value) to these “products,” the social relations hidden beneath the material goods manifest, instead, as different price points between various “products.” Conversely, the gift catalogue also encourages material relations between people: the ability to help a fellow human being is framed in terms of the material goods that a donor can “purchase.” As will be examined in the next chapter, even when there is no obvious tangible good to represent a human need, the catalogue packages that need as if it were a “product” (e.g. the catalogue offers donors the chance to “help 2 sexually exploited children” for the price of \$150). Thus, as has been demonstrated in the two preceding examples, the charity gift catalogue commodifies charitable giving in a way that creates contradictory relations between people and inanimate things.

## 2.1. No Purchase Necessary: Consumption-based Philanthropy

*[T]he market is not a system for delivering political outcomes, even as many of us can't tell the difference between political campaigns and advertising (Dean, 2004, p.22)*

One of the most common and easily identifiable examples of commodified philanthropy is business-driven initiatives, variably known as corporate social responsibility (CSR), cause-related marketing (CRM), corporate philanthropy, consumption philanthropy, etc.<sup>6</sup> Although these types of campaigns come in all different shapes and sizes, the commodified aspect of this class of philanthropy is easy to identify because this type of fundraising is literally tied to the purchase of a product that, in part, benefits a for-profit company. It is important to emphasize that my definition of consumption-based philanthropy designates initiatives that have an explicit fundraising function — that is, through the purchase of a product, there is a promise or implied agreement that money will be donated to a named non-profit organization. This type of purchase-triggered donation should not be confused with the broader practice of ethical consumerism/consumption that aims to align consumption choices with the ethical priorities of the consumer through selective purchasing (e.g. buying fair-trade, ethically-produced goods or boycotting unethical producers). While many consider consumption-based philanthropy to be an incarnation of ethical consumption (see King, 2006; Littler, 2010), I maintain the distinction here to narrow the scope of my project.

Angela Eikenberry (2013) offers three broad categories of CRM (what I call consumption-based philanthropy): 1) the transactional model involves a for-profit company selling a good/service of which full or partial proceeds are donated to a

<sup>6</sup> These terms have slightly different meanings but because these terms are often used interchangeably by businesses, I have chosen to overlook the nuances in the definitions for this project.

charitable cause; 2) the promotion-based model entails a for-profit company creating awareness for a charitable cause while simultaneously making a monetary donation that is not necessarily contingent on sales of the company's products (the company may have a pre-established donation amount); and 3) the licensing model involves a charity licensing its brand to a for-profit company and in return, the charity receives a donation per transaction. An example of this is charity-branded credit cards (see Eikenberry, 2013). Although I believe that there is room for additional categories in Eikenberry's model and that there is a need to emphasize the possibility of overlap between classifications, her framework allows us to understand some of the general trends in CRM. To that end, I prefer to use the term "consumption-based philanthropy" to describe the aforementioned categories of CRM because a third-party commodity purchase is required.<sup>7</sup> Popular examples of consumption-based philanthropy include: one-for-one campaigns (where the purchase of a product prompts the company to give a similar item to someone in need as in the case of *Toms* shoes) and co-branded products (e.g. pink ribbon *Kitchenaid* mixers) that exist in the market.

As many scholars have noted, consumption-based philanthropy is not only built on the visible act of commodity consumption but just as importantly, on the less visible values of consumer culture. Jessica Wirgau, Kathryn Farley and Courtney Jensen (2010) assert that CRM (in this case, consumption-based philanthropy) is founded upon at least three key assumptions: 1) that there is a lack of awareness of the needs of people seeking aid; 2) that awareness will prompt people to take action through consumption because it is the easiest solution; and 3) that the market is a capable and

<sup>7</sup> Admittedly, Eikenberry's second category of promotion-based CRM does not require a purchase because the for-profit company has committed to make a donation to the charitable cause regardless of sales. However, I still consider this to be consumption-based philanthropy because from the perspective of the consumer, it is through the consumption of the company's products that the donor is invited to participate in that philanthropic project. In other words, the consumer's role in being a part of company x's charitable campaign is to purchase a product from company x, thereby making this a type of philanthropy that is directly based on consumption.

appropriate medium to administer or provide aid. Indeed, “awareness-raising” has become a popular buzzword in the non-profit arena in recent years and is a common objective in many consumption-based fundraising campaigns. In some instances, companies will use raising awareness as a means to justify the small percentage of revenue that the company is donating to a cause (see Littler, 2010) — that is, a company claims that raising awareness is just as valuable (if not more valuable) than raising money (see King, 2006). But as Jodi Dean (1999) argues, being aware of and having an opinion on an issue is not equivalent to having the capability or infrastructure to make a systemic change for the good. She posits, moreover, that increasingly, people are satisfied by simply having and communicating an opinion, rather than seeking to effect change through such communication. In other words, communication — such as a company raising awareness about a cause — becomes the end rather than a means to an end (Dean, 1999). As one can imagine, positioning awareness as a major goal of consumption-based philanthropy also bodes well for the sales of co-branded products such as pink-coloured mittens or (RED) Gap t-shirts because these goods are highly visible signs of one’s support of a charitable cause. This is precisely what Wirgau et al. (2010) describe in their second assumption: consumption-based philanthropy presumes that awareness will lead to action and not surprisingly, the type of action that the companies put forth is consumption. While consumption may indeed be a very convenient form of action for many people, it also gives rise to a number of contradictions. Samantha King (2006), for example, documents the irony of *Revlon* being a major sponsor of a breast cancer walk given that many *Revlon* products contain known carcinogens. This leads us to Wirgau et al.’s third point that consumption-based philanthropy positions the marketplace as an ideal authority on solving social issues, even while deeply contradictory cases like *Revlon*’s breast cancer sponsorship suggest otherwise. Again, it is important to emphasize that for-profit and non-profit work are not necessarily incompatible, but the legal obligation of for-profit companies to pursue profits may lead to contradictions or prevent them from undertaking money-losing projects that are nonetheless important to society (Yunus, 2003). Relying on the market to produce solutions — usually through purchasable commodities — is particularly problematic for causes such as environmental protection and poverty reduction because it grossly ignores the role that overconsumption and the structural inequality of the capitalist



system have played in contributing to these issues in the first place (I explore this in greater detail in Chapter Four).

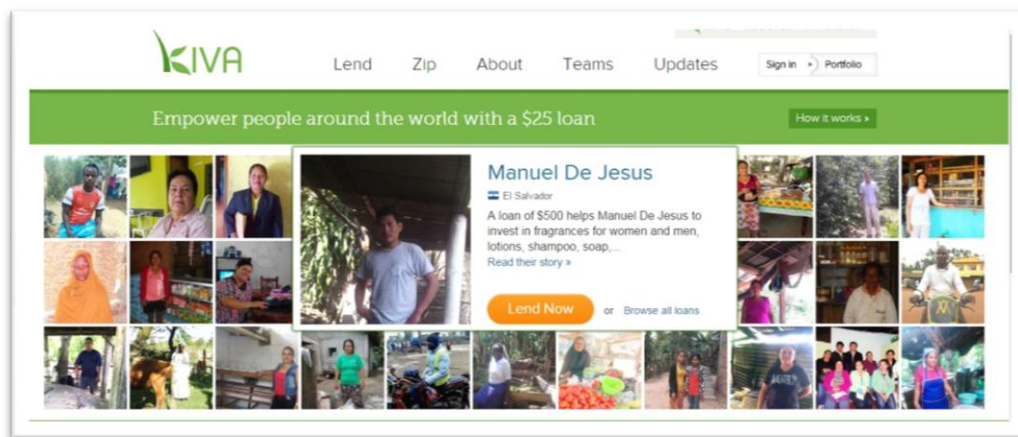
Even as the market continues to embrace consumption-based philanthropy, growing public and scholarly scrutiny of such initiatives has contributed to a changing landscape in the non-profit arena. While there is extensive academic critical research on consumption-based philanthropy, there is considerably less scholarship dedicated to understanding the growing trend of non-profits initiating campaigns that make charitable giving look and feel like shopping (without a third-party product purchase) — or what I call “consumption-oriented philanthropy.”

## **2.2. All that is New and Shiny: Consumption-oriented Philanthropy**

We can view consumption-based philanthropy, as described above, as an attempt by for-profit businesses to associate themselves with non-profits. This trend is not wholly surprising given the esteemed position that charity holds in society. Nathan Farrell (2015), moreover, suggests that the 2008 financial crash has significantly accelerated consumption-based philanthropy as businesses attempt to repair their damaged post-recession reputation. But we are now in an era that is so deeply engrossed in the practices of capitalism that we are witnessing the opposite phenomenon: whether we want to label it as professionalization, marketization, innovation, or commodification, what we are seeing is that non-profits are trying to be more like businesses. This emulation, moreover, goes much deeper than simply borrowing fundraising strategies and best practices. Rather, it is an adoption of the ideology of capitalism and the logic of the commodity.

Consumption-oriented philanthropy is a newer class of philanthropic efforts that is heavily guided by market principles without involving a for-profit entity. In the course of eliminating the third party product, however, what comes to replace the item for sale is charitable aid itself or its recipient. In other words, instead of selling a pink-coloured frying pan, the charity “sells” 1) a tangible representation of aid (such as a community water well) or 2) the story of person in need, who often serves as a representative of all

aid recipients. In fact, this new class of commodities is presented and described in ways that echo the style and language of traditional product marketing: goats for needy families are labelled as “Best Sellers” in mock gift catalogues, thousands of children’s profiles are made available to donors to compare before selecting their favourite, and the ability to help someone in need is described in terms of its economic value and efficiency. Types of initiatives that I categorize as consumption-oriented philanthropy include *World Vision’s* child sponsorship website<sup>8</sup> (the child is the commodity; see Fig.2.1.), Kiva’s micro-lending/micro-credit website (the person seeking a loan is the commodity; see Fig. 2.2.), and *World Vision’s* charity gift catalogues (tangible representations of aid are the commodity).



**Fig.2.2. Kiva’s website**

Note: On Kiva’s website, donors browse through the stories of people seeking micro-loans before deciding to whom to direct their donation. Kiva [website], by Kiva, n.d., retrieved from <http://www.kiva.org/>

While consumption-oriented philanthropy may ease the concern that a for-profit company is profiting off of a consumer’s goodwill, this approach remains deeply rooted

<sup>8</sup> The concept of child sponsorship has existed since the 1950s but it is only in recent years that the children have been marketed in such a way that commodifies their story. In the past, the organization simply matched a child with a donor and monetary contributions went directly to helping that specific child.

in the logic of capitalism. In fact, even without the presence of a for-profit company, consumption-oriented philanthropy is still based on many of the same assumptions that are the foundation of consumption-based philanthropy (see previous section). First, although awareness plays a small role in consumption-oriented philanthropy, the concept of consumption as social or political action still figures heavily. In fact, the *World Vision* gift catalogue is a prime example of idealizing the transformative power of consumption — that is, the basic premise of the charity gift catalogue is that donors can “shop for change.” Moreover, the catalogue is so invested in the idea that consumption is the most attractive and convenient type of action for donors that it theatrically represents intangible forms of charitable aid (for example, saving a child from sexual exploitation) as quantified “products” (I explore an example of this in greater detail in subsequent sections). By forcibly changing all of forms of aid into an act of consumption, the gift catalogue indirectly but systematically ignores all other social and political action.

In fact, there is a noticeable absence of any suggestion of other types of philanthropic activity such as volunteering or organizing politically for policy change throughout the catalogue. Instead, the only course of action that is asked of the donor is to shop. For instance, while the catalogue features personal anecdotes from celebrities who have travelled overseas to volunteer for *World Vision*, the calls to action in the catalogue are always for donors to “shop” rather than engage in any other form of philanthropic activity. In one testimonial from singer Tom Cochrane in the 2009 catalogue, he writes: “I helped distribute gifts from the World Vision Gift Catalogue to villages in Africa....And *you can be a part of it simply by shopping* from this catalogue” (emphasis added). In this quotation, “shopping” from the catalogue is proffered as a way

of taking part in someone else's volunteer efforts. Without denying that voluntourism<sup>9</sup> can also be a problematic colonialist activity, the point here is that the gift catalogue positions individual "shopping" not just as a simple way to help someone in need, but in the context of the catalogue, as the *only* option for donors. This therefore obscures the possibility of alternative or supplementary forms of action for social change. Although the theatrical representation of aid is somewhat extreme in the *World Vision* gift catalogue, it is important to remember that this is not a singular example of placing consumption above all other forms of philanthropic action. Rather, as mentioned earlier, this privileging of consumption over other forms of action is part of the fundamental ideology of consumption-based philanthropy (Wirgau et al., 2010), and as has been shown now, of consumption-oriented philanthropy. We must therefore understand the phenomena of consumption-based and consumption-oriented philanthropy as vehicles that promote consumption as social action at the expense of other forms of philanthropic and political activity. The result, in Henri Giroux's words, is a "[pr]ivatization of one's response to social events...translat[ing] the possibility of agency to the privatized act of buying goods rather than engaging forms of self and social determination" (Giroux, 1993, p. 22).

Similar to consumption-based philanthropy, consumption-oriented philanthropy idealizes the marketplace as an appropriate site for resolving social issues. In so doing, it also reinforces the values of consumerism — namely freedom of choice — as legitimate and important within the philanthropic arena. What is common to all forms of consumption-oriented philanthropy is an abundance of choice: an entire catalogue of *World Vision* "products", profiles of over 1,900 children who need a *World Vision* sponsor, and over 5,000 individuals explaining why they deserve a loan on *Kiva's*

<sup>9</sup> Voluntourism is the practice of travelling to a different country (often in the global South) in order to engage in some form of volunteer activity, such as building a school or houses for people in need. While voluntourism remains a popular activity, there is growing criticism of the practice, including ethical concerns over the high cost of travel, the unskilled labour of the participants, and the reinforcement of colonial power relations (see Smith, 2014).

website. Implicit in this celebration of choice is the idea that — as in the for-profit market — the person with the money (the donor or the consumer) knows best. He/she is deemed to be the appropriate person to select what “product(s)” an unspecified family needs, which child is most worthy of monthly financial support, and which entrepreneur is most deserving of a loan. It is of course implied that the non-profit organization has performed the initial legwork of screening the recipients to ensure that he/she qualifies for aid, but the donor still acts as the final arbiter. In fact, the language and structure used in consumption-oriented philanthropic appeals often cater to the importance of the donor’s selection process in different ways. First, by offering so many “product” options, the donor almost has no choice but to engage in comparison shopping. Second, consumption-oriented philanthropy often employs phrases in its marketing such as “select a child to sponsor” (*World Vision* child sponsorship website), “browse loans” (*Kiva* website), and “find the perfect gift!” (*World Vision* gift catalogue) (emphasis added) to highlight the role of the donor in choosing the right option. Third, by presenting information about each “product” in a standardized way (for example, every child in need of a sponsor answers the same questions for their biography), consumption-oriented philanthropy facilitates the evaluation process for the donor – that is, the organizations purposely try to make it easy for donors to compare one “product” against another.

