

Paradoxes of ethically branded bottled water: constituting the solution to the world water crisis

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Abstract

This paper draws attention to the growing role of corporate marketing in the cultural production of crisis narratives. We examine ethically branded bottled water products that encourage the purchase of bottled water as one means of solving the global water crisis. The brands make a donation to a development organization addressing water issues each time a bottle of water is purchased. Through this process consumers are encouraged to ‘save lives’ and ‘engage’ in ‘alleviating the world water crisis’ through buying one brand of bottled water over another. These brands are somewhat paradoxical because they portray the consumption of products that many consider environmentally, economically and socially harmful as an ethical practice. We undertake a discourse analysis of the marketing materials for Ethos Water (one such ethically branded water product) in order to examine how a version of the world water crisis is constituted by the brand. Using the concept of problem closure, we argue that the cultural production of the world water crisis as natural and apolitical; as dislocated from specific places and environments; and as an opportunity for ethical awakening among consumers, results in the consumption of Ethos Water being constituted as a viable solution to such a crisis.

Keywords

bottled water, consumption, crisis narrative, problem closure, water crisis

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Did you know that water-related diseases are the leading cause of death among children worldwide? By purchasing a bottle of Ethos Water, you can help solve this problem. – Ethos Water bottle, 2006

As ethical branding and cause-related marketing (CRM) become more prevalent, the ways in which these corporate initiatives frame development and environmental problems (and therefore solutions) are in need of further study, particularly as they may aim to ‘educate’ consumers about these issues. Indeed, corporate social responsibility narratives have become a ‘prominent valuative force in global rhetorical culture.’¹ Much of the research on cause framing has been undertaken by advertising or marketing experts who focus on what kinds of messages elicit greater emotional response and empathy (and thereby, purchasing).² In general, marketers have found that a vividly imaged focus on one identifiable person (victim) in need, increases donations because of the greater amount of empathy generated.³ And while a number of researchers have critiqued the continuing fetishization of products through pairing them with ethical causes, what Richey and Ponte call ‘Brand Aid’⁴, it seems that little research attention is paid to the validity with which corporate actors frame the problems they identify as requiring a solution.

This paper engages with the corporate production of a crisis narrative about global water, which seems like a glaring paradox: that the purchase of an environmentally and socially harmful product, such as bottled water, is framed as a legitimate and ethical route towards alleviating the world water crisis. Claims such as these are common from a group of ethically branded⁵ bottled water producers who undertake ‘water-for-water initiatives.’ These initiatives emerged in the early 2000s in Europe and North America to tap the profitability of an enormous bottled water industry and build on trends in corporate social responsibility, marketized philanthropy and ethical consumption.⁶ The initiatives use the popular cause-related marketing (CRM) model, whereby products and social/environmental causes are marketed simultaneously. Usually, a portion of the profits from each product purchased is donated to a social cause.⁷ In this case, bottled water purchases in North America are branded as ethical since they contribute funds to water-related development projects, such as well building and hygiene education, in developing countries.

The growth of the bottled water industry over the last few decades is astounding. The average person in the United States consumed slightly more than 5.5 L of bottled water per year in 1970 (mostly in large water-cooler containers) and more than 112 L per person in 2011 (mostly in single serving plastic containers).⁸ Despite potable drinking water being largely available through municipal systems in the United States and Europe (the main markets for bottled water), US\$11.7 billion worth of bottled water was sold in the US in 2011.⁹

The popularity of bottled water has largely continued in spite of significant and well-developed criticisms of the industry. Concerns exist around the ways in which bottled water may be harmful to one’s health (because of poor quality control); the ways in which it represents a major environmental pollutant (in terms of manufacturing, transportation and disposal of the oil-derived plastic bottles); and its contribution to unsustainable resource use (due to over-pumping of ground and surface water resources).¹⁰ Additionally, many academics and practitioners judge the inherent privatization practices of the bottled water industry to directly conflict with local and global access and human rights to water.¹¹ Overall, many portrayals of bottled water set it up as the antithesis to the aims of social justice and environmental movements.

It is curious therefore that a number of bottled water brands are portraying themselves as ethical products that represent solutions to a world water crisis. We focus on the case of Ethos Water¹², one example of a well-known ethically branded bottled water product. We examine the process through which the individual purchase of Ethos Water comes to be constituted as a solution to the world water crisis. Through a discourse analysis of the brand’s marketing materials, we argue that Ethos Water culturally produces the problem of the world water crisis in a certain way: as a crisis that is

natural and apolitical, as dislocated from specific places and environments, and as an opportunity for ethical awakening among consumers. We argue that by constituting the *problem* of the world water crisis through these particular lenses, Ethos Water is able to background the paradoxical nature of water-for-water initiatives and thus legitimize *a certain solution* to the crisis.

