

'Come and get a taste of normal': Advertising, consumerism and the Coronavirus pandemic

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Francesca Sobande** 

Cardiff University, UK

Bethany Klein

University of Leeds, UK

Abstract

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic continues to present unique challenges to governments and organisations around the world, but one sector has incorporated COVID-19 into its core mission with relative ease: advertisers have acknowledged the pandemic while continuing to draw on notions of 'normality' to activate our desire to consume. As the UK's series of lockdowns have come to an end, we look back over more than a year of unusual advertising and consider how the pandemic has changed approaches to marketing and the shape of consumer culture in ways connected to ideas about what constitutes 'normal' life. Discussions of the relationship between the pandemic and consumerism have included critiques of the prioritising of profit over people, and conceptualisations of Coronavirus as a brand itself, but the politics of notions of 'normality' promoted by consumer culture demand closer consideration. This article complements existing studies and debates by examining the tensions, contradictions and morally neutral positions revealed by the advertising response to the coronavirus disease pandemic. Through an analysis of UK advertising campaigns launched during and with reference to the pandemic, this work explores key themes and strategies, including their connection to power dynamics concerning race, gender, class and capitalism. We suggest advertising during crises may offer the opportunity to critique larger dynamics and trends of consumerism, including narrow notions of the defining features of 'everyday' life.

Corresponding author:

Francesca Sobande, School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University, Two Central Square, Central Square, Cardiff CF10 1FS, UK.

Email: sobandef@cardiff.ac.uk

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Introduction

In the wake of the UK's initial coronavirus disease (COVID-19) lockdown in March 2020, many were enthralled by the environmental consequences of the 'anthropause' as air pollution decreased and animals appeared to return to abandoned environments. But perhaps the most impressive and sustained resilience we have witnessed during the pandemic is in the realm of marketing. While in some respects marketing also experienced a pause (consider the outdated promotional items of re-opened cinemas and retail shops), advertisers were quick to adopt coronavirus-friendly messages in service of sales: reminders of the comforts of normality, promotion of product categories that suit home working (Arzumanova, 2021) and messages of unity and being 'all in this together' attempted to obscure what might otherwise have been viewed as crass attempts to appeal to consumers' individual(istic) wants during a global crisis (Sobande, 2020a).

Discourse on 'returning to normal life' and the comfort of 'everyday' moments was one of several discourses that dominated advertising in the wake of the pandemic. Such marketing was a reminder of the pervasiveness of narrow notions of 'everyday' life, including ideas about what family time involves, and where and when work takes place. The politics and power relations surrounding such perceptions of 'normal' life promoted in adverts during the COVID-19 pandemic demand critical consideration, particularly to grapple with the gendered, aged, raced and classed power dynamics at the core of consumer culture.

Although it has been suggested that 'COVID-19 has loosened neoliberalism's hegemonic grip on the future' (Gross, 2021), there are also signs that despite the political and economic status quo being shaken up by the pandemic, 'hope for a more caring, just and sustainable world' (p. 1) is sometimes more of a slogan than a serious commitment for brands. Even though 'we have seen radical ideas suddenly, newly visible within mainstream discourse', as through the toppling of statues and the oppressive values they represent (Kay and Wood, 2020: 1019), the relentlessness of capitalism persists (Johnson, 2020).

While it is no surprise that brands hide their own self-interest behind socially relevant messages, we focus our attention on how their marketing messages reveal and conceal different perceptions of what constitutes 'normal' life. In this article, we consider the tensions, contradictions and morally neutral positions apparent in the UK advertising response to COVID-19, which also collide with some of their responses to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) social justice movement. In doing so, we suggest that advertising during crises offers a unique opportunity to critique larger dynamics and trends of consumerism, including narrow notions of 'normality' and the defining features of 'everyday' life (e.g. experiences and expressions of family, gratitude and work).