In addition to encouraging comparison shopping, the *World Vision* gift catalogue asserts the legitimacy of donor choice by emphasizing the popularity of certain products. The *World Vision* gift catalogue highlights certain “products” as “Best Sellers” or “Top Picks”, presumably as a means to validate that “product” as a smart choice for donors. And yet, the label “Best Seller” has little to do with “effectiveness” of the “product” or whether it is in high demand; it only indicates that the item is a popular choice among previous donors — donors who, it should be emphasized, likely do not have first-hand experience of the geographically-specific conditions of poverty and inequality that afflict the recipients. Nonetheless, consumption-oriented philanthropy structurally positions the donor as a capable and appropriate judge (even if only theatrically) of what is needed most by recipients.

What is striking about consumption-oriented philanthropy is that it has largely been initiated by charitable organizations themselves. In his study of *Kiva*, Bajde (2013)

makes the important point that what is different about the case of *Kiva* is that the celebration of commodified philanthropy — which as discussed earlier is largely premised on the idea that the capitalist market has better solutions to solving the world's ills than traditional charity models — comes from the non-profit organizations rather than from for-profit companies or philanthropcapitalists who have a vested interest in maintaining the dominant position of the market in society. As Farrell (2015) argues, it is hardly a surprise that those who have made their fortune in the capitalist system are often the strongest proponents of using business logic and mechanisms to solve social problems. On a more cynical note, Michael Edwards (2010) explains that those who have amassed great fortunes through capitalism will never try to dismantle it. In fact, this gives us some insight as to why organizations like *Kiva* and (RED) position their business-oriented philanthropy models as superior alternatives to 'traditional' charity (Bajde, 2013; Wirgau et al., 2010): their co-founders (Bono and Jessica Jackley respectively) are successful entrepreneurs. The curious case then becomes that of non-profit organizations like *World Vision* and other charities that engage in consumption-oriented philanthropy because these are organizations which, as far as I know, are not led by entrepreneurs. As will be shown in the next chapter, despite the non-entrepreneurial leadership of *World Vision*, there is an ever-present pro-market ideology that permeates its gift catalogue.

### **2.3. The Commodification of Philanthropy and *World Vision Canada***

In the previous section, I attempted to illustrate how consumption-oriented philanthropy differs from consumption-based philanthropy, and I drew upon a number of different non-profit initiatives including *Kiva* and *World Vision's* child sponsorship to show that consumption-oriented philanthropy is not just a singular anomaly but a growing trend in the non-profit arena. Having painted a rather broad picture of the commodification of philanthropy, the primary objective of this thesis is to focus on the charity catalogue produced by *World Vision Canada*. The following section provides some historical information about *World Vision Canada* and two of its major campaigns.

I chose to study the Canadian division of *World Vision* in particular because it is my home country, and more importantly, its charitable and non-profit sector is the second largest in the world (Statistics Canada, 2009). In a similar vein, I focus on *World Vision* because it is the largest international children's aid organization in Canada both in terms of staff size and fundraising revenue (Imagine Canada, 2013). It also enjoys a strong media presence and public profile, which means that it has the potential to reach a wider audience than other charitable organizations. According to *World Vision's* catalogue, money raised through the catalogue is used to develop projects within Canada and abroad.

*World Vision Canada* is a regional division of *World Vision*, a Christian humanitarian organization that provides aid in over 100 countries both in the global North and global South<sup>10</sup>. Founded in the 1950s, *World Vision* and its regional offices are committed to helping recipients in financial need of all ages, races, and religions but their marketing often focuses on helping children in the global South. Between 2011 and 2013, *World Vision Canada* had annual revenue of between \$390 million and \$399 million (Canada Revenue Agency).

*World Vision* was one of the first organizations to introduce a charity gift catalogue, publishing its first issue in 2002. It has continued to disseminate a catalogue every Christmas since that time. Its development has largely been influenced by its precursor, the child sponsorship program, which continues to operate today and is the

<sup>10</sup> While *World Vision* and other organizations use the term "developing" countries, many scholars have pointed to the developing/developed classification as problematic due to assumptions of what is/is not "developed." This terminology also implies that there is such a thing as a linear and inevitable path towards being "developed." For these reasons, I opt for the terms "global North" to describe countries that are economically and politically privileged and "global South" to refer to countries that do not enjoy the same privileges. Although the North/South divide is not entirely accurate geographically, 95% of economically poor countries are located south of the equator and this terminology has the advantage of removing some of the judgment imposed by the "developing/developed" terminology. Another viable option is Majority World/Two-Thirds World but that terminology has yet to gain much traction in academia and popular usage.

most lucrative and perhaps the most recognizable campaign for *World Vision*. The charity gift catalogue and child sponsorship program operate concurrently. In fact, the gift catalogue is often used as a tool for enticing existing child sponsorship donors (who donate monthly) to give additional contributions during the holiday season.

Having grown out of the legacy of the *World Vision* child sponsorship program, the charity gift catalogue builds upon certain aspects of its predecessor while exhibiting important differences. In fact, the child sponsorship program is a staunch reminder that the commodification of philanthropy — even on a symbolic level — is by no means a new phenomenon. The charitable organization *Plan* claims credit for pioneering child sponsorship programs in 1937, and *World Vision Canada* has offered child sponsorship opportunities since 1957. In its early iterations, the money that donors contributed was allocated specifically to their sponsored child; however, academic and public critique soon emerged citing issues of jealousy and inequality that resulted from the direct sponsorship model (see Cooper, 2014). This prompted *World Vision* (and other similar charities) to modify its program so that sponsorship money is now mostly pooled and shared amongst multiple families, but donors still have the opportunity to communicate with one specific child who acts as an ‘ambassador’ for the program (Cooper, 2014).

The charity gift catalogue takes the commodification of philanthropy one step further than the child sponsorship program in that the importance of the recipient is largely usurped by the “product” to be gifted — although a child is pictured with each “product,” the emphasis of the text is on the popularity, effectiveness, and/or novelty of the “product.” In this way, the experience of “shopping” is granted priority over learning about the recipient’s situation and circumstance, and more broadly, understanding the socio-economic conditions that contribute to the poverty of the recipients.

To be sure, it is not difficult to understand the practical reasons for which charities have arrived at this mode of representation to solicit donors. The charity provides biographies of the children so that donors can feel a human connection and develop a kinship towards children who are geographically and often culturally distant. Moreover, the children are likely asked standardized questions (e.g. name, age, favourite subject) for their biographies to facilitate efficient information gathering and



distribution. Meanwhile, the charity gift catalogue gives donors an opportunity to have a supposed say in how their donation is spent. All of these choices seem like practical decisions from the standpoint of the organization. And yet, what may appear as pragmatic to the organization can invite particular behaviour from donors. It would not be difficult, for example, to surmise which types of children are most likely to be chosen by the donors: female, younger, conventionally good-looking (by the standards of the donor's home country), fairer-skinned, and living in countries that are well-known for being poor. And in fact, it doesn't matter too much to *World Vision* if particular children are chosen over others because the money is pooled to help multiple children. Thus, even the less conventionally-attractive children or those who have omitted photographs will receive charitable aid. The children, therefore, simply serve as an aestheticized means to attract donors. But in so doing, *World Vision* encourages donors to hand-pick their sponsored child based on aesthetics and consumer values. In a similar vein, by standardizing the information available in the children's biographies, *World Vision* not only makes it easier for, but actively encourages, the donor to engage in comparison shopping through the children who again, while not identical, are made into interchangeable commodities.

Although I take a critical approach to analyzing charity catalogues, this work should not be read as a criticism of any particular charitable organization, nor even of charitable work in general. In fact, from the perspective of the organization, I am the first to admit that the use of a charity catalogue is a clever and often lucrative fundraising tool. However, it is important to understand that equating philanthropy to shopping is more than just a playful metaphor. The charity catalogue is more than a fundraising tool; it is a mechanism of communication that has the potential to shape donors' understanding of philanthropy as a whole. The message, moreover, not only affects donors at an individual level but contributes to the larger cultural and social meaning of philanthropy. As Henri Lefebvre observes, "[c]ommodities do not assert themselves *qua* things but rather *qua* a kind of *logic* (cited in Goldman & Papson, 1996, p. 19). Thus, it does not matter that the *World Vision* gift catalogue is a theatrical representation of shopping rather than a true marketplace because the logic of the commodity still permeates the environment. In fact, the promotion of the ideology of capitalism is ever more powerful in consumption-oriented philanthropy *because* it is subtle. Rather than

sell a trinket co-branded with a charity's logo, the organizations offer up the aid recipient or tangible representations of aid as "products," putting the "product" at the forefront of the donation experience. The result is that the very act of helping a fellow human being is transformed into a shopping experience. This quietly reinforces the idea that one can and should "shop for change" and that the marketplace (even a theatrical one) is the best and most effective site through which to achieve this change. While it may alleviate some of the public concerns over the profit-motive of consumption-based philanthropy, consumption-oriented philanthropy represents an important shift in the conception of charitable giving — how it is perceived, understood, and experienced by donors.

## Chapter 3.

### Representing Charitable Aid

*Any other world, different from that provided by the commodities, is almost no longer accessible to men [sic]. (Haug, 1986, p.52)*

This project focuses on gift catalogues from *World Vision* published between 2009 and 2014, but it should be noted that the use of gift catalogues has grown in popularity in the last decade, with at least 21 Canadian charities publishing a gift catalogue in 2014 (Charity Intelligence Canada, 2014). Gift catalogues are particularly popular among international aid charities like *Plan*, *SOS Children's Villages*, and *Oxfam*. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a detailed analysis of *how* charitable aid is packaged as “products” and how the act of philanthropy is transformed into a “shopping” experience in *World Vision's* gift catalogue.

#### 3.1. Representation

While it is all too easy to overlook charity gift catalogues as simply pieces of junk mail, it is important to recognize gift catalogues, instead, as cultural texts. As Stuart Hall (2013) explains, culture is made up of shared meanings between any given group, and these shared meanings are created, molded, and challenged through the language of representation. These shared meanings not only serve a symbolic function; they shape everyday conduct and practices (Hall, 2013). Customs, conventions — and, therefore, expectations — are formed around these meanings precisely because they are shared. Thus, while it is evident to most readers that the *World Vision* gift catalogue is an intentional play on for-profit retail catalogues, we must push beyond the metaphor to realize that these gift catalogues are specific representations of charitable aid that have

the potential to shape the shared understanding of what charitable aid is, what it should (and should not) look like, and how to best help people in need.

As Andrew Wernick (1991) proposes, “advertising does not just reflect the values of society back to us — at the very least they mirror particular values at specific angles” (p. 42). In other words, advertising — and all forms of representation — privilege certain values while obscuring others. Thus, the task at hand is not really to question whether the *World Vision* charity gift catalogue as a representation is “True/False” (i.e. reflective of reality or not); rather, it is to examine the gift catalogue as a representation of charitable aid that favours certain values over others. Representation also plays a central role in meaning-making because it provides us with the vocabulary (visual, audio, and/or linguistic) with which we think and speak about an object or idea. For example, when feeding a family that is living in poverty is framed in terms of “products” that can be bought from a catalogue, then there is a natural tendency, both on the side of the catalogue creators and the potential donors, to focus on the merits of the item as a *product*. As will be discussed in this chapter, this translates to an emphasis on quantifying aid into discrete units, evaluating the quality of the “product” and even measuring its cost effectiveness. In short, as a representational form, *World Vision's* catalogue format ‘mirrors’ the values of a for-profit consumer marketplace ‘at such an angle’ that consumer values are pushed to the forefront as not only legitimate, but significant criteria of evaluation.

*World Vision's* charity gift catalogue is a representation that is deeply rooted in consumer culture. If “imitation is the sincerest of flattery”, then indeed, *World Vision's* attempt to transpose the visual and linguistic language of catalogue shopping to the act of charitable aid is an unabashed celebration of the consumer shopping experience. Instead of attempting to vilify consumer culture, the point here is that we must recognize that consumer culture brings its own set of values and logic that, as will be discussed further, may very well conflict with the goals of philanthropy in the long term.

Would it be fair, then, to say that this type of representation — even from a charity — is manipulative? Wolfgang Fritz Haug (1986) argues that all advertising is manipulative, and yet he adds that advertising still “speaks the language of real needs

even if it is as it were an alien expression of those needs which are now estranged and distorted beyond recognition” (p. 6). A family’s need for food, medicine, and education is a real need. A donor’s need to feel as if he/she is helping others is also a real — although markedly different — need. The point that deserves scrutiny and critical enquiry, however, is the way in which those needs are represented — basic human necessities like clean water and food are aestheticized and packaged as “products” to be *purchased from a catalogue*. The donor’s need to help others, which was formerly a relationship between fellow human beings, is eclipsed by a relationship between the donor and *things* that he/she can “buy” in the charity gift catalogue.

### **3.2. Wrapping Use Value: Packaging as Ideological Representation**

*Neither power nor its use has disappeared. It has only become more difficult to locate and to trace. (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p.14)*

To borrow from product marketing terminology, we can understand charitable aid as being *packaged* (represented) as a theatrical product. In her book *A Primer for Daily Life*, Susan Willis (1991) makes the compelling argument that one should focus on product packaging as a site of analysis because the logic of the commodity is “metaphorically reiterated in its packaging” (p.3). In other words, the immaculate packaging of the Macbook Pro or the plastic dome that envelops this year’s must-have toy do more than simply make a product look good; they are carriers of the values of consumer culture. As such, Willis’ detailed analysis of various packaging — from Disney theme parks to the branded stickers on bananas — is not simply a quirky fascination with product packaging; rather, her work stems from a much larger project: a desire to recover use value in everyday life — use value which has been abstracted into exchange value through the process of commodification. While professional packaging has become so commonplace today that it is often thought of as just a way to protect or beautify a product, Willis’ work points to a much deeper function of packaging in the system of consumer capitalism, which is aptly summed up by Guy Debord (1967/1994):

Use value was formerly understood as an implicit aspect of exchange value. Now, however, within the upside-down world of the spectacle, it

must be explicitly proclaimed, both because its actual reality has been eroded by the overdeveloped commodity economy and because it serves as a necessary pseudo-justification for a counterfeit life (p.50).