The paper aims to carefully parse out the relationship between the framing of the problem of the world water crisis and the resulting framing of a solution. We conclude that the solution set out by Ethos Water is the consumption of ethically branded bottled water products, which we argue has particular consequences for how individuals and institutions are enrolled in the water crisis. While the constitution of the world water crisis has been examined in the past through engagement with global discourses and institutional governance,¹³ this paper identifies the role that private, business-focused initiatives are now playing in this process.

We begin by briefly introducing CRM. We then describe our theoretical approach for this article, which builds on work that focuses on the production of crisis narratives and problem closure. We then summarize our research methods and introduce the case itself, moving on to describe the depiction of the world water crisis in the Ethos Water marketing materials. Next we establish how the framing of the world water crisis by Ethos Water highlights certain connections while backgrounding others narrowly conceiving of the solution to such a crisis.

Cause-related marketing and the production of crisis narratives

Cause-related marketing campaigns, such as Ethos Water, have increased dramatically in popularity over the last decade. For example, the percentage of consumers in the United States willing to switch brands to those using the CRM model continues to grow, from 66 percent in 1993, to 80 percent in 2010, to 89 percent in 2013.¹⁴ CRM is purported to benefit non-profit organizations by allowing them to raise funds and awareness through corporate marketing campaigns and to benefit corporations by simultaneously selling products and promoting their 'ethical' brand image. Critics of CRM are suspicious of the intentions of corporations that may use CRM as a simply an ethical branding technique to improve their image.¹⁵ Side stepping these debates on the intentions of corporations, this paper explores *the process* through which Ethos Water is constituted as ethical and a viable solution to the world water crisis through marketing discourses.

Previous in-depth research by one of the authors into the use of CRM to fund development initiatives supports the need for such an investigation on two fronts. First, water provision is one of the most popular cases funded within the CRM field.¹⁶ This popularity is mirrored by the fact that ethically branded bottled water sales are increasing, and even doubled in the UK in 2008, while 'regular' bottled water sales slowed.¹⁷

Second, goals of 'awareness raising' within CRM campaigns¹⁸ are often pursued through the use of a marketing sound bite that briefly explains the campaign purpose to consumers. Within the ethically branded bottled water campaigns examples include: 'When you drink One, Africa drinks too,'¹⁹ 'Drink me, save lives,'²⁰ 'If you had a chance, would you save the world?'²¹ and 'With our Drop for Drop Initiative, you are drinking for two.'²² These sound bites are ubiquitous in the lives of consumers (whether or not they actively purchase these water brands), and can now be found in coffee shops, in grocery stores, on airlines, at conferences and at festivals, among other places.²³ In the case of Ethos Water, which is owned by Starbucks and distributed by Pepsi Co., the marketing discourses are estimated to reach over 40 million North Americans each week through coffee shops, grocery and convenience stores.²⁴

These insights of popularity and ubiquity encourage us to take Ethos Water marketing seriously as a site for culturally producing the problem of the 'world water crisis.' Our attention to crisis narratives mirrors that of many other researchers. Those who critically examine development and

environmental management discourses have found that environmental crises are often framed as natural, or the fault of hyper-reproductive or livelihood-seeking local people.²⁵ In-depth and critical analysis of these situations has revealed otherwise. In some cases the environmental degradation or 'crisis' is not underway in the first place in the ways it is portrayed;²⁶ in others the 'natural crisis' is a result of broader political and economic forces that have been left unanalyzed and made invisible;²⁷ and in still others the 'crisis' is framed in a particular way that encourages certain types of intervention over others.²⁸

These examinations of crises and crisis narratives are not necessarily meant to falsify myths or reveal new explanations of political and environmental processes.²⁹ Their purpose is to examine *the process by which problems are constituted in certain ways so that certain solutions come to be seen as natural or obvious to the issue at hand*, resulting in real impacts on environmental resource management and development intervention.³⁰ This process of 'problem closure' often results in certain (socially acceptable or simple) solutions being sought and might also preclude alternative (and more appropriate) interventions or solutions.³¹

While the concept of problem closure has been used to examine environmental crisis narratives related to issues such as climate change, forestry and population,³² less attention has been paid to the world water crisis. Researchers or writers who have problematized conceptualization of the 'global water crisis' or 'water scarcity' do not necessarily write specifically of problem closure, but they have developed critiques of particular popular framings.

The causes of the water and sanitation crisis are complex and generally attributed to multiple processes including: poverty, urbanization, the distribution of water on the planet, agricultural and industrial overuse and pollution of water resources, poor management, lack of conservation, climate change impacts and a general prioritization of other development issues by national governments and funding agencies around the world.³³ The use of global statistics of water and sanitation availability belies these complexities. Both Linton³⁴ and Mehta³⁵ raise significant questions about the use of global water statistics because they separate water from social, political, and local context. These authors do not deny that people face water shortages or lack sanitation facilities; they argue that these shortages and lack are usually attributed to physical shortage and lack of money to pay for sanitation when they may arise because of social and political factors.