Our research is informed by critical studies of inequalities, ideologies and consumer culture, including Banet-Weiser's (2018) work on the 'capitalist, corporate economy of

visibility' which illuminates that '[w]ithin neoliberal brand culture, specific feminist expressions and politics are brandable, commensurate with market logics' (p. 13). Accounting for this, we consider what the visibility of various depictions and discourses in adverts during the COVID-19 crisis suggests about how notions of 'normal life' are constructed in the content of marketing material. We also draw on the work of Chatzidakis et al. (2020: 891), whose research on 'carewashing' explicates why brands have been 'keen to promote themselves as "caring corporations"'. Rather than focusing on the concept of carewashing, or associated terms such as wokewashing (Sobande, 2020b), our article predominantly pays attention to the notions of 'normal' and 'everyday' life that were part of brands' attempts to portray themselves as relatable during the COVID-19 crisis.

Overall, we build on recent research on the relationship between consumer culture and structural inequalities (Grier and Poole, 2021), as well as work that rapidly responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and highlighted that '[t]he crisis context of Covid-19 is generating reflections and re-evaluations that are pouring out in myriad forms' (Kay and Wood, 2020: 1019). As our article elucidates, these reflections and re-evaluations include critical consideration of advertising which is entangled with issues of race, gender, class and constructions of dutifulness.

Advertising and society

Critical media, marketing, communication and sociology scholars have long focused on the role of advertising in reflecting and constructing the social world, from close readings of advertisements and TV depictions that challenge the perceived neutrality of images (Barthes, 1977; Hall, 1973) to explorations of the political motivations and societal implications of advertising (Chatzidakis et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2019; Kanai and Gill, 2020; Sobande, 2020b). Given its purpose to persuade audiences to purchase products or services, representations and messages in advertising are chosen pointedly and deliberately. They are grounded enough in 'reality' for audiences to relate to, but (re) present a version of the world in which problems are to be solved through individual purchase, and 'the very same forces that give rise to the initial problem' (Barnett et al., 2011: 94). For this reason, advertising is arguably less 'open to interpretation' than, for example, entertainment media can be, one reason why advertising can feel particularly direct and obtrusive.

The extensive research of Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012) includes insightful analysis of US consumer culture and the ways that people do and do not connect with brands, but such insights are also applicable to elements of UK marketplace dynamics. As Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012) observe, '[t]he creation of value continues to drive capitalism, yet the meaning of "value" shifts and is reimagined within the context of neoliberal capitalism' (p. 14). Brand responses to COVID-19 have included the marketing of products in ways that frame their value (and by extension, the value of consumer culture) as including their capacity to cultivate a sense of 'normality'. Put briefly, the nexus of neoliberal capitalism and the COVID-19 crisis means that adverts during this time have pushed the message that it is consumer culture that paves the way to a so-called 'return to normal life'. Aware of this, we explore how notions of 'normality' that

are part of such adverts draw on discourses and depictions related to race, gender and different relationships (e.g. family life and intimacy).

Commercial culture is now a key part of popular culture, such as popular discourses of feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018) and popular discourses of racial justice (Johnson et al., 2019; Sobande, 2020b). Our understanding of advertising's potential to aid both commercial *and* social messaging aids our analysis of notions of 'normal' life that are made manifest in adverts that promote products and services while also promoting ideas about the 'everyday'. As is highlighted in the work of Kanai and Gill (2020), 'there is an increasing saturation of "feel good" and "positive" messages of female empowerment, LGBTIQ pride, racial and religious diversity and inclusion, and environmental awareness' (p. 10). Our article includes discussion of how allusions to diversity have formed part of the UK's advertising landscape during the COVID-19 crisis, and in ways that relate back to notions of 'normality' (e.g. who and what is deemed to be part of the desired return to normal life). Such analysis connects to prior studies of how marketers make use of 'key racialised and gendered subject positions' (Sobande, 2020b: 273) as part of their efforts to position brands as relatable and invested in specific socio-political issues.

In analysing how brands have responded to COVID-19, we affirm Gordon's (2022: 10) perspective that the 'pandemic arrived amid other ongoing pandemics. They include antiblack racism, rapacious capitalism, disguised colonialism, neofascism, and dehumanizing social policies of structured inequality'. Therefore, although our article specifically focuses on adverts that directly respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, our analysis is informed by an understanding of how multiple crises have collided during this time and are impacted by how countries are sites of 'nationalism premised on cherry-picked values' (Gordon, 2022) packaged 'under the aegis of "tradition"' (p. 12).