For Debord and Willis, the use value of everyday commodities is so obscured by its exchange value that it becomes necessary to artificially emphasize its use value. The result, however, is not a recovery of use value but a theatrical display of use value for the sake of increasing or pseudo-justifying exchange value. Willis argues that this is precisely why modern supermarkets display theatrical labours — in-store bakers, florists, butchers, etc. — which are incorporated “as if to compensate for” (p.17) the actual productive labour that is carried out behind the scenes of operating a grocery store. In this way, packaging plays a crucial role in the commodification process. As will be explored in the next section, creating and aestheticizing an anticipation of use value is a particularly important function of the *World Vision* gift catalogue packaging — after all, when a donor “buys” a goat from the gift catalogue, he/she will never experience the concrete use value of the goat since the donor is not the ultimate recipient of the “product.”

Willis (1991) also discusses a number of other practical — and at the same time, ideological — functions of product packaging in her work, including standardizing quantities and maintaining product purity. In this analysis, I will explore several of these and other functions in relation to the *World Vision* gift catalogue to demonstrate the way in which this representation commodifies charitable aid. Broadly speaking, I argue that this commodification involves two non-sequential transformations. First, human need is packaged as specific “products.” Thus, instead of asking donors to contribute a general donation to help a family in need, *World Vision* asks donors to buy a goat (or other tangible “products”) for a family. Second, the act of helping others is packaged as a shopping *experience*. Inviting donors to theatrically “shop” through a catalogue — which includes a tear-out mail order form, product codes, etc. — commodifies and aestheticizes the act of helping others. The emphasis is therefore placed on the experience of shopping and how fun it is, rather than on the need of the recipient. As will be discussed in Chapter Four, representing charitable aid from this shopping-centric angle obscures the root cause(s) of poverty in the global South as well as the political and historical struggle of the recipients.

What Willis offers is a Marxian analysis of product packaging as the site of the contradictions of the commodity form, and following in her footsteps, what I offer here is a critical analysis of the gift catalogue as a form of packaging to demonstrate the contradictions of not only the commodity form, but more specifically, of the attempt to transfer the logic of the commodity form to non-profit fundraising. I believe that Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's quotation at the beginning of this section rings true: the ideology of capitalism that pervades the *World Vision* gift catalogue is hard to 'locate and trace' precisely because it is overtly and unapologetically presented (and arguably received) as a metaphor or theatrical display rather than as a paradigmatic shift that equates charitable aid to shopping and, more broadly, that conflates citizenship and consumerism. This project, then, is a study of representation — an attempt to tear away or in Willis' words, to "unwrap" the layers of *packaging* of charitable aid as consumer "products" and to explore how such a representation might shape the shared understanding of the meaning of charitable aid. As I aim to show, the packaging of charitable aid as "products" in a gift catalogue contains just as many ideological implications as the box of any toy. In the remainder of this chapter, I examine how the gift catalogue transforms charitable aid into "products" by a) standardizing quantities b) creating an appearance of use value, and c) aestheticizing the act of helping others as a "shopping" experience.

### **3.3. It's (ac)countable: The Standardization of Quantities**

In the last several decades, financial accountability has become the zeitgeist of the charity world: donors scrutinize annual reports, financial statements, and staff salaries of charities before donating money. Websites like *Charity Navigator* (USA) and *Charity Intelligence Canada* provide comprehensive ratings on charitable organizations on factors such as fundraising efficiency, cost distributions, and funding reserves. I contend that this obsession with financial accountability arises not only from the occasional news story revealing the misuse of a charity's funds, but also from the penetration of capitalist market logic in society's consciousness — that is, the goal of maximizing efficiency and productivity is increasingly applied to non-economic areas of life. Thus, even though donors do not directly reap the benefits of their donation, they

are still on the lookout for a good return on investment (ROI) from a charity as they would in the marketplace. An oft-cited criticism from donors is that they do not feel as if they know “where their money is going,” which inhibits their ability to judge the ROI of their donation. Thus, we can surmise that the shift toward asking donors to “buy” tangible “products” in charity gift catalogues is, in part, a response to this criticism. By assigning a standardized “price” to tangible “products” such as goats or mosquito nets, *World Vision’s* gift catalogue appeases this fear (at least on the surface level). As will be shown in the following sections, the standardization of quantities through the packaging of the charity gift catalogue is not only a reflection of, but a vehicle for, the ideology of business accountability in non-profit spaces.

As Willis (1991) explains, an important function of any consumer product packaging is to standardize quantities: the volume/weight/number of goods contained within the package is labeled on the packaging, and that quantity is standard across all packages of that same product. In the case of cereal, for example, the box indicates the weight of the contents inside to the shopper. Historically, this standardization was instrumental in moving consumers away from bulk commodity purchases: by standardizing weights and adding a discernible brand, companies succeeded in differentiating their product from (often lower-priced) generic goods that were sold in bulk (Willis, 1991). While strategic branding has long played a role in charities, what is a relatively new development is letting donors select exactly what material items (and quantities) their donation will be used to purchase — that is, the *World Vision* gift catalogue does not ask donors to contribute towards the *general* goal of helping people; instead, it packages and “sells” charitable aid in discrete units of goats, sheep, vaccines, etc. The catalogue, for instance, clearly indicates that a donor can “buy” exactly four hens and two roosters for \$150, or two hens and one rooster for \$75. This is not to suggest that *World Vision* only started providing hens and roosters with the introduction of the gift catalogue; the organization has likely had a long history of using general donations to purchase tangible goods like chickens to give to recipients. However, to specifically package aid in purchasable units in gift catalogues is a marked ideological shift in that it feeds a consumption-oriented sensibility in donors, thereby encouraging donors to think of charitable aid as a consumptive activity.



In addition to pushing donors to conceptualize charitable aid in terms of “countable” product solutions, the gift catalogue also standardizes the quantity of recipients to be aided. For the most part, the lower-priced “products” in the catalogue are designated to help a single child and his/her family. In this way, the model of aid offered by the catalogue moves away from helping people “in bulk” to soliciting donations to support a specific number of recipients. Again, the shift here is more likely to be a conceptual (theatrical) rather than a practical one. As mentioned earlier for instance, even though *World Vision*’s child sponsorship program matches a donor one-to-one to a child for the purposes of exchanging letters and photographs, the donor’s monthly donation is pooled with that of other donors to support multiple children. Whether the gift catalogue follows a one-to-one model or pools money to help multiple recipients is not entirely relevant in this case because it does not remove the ideological implications of this representation. Regardless of how *World Vision* distributes its “products” amongst recipients, the point is that from the perspective of the donor who is reading the gift catalogue, charitable aid comes to be understood as helping a measurable number of recipients. As discussed in the second chapter, by quantifying charitable aid into discrete shopping-friendly units, qualitatively different humans and their individualized needs are brought to symbolic equivalence and literally given a price tag. The donor has the privilege of choosing whether his/her \$100 will buy a beehive, a goat, a cabinet full of medical supplies, or help exactly one little girl avoid a life of sexual slavery. Given those choices, how exactly does one choose?

Whether or not a donor struggles with the dilemma of having to choose between one of the options above, drawing equivalence between, and assigning a price to, charitable aid “products” is a representational choice that is centred on the interests of the donors rather than of the recipients. As Willis (1991) points out, one of the functions of standardizing product units is to assure shoppers that he/she will pay the same price as everyone else for that given quantity of goods. Moreover, in the absence of a scale or other tool of measurement, it is only the outer packaging of a product that can provide this guarantee since the standardized quantity is printed on it (Willis, 1991). In much the same way, the quantification and standardized pricing of charitable aid in *World Vision*’s gift catalogue assures donors that, much like in a grocery store, he/she will pay the same amount of money as everyone else for the given quantity of livestock or beehives.

Thus, the cruel irony is that even when life has not treated the recipients fairly, the marketplace — even a theatrical one — can guarantee that all donors will be treated equally as “shoppers.”

In fact, the very logic behind the gift catalogue format is largely built around the notion of accountability to donors. The premise is simple: if donors get to choose exactly what their donation money will be used to purchase, then donors can be reassured that non-profits will be held accountable in their spending. Following the logic of the business world, this reassurance is provided through the means of quantification — the theory goes that in order for charitable aid to be meaningful and impactful, it must be measurable. Thus, the catalogue translates acts such as feeding a family into the quantifiable “product” of “2 hens and a rooster.” Indeed, applying the consumer shopping framework to charitable aid has proven popular among charities (and presumably, donors) but there are other practical implications to consumption-oriented philanthropy. By presenting charitable activities in this way, there is the risk that acts of aid that are not easily quantifiable (but still necessary to recipients) will be less attractive to donors who are being targeted as consumers. A previously mentioned example is the act of ending child sexual exploitation. Although it is an important cause for many donors, the theatrical packaging of this aid as a quantified, monetized “product” — “Help 2 sexually exploited children [for] \$150” or “Help a sexually exploited child [for] \$75” — feels somewhat forced and uncomfortable because quantifying the exact number of children that one can save reminds donors that *other* children are not being saved. Presenting donors with two quantities of the same “product” at different price points, moreover, is eerily reminiscent of the retail practice of offering volume-based pricing (e.g. “buy one for \$12, buy two for \$20”), as if to suggest that helping one child versus two children is simply a consumer choice.

Fortunately, *World Vision* does not cross the line of offering a discount for saving multiple children from exploitation, but the gift catalogue also does not shy away from highlighting “products” as “good deals.” One of the strategies used in the gift catalogue to highlight good value is by emphasizing the productivity of a “product” in quantitative terms. The catalogue highlights rabbits, for instance, as being able to “produce 20 babies a year.” The focus on productivity is further reiterated in the name of the “product”

as “breeding bunnies” rather than as just “bunnies.” Another strategy that *World Vision* employs in the catalogue is to emphasize “good deals” in dollar values. Instead of structuring the economic value of its “products” in terms of discounts, *World Vision* focuses on “products” of which the value is doubled or multiplied thanks to pledges from corporate donors to match or multiply individual donations. The 2012 catalogue (see Fig.3.1.), for example, indicates in bold red print that \$90, which normally “feeds starving families for 60 days” in the case of an emergency, “multiplies in value to \$360.” It is interesting to note here that the multiplied value is presented in its dollar amount as opposed to in the number of families that can be fed (e.g. “\$90 feeds 4 times the number of starving families for 60 days”).



**Fig.3.1. Feeding Children as a “Product” with Multiplied Value**

Note: An example of how *World Vision*’s gift catalogue promotes certain “products” as being particularly “good deals” because corporate donors have agreed to match individual donations. From Gift Catalogue [printed publication], by *World Vision Canada*, 2012a.

Similarly, a different page in the 2012 catalogue graphically illustrates how the dollar value of donating towards clothing for children doubles by showing first, one child in new clothing, followed by an arrow that points to two children in new clothing (see Fig.3.1.). Despite visually representing two children in the photograph, however, the accompanying text still references dollar values: “Your gift that would normally provide \$1 worth of clothing [arrow] will now provide 2 times the value” rather than expressing the multiplied value in terms of the number of children that would benefit. While representing value in either way demonstrates a problematic orientation to consumption,

highlighting multiplied value in dollars, in particular, seems to suggest that “shopping for change” should be less about the impact on the recipient than it is about the donor getting a good deal. This further encourages donors to apply consumer values to non-profit charitable aid.

**\$35 equals \$70 in value**

How your gift multiplies **2X** in value:

With donations from generous corporate partners, your gift will double in value to ship and/or purchase warm coats, shoes, sweaters and more.

Your gift that would normally provide \$1 worth of clothing

will now provide 2 times the value

**“I froze. I tried to run to keep warm... I want to have a jacket.”**  
Soyolmaa, age 6, Mongolia

Your gift of warm clothing for children will protect little ones from bitter cold and sickness in freezing climates.

Clothing for 100 children	\$140	(3426)	\$140 equals \$280 in value
Clothing for 50 children	\$70	(1529)	\$70 equals \$140 in value
Clothing for 25 children	\$35	(1511)	\$35 equals \$70 in value

worldvision.ca/gifts | call 1 800 844-7993

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**Fig. 3.2. Clothing a Child as a “Product” of Multiplied Value**

Note: On the left side of this page from the 2012 *World Vision* catalogue, a graphic illustrates how a donor’s gift of warm clothing will double in value thanks to matched donations. Despite the visual depiction of one versus two children, notice how this promotional incentive is expressed in the text as “two times the value” or in dollar amounts rather than in the number of children that would benefit. From Gift Catalogue [printed publication], by *World Vision Canada*, 2012.

Upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that offers of multiplied value apply only to a particular category of “products.” As I have touched upon briefly and will explore in greater depth in the next chapter, the majority of the catalogue’s “products” (mostly livestock) are meant to help recipients build the capacity to sustain themselves

financially by generating income. A smaller proportion of the “product” catalogue consists of items such as clothing and medical supplies that, while necessary, do not directly build entrepreneurial capacity. It is interesting to note that it is only in this latter category of “products” where the donation value is multiplied. This suggests that, at least from the perspective of the organization, donors might be less attracted to non-capacity-building “products” and therefore, an extra incentive is necessary to promote them.

Out of all of Willis’ observations about standardization in packaging, perhaps the most insightful one is that the standardization of quantities stands at the very heart of modern advertising’s existence:

[T]he underlying effect of mass commodity packaging is to break sales down into standardized units....Prior to the 1890s, there was no advertising for what would later become Quaker Oats, because if such advertising had existed it could only have promoted oats in general. The point of advertising is the designation of commodity...as a discrete unit (p.2).

Admittedly, Willis’ statement requires some qualification: advertising in the sense of announcing the availability and use value of a product did in fact exist before the 1890s, but what Willis is referring to is what we might consider to be *modern* advertising which is characterized by a focus on the transformational aspects of a product or brand (rather than just its use value) (see Marchand, 1985). Thus, the standardization of units in and of itself has its very roots in the beginnings of the consumer capitalist project. As such, representing charitable aid in discrete “product” quantities is a form of packaging that is not just playful or theatrical but deeply ideological. Within the gift catalogue, charitable aid is made into something that conforms to the values and expectations of consumer culture and that reflects the logic of the commodity. Embedded in this new representation are a bias for quantification (count-ability) and standardization (accountability to ensure fair treatment of donors). Just as standardization and branded packaging introduced a new way of consumption to buyers — shifting them away from buying generic bulk goods to branded goods in standardized measures, these same principles, when applied to charitable giving, changes the way in which donors engage in and conceptualize philanthropic acts.

### 3.4. Appearance of Use Value: “It Really Works!!!! [sic]”

While Marx argues that commodities are defined by value, use value, and exchange value, Wolfgang Fritz Haug conceptualizes an additional type of value that exists: an appearance of use value. He writes that “commodities have a ‘double reality.’ First they have a use value; ‘second, and more importantly, the *appearance* of use value” (Haug, 1986, p.16 as cited in Willis, 1991, p.7; emphasis in original). It is important to note that for Haug, the appearance of use value is not the result of deception — that is, the words ‘appearance of’ are not meant to suggest that the use value is intentionally exaggerated or fake. Rather, having an *appearance of* use value is a dimension of the commodity itself. As he explains, a commodity is defined by the act of exchange. Within that exchange, there is a buyer and a seller, each with a different need and end goal within the transaction. The buyer seeks to fulfill a need through the use value of the commodity, and that end goal is achieved by exchanging money for the commodity. Meanwhile, the seller’s goal is to earn money, and thus, “the same use value is merely a means to turn the exchange value of his[/her] commodity into money” (Haug, 1987, p.106). Since use value can only be realized after the exchange has taken place, the only form of use value that is available at the point of exchange is simply the “semblance” or “appearance” of realizable use value which is detached from the commodity itself (Haug, 1986, 1987).

