

*Proceeding*

# Crafting Humanitarian Imaginaries: The Visual Story-Telling of Buy-One Give-One Marketing Campaigns <sup>†</sup>

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<sup>†</sup> Presented at the International and Interdisciplinary Conference IMMAGINI? Image and Imagination between Representation, Communication, Education and Psychology, Brixen, Italy, 27–28 November 2017.

Published: 27 November 2017

**Abstract:** In the Buy One Give One (B1G1) business model, social enterprise companies respond to humanitarian causes by linking consumers to recipients through the commodification of a shared product experience. Ponte and Richey deem these interfaces “new imaginaries”, with consumption elevated as the mechanism for humanitarian action. Using a case comparison of two B1G1 companies, I argue that the visual story-telling of B1G1 marketing materials constructs a “humanitarian imaginary” that shapes how consumers understand engagement. Using visual analysis, I consider the opportunities and ethical limits of building solidarity through social marketing.

**Keywords:** cause marketing; humanitarianism; commodification; ethical consumption; marketing

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## 1. Introduction

In a purchasing scheme called “Buy One Give One” (B1G1), shoes and socks are products available for purchase, triggering donations of the same product to needy populations. Marketing campaigns employ visual story-telling through images of the same product in different settings that feature consumers, recipients, and their interactions. Previous work on cause-related marketing has shown that such business models represent new sources of funding and ideas about humanitarianism, constituting what Ponte and Richey call “new imaginaries” that carry both material and symbolic value [1] (p. 70). As an example of social marketing, Buy One Give One (B1G1) brands introduce consumers to a particular form of ethical consumption as a way to address underdevelopment and poverty. How does the visual story-telling of B1G1 marketing construct a “humanitarian imaginary” that commodifies the shared experience of a product? How does the use of a shared experience offer new opportunities for building solidarity? With what ethical limits for how people understand their ability to engage in humanitarianism?

The marketing material from these B1G1 campaigns constitutes a representation of how charity works, its effects, and the role of consumers (and companies) in addressing humanitarian causes. These campaigns needed to be interrogated for how they shape our perception of charity and aid practices, and the limits of ethical consumerism for addressing social issues. In this chapter, I show how B1G1 marketing uses visual story-telling to construct a “humanitarian imaginary”. Based on the case comparison of TOMS Shoes and Bombas Socks, I argue that the contours of this “humanitarian imaginary” vary based on the company’s approach to B1G1, the type of product that is shared, the causes, and the proximity of the recipient. Overall, I maintain that this visual story-telling comprises a symbolic value that may foster a sense of solidarity yet rests on mixed ethical grounds related to the nature of the “giving”.

Building on scholarship from communications, critical development studies, geography, marketing and business studies, this chapter explores the humanitarian imaginary created by the visual story-telling of B1G1 campaigns. This research fits into considerations of humanitarian communication, privatization of aid practices, and public engagement that inform wider debates around ethical consumption, humanitarianism, and social marketing. First, I introduce cause-related marketing (CRM) and B1G1 as models of ethical consumption that offer new modes of making donations and engaging consumers. Following Ponte and Richey, I explain how CRM and B1G1 business models also generate symbolic value through a “humanitarian imaginary” of how charity and aid operate. Then I blend models from social marketing and humanitarian communication to trace how public perceptions of charity are shaped through corporate marketing campaigns. I introduce and compare two case studies from the United States, TOMS Shoes (based in Playa Del Rey, California) and Bombas Socks (based in New York City), B1G1 companies that market branded products to consumers as a *shared experience* with recipients. In conclusion, I provide insights into how B1G1 companies employ different approaches to constructing “humanitarian imaginaries” through visual story-telling.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Ethical Consumption

This study on the role of businesses in bringing funds and shaping ideas around humanitarianism is situated in debates around ethical consumption. Lekakis describes ethical consumption as “the broader phenomenon of ethical behavior in the marketplace” [2] (p. 8). Complementing the work of human rights NGOs and humanitarian agencies, the market has emerged as a site to both raise issues of injustice and promote forms of social, and possibly political, action. At the very least, the consumer’s ability to exercise “personal choice in the marketplace enables public forms of political expression” that signal an engagement in social, economic, and environmental concerns (p. 9). That business is at the forefront of this ethical activity is a twist; rather than participating in boycotts to protest oppressive states or corrupt businesses, consumers now look to businesses to help them act on their ethical dispositions. A wide range of ethically labelled products greets us in the supermarket and shopping mall (or in fair trade stores), offering the possibility of engaging with a vast array of local, national, or global causes.

