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An anatomy of carewashing: Corporate branding and the commodification of care during Covid-19

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Abstract

This article defines ‘carewashing’ as commercial branding strategies which commodify care and attempt to increase corporate profit, and provides the first theorisation and historicisation of the term. The first section of the article situates ‘carewashing’ in relation to longer-term strategies of corporate ‘social responsibility’ and cause-related marketing. The second shows how established corporate practices are being reinvented in an era of Covid-19 and amidst profound neoliberal instability. The third section focuses on specific examples of contemporary carewashing, showing their variation and pinpointing three tendencies: ‘opportunistic branding’; ‘community resourcing’; and ‘reputational steamrolling’. The concluding section argues that carewashing also needs to be understood as a political act which is involved in wider social struggles. It argues that, in the Gramscian sense, carewashing is part of a ‘passive revolution’ in that it is attempting to claim and demarcate the realm of care for corporate capitalism and against social democracy.

Keywords

branding, care, carewashing, commodification, corporation, Covid-19, pandemic, marketing

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Introduction

'Primark Cares!' pronounces a slogan emblazoned on brown paper bags and across its website, as the fast-fashion retailer seeks to reassure us that it is an ethical company. Facebook launches a new 'care' emoji. British Gas asks us to #Sharethatyoucare on Instagram and educates us about the mental health difficulties of unpaid carers. 'A good community would be made up of caring individuals that support each other constantly', announces a giffgaff mobile telecommunications advert. 'Nike X ASOS' offers a range of 'self-care' events. The 'Dove Men + Care' campaign proposes to wash away toxic masculinity by cheering on men who do care work at home. And an Instagram campaign, 'Dove Cares' reminds us of the importance during the pandemic of washing our hands – with Dove soap – because 'Washing your hands is one of the best ways to care'.

These different examples are all corporate proclamations of care which have been visible during the Covid-19 pandemic. They work in various ways: they propose utopian caring communities; they encourage the pampering of self-care; they suggest you can care by making a purchase to curtail the spread of Covid-19; and they provide information on care inequalities. Yet they are interconnected practices, in that, first, they suggest that a corporate service or product can help us care for ourselves and for others; and, second, they are all produced by multinational corporations with unequal and problematic social and environmental practices (in some cases, such as Primark, notoriously so).

This expanding use of the word 'care' by corporations throughout the Covid-19 pandemic mirrors its proliferation in wider society. In the UK, for instance, people across the country 'clapped for carers' on their doorsteps, and the word 'care' was stamped on enamel pin badges worn by government ministers (Skeggs and Wood, 2020). Policy, journalism, think tank work and academic literature on care has mushroomed worldwide, as care has been emphasised as a socially vital and neglected topic which is in urgent need of retheorising and addressing (Bunting, 2020; Care Collective, 2020; Dowling, 2021; Coffey et al., 2020; Women's Budget Group, 2020). In short, we have witnessed 'a discursive explosion of care' (Care Collective, 2020). Corporate expressions of care are part of this landscape. Yet they also serve their primary bottom line of producing financial profit, enhancing corporate reputations and ultimately legitimising corporations' expanding role and space in society (Fraser, 2016; Matten and Moon, 2020). They function by focusing on selective social and environmental causes while strategically ignoring the majority of externalities of their business practices. They are examples of what we (Care Collective, 2020; Chatzidakis, 2020; Chatzidakis et al., 2020) have dubbed 'carewashing': contemporary practices in which companies try to cleanse themselves from the connotations of corporate exploitation, and instead cathect their brand to a mood, an affect, an ethos, an idea of *care*.

This article fleshes out the meaning of the term 'carewashing' to provide both an initial theorisation and historicisation of this very contemporary practice. We define 'carewashing' as communication strategies designed to demonstrate how 'caring' a corporation is in ways that commonly obscure that corporation's actual destructive social and environmental impacts. Corporate brand involvement in social issues has a long and complicated history (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Binkley and Littler, 2011) and its ubiquity during the

pandemic around, for example, issues such as BLM (Black Lives Matter) and feminism, is becoming more widely observed and critiqued (Sobande, 2020a). As our opening examples illustrate, 'carewashing' during the pandemic has also adopted a variety of forms. Here then we dissect the complexities of how 'carewashing' works in a contemporary context and locate it in relation to much longer genealogies of corporate 'care': which range from very well-established techniques of corporate philanthropy and corporate social responsibility, through cause-related marketing and ethical consumption, and on to the contemporary strategies of 'radical' consumption, commodity activism and 'woke capitalism'.