While Haug’s conception of the appearance of use value is not premised on an intentional exaggeration on the part of the seller, Willis’ work shows that there are many instances in which the appearance of use value is theatrically emphasized. In fact, Willis (1991) posits that, whether in the case of historical theme parks or in-store bakeries, the very purpose of these theatrical representations is to create an appearance of use value. The following sections explore the ways in which the *World Vision* gift catalogue, as a type of packaging, theatrically creates an appearance of use value in its “products.”

Even in the consumer marketplace, a bias towards quantification does not mean the total rejection of qualitative measures that justify exchange value. Particularly in the age of online retail shopping, testimonials and user reviews have emerged as important qualitative indicators of the worthiness of a product based on effectiveness and

consumer popularity. This desire for anecdotal proof of a product's worthiness, too, has been theatrically reproduced in the *World Vision* gift catalogue through the use of personal testimonials and consumption-oriented language. Each *World Vision* catalogue features multiple donor testimonials from a mix of celebrity and non-celebrity donors. Non-celebrity donors mostly convey how giving through the gift catalogue has been a rewarding or inspirational experience for them personally. Celebrity donors also echo this sentiment, but more importantly, many of the celebrities have visited *World Vision* aid recipients and can therefore attest to the organization's work as eye witnesses. Two testimonials from the 2009 gift catalogue, for example, read:

When I travelled to Africa with *World Vision*, I saw firsthand how *World Vision's* Gift Catalogue items impact the lives of families who receive them. — Michael "Pinball" Clemons, Toronto Argonauts Coach

I helped distribute gifts from the *World Vision* Gift catalogue to villages in Africa. Moms with HIV and AIDS received antiretroviral medication. Families received animals. — Tom Cochrane, Singer/Songwriter

In both cases, the celebrities quoted function as the proxy witnesses for donors who may never have the opportunity to see *World Vision's* aid work in person. The last two sentences of Cochrane's testimonial, in particular, are clearly aimed at accountability — that is, assuring donors that the "products" that they have purchased will indeed land in the hands of recipients. Using testimonials in this way — to underscore the rewarding experience for donors and the accountability of the organization — is by no means a new strategy in *World Vision's* marketing practices (see Jefferess, 2007); however, what has changed is that the discourse is structured around the "product." Clemons' testimonial speaks directly to the impact of the "catalogue items" rather than to the work of *World Vision* or charitable aid in general. Similarly, Cochrane carefully names exactly what "products" were delivered. As will be discussed later, this is a particularly important function of the gift catalogue testimonials given that donors do not personally receive the "products."

Because of the distance between the donor and the "product," attesting to the effectiveness of a "product" in qualitative terms also emerges as an important aspect of

gift catalogue testimonials. Describing her recent trip to Zambia, celebrity donor Suzie McNeil proclaims:

“I was able to see for myself what a huge difference a goat or chicken can make in the lives of an entire family....It really works!!!! [sic]”

While it is debateable whether the pronoun “[i]t” is meant to refer to the “goat or chicken” or, more broadly, to *World Vision’s* catalogue program, both readings of McNeil’s testimonial create an appearance of use value. If McNeil is referring to the “goat or chicken,” then the theatricality of representing charitable aid as “products” is taken to the extreme in this quotation: describing a chicken in terms of whether or not it “really works.” Combined with the excessive use of exclamation marks, the consumption-oriented language of McNeil’s testimonial seems to replicate what is arguably the most theatrical form of consumer advertising, the infomercial. In fact, the last sentence of McNeil’s quote reads as if she is vouching for the effectiveness of a vacuum cleaner rather than describing a living animal or an act of philanthropy. Alternatively, if McNeil is describing the catalogue as a vehicle of charitable aid, then her declaration that “[the catalogue program] really works!!!!” is an affirmation of the *effectiveness* of “shopping for change,” which equally demonstrates and encourages market-driven logic and values. The qualitative justification of exchange value in either interpretation is also echoed in the consumer cues like “Best Seller,” “Top Picks” or “Most Popular Gift” — featuring language that is clearly borrowed from the consumer marketplace — that are found throughout *World Vision’s* gift catalogues.

From a semiotic perspective, the consumption-oriented language of the testimonials and consumer cues have a greater function than simply drawing the donor’s attention to a particular “product;” instead, these elements help to structure the meaning of the goat or chicken *as products*. In other words, the text acts as part of the packaging that theatrically makes the goats and chickens *into* commodities. As Roland Barthes (1977) explains, “text constitutes a parasitic message designed to connote the image, to ‘quicken’ it with one or more second-order signifieds” (p.25). In this case, the connotative message of the testimonials and consumer cues are two-fold: 1) they qualify the images (such as that of a child holding a rooster) as a commodity, and 2) they create an appearance of use value by attesting to the effectiveness (“It really works!!!!”) and



popularity (“Best Seller”) of the “product,” which serves the secondary function of reinforcing the first connotative message.

In the first instance, the function of the text is to transform charitable aid into theatrical commodities. Each “product” in the catalogue includes a photographic image, a description, a “product” code, a price for one or more standardized quantities, and occasionally a consumer cue. In the gift catalogues, a typical image that accompanies a “product” such as livestock is a photograph of a young child of colour next to the specified animal. In each case where there is a consumer cue such as “Best Seller,” the words do not describe the image but rather, project a new meaning on to it. Barthes (1977) explains:

Formerly, the image illustrated the text (made it clearer); today, the text loads the image, burdening it with a culture, a moral, an imagination. Formerly, there was reduction from text to image; today, there is amplification from one to the other (p.26).

Thus, for example, when the cue “Best Seller” is printed next to the image of Francisco from Honduras holding a rooster in her arms (see Fig. 3.3.), the text does not clarify what is being depicted in the photograph. At the same time, the image on its own does not denote purchasable commodity. Instead, it is precisely the addition of the “Best Seller” cue that imbues the image with its preferred signified of being a “product.” Barthes (1977) adds further that, “[s]ometimes, however, the text produces (invents) an entirely new signified which is retroactively projected into the image, so much so as to appear denoted there” (p.27). Thus, the text in the gift catalogue does not need to instruct the donor that “the rooster in this image is a product” because the image of the child holding a rooster is transformed into a commodity — an “entirely new signified” — simply by labeling it as a “Best Seller.” Moreover, because the words “Best Seller” describe the popularity of the rooster *as a commodity*, the question of whether or not it is a commodity is not even up for debate — after all, only something that can be sold (a commodity) can be a “Best Seller.” As Judith Williamson (1978) argues, advertising has a tendency to portray meanings — even theatrically-reproduced ones — as a *fait accompli*. The signified of being a commodity is therefore transferred onto the image as if a photograph of a child cradling a chicken *naturally* denotes “product.”



**Fig.3.3. Visual Representation of Charitable Aid as a “Product”**

Note: A page from the *World Vision* charity gift catalogue showing a child affectionately cradling a rooster. From Gift Catalogue [printed publication], by *World Vision Canada*, 2013.

Understanding the function of the consumer cues in this way, it becomes clear just how important this text is in structuring meaning in the catalogue, particularly in creating an appearance of use value that affirms charitable aid as a “product.” The need for this constructed appearance of use value is amplified because the images in the catalogue have been chosen in such a way as to appeal to a consumer palate — that is, even though a cow as a “product” could be visually represented by a photo of a juicy steak on a plate, the gift catalogue opts for more consumer-friendly images: a quick examination of the catalogues shows that almost every “product” that involves a live animal is depicted as a young child hugging, cradling, or touching the animal in a friendly manner. For example, although birds — especially chickens — are rarely associated with being cradled in one’s arms, Francisco hugs the rooster close to her body as if the animal were a pet rather than a source of food and/or income. It could be argued, of course, that young children have a tendency to commune with animals as friends, and therefore, these images simply reflect that propensity. However, in the context of the gift

catalogue in which livestock animals are being represented as food and income sources, Francisco's body language and smile suggests an unusual level of affection towards the animal — one that prevents the image on its own from denoting the message of a child who is happy to have a chicken because it feeds her entire family. Rather, it is the surrounding text — the consumer cue, the testimonial, and the “product” description — that projects this ‘entirely new signified’ onto the image.

This is an example of what Barthes terms “anchorage”: the use of text to guide a reader towards a particular interpretation of an image because it is the text that ‘anchors’ the image to a preferred meaning. Thus, it is only in the text description that the reader discovers that the purpose of the rooster and hens is to produce eggs, which “can be eaten, sold or hatched to provide a continual supply of nutritious food and essential income.” Put another way, the text and image combine to produce an appearance of use value that could not exist without the text as part of the theatrical packaging. This peculiar situation highlights the complex and contradictory nature of packaging charitable aid as commodities in a catalogue: in describing anchorage, Barthes explains that using text as an ‘anchor’ helps to “fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs” (1977, p.39). Interestingly, his assertion comes full circle in the charity catalogue because it is the charity catalogue itself that has created this “terror of uncertain signs” and then must “fix” it.

The proximity of the testimonial and “Best Seller” cued to the image of the child may also contribute to the successful connotation that giving a family two hens and a rooster is a purchasable commodity. In his analysis of press photographs in printed newspapers, Barthes (1977) explains that:

the closer the text to the image, the less it seems to connote it....The caption probably has a less obvious effect of connotation than the headline or accompanying article: headline and article are palpably separate from the image, the former by its emphasis, the latter by its distance...The caption, on the contrary, by its very disposition...appears to duplicate the message, that is, to be included in its denotation. (p.26)

Applied to the context of the charity catalogue, one can see that, indeed, the description, celebrity testimonial, and “Best Seller” cues are visibly separate from the image itself, which might contribute to its ability to project the “entirely new signified” that

a child cradling a chicken is a commodity. Alternatively, if the catalogue designer placed the words “Best Seller” as a caption for the photo, one could imagine that this might cause some confusion to the reader.

It is important to emphasize that although the text indicates how a given “product” can aid its recipient in practical terms, it creates an appearance of use value rather than actual use value because, as explained earlier, the latter can only be realized at the point of consumption (Haug, 1986, 1987). Since donors are not the final recipient of the “product(s)” purchased and will therefore never realize the use value themselves, the catalogue must create an appearance of use in order to justify the exchange value. Arguably, this is the case any time a consumer purchases a retail item as a gift for someone else — the buyer is unlikely to personally realize the use value of the gift. However, in the case of purchasing a gift for a known gift recipient (a friend, a loved one etc.), there is at least the chance that the recipient can communicate the use value of the item to the gift giver. Meanwhile, in the case of the *World Vision* gift catalogue, the aid recipient is not only a stranger but is also likely to be geographically distant from the donor. The gift catalogue shopping transaction, moreover, is not set up in such a way that the aid recipient can provide feedback to the donor, so the donor can only rely on the appearance of use value to justify the exchange value.

Indeed, even in the case of a highly theatrical appearance of use value, drawing a distinction between an appearance of use value and actual use value does not negate the possibility that these “products” have a realizable use value for the recipient — it cannot be denied, for example, that ‘2 hens and a rooster’ can fulfill the need for food or income for the recipient. But distinguishing an appearance of use value *to the donor* from actual use value *for the recipient* brings to light two important aspects of the gift catalogue as packaging. First, the word “appearance” draws attention to the intentional theatricality of the gift catalogue packaging — a theatricality that is aimed at the donor rather than at the recipient. This is a rather extreme example of Haug’s idea that the appearance of use value is detached from the commodity’s use value. Thus, the chosen image for the ‘product’ is of Francisco hugging a rooster — an image that was selected not because it denotes the “product’s” use value as a food source, but because it creates a friendly image of a child who presumably has derived happiness from the

“product.” This is similar to the theatrical labours that Willis (1991) identifies in modern day supermarkets:

The current practice in many supermarkets is to put a theatrical form of production on display, while the real work that goes into maintaining the store and serving the customers is either hidden from view or made to appear trivial [sic] because of deskilling. The work of pricing the merchandise, stocking the shelves, cleaning the store, and preparing the meat and produce for sale is largely accomplished by a largely invisible workforce whose members labor behind the scene in a backroom warehouse or at night after the store is closed.... As if to compensate for the marginalization and in some cases the erasure, of productive labor, the supermarket offers an array of theatrical labours, whose importance has more to do with the spectacle they create than the actual services they render. Most supermarkets today offer in-store bakeries, deli-counters, florist shops, and gourmet food sections. These are staffed by a corps of store personnel whose uniforms are more theatrical than practical (p.17).

Having a theatrical in-store bakery does not mean that baked goods are not truly made on the premise, but what Willis points out is that the primary function of the in-store bakery — the packaging — is to create an appearance of use value for the consumer by displaying such productive labours. In much the same way, 2 hens and a rooster may very well provide protein and income to a recipient, but the image of Francisco holding the rooster ‘has more to do with the spectacle’ of an idealized childish innocence and the “primitive” lifestyle of the distant “Other” than with depicting the use value of the “product.”

Interestingly, Willis notes that in some instances, the appearance of use value that is emphasized differs from the use value that is realized. She demonstrates this argument through her examination of historical theme parks in the United States. In these parks, the historical accuracy of the theatrical labours being displayed — the appearance that the processes being used to tar canoes and repair hunting traps are true to traditional practices — is paramount because “the production of amusement is secondary to the production of the historical setting” (Willis, 1991, p.16). Of course, in the process of replicating these labours to historical accuracy, actual results are achieved — functioning canoes and hunting traps are built (Willis, 1991). In that sense, the labour is both theatrical and real. The irony, as Willis (1991) points out, is that

the objects produced in the historical theme park will never be sold or used as they were originally intended. The candles may be hand-dipped to historical specification, but they will be sold in the park's gift shop as Christmas presents for people who light their homes by other means (p.16).