Since the 1980s, the fair trade model has offered a way to ensure just treatment of laborers and the environment at the site of production. Labels, certification programs, and supply chain transparency characterize this form of ethical consumption. A different set of practices has taken root through cause-related marketing (CRM), a model that “pairs the support of a charitable cause with the purchase or promotion of a service or product” [3] (pp. 51–52). As a feature of many corporate social responsibility platforms, CRM enables a company to fulfill its commitments to local or global causes beyond simply sponsoring a charity. Among its product lines, the corporation will distinguish certain products as purchases that will generate a donation. Thematic ties might link the brand to a beneficiary charity; for example, a portion of the price of a package of Pampers diapers is directed to UNICEF (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** A package of diapers includes the UNICEF logo [4].

From the business perspective, CRM is a win-win for all participants: charities raise funds and educate consumers while corporations increase revenue and staff loyalty, enhance reputations, and gain market share for their brands. Criticism, however, has been directed towards the full extent of the social impact beyond the act of fundraising; for example, Ikenberry finds fault with CRM's promotion of "individual solutions to collective social problems, distracting our attention and resources away from the neediest causes, the most effective solutions, and the act of critical questioning itself" [3] (p. 52). Rather than engage in politics to address the root causes of issues such as poverty, consumers simply signal their concern through the marketplace. Still, as the CRM model continues to enjoy success, it is important to apply visual analysis to detect the "humanitarian imaginary" that constructs ideas of "collective social problems", "effective solutions", and "critical questioning", however limited or obfuscating these ideas may be.

How does the commodification of the same product for purchase and donation offer new opportunities for shaping the "humanitarian imaginary"? In the most recent chapter of CRM, there has been the emergence of a more ambitious form of social entrepreneurship with the company styling itself as a social mission. Founded in 2006, TOMS Shoes was the first private for-profit company to be established on a Buy One Give One (B1G1) model, where all the merchandise constitutes branded products that trigger donations or in-kind contributions. This strategy has been championed as "an effective model for creating both commercial and social value" [5] (p. 28); there are even online marketplace companies that show would-be ethical consumers the many brands that operate on the B1G1 model [6,7]. Recipients of the model range from homeless populations to the hungry to children without access to schooling or adequate health care. B1G1 companies might give monetary donations structured as school fees, microloans, or the purchase of school meals or bio-sand filters; in-kind donations might be clothing, school supplies, baby outfits, toothbrushes, or backpacks [5] (p. 32). The partner organizations that help with distribution of donations include domestic nonprofits as well as large humanitarian agencies such as CARE and Partners in Health. If the predictions are true and the B1G1 model will continue to occupy greater market share in the sphere of CRM, we need to consider the ways B1G1 companies shape a "humanitarian imaginary" and present a certain mode of ethical consumption as a lifestyle choice with an impact on social issues.

## 2.2. Symbolic Value of the B1G1 Model

As a source of new funds, actors, and audiences for development causes, CRM has drawn the intense scrutiny of development scholars and political economists. Ponte and Richey have studied CRM campaigns through a conceptual model they call "Brand Aid", in which causes, branded products and celebrities are linked [1]. Ponte and Richey regard the various interfaces as 'regimes of value', following Appadurai, that produce imaginaries with material and symbolic value. Thus, new humanitarian imaginaries are forged through CRM "in which consumption becomes the mechanism for action and purchase creates a partnership" linking individual consumers and corporations with traditional humanitarian actors such as NGOs, IGOs, and states [1] (p. 70). There is a considerable material impact of the model since sources for supporting humanitarian causes with both monetary contributions and in-kind donations are being expanded.

While NGOs have been studied for their representations of charity and activism [8–10], the sources of the symbolic value of "humanitarian imaginaries" is also being expanded, forcing us to think about how companies impart ideas about the role of the consumer in helping. Today, the arenas of consumerism, movies, and social media must be considered for how they shape public perceptions around charitable donations, support for international NGOs, public policy, overseas development aid, and global solidarity [11]. The ad campaigns of CRM companies contribute to this perception by encouraging consumers to get involved through the marketplace—by making a purchase, learning more about the brand, or volunteering. The companies also provide social media platforms for consumers to build loyalty as "fans", sharing their own images as they interact with the product. I deepen thinking around the symbolic value of CRM by focusing on the B1G1 business model whereby the commodification of the shared experience of a product that also becomes a "gift" is marketed through images and texts that reinforce an understanding of humanitarianism.