Conca³⁶ also cautions that what is called a global water crisis is, in his opinion, a linked set of water challenges including the loss of freshwater ecosystem services, the marginalization of water-related livelihoods, bad water management, and other complex factors like 'damming, dumping, draining, and diverting.' In her analysis of postcolonial water issues in western Australia, Gibbs³⁷ invites us to consider ontological pluralism in conceiving of water problems. Eurocentric characterizations of water scarcity and crisis are not always appropriate or universal. Overall these authors stress the processes through which we have been taught to see water or the water crisis and the consequential outcomes of these understandings.

Trottier's work is particularly useful to us here. She notes there is no agreed upon definition of the world water crisis despite the fact that: '[i]n many [international governance] circles [it] has now achieved the position of hegemonic concept, fuelling theories and policies that rely on its unquestioned existence.'³⁸ Trottier finds that measuring the world water crisis through indicators such as the water poverty index constitutes the crisis as something that can be solved by 'the international community.' This, she argues, enshrines the principles of that community (e.g. the controversial Dublin Principles, which include a statement on water's economic value) as necessarily part of the solution, leaving no room for fundamental clashes between values. As a result Trottier argues that water users can now only act responsibly through obedience to international 'experts' and 'objective' measurements. We follow Trottier's argument here, but redirect it to the work done by

cause-related marketing discourses asking how the framing of the crisis by corporate actors enshrines certain principles legitimizing some solutions over others.

Research methods

This paper undertakes a discourse analysis of the Ethos Water campaign as one case study from a growing field of ethically branded bottled water products. The analysis focused on the ways in which Ethos Water communicates to the public through marketing texts and images that explain the Ethos Water initiative and the world water crisis it purports to alleviate. This included the bottle itself, in-store displays, and systematic online searches that retrieved press releases, public lectures and media interviews with the Ethos Water founders. We used the Ethos Water website³⁹ as a main data source as this is the place where consumers are directed (on the water bottle) to learn about the initiative.⁴⁰ Also, text from the website is commonly repeated in press releases and media covering the campaign. Our insights are supplemented by a great deal of prior knowledge about the use of CRM initiatives in the international development sector after several years of in-depth research into the field.⁴¹

Inspired by framing analysis and its ability to explore the ways in which issue framing is an act of definition, explanation, evaluation and prescription,⁴² this analysis involved a systematic search through the website and supporting literature for answers to some basic questions about the representation of the water crisis (i.e. how is the crisis defined? who exactly is the crisis said to affect? what is cited as the causes of the crisis?). Drawing on the idea that the constitution of a crisis narrative opens up some solutions and connections while obscuring others, we critically analyze how this depiction encourages us to understand and act on the issue of the world water crisis. Before we get to this discussion, we describe Ethos Water in more detail.

Ethos Water case study

We chose the Ethos Water initiative as a case study because it is well known in North America and because the discourses and strategies used epitomized those of the other ethically-branded bottled water initiatives we analyzed in the broader research project. Business school classmates Peter Thum and Jonathan Greenblatt launched Ethos Water in 2003 as a social enterprise with the mission of ‘helping children get clean water.’⁴³ After traveling to South Africa where he saw people without access to clean drinking water, Thum decided to use ‘consumer demand for bottled water in developed countries to address the world water crisis’ by ‘raising awareness and emotional involvement.’⁴⁴

Initially the pair donated half of their (then meager) after-tax profits to a water project in Honduras. Starbucks acquired Ethos Water in 2005 and turned it into a more traditional for-profit CRM initiative, with a 5-cent donation for each bottle purchased (for approximately US\$1.80). In 2007 Ethos Water distribution expanded to Canadian Starbucks stores and in 2008 Starbucks mobilized its distribution partnership with Pepsi Co. to sell Ethos Water in grocery, drug and convenience stores.⁴⁵

Starbucks committed to donating 10 million dollars to water projects by 2010.⁴⁶ As of 2012 Starbucks had donated 7.38 million dollars, citing the economic downturn as the reason for this shortfall.⁴⁷ The donations raised through Ethos Water sales are channeled through the Ethos Water Fund, part of the Starbucks Foundation (Starbucks’ philanthropic arm). They are used to fund well-building and sanitation projects through grants to international development organizations: CARE, WaterAid, UNICEF, Mercy Corps, International Project Concern, Water Partners International, H2O Africa, and others. The money has been used for projects that benefitted an estimated 430,000

people in Africa, Asia and South America as of 2012. In recent years the Starbucks Foundation has narrowed the regional focus of these projects to 'coffee and tea-growing communities in East Africa and India.'⁴⁸ This change likely reflects trends in the streamlining of corporate philanthropy to make it more in line with business goals and corporate products.⁴⁹

Ethos Water and the world water crisis

We begin our analysis by examining the framing of the *what*, *why*, *where* and *who* of the world water crisis by Ethos Water, drawing mainly on a section of its website entitled: 'The World Water Crisis.' Subsequently we turn our analysis to the solutions this framing generates asserting that this problem closure works to legitimize individual consumption decisions as a response to, and Ethos Water as a vital actor in, addressing the world water crisis.