Consumer culture and notions of 'normal' life

There is nothing new about advertising operating in ways that connect to social interaction, identities and issues. This is evidenced by the fact that '[m]arketing executions (e.g. advertisements, packaging, and brand imagery) incorporating racial or ethnic stereotypes are present in many brands' histories' (Leak et al., 2021: 455). In addition, as Littler (2008b: 72) has argued, corporate marketers have 'absorbed the demands for equality of representation into their pursuit of private capital to be shared by the few' (p. 72). However, what *is* new is '[t]he consequences of digitalization, the rise of promotional culture and market-driven cultural policies' (Klein, 2020: 16) in recent years, which have further dissolved the boundaries between popular and promotional culture – enabling brands to frame themselves as being 'one of us', more so than ever before.

What subject positions and notions of 'normality' do brands draw upon and depict in their attempt to appear relatable while acknowledging the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of people? Whose experiences of 'everyday' life are alluded to or omitted as part of such promotional activities, and what might this suggest about aspects of the relationship between consumer culture, crises and inequalities? Our article is oriented by such questions, and an awareness that the COVID-19 pandemic may be temporary in nature, but we can expect current marketing strategies to linger for much longer, as is implied by

industry-facing articles such as ‘Lessons brands can take from COVID-19: The importance of culture and long-term thinking’ (Andrews, 2020). Thus, critical analysis of advertising responses to the pandemic can yield insights that will be applicable to future advertising moves, as well as further studies of how adverts are sites where ideas about who and what is ‘normal’ and who and what is ‘Other’ are constructed and contested.

As The Care Collective (2021) powerfully highlight, during the COVID-19 crisis ‘those most at risk from Covid-19 – health workers, social carers, the elderly, those with underlying health conditions, the poor, the incarcerated, and the precariously employed – have received negligible help or support’ (p. 1). We contend that messaging which underpins advertising responses to the pandemic is, to an extent, reflective of aspects of who and what is societally cared about, and for. Building upon recent studies of marketing and branding practices during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bradshaw and Hietanen, 2020; Mogaji and Nguyen, 2020; Sobande, 2020a), we also consider what advertising content during this time in the United Kingdom suggests in terms of current media and marketplace dynamics and trends of consumerism (e.g. the ways that brands attempt to ‘take a stand’).

Mogaji and Nguyen (2020) pose the provocative yet generative ‘question of whether coronavirus has become recognizable as a brand’ (p. 1). Their work reflects on the beneficiaries of this branding and suggests that despite having ‘a negative perception within the population as a bringer of disruption and death, COVID-19 is a well-recognized brand around the world’ (Mogaji and Nguyen, 2020). In conversation with such research but departing from the claim that COVID-19 *is* a brand, we situate advertising campaigns during the pandemic as part of a wider and long-standing arena of opportunistic marketing that ascends during times of crisis and involves messages that promote ideas about so-called ‘normal’ and ‘everyday’ life.

Although we focus on content produced in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it serves as an emblematic example of how advertising adapts during a state of crisis, uncertainty and upheaval to the benefit of some brands and the detriment of others. By analysing how brands have promoted their products, services and themselves during the COVID-19 pandemic, we consider what such examples reveal about the moral dexterity of advertising, intent on bringing us together to consume while dodging responsibility for the damaging consequences of consumption and/or commercialism. In so doing, we contribute to current conversations and scholarship on the mechanics of how brands attempt to appear as though they care or are invested in addressing specific forms of crisis and social injustice, such as through their (mis)use of ‘issues concerning commercialised notions of feminism, equality and Black social justice activism’ (Sobande, 2020a: 2723).

Method

Our qualitative analysis of UK advertising during COVID-19 joins existing studies of how people and parts of their lives (e.g. family, relationships, work) are depicted in adverts in ways that reflect contemporary tensions between the marketplace and socio-political issues such as inequality (Johnson et al., 2019; Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012; Rosa-Salas and Sobande, 2022). To understand some of the ways that brands in the

United Kingdom responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, we identified and analysed salient adverts that feature representations and/or rhetoric that comments on the crisis and how people are experiencing life during this specific time. To evaluate notions of ‘normality’ in advertising, rather than analysing adverts that foreground celebrities, we analysed those that depict what Littler (2008a: 238) refers to as a seemingly ‘non-celebrity “ordinary” subject’.