In the first part of the article, we situate 'carewashing' in relation to these longer-term strategies of corporate 'social responsibility' in order to understand the specificity of these practices in the present. In the second we show how established corporate practices are being drawn on, reactivated and reinvented in a new era of Covid-19 and profound neoliberal instability. In the third, we focus more intently on specific examples and map different tendencies in corporate care, which can differ substantially in direction, intensity and effects. In the concluding section, we argue that carewashing also needs to be understood as a political act, and as involved in a wider social struggle. We argue that, in the Gramscian sense, carewashing is part of a 'passive revolution' in that it is attempting to claim and demarcate the realm of care for corporate capitalism and against social democracy.

Genealogies of corporate carewashing

Carewashing can be understood as a mutation or adaptation of other types of corporate attempt to wash themselves 'clean' from the stain of unethical behaviour. The term 'carewashing' itself is an adaptation of 'whitewashing', the older term used for glossing over or covering up vices or crimes. Originally referring to the cheap paint used to give a quick uniform clean appearance, 'whitewashing' has been used for over two centuries in the context of cover-ups in a political and corporate context. More recent variants on the term have included the well-established term 'greenwashing', in which corporations (and sometimes governments) flamboyantly present their actions as environmentally friendly, while marginalising the fact that they are, to a significant degree, ecologically damaging (Littler, 2009). 'Pinkwashing' has likewise been used to refer to both the cause-related marketing of companies selling pink products and giving a small percentage of the proceeds to breast cancer charities, while they continue to produce products containing carcinogens (King, 2008) and to the promotion of LGBT issues in a positive light in order to distract attention from negative actions (Schulman, 2011).

There is a long history of corporations demonstrating that 'they care' about social issues in order to legitimise themselves and cover up their own damaging behaviour. A key mode of ostensibly 'caring' yet highly problematic practice has been philanthropy. By the 19th century in the US and the UK, donating money to a museum, gallery or library became a means of attaching a new set of positive associations to the name of a businessperson, and connecting their surname with connotations of benevolence and the public good. Thus the name of Henry Tate, benefactor of the Tate Gallery in London, became synonymous with 'art' at a time when he had become rich through a

system of sugar production founded on slavery (Tate, 2019). Likewise, in the US Carnegie libraries were founded at a time when the name Andrew Carnegie was associated with exploitative employment practices and tough labour lockouts, leaving many local communities reluctant to accept them (Duncan, 1995). Art historian Carol Duncan has analysed how what she calls the ‘donor memorial’ worked to cleanse the problematic taint of corruption from the names of wealthy industrialists, in part by establishing an uneven dynamic between benevolent host and public recipient, and by attempting to make this process last, making their name ‘something eternal’ (Duncan, 1995). Similarly, we could think of how the name ‘Sackler’ is known as the name on numerous art gallery wings while the company are known to be instrumental in generating the opioid crisis in the US; or how fossil fuel corporations like BP have been regular sponsors of art exhibitions (Keefe 2021; Wu, 2003). There is a parallel today with the corporate use of ‘care’ to cleanse problematic brands, as we argue below.

A key issue here is that accruing staggering wealth overwhelmingly tends to involve engaging in sizeable amounts of economic exploitation. The involvement of corporations in social issues and social welfare has dramatically expanded since the 1980s, the time of neoliberalism in political practice, and has been dubbed ‘philanthrocapitalism’ (Bishop and Green, 2008). Philanthrocapitalism is largely distinguished from earlier forms of philanthropy by its unabashed profit motive, as indicated in its common description as ‘making money whilst doing good’. The main criticism of this trend is that it means that billionaires now have far more power to set their own partial agendas in the realm of health, education and agriculture (Giridhardardas, 2019). In the process they erode voters’ power to set the political agenda, the power of states and of social democracy. As the title of Lindsey McGoey’s book (2016) on the Gates Foundation puts it, there’s *No Such Thing as a Free Gift*. The commonly argued solution for such an erosion of democracy is that billionaires and disproportionately wealthy corporations should simply not exist: they should be subject to regulation and taxed in order for wealth to be more equitably shared, and their work of social engagement or ‘do-gooding’ should be relocated to the state.

Corporate expressions of care, then, need to be situated in relation to the material, historical and political realities of corporate power. In the neoliberal period, since the 1980s, this has included the growth of the PR and marketing industries, and their expansion into the political sphere, which Ann Cronin calls ‘commercial democracy’ and Aeron Davies terms ‘public relations democracy’ (Cronin, 2018; Davis, 2002). In the domain of consumer culture, this has included such brand tactics as cause-related marketing (CRM) and corporate social responsibility (CSR). ‘Cause-related marketing’ is a term used since the 1980s to refer to the corporate practice of including a campaign, activism or a charitable cause in advertising or a brand with the aim of increasing profits. Classic examples include pink products, where a proportion of profit from sales is donated to breast cancer charities (King, 2008) or Product RED versions of items like iPhones or pants, from which a small percentage of profits is donated to anti-AIDS charities (Richey and Ponte, 2011). CRM also includes social justice ‘messaging’ with charitable tie-ins – a well-known case being Dove, which we discuss later.