Compared to CRM models that donate a percentage of a purchase price, I maintain that the B1G1 offers the possibility of fostering a more personalized social impact, enacted by the consumer who makes a purchase that then becomes as “gift”. This relationship is heightened when the same or similar product that is sold to a consumer is given to a recipient. Business analysts find that consumer trends are skewed in support of the B1G1 model, “particularly in the millennial generation, which puts a high value on social issues” [5] (p. 28). Here, I consider the “symbolic value” generated by B1G1 companies by exploring “social issues” through the lens of “humanitarianism”, how we help others. Whereas humanitarianism once focused on “saving lives and relieving suffering”, the term also captures institutional responses to the root causes of the suffering: development, human rights, and gender equality [12] (pp. 6–7). Thus, humanitarianism is the sum of acts that address both the immediate and long-term needs of local and distant populations. For the most part, B1G1 companies appear to be more focused on humanitarian causes related to structural poverty rather than the complex emergencies that arise in conflict and post-conflict situations [5] (p. 32). More recently, companies have begun to offer immediate response to refugees and disaster victims [13]. The cases studied in this chapter address the effects of poverty: lack of access to education and healthcare, and homelessness.

When companies get involved in humanitarian causes by selling products for donation, the needs of marketing to increase revenue and build brand loyalty may dictate certain modes of representation. Indeed, B1G1 companies enjoy certain marketing benefits that are related to the “simplicity and tangibility of the proposition” [5] (p. 30). As the key actor in the giving model, B1G1 companies must balance the use of the product to raise awareness while also promoting the notion of business as an effective responder to humanitarian causes. It must be noted that humanitarianism itself is a fraught terrain; as Daley points out, “humanitarian action tends to reinforce hegemonic discourse by tapping into preconceived images and stereotypes of people and (distant) places” [14] (p. 376). The representational exigencies of B1G1 companies is readily seen in the types of products chosen for sale and donation: it is probably not surprising that the model has been most successful for consumer products, specifically apparel like accessories and jewelry. Business analysts maintain that this category of products dominates since it offers “a way for people to publicly express their unique style and personality while also providing conversations that allow them to share the buy-one give-one story with other people” [5] (p. 30). And the eagerness to share this story has given B1G1 an unusual gift in the form of free marketing, especially on social media. The visual story-telling is often enhanced with the personal encounters, organized by companies, in which consumers become volunteers and participate in “drops” to distribute aid. Further, there are some efforts to mobilize consumers, scaling up the awareness raising with events and annual days of social action. The visual story-telling of the B1G1 model, thus, contains a symbolic value as an entry point for consumers to learn about humanitarian causes and solutions, the role of business in partnership with traditional actors, and the capacity of individuals to make a difference.

### *2.3. The Social Marketing of Humanitarian Communication*

We turn to visual analysis to see the diverse ways that B1G1 companies construct a “humanitarian imaginary” through the marketing of a similar product, linking consumers to recipients. As ways of generating meaning, images are understood as significant for provoking individual and collective action for social justice [15] (p. 6). But any representation starts on shaky grounds of authenticity and truth; images may convey “multiple messages”, that convey “the complex or paradoxical nature of particular human experiences” [15] (p. 3). When companies get involved in humanitarian causes by selling products for donation, marketing to increase revenue and build brand loyalty may rely on tropes about helping, the agency of the consumer as “giver”, and the figure of the needy recipient. Even the brand logo of B1G1 companies can be regarded as “signs” whose visual qualities impart ideas about the corporate culture [16] (p. 173). The exploration of the symbolic value of B1G1 campaigns through a visual analysis informed by humanitarian communication and social marketing will give us clues as to how consumers are conditioned, either

individually or collectively, to think about humanitarianism with the help of the shared experience of a product.

The visual-storytelling of “helping” and “saving” often includes a cast of characters. For many human rights causes, Mutua argues that our understanding is based on the presence of three categories: savages, victims, and saviors [17]. Humanitarianism is similarly populated with characters, with a focus on the victims and, to a lesser extent, the saviors in the form of aid workers. The absence of “savages” or perpetrators is explained by the roots of humanitarianism as an apolitical process of helping that avoids pursuing accountability for crises and human rights violations. Humanitarian communication is simply reinforcing the field’s traditional stance of neutrality and impartiality in both its visual treatment of victimhood as well as relief practices. Absent the perpetrators, political action is hard to muster nor is there a sense of the Western world’s responsibility for perpetuating local and global structures of inequality. It’s easier to focus on charity and helping. Who or what is absent in the visual story-telling of B1G1 brands will signify some of the decontextualization and simplification that inevitably takes place when dealing with the marketing of humanitarianism.