Our interest in how the ‘everyday’ and ‘normality’ are framed in brand responses to the pandemic involved focusing our attention on adverts that did not feature celebrities, explicitly depicted elements of what may be perceived as people’s ‘everyday’ lives and were produced by high-profile brand names in the United Kingdom and globally. We identified these adverts by searching online in Spring/Summer 2020 for videos, images and media coverage of adverts that fit the criteria. This entailed an iterative process of individually identifying potentially relevant examples and then collaboratively combing through them to check that they closely corresponded with the criteria we were working with and represented a range of elements of people’s lives (e.g. family time, work, intimacy, food consumption).

We chose seven adverts (Greggs, Birds Eye, Durex, McDonald’s, Amazon, Deliveroo, LinkedIn) which can all be viewed via YouTube. The adverts were selected due to the breadth of brands, products and experiences that they represent, in addition to the readily available nature of access to them, and coverage of them. Our analysis was shaped by Hall’s (1973) landmark work on encoding and decoding media messages, which enabled us to tease out some of the power relations at play, including how issues of race, gender and class are implicated in them.

In the following section, we explore the marketing strategies adopted by the UK advertising industry – one of the largest and most influential advertising sectors worldwide – in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. What advertising says (and does not say) in the midst of a consumption-driven pandemic reveals the extent to which promotional culture has been normalised and left relatively unchallenged, including in ways that can bolster its potential to aggressively reinforce the restrictive parameters of notions of ‘everyday’ life.

COVID-19 themes in UK advertising

Since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, major online players, including in food delivery, benefitted from the closure and restrictions of brick-and-mortar shops. Thus, it seems apt that we start discussion of our analysis by focusing on examples related to food consumption.

Advertising and normality

A key theme in advertising during the COVID-19 pandemic is normality (Joshy, 2020), whether seeking a return to normality, questioning whether we can ever return to normality or relying on consumption itself to achieve normality. Such marketed ruminations on normality reflect the questions prompted by the pandemic for many of us, but with an

inevitable twist: in the world of advertising, normality is sought, reconfigured and attained through acts of purchase.

The call to go back to normality focuses on individual desires: for life before the pandemic and for small comforts, including for products that may be implicated in the environmental concerns linked to new diseases. Beloved UK bakery chain Greggs was one of the first UK brands to welcome the end of the first lockdown by offering ‘a little taste of normal’. The June 2020 ad campaign juxtaposed the many changes consumers experienced – from remote learning to homemade haircuts – with the simple comfort of carbohydrates, and especially Greggs’ flagship sausage roll (Greggs, 2020). Consumers are encouraged through this advertising strategy to ‘return to normal’ by returning to normal comfort purchases (‘no different than before’), an appealing offer when so many other aspects of life simply cannot return to normal.

A 40-second video posted on the official Greggs Twitter account on 16 June 2020 was accompanied by the following words: ‘It’s been a strange time for all of us. We reckon we’re ready for a little taste of normal’. The video is one of many examples of how brands have sought to stay relevant during the pandemic, in ways that invoke the idea that consumption constitutes the core of ‘normal’ and ‘everyday’ life. The audio commentary that features in the Greggs advert references a range of experiences through the use of terms such as ‘the zoomers’, ‘the boomers’, ‘the virtual classroomers’, ‘the beardgrowers’, ‘the houseparty throwers’, ‘the plucky head shavers’, ‘the steak bake cravers’, ‘the TikTokers’, ‘the shop droppers’, ‘the beer o’clockers’, ‘those bingeing on dramas’, ‘those living in pyjamas’ and ‘the boredom buyers’.