The related and often overlapping domain of ‘corporate social responsibility’ deals with the broader work of the corporation. It is itself a large and contested academic

discipline, which runs the gamut from attempting to reform corporate practice by integrating new 'bottom lines' (such as environmental impact) alongside profit, to assuming new areas of political responsibility (such as controlling natural resources and addressing local diseases), to small-scale donations to places like schools or hospitals in return for branding kudos and increased sway over social issues (Caruana and Chatzidakis, 2014; Littler, 2009; Sandoval, 2014). Recent research in corporate responsibility and 'corporate citizenship' thus moves beyond the examination of the philanthropic and voluntary contributions of corporations to examine their wider role in society (e.g. Crane et al., 2019; Matten and Moon, 2020). A key assumption is that corporate responsibility is not just driven by reputational concerns but also a wider array of: 'motivations for legitimacy in the context of relationships between the corporation and, respectively, its core stakeholders, societies the corporations operate in, and the regulators (public and private) the corporations are subject to' (Matten and Moon, 2020: 11). In these terms, the role of corporations in society is legitimised through both implicit (e.g. external regulations) and explicit (e.g. philanthropic programmes) manifestations of 'corporate responsibility'. In the following sections, we show how this now manifests through 'care'.

A more specific but critical context for carewashing is the integration of social issues into corporate brand messaging and advertising. From Virginia Slims suggesting that buying their cigarettes was compatible with feminism ('You've come a long way, baby'), brands incorporating social causes into their strategies has a long history (Curran-Troop et al., 2022). Considerable attention has been paid in and around media and cultural studies to different dimensions of this dynamic, including the popularisation of social issues by commercial campaigns, the use of social trends as a means for corporations to renew themselves, the incompatibility between the structural inequality of capitalism and social justice, and the weakening of social justice by such commercialism. For instance, it has been argued that department store Selfridges' promotion of suffragette colours was formative to mainstreaming first-wave feminism (Nava, 1997); that capitalism renewed itself by drawing from 1960s social movements (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007); that imperialism maintained itself ideologically through advertising (McClintock, 1995); and that consumers can be, to a limited extent, 'agents of change' (Soper et al., 2005). In recent years, contemporary iterations and evolutions of such practices have been critically explored in different terms and through different lenses, including the purposely feminist advertising of 'femvertising' and the ambiguities of 'commodity activism' (Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee, 2012; Sobande, 2020b). Within the marketing industry, the recent integration of LGBTQ+ and BLM messages in corporate campaigns and more diffuse employee behaviour is starting to be referred to as 'social advocacy' (Ploe, 2020). Yet, for Akane Kanai and Ros Gill, for instance, it is an example of 'woke capitalism' in which social justice issues 'are offered as brand ambassadors not simply for particular corporates but for capitalism itself' (Kanai and Gill, 2020: 134; see also Jones, 2021). In this article, we hold on to the complexities of this interpretative tradition, which cultural studies has done so much to open up; and, like John Storey, we do this while deploying a Gramscian perspective which 'does not lose sight of the enormous and often crushing power of capitalism' (Storey, 2017: 115).

What's specific about carewashing?

Carewashing can be viewed as the latest iteration of explicit corporate gestures in support of social and environmental causes which are driven by both reputational and broader legitimacy concerns around the role of corporations in society. However, it also has particularities. In this section we outline what is specific about it as a contemporary phenomenon. We discuss how, while it clearly has precursors which pre-date the pandemic, carewashing rapidly proliferated and took on a distinctive shape during the Covid-19 crisis.

First, and most obviously, carewashing involves using and emphasising the term 'care'. Corporate use of the term in marketing, advertising and branding literature has conspicuously expanded during the pandemic. 'Corporate care' talk has strategically jumped across a wide range of different scales of everyday Covid life, from the home to the community to the market, the nation state and the world at large (Care Collective, 2020). As our analysis of specific examples in the next section shows, 'care' has been used by corporate marketing in a range of ways: whether to specifically indicate the care sector, gendered inequalities of care, or care during the pandemic. Notably, the 'bagginess' of the term, and its extent and reach – or the generalisable affect of care – also gives it some of its power, and suffuses nearly all of the representations we consider here.