In her work on the “saviors” and “victims”, Chouliaraki regards humanitarian communication as one that “aims at establishing a strategic emotional relationship between a Western and a distant sufferer with a view to propose certain dispositions to action towards a cause” [18] (p. 109). Chouliaraki’s work has documented changes in humanitarian communication over the past four decades; she argues that we have moved into the “post-humanitarian” age, wherein solidarity is motivated by neoliberal logics of consumption that make doing good for “others” dependent on what we do for ourselves [19]. This suggests a type of moral agency to Northern publics that focuses on pity over political action, which is mirrored in forms of ethical consumption that enable consumers to publicly express preferences about worthy causes but doesn’t necessarily lead to political participation to address root causes of suffering. An exploration of the moral disposition intended by B1G1 businesses becomes necessary when, as Ponte and Richey argue, humanitarian causes “become so imbued with symbolic and ‘ethical’ value that they are used to market consumer goods” [1] (p. 66). The “wearing” of B1G1 brands will broadcast our identity as a “giver”, or even “saviors”, who is consciously aware of and acting on behalf of social issues.

Moreover, in the visual story-telling of B1G1 marketing, we can see how the practice of generosity is itself commodified. But the “giving” aspect of the model, which is a major part of the appeal for an ethically minded customer, is muddled by “the underlying moral intention inherent in gift exchange” [20]. As Marcel Mauss expounded, the act of gift-giving ensures that “the recipient puts himself in a position of dependence vis-a-vis the donor” [21] (p. 76), a persisting feature of critiques around humanitarianism and charity. The “gift” itself—shoes, socks, or other wearable object—reveal “the idea which the recipient evokes in the imagination of the giver” [22] (p. 2). The consumer in this case believes that the shared product will make an indelible impact on the life of the recipient, who at a distance, is in no position to challenge such notions. As contributors to the marketing of B1G1 brands by wearing the product and sharing images through social media, consumers are able to both act on and display their morality while also sending messages about what types of “gifts” are needed to address the circumstances of needy recipient communities.

Scholarship within geography and development studies on the marketing of CRM companies has already raised various representational concerns with the campaign materials that accompany humanitarian branded products. Hawkins finds that the CRM models emphasize individual consumption, the selection of favored causes as those that are “easy to market”, with “catchy slogans” that result in simplification of complex social issues [23] (p. 1799). The humanitarian communication embedded within the CRM model brings together strange worlds, the one where the purchasing is done and the one where the victims are saved. Work by Richey on (PRODUCT) RED, one of the most famous and controversial CRM “Brand Aid” initiatives, reveals how images reinforce the consumerist hegemony latent in humanitarianism; in this case, a Western celebrity Bono partnered with iconic brands like Apple and Emporio Armani to create RED-products, a portion of whose sales would benefit the Global Fund to Fight Aids [24]. Richey argues that the representational aspects of the RED campaigns are constructed on racial and gendered dimensions with images that “have little

to teach us about the lived experiences of Africans”, the main beneficiaries of the Global Fund [24] (p. 177). Helping distant others in this case relied on images replete with flashy celebrities, sex appeal, and “coexisting notions of familiarity and distance” [24] (p. 175). The consumer audience is brought close to the suffering but through the glamorous mediation of Western celebrities and the sale of luxury goods.

In terms of the focus on victims as needy and worthy recipients, their representation has been studied for intended effects on audiences—either to engender fundraising or other social action—and how these effects are sustained by certain visual tropes. Campaigns are often ‘victim-oriented’ with the audience’s “focus on the distant sufferer as the object of our contemplation” [18] (p. 110). Other common tropes when featuring victims that have come to dominant human rights and humanitarian appeals include eye contact, naked bodies, and a focus on children [25] (p. 66). This may produce a ‘shock effect’ that turns the viewer, the potential savior, into the perpetrator, as Chouliaraki argues, producing “guilt and indignation” [18] (p. 110). In an examination of NGO appeals, Pruce detects the prevalence of three motifs of victims—desperation, determination, and defiance—that reflect organizational mandates related to aid, advocacy, and activism [25] (pp. 65–68). These analyses suggest that humanitarian communication might heighten the desperation on the part of the victim to arouse an emotional response. On the other hand, images that convey determination and defiance might convey a sense of agency on the part of target population, rather than simply passive “recipients” dependent on “gifts”.

The visual story-telling of B1G1 marketing must be situated in recent shifts in humanitarian communication, in thinking about how consumers are presented with or confronted by causes and vulnerable populations to raise awareness and funds, conditioned to think about their own agency, and mobilized by corporations. From a social marketing perspective, visual story-telling aims to change the behavior of a target audience that will rely on B1G1 schemes to act on their moral impulses to help. Through images and texts, the brand conveys its message “in an effort to drive emotions and encourage a particular action” [26]. In this case, consumers build brand loyalty while also learning to rely on business to address (but not solve) vexing social issues.