Constituting the crisis

In terms of defining *what* the water crisis is, Ethos Water marketers do this through a discourse of public health and through the use of commonly cited statistics taken from United Nations (UN) reports.⁵⁰ They explain the crisis like so:

Despite the apparent abundance of clean water in the US and most of the developed world, more than 1 billion people around the world lack clean, safe drinking water and more than 2.6 billion lack adequate sanitation services. The problem affects children most. Indeed, the world water crisis is one of the largest public health issues of our time.⁵¹

This opening statement in 'The World Water Crisis' section of the website immediately sets up an imagined geography of a 'developed world' with access to water and a (implied) developing world without; a binary that will be expanded upon below. The large-scale statistics used here which Trottier⁵² argues creates a 'mass of anonymous water users' that seem 'infinitely substitutable for each other' are reinforced by one of the few images on the Ethos Water website used to represent 'The World Water Crisis' section. In the image, approximately 60 people, all black and in colorful clothing, are squeezed against one another and are looking up together at the camera, such that it is impossible to tell which heads, bodies and limbs belong to which person.⁵³

The use of statistics is a common tool throughout the Ethos Water website. For example, it states: '[i]n fact, out of the 2.2 million unsafe drinking water deaths in 2004, 90% were children under the age of five.' This statistic and many others are drawn from the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF. Trottier's work indicates that this use of statistics may legitimize the role of the 'international community' in addressing the world water crisis. Emily Potter⁵⁴ argues through her analysis of ethically branded bottled water that statistics play a role as part of an assemblage (that also includes inputs like celebrity endorsements and medical research) that secures the market for ethically branded bottled water. Therefore, the use of global statistics and the links made to international organizations such as the WHO may work to legitimize Ethos Water's role as an international actor working towards ending the crisis, which until now has largely been the domain of international organizations rather than corporate ones.

Important to note from these initial descriptions of the crisis by Ethos Water is the emphasis on health. The world water crisis is defined through a health-related lens – a public health issue, an issue of disease – as opposed to through one of the many other lenses identified by international organizations (e.g. the UN or the WHO) such as a crisis of poverty, a lack of dignity, a lack of

human rights, a development failure or an environmental crisis.⁵⁵ We will argue below that this focus on health is a tool through which the issue of the world water crisis is depoliticized.

Ethos Water marketers are far less precise when it comes to describing *why* the world water crisis exists. They state:

The world water crisis is created by a confluence of factors including climate and geography, lack of water systems and infrastructure, and inadequate sanitation, something that 2.6 billion people (40% of the world's population) lack access to. Some of these countries have additional problems, including high levels of arsenic and fluoride in drinking water.

Of note here is the use of the idea that some people 'lack' access to infrastructure and water systems without any explanation as to how this lack emerges through particular confluences of political, environmental, economic and social factors. Also, the focus on geography and climate as 'natural' reasons for a water crisis is emphasized (above social and political reasons for poor access to water) with the use of arsenic and fluoride as examples of water pollutants (since these are generally naturally occurring pollutants as opposed to agricultural run-off or industrial effluents, for example).⁵⁶ The apolitical use of the word 'lack' and the 'naturalness' attributed to the crisis are at issue with a more critical perspective on the crisis, as will be discussed below.

In our analysis we find that Ethos Water does not offer much more of an explanation as to *why* the world water crisis occurs. It does, however, offer an explanation of what happens *because* of the world water crisis:

Thus, the lack of clean water, coupled with the lack of basic sanitation and a dearth of hygiene education is one of the largest obstacles to progress and development in these regions and across the world. The UN has prioritized water access among its Millennium Development Goals because it contributes to such widespread suffering, including increased poverty, high child mortality rates, depressed education levels and political instability.

Statements like this by Ethos Water draw a unidirectional explanation of the 'natural' occurrence of the water crisis causing uneven geographic development but not vice versa. Additionally, we again see Ethos Water engaging with global institutions (the Millennium Development Goals) perhaps to further legitimize the constitution of the crisis in this manner and/or the role of Ethos Water as an actor in these discussions.