Second, carewashing is a response to an acute 'crisis': Covid-19. It comprises a swath of corporate interventions during a 'state of emergency' (Agamben, 2005) that violently ruptured the previous state of normality. However, and very much like the multiple 'crises' that preceded it – for instance the 2008 financial crisis or the 2015 European refugee crisis (e.g. Poulimenakos et al., 2021) – the pandemic crisis has been seized upon in profoundly ideological ways. Covid provided a framework of fear and uncertainty that facilitated new social reconfigurations and opportunities for interventions by multiple actors, not least corporations. In this sense, carewashing can be understood as akin to corporations' gestures of 'solidarity' during the financial crisis, or philanthropic programmes in response to the refugee crisis (Chatzidakis, 2013). It dovetails with a wider process of extending neoliberal forms amidst contexts of shock and disruption over the past few decades (Klein, 2008; Walby, 2015). Carewashing, in other words, can be understood as a process through which corporations are attempting to *capitalise on crisis*.

Third, carewashing has been developed as a tactical corporate practice during the pandemic. Many of the examples we mention here would have been executed by outsourced marketing and PR agencies as well as rank-and-file members of the corporation. Care was discussed from early on in 2020 by marketing professionals as a means of adapting to the changed situation, avoiding corporate crisis and leveraging profit-making opportunities. From March 2020 the marketing and branding media were awash with discussion of how to respond to the changed context in which the sector found itself. In an area which is fond of a rapidly generated neologism, new terms emerged to help the sector cope and encourage them to keep reading. One such term was 'pandemic marketing'. One article on this topic outlined how corporations should respond to the crisis by, for instance, checking that existing content was not facile, insulting or inappropriate (e.g. mentioning far-flung

holidays when the lockdown hit); keeping up with keyword trends (e.g. ‘remote’, ‘home-working’) and targeting social media and video at a time of increased traffic (Facebook noted a 70% increase during the first lockdown).¹ Beyond this, pandemic marketing relies on the idea that ‘all of your posts reflect truthfulness, empathy and compassion. This way, you can let your customers know that you truly care about their wellbeing and that you are not only here for their money’.² Such corporate expressions of care took several forms as we discuss in the next section.

Fourth, carewashing is perhaps the most emblematic consumer-oriented reflection to date of so-called ‘compassionate’ (e.g. Benioff, 2009) or ‘caring’ capitalism – what is increasingly demarcated in the corporate world as ‘stakeholder capitalism’. For several neoliberal decades now (Hutton, 1995) this has been designated as a ‘new’ model of capitalism that has gained popularity through circles such as the World Economic Forum. Stakeholder capitalism is meant to look beyond shareholder value to embrace a variety of different social purposes and responsibilities towards stakeholders. According to the influential 2020 *Davos Manifesto* (World Economic Forum, 2020), for instance, stakeholder capitalism is a ‘better kind of capitalism’, one that effectively addresses ‘social and environmental challenges’ (Schwab, 2019). The *Davos Manifesto* directly contrasts stakeholder capitalism to ‘shareholder capitalism’, ‘embraced by most Western corporations, which holds that a corporation’s primary goal should be to maximize its profits’, and ‘state capitalism’ in faraway countries ‘like China’, where the government sets the direction of the economy. Conspicuous by their absence are other examples of economic organisation, such as the welfare state economies that emerged after the Second World War across the so-called Western world, or the more contemporary welfare economies of Scandinavian Europe. The corporate expressions of care which we examine in the next section often dovetail with and connect to this wider agenda. We return to this broader conjunctural significance of carewashing in the final section.

Theorising examples: a carewashing typology

In this section we consider a range of examples of ‘carewashing’ which have appeared in Anglophone-based marketing and advertising campaigns, across social media, billboards and TV since 2020. Our aim in this article is not to provide an exhaustive list of themes or comprehensive empirical mapping; rather, we want to illustrate some of the expansive, and remarkably flexible uses of care talk by corporations. Therefore we have selected here some characteristic examples that point to both the pervasiveness of carewashing, the different degrees and levels and upon which it operates, and its tactical creativity. We group them into three broad categories, which are conspicuously different in their approach and to some extent escalate in intensity: opportunistic branding; community resourcing; and reputational steamrolling.

Opportunistic branding: buying as care

One basic form of carewashing involves suggesting that using a particular corporate product is a way of mediating and facilitating care for ourselves and others. For example, on Instagram the soap Carex used the hashtag ‘#whywecarex’, telling us that

'every squirt and splodge keeps those hands safe and protected'. Carex is an established brand that, during the pandemic, when it chose to emphasise 'care' in its marketing strategy, witnessed a 37% increase in its profits. Handwashing was prioritised at the outset of the pandemic before the primarily airborne nature of the virus became widespread knowledge. It was at this time that excessive and unfair pricing of such sanitising and cleaning products became a phenomenon in many countries, including the UK.³ However instant price-based opportunism was not the only form of corporate exploitation around. Another, as we show here, was corporate exploitation of the keyword 'care' as a sales strategy while failing to care in other significant respects as an organisation. The lineaments of this can be seen in Carex; owned by PZ Cussons, the soap scores 8/20 on its record in the Ethical Consumer index and the company has been specifically targeted by Greenpeace over its environmental record, particularly its use of palm oil (Gwynn, 2018; Turner, 2020).