The next section will explore how the visual materials of B1G1 campaigns constitute “humanitarian imaginaries”. I compare the original B1G1 company, TOMS Shoes, to a recent arrival, Bombas Socks, to see how they exhibit diverse approaches. Both TOMS and Bombas Socks are United States based B1G1 companies that offer products for sale that trigger donations to vulnerable populations, either in the US or across the world. For each case, I conducted a content analysis of the ecommerce website and social media platforms (facebook and twitter), where most of the marketing material can be found. TOMS reportedly has no marketing budget nor does it participate in traditional advertising, choosing instead to use viral marketing and social marketing [27]. I provide the mission statement and relevant background on the company. Then I used screenshot and the software Snagit from TechSmith (Okemos, MI, USA) to collect images representative of the marketing campaigns. While I focus on visuals, I also pay attention to text provided with images (if any) and hashtags featured on social media. I argue that B1G1 companies build a distinctive “humanitarian imaginary” through this visual story-telling to convince consumers to make purchases at a higher price point as a form of social action. Visual coherence across images in terms of the staging, models, and positioning will offer clues as to how companies engage consumers and new audiences in humanitarianism. I find that the different approaches are based on the type of products for sale and donation, the causes, and the proximity to the needy population.

### 3. Case Comparison of B1G1 Companies

#### 3.1. TOMS Shoes

As the first B1G1 company, TOMS Shoes offers a mission statement that handily summarizes the business model: With every product you purchase, TOMS will help a person in need. One for One® [28]. TOMS Shoes was founded by Blake Mycoskie, an entrepreneur from the USA who came to fame after an appearance on the TV show, *The Amazing Race* [29]. His founder’s story involves a



trip to Argentina where he donated used shoes. In 2006, he launched his company, TOMS, as a for-profit company that sells shoes to help people “in need”. He designed a shoe resembling the alpargata shoe worn by Argentinian farmers and sold them for twice the product’s price to fund the giving scheme.

TOMS stands for “Tomorrow’s Shoes” and refers to the matching pair of shoes that is given away in dozens of countries including Argentina, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Haiti, Rwanda, South Africa, and the USA. The logo of TOMS has three horizontal stripes, evoking a flag; in fact, TOMS flags are often included with shoe purchases as an additional accessory. Taken as a sign, the logo evokes a new post-nationality, that of the ethical and global company, whose consumers become part of the “TOMS Tribe”. The social marketing of TOMS is heightened through this aspect of “membership” or “citizenship” that comes with a purchase, signifying the community and common lifestyle of TOMS consumers. Whether everyone (consumers and recipients) who carries and wears the flag on their shared products feel like members of this Tribe speaks to some of the ethical challenges of fostering solidarity across givers and receivers.

The point of purchase gives the consumer a basic understanding of humanitarianism. Shoes sold in the North for retail range from \$40 to over \$100 with the price including the pair given away in the South along with transport costs. TOMS partners with NGOs, foundations, and community-based organizations in its distribution of shoes. The shared experience of the shoe at the heart of TOMS marketing constructs a “humanitarian imaginary” that suggests that one person and one purchase can make a difference. That the purchase and the gift are the same lies at that core of the commodification of a shared experience that supposedly links consumers and recipients. Yet the product fulfills different needs: the purchase of the shoes for a consumer is a moral action, meeting the need to make a difference in the lives of those who are deprived of basic goods, for whom shoes may offer the possibility for social and economic development.

Future TOMS Tribe members are targeted through ads that feature models who are usually young and white with upper middle-class proclivities (see Figure 2); these are not classically tall models nor are does the campaign material rely on celebrities. The social marketing of TOMS presents a lifestyle where emotions are light as models walk in groups, frolic on promenades and beaches, or explore the world in an easygoing manner. The shoes themselves are colorful, full of whimsical designs; moreover, members of the TOMS Tribe can easily identify one another by the prominent, outward facing TOMS label, the flag logo. The individual actions of TOMS consumers, linked together through the label and other company sponsored Tribe activities, become a collective action albeit one that does not extend much beyond socializing. The body of images don’t necessarily convey much beyond the wholesomeness of the brand and its young clientele. The twitter feed of #toms includes user-generated photos, often tagged with #happyfeet; consumers photograph their TOMS clad feet on carpeted or textured floors, with their TOMS shoes up on furniture, in repose, or in scenic locations [30]. These are shoes to be worn proudly, in the mode of post-humanitarian communication described by Chouliaraki, proclaiming a consumer’s moral disposition and willingness to pay a high price point to give back.



Figure 2. TOMS ad. [31].