While Willis is right to point out this discrepancy between theatrical appearance of use value and actual use value of these candles, it also does not pose any real threat to the theme park: visitors happily purchase their handmade candles, and without any sense of irony, many of them will likely use the candles as decorations rather than as lighting sources. However, when this same discrepancy exists and is publicly reported in the context of charitable aid, it threatens to shatter the illusion of the appearance of use value. In recent years, there has been a growing number of reports indicating that aid recipients are using donated items in unintended ways, if at all. For instance, for years, charities including *World Vision* have been soliciting donors to buy pesticide-treated bed nets for recipients in malaria-ridden areas. Meanwhile, reports have emerged indicating that recipients are re-purposing these nets for fishing, repairing fences, and even for making wedding veils (Gettleman, 2015; World Vision International, 2013). While one can hardly argue that using a mosquito net to catch fish is a frivolous use — especially in the case of recipients living in poverty — local governments have reprimanded recipients for their behavior, citing environmental concerns (Gettleman, 2015). In response to this supposed “misuse” of mosquito nets, *World Vision* Health Specialist Rose Craigue explains that the organization has increased focus on providing “critical education” to recipients so that they “understand the importance of using the nets *correctly*.” (World Vision International, 2013; emphasis added). The reason for this neocolonialist “correction”, of course, is not that *World Vision* wants the recipients to go without food, but because it squarely contradicts the appearance of use value that was literally and figuratively *sold* to the donor.

This betrayal is not altogether a rare occurrence in the context of product packaging. In fact, Willis (1991) argues that packaging promises an appearance of use value that cannot be fulfilled. In the case of consumer products, the packaging creates a physical barrier between the consumer and commodity, heightening the consumer's anticipation for realizing the use value of the packaged contents (Willis, 1991). Extending Tania Modleski's analysis of soap operas, Willis argues that in the same way that soap

operas make waiting enjoyable for the viewer (as cited in Willis, 1991), unwrapping commodity packaging — freeing the product from layers of plastic bags, twist ties, and carefully-constructed cardboard — is the site of pleasure for the consumer. She adds:

commodity packaging defines the anticipation of use value as the commodity's most gratifying characteristic. No commodity ever lives up to its buyer's expectations or desires. This is because in commodity capitalism, use value cannot be fully realized....[T]he consumer learns to associate pleasure with the anticipation of use value simply because commodity culture does not offer use value itself as appreciable or accessible (p.6).

Willis (1991) explains that whether one purchases a “shoddy” product that fails to deliver on the advertised use value or an expensive product that momentarily gives the feeling of achieved use value, the purchase always triggers pleasurable anticipation for the next commodity purchase. As such, the pleasure of the purchase resides in the packaging itself. The salience of Willis' observation is difficult to deny given the proliferation of “unboxing” videos online, which demonstrate that consumers revere the climactic moment of unwrapping a package so much that they actually derive pleasure from watching a video of a stranger not only opening but carefully describing the experience of unwrapping a product's packaging for the first time. This brings us to the second aspect of the gift catalogue packaging that is highlighted when focusing on an appearance of use value rather than actual use value: the appearance of use value is the only form of use value to which the donor has access. He/she will never realize the use value of the “product” since it is a gift to an unknown, distant recipient. Thus, he/she can only consume the appearance of use value that exists in the packaging. As will be discussed in the following section, this is precisely why the gift catalogue prescribes the theatrical shopping experience as the primary site of enjoyment for the donor.

### **3.5. Crazy Sexy Charity: The New Look of Philanthropy**

*For does not the poster's very humour show that the diverting superficiality of the new politics involves not just a loss — in seriousness — but also a gain — in fun? (Wernick, 1991, p.129; commenting on a political poster featuring a cowboy)*

*There is laughter because there is nothing to laugh at....Fun is a medicinal bath. (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1987/2002, p.112)*

In the beginning of this chapter, I argued that packaging has an ideological function rather than simply an aesthetic one, but the aestheticization of philanthropy as demonstrated by the *World Vision* gift catalogue is in itself ideological. Since the theatrical packaging of the gift catalogue is the only point of consumption for the donor, the appearance of use value is packaged in such a way that appeals to the consumer palate. In other words, the gift catalogue not only creates an appearance of use value for the donor but one that is stylized in a very specific way. The result is a “face-lift” of sorts for philanthropy, resulting in a new aesthetic that is upbeat, clean, and above all, *fun*.

In the previous section, I analyzed how various elements in the charity gift catalogue act as a form of packaging that theatrically represents charitable aid as “products.” Another way to describe that transformation is as an aestheticization of philanthropy. This term can be understood in two ways. First, aestheticization refers to the idea that something is made to provide visual pleasure, to be beautiful. Images of the “products” in the catalogue, for example, are often paired with smiling, adorable children, creating a visual appeal for the donor. Second, aestheticization refers to the idea that something that was intangible is distilled to a visual representation — it is given a visual signifier, a “look.” In the gift catalogue, helping someone in the global South through a monetary donation is given a visual representation as quantifiable “products.” Moreover, the act of aiding a fellow human being is “given a makeover” to look like catalogue shopping. While these instances of aestheticization seem to translate the general into the specific, aestheticization also implies a reduction. In this case, the essence of philanthropy is distilled to only its surface level — the visually-gratifying signifiers of Francisco hugging her rooster or of Ntlou cuddling a goat come to represent charitable aid, leaving out all of the complexities: details of why Francisco needs aid in the first place, the amount of labour that goes into raising chickens, the socio-political context of her life, etc. In that sense, within the *World Vision* gift catalogue, charitable giving is made to not only be aesthetically pleasing, but in the process, it becomes aestheticized. This aestheticization suggests that the pleasure to be derived from charitable aid resides



just as much — if not more so — in the theatrical shopping experience as it does in the idea of helping someone in need.

The theatrical packaging of the gift catalogue not only transforms charitable aid into “products,” it also re-frames the experience of giving charitably. The act of helping someone — of possibly saving someone from starvation or exploitation — is made into a fun “shopping” experience. From the moment that the donor receives the catalogue in the mail, he/she is positioned as a shopping subject: the look and feel of the publication — the physical dimensions, the smiling face of a child on the cover — follow the conventions of any retail catalogue that one might expect to receive near Christmas time, and in case there is any doubt, the text on the front cover identifies itself as a “Gift Catalogue” of goods. Beyond the cover, the charity gift catalogue perfectly replicates the shopping experience: the donor is invited to flip through colourful pages of “products” options, read through peppy “product” descriptions, and ideally, round out the experience by filling out the tear-out mail order form (see Fig. 3.4.). In the following sections, I examine some of the design details of the catalogue that package the act of helping someone charitably as a shopping experience.

CHOOSE YOUR GIFTS	ITEM	QUANTITY	TOTAL AMOUNT
Pages (1) 1412		\$40	\$
Pages (2) 1420		\$100	\$
Pages (3) 1428		\$30	\$
Pages (4) 1436		\$70	\$
Pages (5) 1444		\$70	\$
Pages (6) 1452		\$70	\$
Pages (7) 1460		\$100	\$
Pages (8) 1468		\$70	\$
Pages (9) 1476		\$70	\$
Pages (10) 1484		\$70	\$
Pages (11) 1492		\$70	\$
Pages (12) 1500		\$70	\$
Pages (13) 1508		\$70	\$
Pages (14) 1516		\$70	\$
Pages (15) 1524		\$70	\$
Pages (16) 1532		\$70	\$
Pages (17) 1540		\$70	\$
Pages (18) 1548		\$70	\$
Pages (19) 1556		\$70	\$
Pages (20) 1564		\$70	\$
Pages (21) 1572		\$70	\$
Pages (22) 1580		\$70	\$
Pages (23) 1588		\$70	\$
Pages (24) 1596		\$70	\$
Pages (25) 1604		\$70	\$
Pages (26) 1612		\$70	\$
Pages (27) 1620		\$70	\$
Pages (28) 1628		\$70	\$
Pages (29) 1636		\$70	\$
Pages (30) 1644		\$70	\$
Pages (31) 1652		\$70	\$
Pages (32) 1660		\$70	\$
Pages (33) 1668		\$70	\$
Pages (34) 1676		\$70	\$
Pages (35) 1684		\$70	\$
Pages (36) 1692		\$70	\$
Pages (37) 1700		\$70	\$
Pages (38) 1708		\$70	\$
Pages (39) 1716		\$70	\$
Pages (40) 1724		\$70	\$
Pages (41) 1732		\$70	\$
Pages (42) 1740		\$70	\$
Pages (43) 1748		\$70	\$
Pages (44) 1756		\$70	\$
Pages (45) 1764		\$70	\$
Pages (46) 1772		\$70	\$
Pages (47) 1780		\$70	\$
Pages (48) 1788		\$70	\$
Pages (49) 1796		\$70	\$
Pages (50) 1804		\$70	\$
Pages (51) 1812		\$70	\$
Pages (52) 1820		\$70	\$
Pages (53) 1828		\$70	\$
Pages (54) 1836		\$70	\$
Pages (55) 1844		\$70	\$
Pages (56) 1852		\$70	\$
Pages (57) 1860		\$70	\$
Pages (58) 1868		\$70	\$
Pages (59) 1876		\$70	\$
Pages (60) 1884		\$70	\$
Pages (61) 1892		\$70	\$
Pages (62) 1900		\$70	\$
Pages (63) 1908		\$70	\$
Pages (64) 1916		\$70	\$
Pages (65) 1924		\$70	\$
Pages (66) 1932		\$70	\$
Pages (67) 1940		\$70	\$
Pages (68) 1948		\$70	\$
Pages (69) 1956		\$70	\$
Pages (70) 1964		\$70	\$
Pages (71) 1972		\$70	\$
Pages (72) 1980		\$70	\$
Pages (73) 1988		\$70	\$
Pages (74) 1996		\$70	\$
Pages (75) 2004		\$70	\$
Pages (76) 2012		\$70	\$
Pages (77) 2020		\$70	\$
Pages (78) 2028		\$70	\$
Pages (79) 2036		\$70	\$
Pages (80) 2044		\$70	\$
Pages (81) 2052		\$70	\$
Pages (82) 2060		\$70	\$
Pages (83) 2068		\$70	\$
Pages (84) 2076		\$70	\$
Pages (85) 2084		\$70	\$
Pages (86) 2092		\$70	\$
Pages (87) 2100		\$70	\$
Pages (88) 2108		\$70	\$
Pages (89) 2116		\$70	\$
Pages (90) 2124		\$70	\$
Pages (91) 2132		\$70	\$
Pages (92) 2140		\$70	\$
Pages (93) 2148		\$70	\$
Pages (94) 2156		\$70	\$
Pages (95) 2164		\$70	\$
Pages (96) 2172		\$70	\$
Pages (97) 2180		\$70	\$
Pages (98) 2188		\$70	\$
Pages (99) 2196		\$70	\$
Pages (100) 2204		\$70	\$

**FREE handcrafted ornament\* with every gift!**

Thank you for helping transform lives! Every aspect of your Gift Catalogue purchase helps families in need break the cycle of poverty — right down to the free ornament you receive!

These colourful ornaments are handcrafted by women in a World Vision project in Carpina, Pernambuco, Brazil. The moms and grandmothers in this project earn a fair wage so they can build brighter futures for their children. Please allow up to 14 working days for delivery of greeting cards and ornaments.

\* While supplies last

Total annual donations of \$11 or more will be accepted in time for tax purposes. In the exceptional case where donations exceed what is needed for a particular item, World Vision will redirect funds to a similar item or program to help people in need.

Order 24 hours a day, 7 days a week  
1 800 844-7993  
www.worldvision.ca

4113021  
My World Vision Gift Catalogue  
order form enclosed.

WORLD VISION CANADA  
2500-1 WORLD DR  
MISSISSAUGA, ON L5T 0A7

**Fig.3.4. Catalogue Mail Order Form**  
 Fig. 9: A detachable mail-order form similar to this one is included in every issue of *World Vision's* charity gift catalogue. From Gift Catalogue [printed publication], by *World Vision Canada*, 2009.

In the printed catalogue, every “product” is assigned a numerical code which corresponds to those listed on the mail-order form. The use of numerical codes for each of the “products” is particularly interesting because it appears to serve a primarily theatrical function. In a for-profit catalogue such as that of *Sears*, the use of product codes serves the important administrative purpose of helping customers and staff identify a given product within a vast array of inventory. Meanwhile, it seems that the purpose of the code in the *World Vision* charity catalogue is to reinforce the connotation of charitable aid as a consumer product rather than to help either the donor or *World Vision* staff identify the product. There are a number of reasons to support this claim. First, the “products” on the mail order form are listed in alphabetical order by product name, and therefore, there is presumably no need for the donor to even refer to the item code when filling out the form. Second, while it is certainly possible that the code is used for accounting purposes on the *World Vision* side, it should be noted that the charity catalogue assigns an unusual amount of visual emphasis to the “product” code compared to that of most for-profit catalogues — product codes in a *Sears* catalogue, for example, are always displayed in a smaller typeface than the name of the item itself. Meanwhile, *World Vision*’s catalogue prominently displays the code in the same sized typeface as the “product” name as if to stress that the offering is indeed a consumer “product.”

Moreover, there does not appear to be a discernible pattern of how the codes are assigned, which would be logical if the codes were used for administrative purposes. For instance, “3 little pigs” is coded as 1420, “2 piglets” is 3392, and a single “piglet” is associated with the code 1412 (see Fig. 3.5.).



**Fig.3.5. Example of “Product” Codes**

Note: The numerical “product” code listed next to each option is given an unusually high level of visual emphasis for an administrative detail, and the codes do not appear to have been assigned following any particular pattern. From Gift Catalogue [printed publication], by *World Vision Canada*, 2014.

Third, many donors who receive the *World Vision* charity catalogue in the mail tend to make their purchase online rather than use the mail order form (Sullivan, 2012); the website, however, does not use the “product” codes at all, even though all of the “products” in the printed catalogue are also available online. If *World Vision* thought that donors would rely on the “product” codes to match items in the printed catalogue to those of the website, it would be logical for the codes to be displayed on the website. For these reasons, one must wonder if the “product” codes have been included for an administrative function or primarily for theatrical purposes.

With the exception of omitting product codes, the online version of the *World Vision* gift catalogue also caters directly to the desires and behaviours of consumers. For example, because shoppers often set a budget, *World Vision’s* catalogue website allows donors to shop by price categories like “Gifts Under \$50.” *World Vision’s* catalogue website also employs the language of “shopping basket,” “add to cart,” and “checkout now” etc. — all terms that are familiar to the experience of shopping online from a for-

profit retailer's website, and therefore theatrically recreate this experience in a philanthropic context.

Whether in the printed or online versions of the catalogue, the use of bright colours and positive imagery reinforce a theatrical, fun shopping experience. As noted earlier, the majority of the “real life” recipients depicted in the catalogue are smiling brightly as one would come to expect from models in a consumer catalogue. In addition to depicting farm animals as being pet-like companions to young children, the animals in the catalogue are also remarkably clean in appearance, with the exception of an occasional mildly muddy piglet. Similarly, the children, who are supposedly playing outside with farm animals in what looks to be mostly hot, dusty, rural environments, are noticeably kempt with hardly a stray hair or dirty fingernail to indicate actual outdoor play (see Fig.3.6.).