Carex was not the only soap brand to market itself as offering a form of pandemic caring. Dove, for instance, tells us that 'taking the time to properly wash your hands is one of the best ways to care for yourself and your loved ones'. Its care claims soon extended beyond this, however, as the hashtag campaign #WashToCare was launched, which now suggested that 'Properly washing your hands is one of the best ways to care for yourself, your loved ones and the world'. #WashToCare was part of a wider package of care marketing launched by Dove under the strapline 'Take Care, Be Safe' during the pandemic. In the US these included a TV spot advert featuring frontline healthcare workers (Figure 1). In this 'digitally untouched' ad, a range of exhausted healthcare workers in scrubs look at the camera, against the backdrop of a solo piano piece, followed by the strapline 'Courage is Beautiful'. It also included publicising its donations (including to the charity Direct Relief and the World Health Organization); launching a new initiative, #selfesteemathome, which was targeted at teenagers 'to support young people's health at home whilst schools are closed'; and developing its 'Men + Care' campaign that we discuss later.

Dove was therefore in effect developing an entire, interlinked suite of marketing projects around care. In the process it was extending its previous 'confidence' and 'body positivity' campaigns to new or embryonic demographics (homeschooling teenagers and men) while attempting to drive, hone and anchor itself as a 'caring' brand during a time of crisis. A range of care-related hashtags therefore appeared on its social media and online platforms, including #CareFromDove; 'Care is at the heart of what we do' announced its webpage.⁴ Dove campaigns have an established history of 'social concern' or 'purposive' marketing, having been a corporate trailblazer in this area over the past decade through their high-profile campaigns on female body image. It has, for example, provided campaigning and 'media literacy' materials, produced with established psychotherapists, for use in schools (Gill and Orgad, 2021; Murray, 2013). Dove has therefore enjoyed a 'lucrative market that targets young, middle-class girls as its consumers' and invites 'progressive' narratives to be crafted and reached for through commodity culture (Banet-Weiser, 2012). The brand is owned by the multinational consumer goods company Unilever, a pioneer of 'purpose-led branding'. In 2018 the purpose-led component grew 69% faster than the rest of its business, when its CEO stated: 'in the future, every Unilever brand will be a brand with a purpose'.⁵



Figure 1. Still from a Dove TV advert, shared on Twitter by the CEO of Unilever.

The #WashToCare campaign launched during the pandemic can be understood in this context.

In the process, we argue, Dove was advertising itself as a *public service institution*, as well as – or even more than – a corporate brand. Dove’s ambitions are to present itself as a corporation that can ‘do’ the job of public welfare to some extent: it is attempting to re-articulate care to the corporate domain. This is indicated by an advertorial-style feature in the luxury US lifestyle magazine *Uptown*, which announced: that ‘Dove [...] has the back of the community-at-large’ (*Uptown*, 2020). Yet, alongside its highly selective ethical practices its parent company, Unilever, has a range of decidedly unethical ones. For instance, and to take but two examples, in 2019, the corporation was

charged with being in the global top 10 of plastic polluters (Segran, 2019) and has come under fire for anti-union violence in South Africa (it is 'a British company' but the majority of workers are overseas).⁶ This is the context in which claims 'to care' must be considered.

Community chance(rs): resource providers

As these examples are already starting to show, the promotion of care during the pandemic also involved presenting corporations as *a resource for and generator of community care*. A number of brands, such as telecommunications company giffgaff, drew on tropes of community mutual aid, care and solidarity – all practices which had been significantly revived during the first lockdown through the creation of local mutual aid groups (Spade, 2020). For giffgaff, 'a good community would be made up of caring individuals'. Similarly, for detergent brand Fairy, 'community is kindness'. Community 'heroes' were also emphasised in many carewashing campaigns. HSBC, for instance, stated it was grateful to 'all our local heroes', from 'farmers to pharmacists' for 'going above and beyond'. After all, it pronounced, we are all 'part of something far, far bigger'. Uber thanked 'all drivers, for moving what matters', including nurses and paramedics. This tactic can be understood in branding terms as adopting 'piggyback marketing', the idea that such brands can jump on the bandwagon of the popularity of caring communities and their 'heroes'.⁷ It reflects that fundamental principle of corporate branding known as 'meaning transfer' (McCracken, 1986), whereby meanings are appropriated for brands from the wider realm of culture and society.