The geographic framing of *where* the world water crisis takes place adds confusion to the depiction of the crisis by Ethos Water. The marketing discourse states:

This problem [of the world water crisis] isn't just confined to a particular region of the planet; it's a worldwide issue. A third of the earth's population lives in water stressed countries and that number is expected to rise dramatically over the next two decades. The crisis is worst in developing nations, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.⁵⁷

This statement does not particularly clarify where the world water crisis is. It implies that it is everywhere ('a worldwide issue'), but also only in one third of the world's countries and that these countries are mostly developing nations (such as South Asia). The idea that the crisis takes place 'everywhere' is contradicted by the use of photos on the Ethos Water website. While there are only three photos on the website that do not depict the Ethos Water bottle or logo, all three invoke imaginaries of Africa. Along with the mass of water users described above, the other photos include: a picture of two young black boys standing in front of thatched roof housing in what seems to be a desert environment, reminiscent of sub-Saharan Africa; and a close-up a photo of four black hands

holding a bowl full of water. The messaging that the water crisis is a worldwide issue seems to be in tension with the images used by Ethos Water and their use of particular bodies and African-esque landscapes.

Alongside a focus on developing countries like those in Africa, are statements by the Ethos Water founders that the crisis is currently poised to affect nations other than those currently described as ‘water stressed.’ For example in a media interview, Ethos Water’s founder Thum draws on this potential infiltration of the crisis; he says:

The most important thing is to start a dialogue and to get people in the U.S. to start thinking about the world water crisis not just as something that affects people far away, but as a problem that we will face soon as well.⁵⁸

Despite this somewhat contradictory discourse on where the world water crisis is located (everywhere, in one-third of countries, soon to be ‘here’) there is an implied sense throughout the Ethos Website that the world water crisis is (for the time being) located ‘elsewhere.’ Below we will explore how these multiple (and contradictory) geographies of the world water crisis work to mask some global connections while highlighting others.

Investigating *who* was portrayed in the Ethos Water discourse as being affected by the crisis yielded unexpected results. As we might expect, some of the Ethos Water content refers to the trials faced by women and children when it comes to water quality and access. The emphasis on childhood disease and mortality by Ethos Water reflects this. Similarly, the following statement about women describes their particular plight:

[M]any women and young girls in rural areas in Sub-Saharan Africa and other parts of the world must trek as much as six miles everyday to retrieve water for their families. Due to this manual labor, such women and children are prevented from pursuing an education, maintaining their households or earning additional income.

Surprisingly though, these generic statements about women and children remain focused on large-scale and universalized categories without depicting any personalized experiences, pictures, or the traditional ‘stories-from-the-field’ that we have come to expect from marketized development and consumption campaigns.⁵⁹

In fact there was only one story available on the Ethos Water website about an individual and that story focused on the experience of one of the founders: Peter Thum. The story describes Thum seeing people without access to water in South Africa and his subsequent career transition from the for-profit to the social enterprise sector. ‘The Ethos Story’ section of the website states:

The idea for Ethos came to Peter in 2001 after working in South Africa as a consultant ... While there, he met people in townships and in the countryside who lacked access to clean water. He recognized their dire need and wanted to do something to help ... Ethos became Peter’s passion. He left his job to pursue his idea at the beginning of 2002 and set up an Ethos office in his London flat, where he came up with the name Ethos and wrote the business plan. That summer he moved to Manhattan, the world’s largest bottled water market, to launch in the U.S.⁶⁰

Media articles picking up this story focus on the founders’ journey from a struggling business to a successful one. Thum explains:

I stood with five other workers in the bottling line, wore a hairnet and gloves, and screwed the caps on by hand ... [and later after Starbucks acquired Ethos Water] I moved to Seattle and now manage Ethos inside a company of 150,000 employees. I just bought a house for the first time.⁶¹

Below we will explore how these stories of Thum's passion and entrepreneurial ingenuity and his rise in social standing from a production line worker wearing a hairnet to a home owner and manager are reminiscent of notions of the American Dream reinforcing tropes of individualism.

The only other mention of *who*, beyond the 'many women and young girls' affected by the crisis and Peter Thum's story is the 'you' (the consumer) frequently referred to by Ethos Water. Consumers are told that they can 'engage,' 'help solve this problem' and 'join a growing community' all through purchasing Ethos Water. The final section of 'The world water crisis' section of the Ethos Water website sums this up when it states:

Without question, the world water crisis condemns billions of people to a perpetual struggle to survive at the subsistence level, thus inspiring millions to engage and alleviate this problem. Every time you purchase a bottle of Ethos you make a difference.

The extent to which purchasing bottled water can be considered an example of 'engagement' is of course in need of further analysis.

In sum, the Ethos Water marketing discourse frames the world water crisis using global statistics as a public health issue affecting a plethora of anonymous water users. The crisis is described as caused by a lack of access to water due to natural processes and as affecting people in the developing world (women and children), as victims of water impoverished places. The crisis might also be a threat to those in the developed world in the near future. For the time being, people in the developed world are depicted as engaged with the crisis through responsible business ventures (in the case of the founders) and 'ethical' consumption decisions (in the case of the general public).