Greggs’ explicit reference to buying, shopping and consuming in their video advert makes clear that getting a ‘little taste of normal’ is dependent on participation in various aspects of consumer culture. In conveying such a message, Greggs draws on a range of representations that feature in the video footage, including stereotypical depictions of ‘the boomers’ who are portrayed as lacking the digital skills to navigate video calls. While the closing remarks in the advert include mention of ‘all of our amazing colleagues and the frontline legends’, they are swiftly followed by words that position Greggs as dutifully assisting other people in their effort to return to normal life: ‘we’re coming back, shop by shop, to bring you a little taste of normal’. In other words, although this Greggs advert includes a nod to the work of employees and ‘frontline legends’, it mainly focuses on framing the brand and consumerism as essential to ‘normal’ life, under the guise of providing people with an invaluable service.

The acknowledgement of Greggs employees during the last 10 seconds of the ‘little taste of normal’ advert may be intended to indicate their appreciation of such staff, in a way that is unintentionally akin to ‘carewashing’ (Chatzidakis et al., 2020). However, such recognition of employees is fleeting, and most of the advert (30 seconds of it) foregrounds consumers, rather than staff. Overall, Greggs’ mention of employees, and ‘frontline legends’, may create the impression that they are grateful for the work of such individuals. Then again, the very brief nature of this recognition, which occurs moments before the advert ends, may call into question the extent to which Greggs is substantially supporting those doing such work, including during more ‘normal’ circumstances.

Other brands that have aimed to convey a sense of normality include American international frozen foods brand Birds Eye, which is one of numerous brands that has been

scrutinised due to the environmental impact of the global fishing industry and forms of exploitation, abuse and violence that are involved in it. Birds Eye offers itself as an anchor to normality through its reassuring role: you can find comfort in moments of normality – like deciding ‘what’s for tea’ even as we all struggle with bigger questions. Birds Eye’s UK ‘what’s for tea’ TV advert debuted in April 2020 and features a montage of footage of people involved in ‘everyday’ life at home – from a family baking to another family exercising in front of a television.

Ultimately, Birds Eye’s ‘what’s for tea’ advert focuses on scenes of predominantly white familial domesticity and food consumption, as part of their message about ‘helping everyone through this in whatever little ways we can’. The advert includes light-hearted background music which aligns with an apparent intention to comfort people and position Birds Eye as a ‘brand of reassurance’ (Rogers, 2020) that ‘feels a responsibility to stay on air and remain connected to consumers during the coronavirus pandemic’. Such self-proclamations of by brands suggest more altruistic motives at play than their intention to pursue profit. While it is unsurprising that brands choose not to represent themselves as profit-oriented, analysis reveals the subject positions and narratives they choose to draw on when attempting to secure their longevity during times of crisis.

Birds Eye’s ‘What’s for tea?’ TV advert involves the narrator making statements such as right now we’re all thinking about more than what to cook. We’re all trying to live together, laugh together, and do our very best to stick together . . . everyone is doing their bit, as are we, helping everyone through this in whatever little ways we can. Such repeated invocation of ‘we’, which conveniently involves the narrator shifting between referring to we at Birds Eye and the experiences of everyone in general, demonstrates the ways that the ‘platitudes of brands enable them to platform and promote themselves, under the guise of being invested in human connection, care and community, as opposed to commercial success’ (Sobande, 2020a: 1034). In addition to this, Birds Eye’s reference to us ‘all trying to live together’ suggests their focus on the experience of families living under the same roof, rather than the potentially starker everyday realities of many people living alone.

Overall, Birds Eye’s implication that they are a devoted ‘brand of reassurance’ (Rogers, 2020) points to the strategic ways that some brands attempt to construct a heroic image of themselves as both moral and a saviour during times of crisis, including as part of their brand longevity strategies. The informal narration style of the ‘What’s for tea?’ advert, which involves audiences being addressed as though they are friends or family, paired with Birds Eye’s claims about providing reassurance, demonstrates their marketing as intended to simultaneously humanise and heroise the brand, while invoking ideas about ‘everyday’ family life.

However, for other brands faced with concerns about so-called normality, benefits lie in challenging the return to normality rather than attempting to reassure by maintaining the status quo. Can or should we go back to normal, knowing what we know now? Condom brand Durex released a canny advertising campaign, which used the COVID-19 pandemic to question consumers’ ‘normal’ approach to condom use and to encourage more vigilant use (and increased purchasing). The brand’s June 2020 ‘Let’s not go back to normal’ spot highlights among the problems with ‘normal’, ‘One million needless

STIs every single day' as a reminder of our responsibilities in reducing infection transmission rates beyond COVID-19 (Durex, 2020).