As well as these forms of brand association through the mediation of thanks and references to mutual aid in advertising, a significant number of corporations publicised the *care resources* they either linked with or developed. Fairy offered seminars on how to 'deal with anxiety in lockdown', whereas Head and Shoulders shampoo offered tips on 'how to keep a clear head'. Lloyds Bank partnered with a mental health charity to offer 'support and advice'. These initiatives were a form of CRM, operating as a publicity strategy as well as a care resource, being folded into product advertising campaigns.

Some corporations have also sought to intervene in issues of care injustice. Dove for instance has emphasised that domestic care work needs to be more fairly distributed between men and women, and has partnered with the global charity MenCare. Its pandemic consumer incursions in this respect included 'Men + Care', which ran a competition on Instagram, with a prize of a signed rugby jersey for those men who are creatively keeping the kids entertained, tagging @DoveMenUK & #DadsCare. At the same time, British Gas (a formerly nationalised fossil fuel utility company now privatised) extended its pre-Covid campaign on unpaid care workers, reminding us that roughly half of unpaid carers suffer from mental health problems. These practices publicise issues of inequality and social justice, and their promotional power has the capacity to raise consciousness of the issue; corporations work with charities as a form of CRM. Yet they can also, simultaneously, be understood as corporations glossing their problematic practices (fossil fuels, production, inequality) with the affect of 'care'. We can therefore understand such carewashing practices in part as 'neoliberal justice narratives' (Littler, 2018: 67–8)

which works by raising issues of inequality and then presenting neoliberal corporate power as the solution.

The great hypocrites? Care as reputational steamroller

It may take 20 years to build a good reputation but minutes to ruin it, in the famous words of Warren Buffet (see e.g. Tallovis, 2019), not least when the reputational bar is set so high as to include ideals of care, truthfulness and solidarity. Yet 'care', in some cases, was used as kind of relentless marketing bulldozer, in which a gestural *statement* of care clearly countered or ran against what the company in question was widely understood to be doing. There is a correlation here with 'fake news' of right-wing politicians claiming that they are doing one thing while actually doing the opposite (Gilroy-Ware, 2020); or what McGoey terms 'strategic ignorance' (McGoey, 2019). It is the case that some corporations are more caring than others. For instance, Monzo bank cut senior management pay by 25% and CEO pay by 100% for 12 months (Wexler, 2020). Yet a significant proportion of the campaigns we encountered were opportunistic attempts to counteract bad publicity – whether in advance, during or after – and to aggressively manufacture reputational benefits. Amazon's advertising, for instance, illustrates that a corporate caring reputation can indeed be a form of hypocrisy, enmeshed in wider structural forms of carelessness and post-truth politics (e.g. Ihlen et al., 2019). A corporation accused of repeatedly failing to care for its workers' health and safety standards – to the extent that it was ordered by court to close its French factories – still went ahead with a campaign claiming the exact opposite: 'Keeping our people safe while getting you the things you need has never been more important' (Figure 2).

Amazon featured at the very top of suggested Covid-related consumer boycotts by various organisations, from *The Guardian* to the Ethical Consumer Research Association. Amazon working conditions have been subject to a barrage of exposés – particularly around its delivery drivers being forced to perform to targets that do not allow for bathroom breaks – and are emblematic of the hard edge of exploitation in the gig economy (Cant, 2019; Rosa, 2021). 'Demands for overwork' are endemic to Amazon's wider working culture, as Little and Winch have detailed (2021: 101).⁸ Meanwhile, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos's personal wealth has increased 87% to date during the pandemic; he is projected to be the first person in history worth \$200 billion; he is currently the richest person in the world (Peterson-Withorn, 2021) and yet is conspicuously indifferent to social and environmental causes. In the US, Amazon has just entered the privatised healthcare market via its new venture 'Amazon Care', which was rolled out in select US cities in 2020. Amazon's care marketing thus sought to reassure consumers anxious about Covid; to deny abuses of employee care via branding rhetoric; to ensure the continuity of its extensive profit-making practices; and to legitimise its new privatised care venture.

Amazon was not alone in these extreme forms of corporate carewashing. A range of media articles exposed the hypocrisies of corporate care talk. These included major supermarkets praising their workers while disproportionately increasing the profits sequestered to CEOs (Toynbee, 2020). Virgin Group voluntarily offered to produce ventilators for the NHS with the one hand while suing it with the other (Matthews-King, 2017).