Constituting the solution

We continue our analysis below and argue that the depiction of the world water crisis by Ethos Water contributes to a process of problem closure. We argue that Ethos Water works to foreground individual consumers and itself as predominant actors in a solution to the world water crisis and background both the complexity of the crisis and the harmful track record of the bottled water industry. This problem closure is constituted through three interrelated framings of the world water crisis by Ethos Water which include: (i) the apolitical and natural depiction of the crisis, (ii) the geography of the crisis as dislocated from specific places and environments, and (iii) the emphasis placed on the Ethos Water story as an opportunity for ethical awakening. We discuss each in turn below.

(i) *An apolitical crisis.* There is an overall sense within the depiction of the world water crisis through Ethos Water marketing discourses that the crisis is a simple matter of 'luck' and 'lack.' The discourse suggests that it is merely an issue of luck that some people in the world have access to potable water and sanitation facilities and others do not. There is very little exploration into why some people lack access to these basic human needs except to ascribe it to 'unlucky' or 'natural' combinations of geography, geology and/or climate (but not climate change). The emphasis on a lack of infrastructure as a key cause of the water crisis must also be noted. As well, the use of impersonal statistics and the unidirectional causality depicted within the Ethos Water discourse (e.g. the water crisis causes but is not in turn also a consequence of uneven development) also contribute to a narrow and apolitical framing.

Of particular interest in the case of Ethos Water is the emphasis on health. The apolitical depiction of the crisis is emphasized when it is described as a public health issue rather than through another lens. Researchers studying CRM and corporate philanthropy more broadly have identified

health as a key theme within CRM campaigns because it is easy for consumers to relate to. They argue that a focus around health placates consumers making it difficult for them to connect the material implications of consumption decisions (e.g. pollution caused by overconsumption in the North) to the development issue. This focus on health may also make it difficult for consumers to question the CRM campaign itself without seeming to question the feel-good mandate of 'helping children worldwide.'⁶² The focus on non-controversial causes like 'saving lives' may be an especially important maneuver for CRM products that are inherently environmentally and socially contradictory, such as bottled water.

Demonstrating how issues that are significantly political, environmental and social are framed as apolitical remains important work.⁶³ An apolitical and ahistorical account of the water crisis ignores the very complex reasons for lack of potable water and sanitation facilities. Crucial here though is not just that Ethos Water frames the water crisis as apolitical but the work that this framing does. We suggest that this simplistic framing of 'luck' and 'lack' renders invisible the roles of colonialism, dispossession, debt crises, racism and neoliberal-led development on water availability and quality.⁶⁴ Framing the world water crisis in this narrow and apolitical way closes off the crisis constituting it as a physical and technical one emphasizing solutions that require only technical interventions (e.g. increased infrastructure), rather than structural or political changes.⁶⁵ Furthermore, questions that consumers may have about Ethos Water or bottled water as an ethical or sustainable product are largely silenced, working to maintain Ethos Water's legitimacy as a player in educating the public on and addressing the world water crisis.

(ii) *The geography of the crisis.* Geography comes into play in the confusing constitution of the world water crisis by Ethos Water as located everywhere but also (at least for the time being) 'elsewhere.' This geography of the crisis does two things that work in tandem to forefront Ethos Water as a legitimate actor in the solution to the water crisis. First, framing the crisis as everywhere reinforces the technical and physical aspect of the crisis, emphasizing the roles of some actors over others. Second, framing the crisis as elsewhere distances the world water crisis from the material effects of the bottled water industry in North America and around the world.

In some ways the depiction of the water crisis as broadly 'worldwide' by Ethos Water is a surprising finding in that some regions around the world are synonymous with 'water crisis'⁶⁶ and therefore could have been useful tools for communicating the direness of the crisis to consumers (especially given the desire to communicate in sound bites). However, the constitution of the water crisis as global and the reoccurring use of apolitical descriptions and statistics does work to legitimize Ethos Water as an actor in this field and according to Conca may place focus on the physical aspect of the crisis as transnational while not recognizing the equally transnational components of social, economic and political institutions.⁶⁷

Beyond the constitution of the crisis as 'everywhere,' the contradictory use of geographic imaginaries of Africa and the names of specific regions (e.g. 'South Asia') reinforce the depiction of the crisis as underway in developing regions and not in North America. This distancing of the crisis from North America is emphasized by an almost complete silence on the material geographies of Ethos Water as a commodity and of the bottled water industry more generally. The specific environments and places involved in the production, distribution, consumption and disposal of Ethos Water products are (not surprisingly) missing from the Ethos Water website.⁶⁸ The founder, Thum, describes this as a purposeful promotional strategy to downplay the source of Ethos Water in favor of other messaging. His idea was to:

Develop a fashionable bottled-water brand that generates funds to finance water programs in developing countries, and make the social message on the bottle more compelling than the source of the water.⁶⁹

Marketing bottled water through the use of promotional narratives that do not relate to the material reality of the water is not a new tactic and in fact is an increasing phenomenon as more and more bottled water is produced from municipal water sources rather than springs.⁷⁰

What is intriguing here is not just the distancing of Ethos Water from its own materiality but the ways in which masking the environmental and place-based aspects of bottled water works in tandem with a constitution of the world water crisis as 'elsewhere' to dislocate Ethos Water (and the practices of the bottled water industry as a whole) from the world water crisis. This framing closes off certain questions that one might ask about the contributions of the bottled water industry to water scarcity, contamination, and unequal access to potable water and sanitation.⁷¹ As well, the role that bottled water companies have played in increasing the vulnerability of populations facing local water crises (through over-pumping of resources or the disposal of plastic bottles for example) is rendered invisible through the selective focus of Ethos Water marketing.⁷²

The depiction of the world water crisis as happening 'elsewhere' hides the connections that people in North America may *already have* to the world water crisis and obscures the transnational components of economic and political systems. These connections range from experiencing local water crises and paying for needed infrastructure replacement in the North,⁷³ to the impacts that unsustainable consumer lifestyles, corporate practices, government interventions or global environmental processes may have on local populations and resources around the world.⁷⁴

Together, these geographies of everywhere and elsewhere result in connections between people in North America and those suffering the effects of water crises as *only existing* through the consumption of ethically branded bottled water and only mediated through Ethos Water. This emphasizes Ethos Water's role as a legitimate actor in this process and makes irrelevant the possible actions that North Americans might take 'at home' to alleviate the crisis (for example: water conservation measures or more sustainable consumption practices).

(iii) *An ethical awakening.* The most surprising finding of this analysis was that 'stories from the field' and the voices of aid beneficiaries were not a focus in the Ethos Water campaign but instead the focus was on founder Peter Thum. Potter also noted this trend towards sharing the personal journeys of social enterprise founders. She calls these stories 'ethical awakenings'⁷⁵ and argues that they emphasize individual and business-oriented actions as reasonable solutions to global water issues. Unlike Trottier's⁷⁶ finding that constituting the world water crisis in global governance circles with technical measurements frames it as a crisis best addressed through international experts and statistics, this 'ethical awakening' discourse focuses on individual actions as the solution. Drawing on the everyday struggles and successes of Thum's own journey, these stories aim to inspire audience members and as such constitute the consumer as someone who can also have such an ethical awakening simply by changing their consumption choices.⁷⁷ The themes of entrepreneurial success, 'self-made men' and transformation, are common hallmarks of American culture, of which King⁷⁸ argues philanthropy is a major aspect. The founder's story therefore reinforces the entanglement of consumption and philanthropy fundamental to the Ethos Water initiative and continues to reinforce bottled water consumption as a viable vehicle for development.

Useful here is Prudham's examination of the role of the entrepreneurial subject in legitimizing the contradictory notion of green capitalism (of which we argue CRM is an example). Prudham states that centering the entrepreneurial subject in these discourses helps to legitimize the (seemingly contradictory) 'political and cultural' fusion of capitalism and environmentalism.⁷⁹ He notes that the performance, cultural worth, and status of entrepreneurs as elites who act as architects of (rather than obstacles to) change makes them valuable players in legitimization processes. In particular the focus in the Ethos Water discourse on the personal stories of Peter Thum, his travel experiences, business-related struggles and eventual entrepreneurial success, illustrate this. The attractive stories of Thum's

'ethical awakening' highlight the role of individuals in global development through market-based mechanisms. This acts to constitute individual consumption as a valiant and legitimate (rather than contradictory) route to addressing global social and environmental problems.

The legitimization of consumption as a means of development intervention is also reinforced through the slippage between the act of consumption and the words use by Ethos Water to describe it in the discourse (e.g. engagement, joining a community, helping). Despite the call to 'visit our website to learn how you can help' that is inscribed on every Ethos Water bottle, the website lacks information on how to 'help' outside of consuming bottled water. While co-founder Greenblatt does describe a more engaged and nuanced initial goal to inspire at least a fraction of the consumer base to not only buy the bottle but also to 'pick up a pamphlet, visit the website, sign an online petition, tell a friend, make a donation, volunteer their time, perhaps even to start their own social venture,'⁸⁰ these options were not presented as part of the Ethos Water marketing discourse at the time of this research.