The 'Let's Not Go Back To Normal' campaign suggests, in the words of the narrator, 'normal was making rubbish excuses for not wearing a condom. Normal was shaming women for even carrying one'. Such sentiments signal Durex's awareness of how sexism and misogyny are implicated in sexual experiences and perceptions of them. Thus, this campaign has the potential to be perceived as an example of how brands attempt to take a stand on certain social issues, including by alluding to 'popular feminism and popular misogyny' (Banet-Weiser, 2018) as part of their promotion of a move away from 'normal' to embrace change. The Durex campaign maker, Reckitt Benckiser, credited the brand's post-lockdown sales jump in part to improved hygiene among consumers (BBC News, 2020), demonstrating how a departure from normality can be both an opportunity for sales and generative shifts in certain areas of public health.

In contrast with Birds Eye's suggestion that during this pandemic '[w]e're all trying to live together', Durex acknowledges the sense of isolation that some people are experiencing, including by depicting several lonesome individuals looking out of windows. Unlike the Greggs and Birds Eye adverts which appear to mainly foreground depictions of white people, the Durex advert features individuals from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. In addition, scenes of domesticity and intimacy at the core of the Durex advert depart from the heteronormativity that is often hinted at in other marketing messages: Durex depicts a range of intimate relationships and calls for '. . . better, safer sex. For everyone. Forever'.

Differences and similarities between how Greggs, Birds Eye and Durex have responded to COVID-19 via the construction of their adverts reflect how notions of 'normality' are struggled over by brands invested in selling a range of products during the crisis, while also addressing specific social and health issues such as safer sex. Advertising has sought to resume its 'normal' role of offering consumption as a solution to many problems, but real consumption patterns during the pandemic have challenged the marketing response of 'consumption as usual'.

Many consumers have turned to local businesses as the plight of small and local shops drew communities and supportive websites together (Topping, 2020). Consumption in some product areas decreased through the pandemic as we have reassessed our short- and long-term priorities: while consumer spending took repeated hits because of what consumers were unable to do, it is also the case that some new behaviours are likely to stick around since the lockdowns were lifted (Elan, 2020). The tendency of consumers to buy less and buy local cannot be easily taken advantage of by global brands. On the contrary, the accompanying sense of change or 'new normal' brought by the pandemic has been exploited by advertisers, who largely ignore the socio-environmental impact of hyper-consumerism. We explore this tension in the next section where we look at examples of how advertisers of potentially blameworthy products (i.e. those closely linked to practices associated with environmental destruction) have pitched their COVID-19 pivots.

Advertising and hyper-consumption

Some of the companies behind COVID-19-related advertising campaigns have been the focus of long-standing media and activist critiques. For these global brands, acknowledging

COVID-19 in advertising required a careful dance: advertisements highlighted steps taken to improve lives during the pandemic, while companies continued to benefit from practices that make the lives of some much worse. Whether raising hygiene standards for customers while skimping on supplies and occupational safety, or breaking down barriers for consumers while reinforcing poor company working conditions, some brands behind COVID-19 advertising offer a contradictory picture of responsibility and support. McDonald's, Amazon and Deliveroo were among those brands gambling (perhaps rightly) on the assumption that customers care more about their individual consumption experiences than the company issues that have made headlines.

Meat-based products are an obvious culprit when it comes to pandemics, with industrial farming practices, constantly adapted to produce more for less, at the heart of new virus emergence and transmission. Global brands that sell meat-based products – including the high-volume, low-cost fare of fast-food chains – have acknowledged in 'post-COVID-19' advertising that things are different or that we're living in a 'new normal', but recognition comes in the form of measures they're taking to keep consumers safe, rather than in reflections of how we got here. McDonald's, for example, launched its post-lockdown campaign with detailed information on how it is 'Helping to keep our teams and customers safe': fewer staff in kitchens, reduced hours and menus, and additional hygiene and social distancing measures are among the changes introduced. Of course, if global fast-food chains really want to keep us safe, they could keep us safe from the conditions that drive new diseases, by adopting genuinely environmentally responsible practices, not just 'greenwashing'.