The website shows the same shoes given as donations to smiling children, featured in action photos, usually in school settings. No names of children are given, neither is there any sense that the

children gave their consent for the photos. No accompanying text tells us where the kids are and the nature of the circumstances that led to their community being in need. Instead, we learn that our purchase and donation of shoes supports “improved health, access to education, and confidence building” [32]. No accompanying link brings us to a scientifically driven data to support these claims. We are led to assume that the page of “recipients” shows children whose transformation has been effected by the shoes. The focus on children as innocent victims reinforces common tropes of humanitarianism where adults are neither worthy as recipients nor capable of taking care of the needs of the community’s children [33]. The visual story spun for us as consumers is simple: buy the shoes and make kids happy.

The visual story-telling of TOMS Giving Trips documents the gift-giving of the Buy One Give One model that links the consumer and needy other as giver and receiver. On the blog section of the company website called “Stories”, images show volunteers donating the shoes in the USA or one of the many global locations. Here, the consumers and recipients are indeed wearing the same shoes, with a few differences: hue and style. As Figure 3 above shows, the shoes given to the recipient communities tend to be in dark hues, in the classic slip-on model while the founder wears a cheery red pair. The contrast between the colorful patterns of the purchases and the dull tones of the donation line is only a visible marker of difference; in fact, the shoe lines are produced separately [1] (pp. 79–80). Thus, the symbolism of the shared experience of the shoe rests on a number of illusions related to the company’s supply chains.



Figure 3. Collage of a Giving Trip [34].

The Giving Trips show the donations being made in public spaces, with chairs set up in a square or courtyard for the volunteers to kneel in front of the children to measure and fit their new pair of shoes. The tender exchange produces a humanitarian imaginary that echoes “images of Christian culture”, as Ponte and Richey describe [1] (p. 79). Putting themselves below their recipient, volunteers humble themselves in the act of giving. Kids mug for the photographer, beaming with wide grins or hesitant smiles, facing head-on the global audience of loyal customers and future consumers. Accompanying pictures show the children active, happily running around school yards, transformed by the shoes. Other photos show volunteers nested in crowds of TOMS recipients, the racial contrast as well as the contrast of life circumstance offers a branded encounter that echoes “usual motifs of fundraising by international humanitarian organizations” [35] (p. 409). In these images, TOMS has commodified for sale the experience of giving directly to the recipients. The Top Gun style high five of the upper right image of Figure 3 conveys a sense of solidarity constructed the trip, the coming together of consumers and recipients, sharing the experience of TOMS Shoes. The celebratory atmosphere of the Giving Trip is played out for the cameras but the effects are fleeting. The volunteers will return to their homes in the US, themselves transformed by their experience, while the kids will outgrow the shoes and continue to struggle with the effects of structural poverty.



### 3.2. Bombas Socks

In another social enterprise, Bombas Socks (based in New York City, NY, USA) provides socks to the homeless. The moniker of the bumblebee is explained in language that is a call to action:

/Bom-bas/ Derived from the Latin word for bumblebee. Bees live in a hive and work together to make their world a better place. They're small, but their combined actions have a big impact on the world. We like that. That's why our mantra is bee better. We knit it on the inside of every pair of Bombas as a reminder that you helped someone in need with your purchase. And a reminder that little improvements can add up to make a big difference [36].

Bombas evokes the community of the hive, of creatures working together for the common good; the logo of the bee mimics TOMS in promoting feelings of a tribe and the invocation to selfless behavior. The Bombas website describes how socks are the “#1 most requested clothing item at homeless shelters” [37]. This fact puzzled entrepreneur David Heath, who learned some of the explanations: it is not possible to donate used socks; the homeless may also be reluctant to take off their shoes at night for concern of theft; and emphasis on walking and lack of access to washing facilities. With a business partner Randy Goldberg, Heath launched the New York-based company in 2013.

The mission of the company is twofold: “to support the homeless community, and to bring awareness to an under-publicized problem in the United States” [37]. The company donates to over 750 giving partners across the USA, including shelters, nonprofits, and charities that work with homeless and other needy and at-risk communities. Socks cost around \$11–\$18 and over four million socks have been donated. In contrast to TOMS and other B1G1 companies, Bombas distinguishes itself by not overemphasizing the social mission but rather the superior quality of the socks [38]. This strategy is embedded in the visual story-telling of the company's marketing materials.

Indeed, the website's home page is dominated by pictures of socks for sale. A short blurb about the number of pairs donated (continually increasing) invites you to click to “learn more” about the company's mission. With more transparency than TOMS, Bombas Socks informs customers that it manufactures different socks for consumers and recipients; socks for the homeless were designed in darker colors with reinforced seams and anti-microbial treatment so they require fewer washings [37]. This difference is visually represented in the range of hues: socks for sale are in bright colors while those for donations are more often black and grey (See Figure 4). Consumers are encouraged to get involved by volunteering; there are some initiatives including artistic projects combining art, education, philanthropy, and fashion in what is called Day of Hope (29 November).