“I love my goat...  
she allowed me to go  
back to school.”  
— Ntlou, Zimbabwe

**Popular gift**

**Goats are great**  
for milk, income and bright futures!

Goats provide families with protein and income to help them survive and thrive. One dairy goat can give up to 250 litres of milk a year. Two can be bred to produce 2 to 3 kids a year and eventually multiply into a whole herd. These hardy animals eat grass and leaves, and do well in harsh climates. Give a goat — or maybe two — to make a lasting difference.

2 goats	\$200	(1586)
Goat	\$100	(1578)

Oumarou, Senegal

**Fig. 3.6. Sanitized Representations of Charitable Aid Recipients**

Note: Throughout the *World Vision* catalogue, most of the children and the animals that they hug, pet, or cradle are exceptionally clean in appearance. From Gift Catalogue [printed publication], by *World Vision Canada*, 2013.

Of course, one may argue that using bright colours and upbeat images is a logical marketing choice for any charitable endeavour, whether or not it is consumption-oriented. While it is true that colourful visuals are not the exclusive domain of for-profit marketing, it is also important to note that this upbeat aesthetic is in stark contrast to the images of teary-eyed, hopeless subjects that have come to characterize *World Vision's* television commercials and paid programming for child sponsorship in the past (see Jefferess, 2007). More broadly, there has been a noticeable shift away from what has been called 'the pornography of poverty' — the heavy use of images and descriptions that depict 'helpless others' as a means to elicit guilt and sympathy — in marketing campaigns for development charities (Cameron & Haanstra, 2008). In particular, scholars John Cameron and Anna Haanstra have examined overt attempts to "make development sexy" through the incorporation of attractive celebrities and sexual innuendos in charity advertising campaigns. Although *World Vision* does not use sex appeal as a marketing strategy, the catalogue nonetheless attempts to make development "sexy" in the broader sense of trying to present charitable aid as fun and trendy.

In recent years, the growing preoccupation in charity circles with being the next viral charity campaign has resulted in highly aestheticized fundraisers, most notably the ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis) Ice Bucket Challenge in which participants had a bucket of ice poured over their heads, then nominated others to perform the same feat (usually via social media). The premise of the challenge was that participants would donate money to the *ALS Association* (a non-profit organization in the United States) and/or raise awareness of the disease<sup>11</sup>. The campaign was met with both intense

<sup>11</sup> There were various iterations of the Ice Bucket Challenge. In some instances, people who were nominated had to either perform the challenge *or* donate \$100 to the ALS Association. In other cases, people who agreed to undergo the challenge also donated money to the *ALS Association*, sometimes in an amount lesser than \$100. As the Challenge gained popularity, some participants chose to donate to a charitable cause of their choice instead of ALS. Each of these iterations prompted a varying amount of criticism.

popularity and criticism, the latter of which was mostly centred on the wastefulness of the exercise and the lack of significance of the act to the cause itself. This second criticism points to the problem of aestheticizing philanthropy: while many regarded the Ice Bucket Challenge as an unprecedented success because of its viral nature, what attracted people to the campaign was the visual spectacle of the stunt rather than a desire to learn about, or contribute to, curing a debilitating condition. Proponents of the Ice Bucket Challenge point out that despite its flaws, the campaign produced a significant spike in donations, just as *World Vision* might point to the lucrative nature of the gift catalogue. Without denying that aestheticized fundraising campaigns can be important revenue streams, the question is also whether or not the end justifies the means.

Cameron and Haanstra's concerns over "making development sexy" can be readily applied to the aestheticization of charitable giving that occurs in *World Vision's* catalogue. First, if charitable giving must be represented as a fun activity, there is the risk that certain causes that are more difficult to re-frame as fun will be ignored or marginalized: it is no coincidence that "products" of a more serious nature such as preventing child labour or child sexual exploitation are consistently relegated to the back pages of the publication. Meanwhile the cheery, pet-like "products" dominate the cover and front sections of the catalogue. Second, similar to the critiques of the Ice Bucket Challenge, Cameron and Haanstra (2008) question whether representing development as "sexy" helps to "promote a deeper understanding of the underlying forces that produce and sustain poverty and social injustice in the global South" (p.1479). Applied to the context of the *World Vision* gift catalogue, we must ask if an aestheticized "shopping" experience can engage donors to understand the root causes of poverty, or if, to the contrary, the consumption-oriented nature of this representation can only mask those underlying forces in favour of an upbeat aesthetic.

## Chapter 4.

### Literature Review

While market-oriented solutions to social problems (consumption-based and consumption-oriented philanthropy) are largely popular, this commodified approach is not without its critics. This chapter provides a review of the existing critiques of marketized philanthropy and other consumption-oriented modes of charitable giving. While neither I nor the scholars reviewed necessarily offer a concrete *solution* to global poverty, our goal, instead, is to problematize consumption-oriented philanthropy based on the social and ideological dimensions of such practices. The aim of this chapter is to theorize the potential long-term negative consequences of consumption-oriented philanthropy. This discussion is divided into three main areas of enquiry: 1) how does consumption-oriented philanthropy shape the donor's identity? 2) What is (potentially) lost during the process of commodification? 3) How can charitable organizations retrieve that which is lost?

#### 4.1. Happy Capitalists: The Irony of Capitalism

*That's the thing about competition — some people win and many others lose.* (Edwards, 2010, p. 71)

At the most basic level, adopting the language and style of a shopping catalogue to solicit donations is motivated by the belief that the market is the best vehicle for eliminating poverty. This ideological construction operates two-fold: first, the catalogue theatrically represents aid as a shopping experience, thereby making consumption the answer to poverty. Second, most of the 'products' offered in the catalogue are meant to not only provide temporary aid, but to help recipients thrive as self-sustaining entrepreneurs. Thus, the catalogue suggests that it is entry and participation into the

market that will allow recipients to “pull themselves up by the bootstraps.” In fact, there is a strong tendency across many different consumption-oriented philanthropic initiatives (including gift catalogues and microfinancing) to operate on a “teach a [wo]man to fish” approach to poverty reduction. In the *World Vision* gift catalogue, for example, the “product” description for “2 hens and a rooster” explains that the chickens “can produce up to 150 eggs a year...to provide a continual source of food and income.” A similar emphasis on income generation is consistent across all livestock “products” in the catalogue as well as many of the agricultural “products” such as fruit trees and bee hives. Ideologically, this reproduces the classic narrative of the American Dream that one can pull oneself out of any bad situation through hard work (in the marketplace), which is congruent with the principles and ideals of capitalism.

But as we probe deeper into the idea of applying market principles to achieve social change, what becomes clear is that the logic reaches beyond simply believing in the effectiveness of business practices. Jacqueline Novogratz, renowned CEO of the non-profit venture capitalist *Acumen Fund*, suggests that “we should see every poor person on the planet as a potential customer” (as cited in Edwards, 2010, p. 8). Novogratz makes an admittedly strong statement but perhaps what makes it so jarring is not just that it is opportunistic but that it is *overtly* opportunistic. She expresses a sentiment that is rarely voiced but remains quietly present in the logic of capitalism: when it comes to cultivating more small business entrepreneurs in the global South, one of the markers of success is their ability to actively participate in the marketplace not only as producers but as viable consumers.

Novogratz is not alone in her vision of making capitalists — and someday, customers — out of the world’s poorest populations. As I have argued in the previous chapters, consumption-based and consumption-oriented modes of philanthropy, which are driven by business principles, are rapidly in ascendance. The underlying logic of this cultural shift is well summed up, if not largely inspired, by C.K. Prahalad’s influential work, *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid: Eradicating Poverty Through Profits*. The book proposes that businesses need to recognize the “bottom of the pyramid” (comprising four billion people that live on less than \$2 USD a day) as a vast “untapped market,” and that this population will pull itself out of poverty if only they are



provided with the tools and support to fully participate in capitalist exchange. In other words, the eradication of poverty is said to lie in the ability to train the poor to be good entrepreneurs and even better customers.

While Prahalad's approach — reframing poverty as profit opportunity to interest businesses — may seem pragmatic, it also reinforces the harmful belief that only people who can produce a solid return on investment (ROI) are worthy of attention and resources. Moreover, it applies a free market approach to helping people — it is up to existing players in the market to exercise their freedom of choice to decide which cause or person is most deserving of aid. It is this same system of values that has prompted the comparison shopping model of philanthropy as seen in *World Vision's* gift catalogue and child sponsorship program. As I have argued, this consumption-oriented mode of charitable aid is pernicious because it renders needs that are less easily quantified or less consumer-friendly as undesirable.

To be sure, the narrative of the self-sufficient entrepreneur is an appealing one, in part because it implies that there is an exit strategy to developmental aid. But the fairytale of happy capitalists grossly ignores the role that capitalism has played in contributing to deep global inequality (Edwards, 2010; Livingstone, 2013; Nickel & Eikenberry, 2009). By cleverly re-framing the issue of poverty as a case of the poor being unfairly neglected — or in Prahalad's (2010) words, “underserved or unserved” (p.6) — Prahalad's apparent indignation on behalf of the poor distracts from the recognition of capitalism as a source of poverty rather than a solution to it. This contradiction seems to go unnoticed by Prahalad who, while briefly mentioning that businesses must strive to reduce their environmental impact when serving such a large population, later argues that providing single-serve quantities of goods is key to serving the poor (because the poor have limited and unstable cash flow making bulk purchases impossible.) What is missing from Prahalad's so-called “solution” to poverty, of course, is a recognition of the environmental degradation that mass production has already caused and its disproportionately large impact on some of the poorest countries of the world. Meanwhile, the irony is not lost on Nickel and Eikenberry (2009), who assert that “[m]arketized philanthropy is an especially insidious case because it creates the

appearance of giving back, disguising the fact that it is already based in taking away” (p.975).

With competition being one of the main pillars of capitalism, it is strange to suggest that the market can create sustained equality on any scale, especially on a global one. As Edwards’ quotation at the beginning of this section illuminates so well, having few winners amongst many losers is a requisite of capitalism, and it is the losers of the system who most often require charitable aid. This leads to Edwards’ (2010) main critique of the Bottom of the Pyramid theory: as long as we focus only on moving people up the pyramid rather than changing the shape of the pyramid itself, then inequality will always be structurally embedded into the system. Admittedly, lifting the entire pyramid up to ensure that those at the bottom at least live above the poverty line can be helpful, but it amounts to little more than a band-aid fix and a convenient myth for those who are propped up by the losers (Edwards, 2010).

The myth of “shopping for change,” particularly as it operates in the charity gift catalogue, is interesting because it both depoliticizes and politicizes consumer practices. On the one hand, the concept of solving world hunger, poverty, and disease by shopping through a catalogue is fun precisely because it depoliticizes these social issues and hides their root causes. Nowhere in the catalogue is there a “product” that even tangentially addresses the complex interplay of racial, gender, and other systemic inequalities that exacerbate conditions of poverty, nor is there any hint that such factors exist. Instead, the charity gift catalogue proffers a clean, upbeat theatrical shopping environment where solving deeply-entrenched systemic issues amount to individual consumer choices. Aestheticizing charitable aid in this way helps to create the illusion of an apolitical solution to poverty: by marketing the idea that a material “product” purchased by a donor will be delivered *directly* to a recipient, the catalogue not only hides the political in favour of the political, it attempts to do away with the messiness of politics altogether, quietly asserting the superiority of business rationality over traditional forms of philanthropy and even political engagement. As noted in the early sections of this thesis, however, the provision of material goods follows a less direct path than what the catalogue suggests since *World Vision* reserves the right to give gift variations as suited to the geographic area (see footnote on p. 2).

On the other hand, the rationale for the gift catalogue draws heavily on the growing popularity of consumer activism (e.g. ethical consumption, consumption-based philanthropy), whereby political will is enacted through shopping. Indeed, shopping is a deeply political activity in that structures of power are implicated. This is particularly so in the case of the charity gift catalogue: donors with socio-economic power engage in a non-reciprocal relationship with people in need. In Marcel Mauss' famous work *The Gift*, he explains that any gift exchange — reciprocal or not — establishes or maintains a power dynamic between the gift giver and recipient. Thus, whether in the case of building alliances or passively affirming rivalry (Mauss, 1923/1967), gift exchange reproduces social differentiation (Berking, 1999; Strasser, 2003). The presence of a power dynamic is also evident in the world of charitable aid. For example, there is growing recognition, even among charities, that people do not donate money in order to join the struggle, but to keep it at a distance (Rutherford, 2010). As Paul Rutherford (2010) points out, the *Red Cross* went as far as to create an advertisement with the slogan "Send money so that you can get on with your life." In a similar vein, Ceri Dingle of the UK-based charity *WORLDwrite*, asserts that "[providing goats as charitable aid] is about western feelgood. It's not about serious development" (Scrivener, 2010). As will be explored later, "shopping" from the *World Vision* gift catalogue may not only be a means of keeping the poor at a metaphorical distance, but also of obscuring the role that global capitalism has played in contributing to widespread inequality.

Thus, when critics point out the flaws of consumer activism or consumption-based philanthropy, it is not so much premised on the idea that consumption is apolitical, because shopping clearly involves power structures. Instead, the critics are more often concerned with shopping for/as change because, as a political act, it is undemocratic and highly individualized (I explore this in the next section). As King (2006) observes, the shift that neoliberalism has effected is the widespread dissemination and acceptance of "the notion that in neoliberalism[,] citizenship in the contemporary moment should be less about the exercising of rights and the fulfillment of obligations and more about fulfilling one's political responsibilities through socially sanctioned consumption and responsible choice" (p. 73). Thus, it is not that politics is erased but that it is channelled through acts of consumption and made to reconcile with the logic of the marketplace. In

the next section, I examine how this business-infused logic helps to reconfigure the identity or role of the donor.

## 4.2. Constructing the Consumer-Donor

*In the place of anything resembling citizenship, we have consumer choices, 'innovation' and above all, brand marketing.* (Kim, 2006)

By structuring the fundraising “ask” or appeal through the written and visual language of a shopping catalogue, *World Vision's* gift catalogue does not address the reader as a traditional donor but instead, constructs a hybridized consumer-donor, with a particular focus on the sensibilities of the consumer half of the identity. The following section explores the role of not only the gift catalogue but also of its reader in constructing this identity. In considering the ramifications of this identity shift, I also examine the long-standing debates on citizenship versus consumption and on the constraints of consumerism as a vehicle for social change.

In her seminal work *Decoding Advertisements*, Judith Williamson explains that meaning-making only occurs when the person on the receiving end of a text (for example, the reader of the gift catalogue) completes the signification process. The reader must play an active role in order for the text to have meaning. Thus, the reader is put into the role of the subject of a particular ideology: “[w]e are not participants in an ideology until we are active within its very creation; paradoxically, ideology *means* we are participants, *subjects*, i.e. ‘initiators of action.’” (Williamson, 1978, p. 44; emphasis in original). Walker Gibson proposes a similar theory with his concept of the “mock reader”:

First, there is the ‘real’ individual upon whose crossed knee rests the open volume, and whose personality is complex and ultimately inexpressible as any dead poet’s. Second, there is the fictitious reader — I shall call him the ‘mock reader’ — whose mask and costume the individual takes on in order to experience the language. The mock reader is an artefact, controlled, simplified.... (p.2).