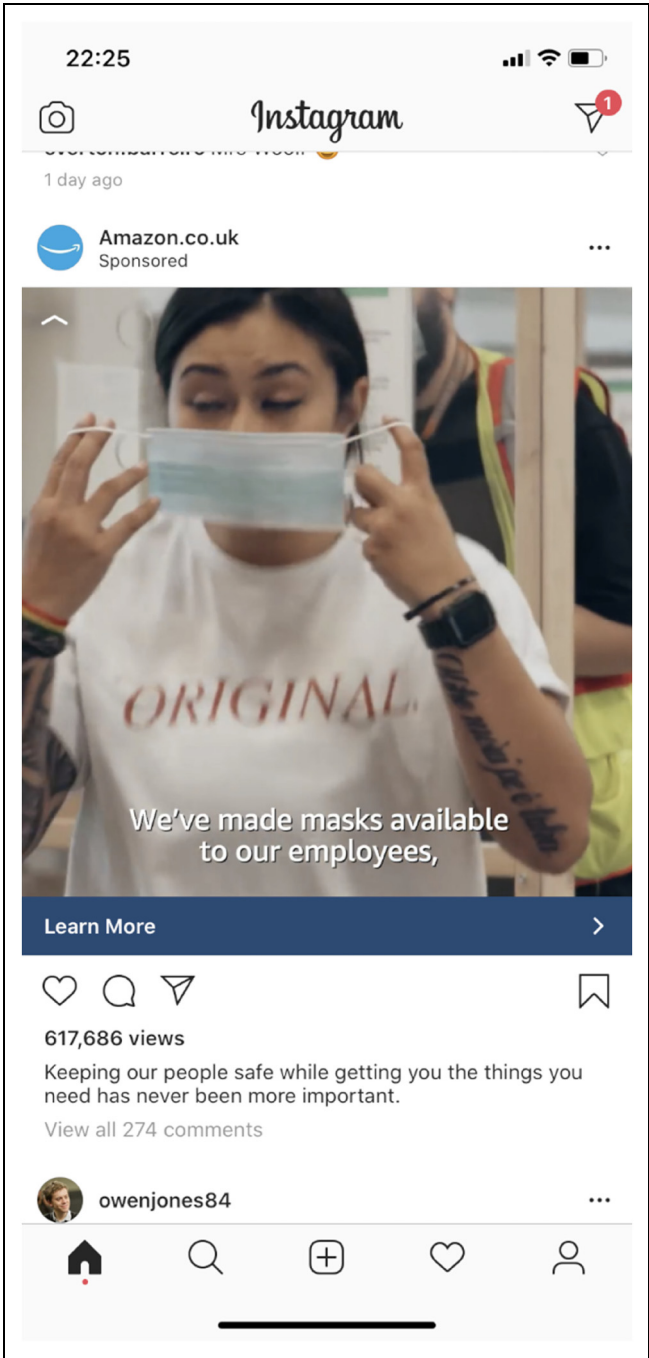


Figure 2. Amazon Instagram advert

Such extreme forms of carewashing did not simply arrive with the pandemic; they had been rehearsed beforehand. Just before the beginning of the pandemic, for example, Primark, a company that is emblematic of fast fashion and the throwaway consumer



Figure 3. 'Primark cares' display.
Source: Photo by Andreas Chatzidakis.

society, launched a 'Primark Cares' pop-up store in London (Figure 3). The store, using natural colours and materials such as wood, attempted to communicate a more natural and sustainable ethos, and to showcase the ethical range of Primark products. It was part of the 'Primark Cares Initiative', expressing the corporation's commitment to 'being a responsible retailer, taking care of our people and the planet'. Primark is also member of many other ethical initiatives, such as the 'Sustainable Apparel Coalition' and the 'Cotton Pledge'. While such initiatives are of course better than their regular output, at the same time Primark, along with Boohoo, continues to be the most emblematic of 'fast-fashion' retailers, selling vast amounts of ultra-cheap and short-lived products, which continue to damage both people working in their supply chains and the planetary ecosystem.

Primark's message of caring, then, notably came from a corporation that is notorious for its own unpaid 'environmental externalities'. It is an extreme example but it also highlights a common denominator across carewashing campaigns: that corporate care can only be practised selectively and inconsistently. While there are different degrees and modes of corporate care, organisations driven by logics of capital accumulation cannot be fully and unconditionally 'caring'. Put differently, corporations are 'artificial persons' that do not have the capacity to care, or to contemplate how to satisfy competing care needs in the same way that humans, or democratically governed institutions, do.⁹ The evidence shows that corporations are obliged, by design, to put the interests of their shareholders over and above the care needs of any other 'stakeholder' (e.g. Ihlen and Roper, 2014). The actions of Primark and Amazon that we have discussed in this section, which we term 'steamroller carewashing' – in which care is used very aggressively as a form of reputation management alongside extreme forms of capitalist practice – show the logic of carewashing writ large.