The color contrast of the different products spills over into the visual materials of the company on the company website and social media platforms that prominently feature the product for sale and not the mission of giving. On the home page, models are photographed from the legs or knees downward, on non-descript backdrops, with colorful socks as the focus. There is more visual story-telling when we move to the “About” section. Here we find a young, heterosexual, white couple in a well-appointed home, playing around with pancakes while wearing their pajamas and Bombas Socks. The mood is light and speaks of luxurious surroundings, conveying an aspirational couple. On the website, other advertisements for the socks are colorful, cozy, and action-filled, showing young white or interracial couples curled up on couches or athletes in the middle of workouts, their feet donned in candy-colored Bombas Socks. Images contain one or two (usually torsoless) figures while the socks, when worn, are often hidden by shoes. There is no sense of pulling Bombas sock consumers together into a tribe with a collective identity since socks don't offer the same opportunity for outward expression as shoes.



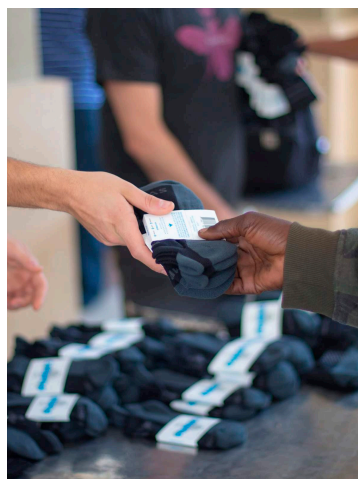
**Figure 4.** Bombas socks for sale and donation from company website. [36]

The images of the recipient population are few but distinguish themselves immediately since they are in black and white, echoing the dark hues of the donation socks. They appeared staged though the people in them don't appear to be classic model types. The images feature downtrodden male figures with downcast expressions sitting outside, in the public urban settings where we often encounter homeless. Figure 5 shows a recipient, contemplating a package of Bombas socks; another recipient looks at us head-on with an expression of resigned determination, as Pruce might describe; a third image features a recipient, with his face turned away from the camera, with his shoes off, revealing the Bombas socks underneath. Some of the photos have text, giving information about chronic homelessness. The hashtag #beeinformed offers the Bombas consumer a way to learn more about the issue; a quick twitter search finds only 5 informational tweets from Bombas that contain the #beeinformed hashtag out of nine thousand tweeted by the company [39]. There is no sense that the recipients' lives have been transformed by the socks.



**Figure 5.** Images of recipients from facebook photo collection [40].

The visual story-telling of the donation aspect of Bombas is muted and the ritual of gift-giving is nearly absent. Rather than the celebratory atmosphere of the TOMS shoe drops and Giving Trips, the visual motif of sock donations photos is quieter but no less representative of the “moral imbalance” of giving; one image shows a white hand reaching down at a slight angle to place a pair of the dark socks in a black hand, a reinforcement of the racial and power relations that characterize local charity and global humanitarianism (see Figure 6). Faces, genders, and other identifying markers are absent though the motif of Bombas on a giver's shirt is visible. Context is also absent, we don't know where the donation is taking place other than we appear to be inside. In contrast to TOMS, there are only two photos on the website showing what appear to be volunteers. The “self” of Chouliarakis' post-humanitarian communication is restrained here; the company delivers the socks without celebrating the ethical disposition of the consumer or the act of giving. The shared experience of wearing Bombas socks does not emphasize a public expression of solidarity but rather a more private, modest transaction that takes place “offstage”. Consumers are urged to learn more about chronic homelessness, and in that critical questioning, perhaps engage in other social and political action to effect change.