Gibson’s theory is useful in that — unlike that of Williamson — it creates a space for a temporary theatrical role for the reader. In that sense, a reader may momentarily complete the signification process to make meaning of a text but ultimately deny its

message and refuse the mock reader identity. Gibson (1980) explains, for example, that when confronted with a piece of advertising, rejecting the mock reader role is how one “keeps money in [his/her] pockets” (p.2).

Within the charity gift catalogue, the construction of the consumer-donor identity is thus more complicated than simply addressing the donor as a consumer. Instead, the catalogue first creates a theatrical shopping experience then hails the donor as a consumer by appealing to market values of novelty, popularity, and effectiveness. It is then left up to the reader (the donor) to complete the process of identity creation by playing along with the theatrical “shopping” experience. This highlights an important characteristic of the gift catalogue: the mock reader not only has to recognize the references of shopping and consumerism in the gift catalogue (to make sense of it), he or she must actually play the role. Fitting to Willis’ metaphor of theatrical representation that I have been employing thus far, the catalogue is structured in such a way that invites the reader to *perform* the role of the consumer-donor: reading through “product” descriptions, comparing the different options, and filling out the order form with payment information. Whereas a person watching a video advertisement might only need to assume the mock reader role mentally for 30 seconds to make sense of the text, the gift catalogue requires a fairly prolonged performance of the consumer-donor identity both mentally and physically.

While engaging donors in this performed role of consumer-donor may seem harmless, there is an important difference between a non-consumption-oriented form of philanthropy (e.g. making a general donation) and “shopping” from a charity gift catalogue. Indeed, both making a general donation and shopping from the gift catalogue might produce the same result: *World Vision* could, for example, use a general donation to provide a goat to a family. However, we might understand the difference between contributing through a general donation and through a gift catalogue as similar to the difference, as described by Willis (1991), between visiting a museum and walking through a historical theme park: museums have visitors whereas historical theme parks have participants. In both venues, the purpose is the same: to learn about a different culture, observe artifacts and take in information about traditional practices. But in the historical theme park, guests are transplanted into an active — albeit theatrical —

environment. Guests at *Colonial Williamsburg*, for instance, do not simply watch as the angry mob passes by, they join in; they do not read about the revolutionary war, they (safely) take part. At the end of the visit, one may leave both the museum and the theme park with the same amount of new information, but the experiences are wholly different.

Moreover, what is so peculiar about the consumption-oriented nature of *World Vision's* gift catalogue is that it makes the role of the consumer-donor so difficult to resist: as strange as it may feel to someone to check off a box on an order form to save a child from sexual slavery, refusing the role of the consumer-donor also feels like a rejection of charitable aid altogether. Furthermore, the catalogue makes no attempt to hide its equating of philanthropy to consumer shopping; the play on charitable aid as consumer products in a catalogue is boldly displayed to the point of being a playful representation. As a result, the unspoken (and perhaps even unconscious) acceptance of the consumer-donor identity may seem rather innocuous to the donor — after all, it seems fairly harmless to play along in the game of “shopping” as long as the end result is that an impoverished family receives a goat that can feed his/her family. Yet, even while “shopping for change” in a catalogue is so blatantly a performance, it is at the same time a role that does not feel altogether foreign because it is an identity that is so familiar to the everyday lives of many global Northerners. In that sense, to play the role of the consumer-donor as invited by the gift catalogue is not so much the temporary act that Gibson describes, but more so a continuation of an existing identity that has been extended into a different space, making the acceptance of the role an easily naturalized process.

The consumer-donor identity is particularly powerful because it not only requires the donor to go through the physical motions of “shopping,” it also asks the consumer-donor to apply the *logic* of consumerism to social change. Herein lies the potency of the catalogue format: it is not simply external packaging, it is ideology expressed as packaging (Willis, 1991). As Judith Williamson (1978) writes, “[i]deology is always precisely that of which we are not aware....And how does it become ‘invisible’, what keeps it hidden from us? — the fact that we are *active* in it, that we do not receive it from above: we constantly re-create it” (p.41). Thus, even while the performance aspect of the

consumer-donor role is obvious, the reproduction of the logic of consumerism is much harder to recognize.

### **4.3. Donor Ethic(s): The Consumption Ethic x Philanthropy**

*Because I know one thing about the modern teenager...You can get them to buy anything if it comes in leopard print. — Paris Geller, Gilmore Girls*

By inviting donors to partake in the prolonged performance of the consumer-donor, the gift catalogue risks not only carving out a new identity but cultivating an entirely new set of behaviours and expectations from its donors. Similar to Roland Marchand's theory of the American "consumption ethic" that was developed and molded in the early 1900s, I propose that a particular "donor ethic" may result from consumption-oriented philanthropy. In *Advertising the American Dream*, Marchand explores the development of a drastically different consumption ethic that guided consumer choices during the early stages of industrialization. As will be discussed in the following sections, understanding this consumption ethic as a historical construct rather than as an innate human behavior can help us to better theorize the potential consequences of the seemingly harmless theatrical representations of charitable aid as "shopping."

Many theorists have identified and traced the historical development of the modern consumer in North America as distinctly tied to the birth of industrialization, and more specifically of mass production. Marchand (1985), in particular, offers a thorough analysis of American advertising at the turn of the century to demonstrate how advertisers strategically cultivated a particular "consumption ethic" or ideology of consumerism that served the needs of commodity producers. As he explains, thanks to industrialization, the capacity to produce goods increased greatly but it was woefully out of sync with the public's demand to purchase the goods. The solution was to slowly condition the working classes — who were, at the time, still avid followers of the "work hard, save hard" Protestant ethic — to become enthusiastic consumers (Ewen, 2001; Marchand, 1985). Along with the introduction of shorter working hours and higher pay to give workers leisure time and disposable income, advertising became the primary vehicle for educating consumers on not only what they should consume but also *how*

they should consume (Marchand, 1985). In particular, style moved to the forefront of consumer values. Whereas the working classes largely favoured utilitarianism in their household goods, Marchand traces the gradual introduction and adoption of consumer values such as colour and style in everyday products from kitchen sinks to typewriters. Advertising played a crucial role in encouraging consumers to take pleasure in shopping by increasingly linking happiness and improved social relations to style-driven consumption in advertisements (Marchand, 1985).

To be sure, the development of this consumption ethic did not happen overnight and consumers exercised agency and even outright resistance to this shifting ideological landscape (Marchand, 1985). However, what Marchand's analysis shows is that the cultivation of the consumption ethic that was oriented to aesthetic pleasures was a deliberate process rather than a natural development stemming from an innate desire for beautiful things. The appreciation for visual beauty — in art, for instance — certainly predates the rise of modern consumer culture, but the desire for style *in everyday goods* is a phenomenon dating back only about 100 years (Marchand, 1985). A quick survey of the current consumer marketplace — where style and colour touches the most mundane and utilitarian everyday goods — attests to the triumphant cultivation of this consumption ethic. But what is the most telling of the power and pervasiveness of this consumption ethic is not its reach into the farthest corners of the marketplace, but beyond the marketplace into the realm of philanthropic human relations.

Up to this point, what this thesis has demonstrated is that *World Vision's* catalogue and other consumption-oriented forms of philanthropy are encouraging and even conditioning donors to think of and engage in charitable aid in a very different way than in the past. While the intention of the non-profits behind this ideological shift may not be as deliberate or calculated as that of corporate America in the early 1900s, this does not mean that the shift is any less likely to occur. Moreover, Marchand (1985) is careful to note that the cultivation of the new consumer ethic in the 1920s was never a planned conspiracy between corporate America's key players. Instead,

most individual advertisers recognized only a minor stake, if any, in the promotion of a broad consumption ethic. They were anxious to persuade consumers to loosen their purse string...in order to obtain their own product. If desire for this product required a new sensitivity to the



pleasures of style and luxury, they were eager to promote that consciousness as well — but usually with the cultivation of a taste for their specific product narrowly in mind (p.160).

The same can be said of the commodification of philanthropy. The shift towards consumption-oriented philanthropy is not the result of an explicit consensus between major charitable organizations to move the industry in a particular direction but rather, it is a trend that many charities are following in pursuit of their own fundraising goals. In other words, non-profits like *World Vision* are primarily concerned with attracting donor dollars to its own charity, and if that requires pushing donors to think about charitable aid as “products” then the 21 Canadian charities currently publishing gift catalogues seem more than happy to engage in a bit of theatrics.

But as greater number of charities engage in the practice of trying to make charitable giving look and feel like shopping, the cumulative effect might be the cultivation of an entirely new donor ethic — one that is based on popularity, novelty, and fun rather than on kindness, human needs, and responsibility. This is a donor ethic that is oriented towards consumption. As the commodification of philanthropy is arguably still in its early stages of development, I believe that we have yet to realize the full depth and scale of this ideological shift.

Although advertisers may not have been successful in convincing modern consumers to have different coloured towels for every day of the week, the importance of aesthetics has established a firm footing in the hearts of today’s consumers. If this analysis of the *World Vision* catalogue is any indication, the consumption ethic is quickly gaining ground in non-profit territory. The concern is that just as the efforts of 1920s advertisers triumphed in introducing colour and style as mainstay consumer values, the consumption ethic proffered by charitable organizations will also take hold and become the norm. After all, few customers today would agree to buy a car that is only available in black when all of the other car manufacturers offer an array of colour options. Thus, it is perhaps not so unreasonable to think that one day, few donors will give to charitable organizations that do not have a gift catalogue — not in the name of vanity but because, as explained earlier, the theatrical packaging of charitable aid as quantifiable products reproduces the ideological desire for a form of accountability that is native to the

capitalist market. In other words, in the same way that having a multitude of colour and style options for towels makes perfect sense to most consumers today, there is the possibility that having a wide variety of “product” solutions to poverty will be understood as the “best” or “most effective” way of helping people living in poverty.

Thus, an understanding of how particular representations in early advertising successfully shaped a profit-friendly consumption ethic helps us to better grasp the shift that is currently occurring in the non-profit arena. First, what the analysis in the previous chapter makes clear is that the consumption ethic (style-driven consumption) is still alive and well today and has made its way into the realm of non-profits. The values of consumerism — a penchant for cheery representations, novelty, testaments of efficacy and the basic expectation that shopping should be fun — have been transposed to charitable giving. In other words, charitable giving has become aestheticized — its “value” is increasingly tied to its ability to deliver aesthetic pleasure to the donor rather than to the need of the aid recipients. Second, the historical unfolding of the consumption ethic gives us an idea of how deliberate representations in pursuit of individual goals can have the potential to shape behaviours on a broader scale over time. This is not to discount the possibility of resistance — there was and continues to be resistance to consumer culture just as many donors reject consumption-based and consumption-oriented philanthropy. But because the commodification process is being initiated by the charities themselves — because it is the charities that are inviting donors to shop for change rather than a profit-hungry corporation — I believe that any resistance is greatly minimized, making the invitation ever more enticing. Moreover, because the catalogue is so clearly a theatrical portrayal, the underlying ideology of such a representation ironically flies under the radar because it is considered to be just a playful metaphor.

When the gift catalogue is so prevalent and normalized that its theatricality seems like the normal order of the day, then “shopping for change” just becomes another form of shopping. The problem with this is that it puts charitable organizations in the peculiar and precarious position of having to compete on equal footing with for-profits. Corporations — once the (perhaps unequal) ally of non-profits in consumption-based philanthropy initiatives — become the competitor in consumption-oriented

philanthropy. Certainly, non-profits can offer something that for-profits cannot: altruism and the rewarding feelings that accompany it, but for-profits can also offer pleasures that non-profits cannot, namely price advantage (discounts), material satisfaction (of getting something in return for money)<sup>12</sup>, and constant innovation (trendiness). Thus, it is easy enough for a charity to label a “product” as a “Best Seller” just as a retail store might do, but can the charity compete on price? That is, will “products” in the gift catalogue eventually go on sale, perhaps after demand has waned after the holiday season? This suggestion, which is admittedly bizarre, not only highlights the limited capabilities of non-profits to compete with for-profits in general but particularly in the territory of for-profits.

Moreover, a consumption ethic not only encourages consumers to buy in certain ways (and not others), but can come to define the right and wrong way to consume. In a similar vein, a consumption-oriented donor ethic can cue donors to the right and wrong ways to donate to a cause. For example, the gift catalogue’s insistent focus on material “products” that can help aid recipients makes tangibility an important criterion of donors. This suggests, by negation, that donating money towards a cause that does not have a tangible “product” solution is a bad philanthropic choice. But there are many important causes that are not easily represented by tangible “products” — mentoring at-risk youth, for instance — and that shouldn’t make these causes any less attractive to donors. As mentioned earlier, this bias for tangibility is even evident in the *World Vision* catalogue where less comfortable topics and needs that are less than cheery, are pushed to back half of the catalogue. On a broader scale, then, the use of charity gift catalogues which tend to appeal to the consumer appetite rather than that of the donor, not only encourages donors to evaluate charitable causes using the values of consumerism but also has the potential to direct donors away from causes that are not or cannot be easily

<sup>12</sup> In fact, the offer of token goods in return for charitable donations is a common practice in non-profit fundraising. In July of 2015, for example, *World Vision’s* gift catalogue website featured a promotional offer of a free reversible sun hat for donors who “purchased” a beehive, a latrine, or a fruit tree + chickens combo for recipients.

oriented to consumption. This steering of donors — this cultivation of a particular consumption-oriented donor ethic — is therefore about more than any one consumer value, but the ideology of consumerism. Consumer culture has colonized spaces to the point that non-profit charitable acts — human relations — are packaged and literally sold back to donors as “products”, as if to suggest that the consumption ethic is so firmly established in our identities that we are unable to participate and engage in philanthropic relations in ways that are free from the language, representation, or values of consumerism.