This finding adds to the growing concern that the prioritization of consumption as the mechanism of change obscures other collective or political forms of action such as lobbying for government investment in development aid, for the human right to water, or for policies to limit water pollution. The individualized nature of the Founder's story and the slippage between 'engage,' 'help' and 'consume' illustrate the narrowness with which Ethos Water frames action and engagement. This triggers concerns about the consequences of corporate-led awareness-raising and development campaigns.

We argue that alternative solutions to the water crisis are invisible here precisely because of the problem closure that occurs when Ethos Water narrowly constitutes the world water crisis in their marketing discourse. The analysis shows that the discourse makes invisible a series of connections between people and places that are *already* intimately linked through a variety of consumption, production, political, and emotional networks.

Problem closure and the paradox of consumption-as-development

The analysis above considered the paradoxical notion of buying a product widely known to be unsustainable from an industry with a poor social and economic track record in the name of ethical consumption. We explored the process of *how* bottled water comes to be constituted as a solution to the world water crisis. By examining the marketing discourse of Ethos Water we find that the problem of the world water crisis closes off the plethora of possible solutions, highlighting individual consumption practices as a (or perhaps *the most*) legitimate route to global change. This framing of the world water crisis makes visible only certain environments (those naturally lacking water), places (elsewhere) and actors (entrepreneurs and consumers). This in turn limits the potential connections of people in North America to the world water crisis (both at home and abroad) to those mediated by marketing, consumption and development intervention. The constitution of the world water crisis here, through a combination of an apolitical narrative, a particular geography and an emphasis on entrepreneurial subjects, is unique.

Research that we reviewed on the constitution of water and the water crisis pays particular attention to the outcomes of how we have been taught to see water⁸¹ (for example, as a thing to be managed and measured by experts, or as a transnational problem necessarily involving state management).⁸² Therefore, further research on the role of corporations in raising awareness about causes must attune to the outcomes that are triggered through a particular type of problem closure.

This paper raises concerns about the prominence of corporate social responsibility narratives and the triumphs and perils of corporate-led awareness-raising, ethical consumption and development philanthropy. When it comes to ethically-branded bottled water products, debates generally

oscillate between claims that they either represent ‘ethics in a bottle’⁸³ or ‘bullshit in a bottle’⁸⁴ and focus on the material impacts of the exchange (e.g. how much money is donated per purchase and how many wells can be built with the donation?). Our argument here steers away from these particular worries to examining the broader practices by which consumption becomes a legitimate route to development intervention. We take the cultural production of the development crisis seriously, as a starting point for understanding which actors, places, and processes are included in or excluded from the discussion.

Thus far the work examining crisis narratives has mainly focused on government and sometimes non-governmental organizations, media or academic framings of crises and the resulting environmental and development policy decisions and actions. A significant contribution of this paper is to turn our attention to the role of corporate actors and marketing/branding campaigns in the constitution of crisis narratives. Rather than examine these corporate marketing narratives for how best they can increase demand for products and causes (as is the case in much of the business literature) we consider their role in problem definition and awareness-raising. As international development practices become more marketized and public-private partnerships (such as CRM) become more common we must pay attention to the role that corporate entities play in defining development-related problems (and solutions).

Our findings offer some interesting points for further investigation. While it may be somewhat expected (at least by the cynical among us) that a bottled water company would engage in marketing practices that encourage bottled water consumption above all else, this was not the end of the story with Ethos Water. In the case of Ethos Water, the founders have explicitly stated their intention to educate Americans about the world water crisis since general awareness about the issue was ‘quite low.’⁸⁵ In practice, this ‘education’ was intricately wound up with marketing campaigns to sell more product and discourses that further legitimize the brand as an actor within global water governance practices. We must therefore ask ourselves whether corporate brands are best placed to ‘educate’ the public on these matters? The goal of many CRM initiatives to raise awareness of and ‘emotional involvement’ in an issue must drive us to investigate how the seemingly inherent paradoxes of philanthropic or green capitalism are squeezed out of the discussion. These potential paradoxes go beyond the Ethos Water case and raise questions for us about whether a narrow focus on individual, charitable or technical-based solutions to complex global problems of inequality is ever workable?

While this paper does not address the material impacts of the bottled water industry or Ethos Water in great detail, our goal is to parse out the relationship between the process of problem closure and the solutions that are necessarily generated from and negated by this process. We add to this an emphasis on corporate actors and new forms of consumption philanthropy. We conclude that what is at stake here is not just a concern over corporate marketing practices perpetuating inaccurate or simplified versions of a crisis. As has been demonstrated above, this process of constituting a crisis through marketing discourses works to background the paradoxes that seem inherent in ethically-branded bottled water campaigns. They emphasize certain understandings of a crisis that necessarily legitimize certain (seemingly contradictory) solutions. This process of problem closure has global economic, environmental and social impacts including a particular form of development (technologically-focused, interventionist, neoliberal) being constituted as normal, necessary and viable.

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Notes

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