Leveraging the crisis: carewashing as passive revolution

As we have shown, 'carewashing' involves commercial branding strategies which – in different forms and degrees – act to commodify care and attempt to increase corporate profits. Carewashing has been developed as a tactical set of corporate practices during the Covid-19 crisis. It has taken a range of forms: from simple opportunistic 'care' branding to the sophisticated expansion of a multi-dimensional 'cause branding' marketing strategies; from the attempt to establish companies as ethical repositories of care, which appear to generate resources for caring, to a more extreme, crude, yet effective form of 'reputation steamroller' – an insistence against obvious evidence that the company cares. This multiplicity of carewashing forms draw on earlier corporate logics, extending 'corporate social responsibility' and 'cause-related marketing' discourses by leveraging the Covid-19 crisis and its language of care.

As our analysis indicates, carewashing can therefore be understood not only as reflective of the seizing of the short-term capacity for reputational benefits that arose after the advent of Covid, but also as part of a broader tectonic shift that is attempting to create a larger welfare and societal role for corporations. Discourses of human and environmental rights, access to healthcare, community mutuality and solidarity are continually being appealed to and modified across the terrain of carewashing, a strategy which works to

support an ostensibly ever-more radical and caring image of the corporation. In ‘compassionate’, ‘caring’ or ‘stakeholder’ capitalism, the future of the corporation is now widely envisaged as one with a socio-environmental ‘purpose’: ‘to profitably solve the problems of people and the planet, and not profit from creating problems’.¹⁰ The use of care, in this sense, is strategically expansive. At stake are not only short-term or opportunistic reputational benefits but also the legitimisation of the corporation as an institution that is increasingly replacing whatever is left of the welfare state and democratic institutions.

We can understand this formation further in relation to the Gramscian idea of ‘passive revolution’. For Gramsci a passive revolution is a revolution from above rather than below, involved whenever relatively far-reaching economic modifications are being made, and in which an element of dictatorship is present alongside significant economic reform; when power is gained ‘without dramatic upheavals’ (Gramsci, 1971: 115); and in which there is the absorption of the language of an opponent, of antithesis (1971: 109). What we are considering here is different in that it focuses on corporate power as part of a broader socio-political terrain. Yet there are useful commonalities, and notably Gramsci also applied the term flexibly to a wide range of different political contexts. Corporate carewashing can similarly be understood as part of a broader power struggle over care, and over the control of social, political and economic resources. Carewashing is part of a wider attempt to legitimise corporations as the natural and common-sense custodians of care and of life. It is a means through which a logic of corporate power and control can be pushed forward and expanded; in the case of Dove and Amazon Care, as they move into homeschooling and adult social care, marketising and squeezing out socialised provision as they go.

In conjunctural terms, then, carewashing needs to be comprehended as part of a wider power grab by corporate interests for capitalism. Marketing and branding strategies are not the only form through which this ideological discourse manifests. For instance, in the US comedy-drama *The Bold Type*, which follows the adventures of three young women working in a contemporary women’s magazine, the protagonists are conspicuously less individualist than their neoliberal predecessors in *Sex and the City* or even *Girls*: they are in solidarity with each other, and invested in a variety of social, environmental and diversity issues. Crucially, their boss is consistently portrayed as someone who deeply cares for them and their political aspirations; yet she is also portrayed as infinitely wiser, a ‘no-nonsense pragmatist’ (Desmond, 2013) acutely aware of the limitations and boundary thresholds of business diplomacy. Put differently, this is the phantasmatic terrain of TINA, or ‘there is no alternative’ (to capitalism), which simultaneously folds in a sense of reassurance that capitalism can, in fact, be more caring than we think; which suggests it is finding ways of caring for people and the planet and reconciling itself with progressive politics – despite its actions in simultaneously, firmly and unapologetically putting all of these things behind shareholder profits and ignoring its own destructive contradictions.

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Notes

1. <https://devrix.com/tutorial/content-writing-during-covid-19/>
2. Ibid.
3. <https://www.gov.uk/cma-cases/hand-sanitiser-products-suspected-excessive-and-unfair-pricing>
4. <https://www.dove.com/uk/stories/about-dove/take-care-be-safe.html>
5. <https://www.unilever.com/news/news-and-features/Feature-article/2019/brands-with-purpose-grow-and-here-is-the-proof.html>
6. <https://www.ethicalconsumer.org/company-profile/unilever>
7. <https://www.marketingtutor.net/piggyback-marketing/>
8. As they report, one employee said: 'If you're not good, Jeff [Bezos, Amazon CEO] will chew you up and spit you out. And if you're good, he will jump on your back and ride you into the ground' (Little and Winch, 2021: 101).
9. As Logan (2021) illustrates, the very notion of corporate personhood was born when US railroad corporations appropriated the racial equality discourse used in the Fourteenth Amendment to claim that they should be entitled to similar personhood protections.
10. <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/future-of-the-corporation/>

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