#### **4.4. Retrieving the Throwaways of Packaging**

*‘Buy Dell. Join (RED). Save Lives.’ Whose lives are we saving? No idea.*  
(Wirgau et al., 2010, p. 626)

As elaborated in the first chapter, the possibility of the consumption-oriented approach of *World Vision’s* gift catalogue and child sponsorship marketing lies in the commodification process: it is only by rendering qualitatively different humans and their needs as equivalent that *World Vision* can invite donors to “shop” through a catalogue or scroll through a roster of bios before selecting a child to sponsor. Yet both Willis and Theodor Adorno (as cited in Willis, 1991) contend that when an item’s use value is abstracted into an exchange value, a “remainder” of sorts is left out — after all, if two different objects need to be brought to equivalence, then something must be left out or else the objects would have been identical from the start. It is precisely in these “remainders” that Willis locates both the contradiction of capitalism and its antidote. Building upon Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*, Willis (1991) explains that capitalism is contradictory because in so far as abstraction renders entities as equivalent, it also *requires* that those entities be qualitatively different. Abstraction therefore both depends upon and negates difference, and thus, the “remainders” of commodities are dialectically referred to in their denial (Willis, 1991). The key to Willis’ project to reclaim use value in everyday life, therefore, “requires ferreting out all the remainders — those resistant, and perhaps quirky, material of practice and relationships that cannot be assimilated in the process of coming to equivalence” (Willis, 1991, p.9).

When *World Vision* packages charitable aid as “products” to be purchased from a catalogue, that which comes to equivalence are the recipients — children living under vastly different political, geographical, and socio-economic environments are lumped together to become the mythical but consumer-friendly figure of “The Impoverished Child” or “The Family In Need.” As Adorno (1973) explains, “it is through [exchange] that nonidentical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical” (p. 146). In this way, the beady brown eyes of Maria from Honduras on the cover of the 2013 catalogue comes to represent every child in need — the dark-skinned “Other.”

By shifting focus away from the aid recipients onto “products,” the gift catalogue collapses the recipients’ individual circumstances into a single narrative of a life that can be vastly improved or even saved by a goat or a pair of chickens. The “products” in the catalogue thus seem as if they are universal “solutions,” miraculously suited to each of the varied climates of the over 100 in which *World Vision* operates. It is only in the fine print that *World Vision* acknowledges that certain livestock and agricultural “products” may not be available or appropriate for particular regions. The question then is whether *World Vision* simply spends the donation on a suitable alternative or if people who live in regions where “Best Sellers” are not suited simply lose out. While it is not within the scope of this project to probe *World Vision’s* distribution policies, this research is concerned with the representation of how charitable aid is administered. From the perspective of representation, what is problematic is that the catalogue’s “sales pitch” to the donor revolves around the merits of the “product,” while the recipient — outshone by the unexplained appeal of a goat or a beehive — is reduced to a mere variation in the fine print.

Despite how the charity catalogue packages charitable aid into discrete, purchase-able commodities for a specific number of recipients, the paradox is that the recipient remains a generic, anonymous “Other” to the consumer-donor. The irony is that what is left out or, in Willis’ words, *thrown away* is that which might turn out to be philanthropy’s strongest “selling point:” helping someone is a deeply personal act; there is a unique person and a story on the receiving end of each “product.” Meanwhile, when a donor “buys” a goat for a family, there is no detail about the recipient’s history, personality, or circumstances; rather, the donor only knows that the goat will be given to

an unnamed child in an unspecified country. Admittedly, this de-contextualization is not necessarily specific to the charity gift catalogue model — a donor can donate to a children’s hospital without ever knowing the name(s) of the child(ren) who benefitted. The difference, however, is that when a consumer-donor buys a “product” from the catalogue, it seems almost as if the novelty or attractiveness of the item itself is more important than the actual desire to help someone. It is the pleasure of the “shopping” experience rather than the need of the recipient that is *sold* to the donor.

In as much as donors are attracted to the novelty of “shopping for change,” what drives their philanthropic behaviour is the desire to help fellow human beings. Moreover, the long-standing success of *World Vision’s* child sponsorship program — by far the highest revenue generator for the organization — demonstrates that donors relish the opportunity to communicate with and learn the *specifics* of, the child being sponsored.<sup>13</sup> Assuaging [Northern] guilt may very well be the principal motivation behind buying a “product” in *World Vision’s* gift catalogue, but the very existence of some level of guilt signals a recognition of responsibility and care for the recipients.

Of course, sharing the details of each and every recipient with the donor is a time-consuming and expensive task and is therefore not a viable option for charitable organizations to undertake. At the same time, translating charitable aid — particularly relations between humans — entirely into the language of consumer “products” also seems counterproductive to the mission of engaging donors to care about people, rather than “products”, over the long term. Moreover, playing to the values and desires of the consumer side of the consumer-donor identity also raises questions of whether or not charitable organizations can adequately compete against for-profits for the attention and dollars of consumers.

<sup>13</sup> Ironically, the letter-writing component of child sponsorship is often highly theatrical, largely orchestrated by non-profit staff who write standard sentences for sponsored children to copy into letters to their respective sponsors.

In the second chapter, I situated consumption-based philanthropy as an attempt from businesses to be more like non-profits, and consumption-oriented philanthropy as an attempt from non-profits to be more like businesses. But as Farrell points out, these two phenomena are really just “two sides of the same coin, united under the normative agenda of bringing together capitalism and conscience [morality]” (p. 255). In so doing, the gap between capitalism and charity all but disappears. As Nickel and Eikenberry (2009) write:

[W]hen discourse takes place through the venue of the market, it cannot help but stabilize the market as it shortens the distance between consumption and critical action. When stories of philanthropy sell products or increase the number of viewers of a given television show, the distance between the philanthropic impulse and the market collapses (p. 976).

The *World Vision* gift catalogue, moreover, goes one step farther — instead of simply trying to replicate the success of the market in a non-profit endeavour, the catalogue seemingly offers a superior alternative to both the “inefficiencies” of traditional charity *and* to the profit motives of capitalism by creating a space where donors shop directly for tangible goods to help donors help themselves. The gift catalogue, however, fails (and must necessarily fail) at both tasks: first, it cannot undermine traditional fundraising models because the gift catalogue runs concurrently with other *World Vision* campaigns that are not catalogue-based, and second, it cannot pose a legitimate challenge to capitalism because, as Nicola Livingstone (2013) compellingly argues: “[i]n its present form, [charity] does not negate capitalism but helps people to limit their creativity and acquiesce to the prevailing ideology” (p.348). Philanthropy is a form of capitalism rather than its antithesis. As philanthropy increasingly submits itself to the laws and logic of the market, it becomes a self-limiting discourse rather than a transformative one that allows people to conceptualize and represent alternatives to the capitalist system (Nickel & Eikenberry, 2009).

Thus, while I do not pretend to have the solution to help charitable organizations like *World Vision* to “retrieve the remainders” of charitable aid, what I can suggest is that further embedding donors and aid recipients into the folds of capitalism is not the answer. Even though Livingstone denies the possibility that charity can ever produce

substantial positive change, Nickel and Eikenberry still hold faith in the transformative potential of philanthropy. For Nickel and Eikenberry, the key lies in maintaining a critical distance between capitalism and philanthropy in such a way that recognizes the role that capitalism has played in contributing to global inequality. The *World Vision* gift catalogue accomplishes the very opposite of this. Charitable organizations need to not only remind themselves but their donors to actively maintain this conceptual distance. In so doing, it will become increasingly clear that it is modifications to capitalism rather than an expansion of it that will sustainably reduce conditions of poverty.

As much as the “success” of the marketplace may seem to be enviable to non-profits, charitable organizations need to recognize and play upon their own strengths: compelling stories, relationships between people, and human kindness. But as *World Vision*’s own child sponsorship program demonstrates, highlighting the human aspect of charitable giving can easily lead to the trap of commodification and the creation of a pseudo-popularity contest. This not only highlights the complexity of the issue but also to the extent to which the logic of competition is engrained in our way of thinking. Indeed, it may be that it is because a critical distance between philanthropy and capitalism is currently lacking that we struggle to imagine alternatives to consumption.



## Chapter 5.

### Conclusion

I began this thesis with an inquiry about a goat, to ask what it means to represent charitable human relations as a “product” showcased in a glossy catalogue — a “Top Seller,” as it were. I situated this phenomenon of charities “selling” goats and other material items as just one example of non-profit organizations shifting towards the language and logic of the market, or what I term “consumption-oriented philanthropy.”

The second chapter helped to define “consumption-oriented philanthropy” in relation to “consumption-based philanthropy:” whereas the latter involves the purchase a consumer product of which partial proceeds are donated to a charity, consumption-oriented philanthropy replicates the look, feel, and logic of consumerism without involving a for-profit entity. In the absence of a consumer product, consumption-oriented philanthropy reconfigures charitable aid and its recipients as commodities — standardized, quantified, and aestheticized to facilitate comparison shopping and to conform to the values of the marketplace. Using *Kiva* and *World Vision’s* child sponsorship and gift catalogue campaigns as examples, I examined how consumption-oriented philanthropy renders human relations and individual needs as equivalent, such that the decision to feed or vaccinate a child becomes merely an exercise of consumer choice.

In the third chapter, I situated my research approach primarily in the work of Susan Willis who locates the logic of the commodity in consumer packaging. Through this lens, I performed a detailed analysis of various issues of *World Vision’s* gift catalogue as a theatrical representation of charitable aid. Moving beyond an understanding of the catalogue as simply a playful metaphor, I explored the ideological dimensions of some basic functions of packaging, namely standardization,

quantification, and the creation of an appearance of use value for the donor. In this sense, the seemingly trivial addition of elements such as “product” codes, consumer cues like “Top Pick”, and celebrity testimonials serve to package charitable aid as “products” and, therefore, align charitable aid and philanthropic impulse with the values and practices of consumer culture.

The fourth chapter reviewed scholarly critiques of consumption-based and consumption-oriented philanthropy in order to explore why the growth of consumption-oriented philanthropy is, and should be, of concern. Specifically, the discussion focused on the pitfalls of measuring the worth of helping the poor in terms of ROI and of trying to bring about equality by welcoming the poor to participate in a system based on competition and private ownership. Consumption-oriented philanthropy is particularly compelling, moreover, because it hides the flaws of capitalism: the gift catalogue rides on the coat-tails of the popularity of consumption-based philanthropy (e.g. buying pink ribbon products) but eliminates the profit-hungry corporation altogether. But as many scholars have noted, philanthropy as it exists in our neoliberal environment is neither an antidote to, nor a means to temper capitalism. Rather, it reproduces capitalism all the while appearing to correct it. This fits precisely within Williamson’s definition of ideology as “the meaning *made necessary* by the conditions of society while helping to *perpetuate* those conditions” (Williamson, 1978, p.13, emphasis original). Philanthropy is a necessary component of neoliberal capitalism. As Livingstone (2013) argues:

If charity did not exist, social problems could become worse, sparking dissent (in the form of theft, strikes and riots, for example), as the impoverished rally together and gather their voices. In such a situation, a response or rebuke would be necessary on the part of the state form, expressed through political and, no doubt, police action. The reproduction of charity transforms such action. Charity cannot prevent such things from happening, but can appease them, since anger and discontent can be channelled through charity into social action — action for capital, rather than against it (p. 348).

From this perspective, it becomes clear why it is so important to critically analyze the ideology beneath non-profit marketing campaigns as I have done. In an environment dominated by neoliberal thought, there is a need for an outside-the-box voice to

“unwrap” and above all, ask questions about the dominant way of thinking. As Williamson (1978) explains:

[Ideology] is based on false *assumptions*....[T]here is a big difference between saying something is true (which admits the potential of the opposite), and saying the truth of something *need not be questioned* – which admits nothing, and claims nothing either. In ideology, assumptions are made about us which we do not question because we see them as ‘already’ true (p. 41, emphasis original).

The charity gift catalogue falls in to the latter category: when “shopping as change” is presented theatrically and playfully in a gift catalogue format, one need not question the ‘truth’ of the superiority of business rationality or logic. Thus, while at times seeming to be an apolitical, value-neutral way of helping people, the gift catalogue and other forms of consumption-oriented philanthropy set up an ideological narrative of how to best enact philanthropy. In this narrative, capitalism is doubly implicated in the eradication of poverty: it is through market practices (shopping) that donors can help recipients reap the benefits of participating in the market.

As Andrew Wernick lays out so clearly in his seminal work *Promotional Culture*, the promotional nature of commodities is not an externality; it is core to the product itself: “[f]or things implicated in a competitive market to be given a self-promotional form is not a merely decorative — and dissimulating — addition; it changes their very being” (p. 190). In the same way, the theatrical packaging of charitable aid as a shopping catalogue fundamentally changes its nature. This is precisely why Willis insists on studying product packaging as a vehicle of ideology and why I have emphasized the importance of analyzing *World Vision’s* charity gift catalogue. The provision of material items to needy recipients may not be a new function for *World Vision*, but framing this type of charitable aid as a “shopping” experience is a significant change because it embeds the logic of capitalism into philanthropic aid.

Admittedly, I have not and do not claim to have found the answer to eliminating poverty; instead, my contribution has been to problematize the current trend towards applying market logic to non-profit endeavors. While I cannot provide a silver-bullet solution to poverty, what I can offer is a correction of sorts to the short-sightedness of

consumption-oriented philanthropy while this ideological shift is still in its early stages. It is a rather small contribution, I admit, but the logic of capitalism is so deeply entrenched and expands so quickly that we sometimes need the simple reminder that capitalism does not have all of the answers. When human lives and needs are at stake, we need an approach that is more robust than market efficiencies and the aggressive pursuit of revenue (even if it is donations).

For charitable organizations, I recommend a conscious scaling-back of the language and logic of capitalism in fundraising campaigns. Instead of trying to emulate for-profit businesses — which, “shortens the distance between consumption and critical action” (Nickel & Eikenberry, 2009, p.976) — charitable organizations should, instead, try to lengthen that “distance” by focusing on their strengths as non-profit organizations. A well-told personal story can compel donors to take action, without the need to artificially pit recipients or their needs against one another in the style of a free market competition. Representing the needs of recipients in a more humanistic way affords recipients the dignity of not having to be displayed on a website like “products” to be purchased or compared. Those who have disproportionately suffered at the hands of capitalism and other forces deserve to have their hunger, safety, and overall well-being treated as more important than novelty, aesthetics, and fun. Finally, while it is tempting to flatter and appease donors by assigning them the power to decide exactly how their donation will be spent, re-establishing the authority of the charitable organization can also bring long-term benefits. There is no shame in asking donors to put their trust in the expertise of the charitable organization’s staff and in the ability of the aid recipients to decide *for themselves* what is most needed.

Early on in this project, I mentioned — with an equal mix of sincere and sarcastic incredulity — that I did not understand the overwhelming popularity of the goat over all of the other “products” offered in the catalogue. As I’ve searched more deeply into the ideological functions of the charity gift catalogue, I’ve realized that, in fact, this is a very special kind of goat. It is a goat with the ability to retell/retail the story of poverty and of charitable aid. It is a goat that creates a tale in which people are poor because they have been excluded or underserved by the market. It is a goat that, without any hint of irony, tells us that the answer to the ills of capitalism is more capitalism. It would seem then,

that I have perhaps mistaken the meaning of the goat's prestigious title – it is a “Top Seller” not only because it is the “product” most *sold*, but for its ability to *sell us* on the idea of “shopping for change.”

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