**Figure 6.** Sock donation image from Bombas website [37].

### 3.3. Discussion

The two cases confirm the marketing ease of the B1G1 model for engaging consumers in humanitarianism while calling into question the prospects for balancing moral intentions behind the “gift”. Mission statements are simple, laying out the transaction at the core of the social enterprise while the corporate culture as embodied by the logo establishes new types of community based on ethical consumers interested in changing the world. The products, since they need to be useful for donation to needy populations, seem to be limited to utilitarian items like shoes and socks. Yet, the possibilities for collective action are greater with TOMS, where like-minded folks can find one another by tracking the flag logos, as opposed to Bombas Socks wearers who cannot display their ethical dispositions. For the customers of both companies, there is enthusiastic sharing and connecting online through social media. The extent to which the model builds solidarity with the recipients is influenced by the different approaches adopted by B1G1 companies. While TOMS maintains its status as the first company, other models of social enterprise have modulated the self-congratulatory tone of the giving scheme. TOMS offers a product that readily links its consumers in a community, regardless of whether one is aware of the social mission. Bombas makes no pretensions of linking its consumers as a movement; customers become loyal out of devotion to a superior product. In terms of serving its recipients, Bombas makes a stronger claim of better addressing the cause of homelessness. The company fills a stated need and operates in close proximity to its target population. The dissimilar makes of the “shared product” are a more accurate reflection of the disparate circumstances of the consumers and recipients. TOMS was originally faulted for myopically focusing on shoes as a short-term and faulty solution to lack of access to school and healthcare; it now makes other in-kind donations to sustain various initiatives in addition to giving shoes. The distance between consumers and recipients looms large, with TOMS facing the burden of tailoring its giving depending on the site and specific needs. Bombas targets a domestic issue; the fact that there are fewer images suggests that there is a wider acquaintance with the issue of chronic homelessness. With its global reach, TOMS must connect its consumers to distant suffering through images and giving trips. Despite the similar business models, the two cases show the ways in which the commodification of the shared experience of the B1G1 purchasing scheme reveal distinct “humanitarian imaginaries”. We enact our moral dispositions with both purchases but can tailor expectations of our capacity to address collective problems through individual action through ethical consumption.

## 4. Conclusions

This chapter explored how the B1G1 model commodifies a shared experience by marketing a product that is worn by both consumers and recipients. The symbolic value surrounding a pair of shoes or socks ostensibly creates a seamless community across borders. Images from marketing

materials emphasize the product's ability to travel and cross boundaries, used by both consumer and recipients but in vastly different circumstances. The "humanitarian imaginary" is thus constructed through this commodification of humanitarianism, denoting a new set of market relations between buyers and recipients as directed by B1G1 companies. Compared to cause-related marketing schemes, B1G1 offers some opportunities for a shared experience but one that is based on a limited sense of solidarity. Through a visual analysis, it's rare to find a photo where we see both consumers and recipients wearing the same product.

Other findings point to the ethical limits of the practice. First, there is the reality that the products for sale and donation are different; this was demonstrated by the contrast in hues and styles. This difference emphasizes the gulf in circumstance though not every company wants to shatter that illusion. Second, the visual story-telling does not attempt to make consumers "walk in another's shoes" as the proverb goes. The experience of poverty or humanitarian cause is restricted to a handful of images, some text, and little reference to the actual impact of giving. Third, the humanitarian imaginary veers from classic tropes; rather than being 'victim-oriented' with a "focus on the distant sufferer as the object of our contemplation", the photos include employees and volunteers. Yet, some common tropes do make an appearance with children being featured prominently, as innocent lives, easily transformed by a little attention and a small gift. The plight of adult suffering is dealt with differently, with homeless recipients featured to a lesser extent and without any sense of transformation. Meanwhile, the hegemonic impulse of the "humanitarian imaginary" is reinforced, with the agency of consumers emphasized over that of the recipients, who await their "gifts" and charitable donations. As characters, givers and receivers are reinvented as saviors and victims; companies are also presented as saviors, operating in the absence of state or other international agency, in ways that enact neoliberal practices and champion market solutions. Finally, beyond the giving transactions, there is little sense of the "after" effect of the product donation. While the consumer goes away with the knowledge of having acted with good intentions, it is not known whether the lives of the recipients are transformed beyond creating new dependences upon the "gift-giver".

Visual story-telling is a marketing device that persuades the consumer to make a purchase and engage in supporting a humanitarian cause, but without offering the sense that the cause has been "solved". Indeed, the B1G1 business model mimics humanitarian action in this way, with its focus on addressing the symptoms of human suffering rather than tackling the roots causes of inequality that exist within and across countries. Despite the promise of these encounters with the shared product bestowed on the lucky recipient, the vast gulf between circumstances endures. As an accidental juxtaposition from google images shows, Figure 7 shows a more authentic telling of the gulf between consumer and recipient, as well as the limited transformation realized by the B1G1 model. While the consumer on the right models his TOMS in pristine circumstances, the presumed recipient on the left is shown with his battered TOMS, standing on an earthen floor strewn with hay. The opportunity to share the experience of the product may offer a sense of solidarity but one that rests on the muddled foundations of ethical consumption to transform lives through buying and "giving" the same product.



**Figure 7.** Images juxtaposed under google images of "TOMS Shoes" [41].

**Acknowledgments:** This work is part of the Research Project Commodifying Compassion: Implications of Turning People and Humanitarian Causes into Marketable Things, under PI Lisa Ann Richey (Roskilde University), with funding from the Danish Council for Independent Research.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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