In other words, it is not enough to claim that 100 percent of their beef is British and Irish (as McDonald's does in the United Kingdom) if production remains implicated in global trade patterns and linked to unsafe work practices. Many of the largest global fast-food chains and supermarket chains continue to sell meat from animals raised on soy-based feed linked to the destruction of tropical forests (Watts, 2021). And working conditions in meat processing plants have led to a large number of COVID-19 outbreaks that highlight the impact on, and vulnerabilities of, working-class people in particular (Reuben, 2020). Besides, even in cases where local regulation has improved treatment of animals and workers alike, the behaviour of a global brand in more loosely regulated countries matters: whether the rainforest is destroyed for your burger or someone else's is neither here nor there. Furthermore, in the poignant words of Johnson (2020),

Where are the statements from multinational corporations about their factory workers in Black and Brown countries who have had to work through all manner of illnesses and catastrophes to survive? How much further could we be with treatments and vaccinations if the violence of borders and racial capitalism didn't infect so much of our worldview?

Another area that figures prominently in debates about the negative consequences of hyper-consumption involves not product, but method of delivery: the pandemic expedited a process already in train, whereby we rely more and more on delivery of everything from groceries, to household items, to meals. Delivery as the new normal offers clear benefits to large companies (and perhaps especially those in the business of delivering), but not necessarily small independents or local suppliers, who are forced

to compete but whose small scale means delivery costs cut into profits. Here again, the reality is that those able to provide the cheapest and fastest service are unlikely to be the most ethical.

Amazon's 'The show must go on' advert, which is 2 minutes long, points to the online company as offering all the supplies we need to overcome barriers presented by the pandemic: in the advertisement, a young ballet dancer's community comes together to stage an alternative to the performance cancelled due to COVID-19. The advert mainly foregrounds depictions of Black people (at home, at work, in love, at a housing estate, at different stages of life and involved in intergenerational hair care practices), who have often been excluded from the predominantly white and classist world of ballet.

The optics of Amazon's advert allude to both the 'new normal' of the COVID-19 crisis and the 'new normal' of the world of ballet, with the advert's visuals clearly departing from the whiteness that is often associated with such creative expression. Moreover, the advert was released during the months following impactful BLM organising around the world in Spring/Summer 2020 and following subsequent calls for the marketing industry to reckon with racism and 'amplify Black people' (Grier and Poole, 2021; Thomas et al., 2020). Hence, Amazon's 'The show must go on' advert may be understood as responding to the entwined crises of COVID-19 *and* antiblackness, by attempting to allude to a 'new normal' that appears to be supportive of Black people, at least superficially. Such Amazon advertising is, arguably, an example of how brands make 'use of key racialised and gendered subject positions' (Sobande, 2020b), including by drawing on discourses of 'Black Excellence' which involve brands depicting the talents of Black people in ways that are intended to frame the brand as 'diverse', or, even, 'woke' (p. 2723).

Many consumers did indeed turn to Amazon to deliver what they could no longer access, but the company's record-breaking profits during this period cannot be understood without acknowledging critiques of its tax practices, treatment of workers and carbon footprint. It is no surprise that Greenpeace has the company firmly in its sights. While the broader global consequences are less direct, food delivery services represent another advertising category that took advantage of the COVID-19 moment to expand their ethically dubious operations (Shenker, 2021). Just Eat and Deliveroo both launched major ad campaigns during the pandemic, their debatable value to local independent businesses and promotion of the gig economy were dwarfed by their ability to provide restaurant food during lockdown. Ultimately, if their approach benefits the big players, including national and global chains, disproportionately, then the success of these apps contributes to the same global crises around food processing and distribution.

Yet even in the face of potential criticism, delivery-based brands sought to link their services with those of 'key workers', or employees providing key services during the crisis. A December 2020 Deliveroo spot thanked all delivery drivers for their work as 'another set of key workers who have gone above and beyond to support Britain this year'. The spot includes shots of Deliveroo workers alongside shots of people in a range of delivery roles, such as a Royal Mail worker and someone delivering blood. In addition to invoking the sentimentality and ideas about heroism that surround the socially constructed notion of 'key worker', the advert points to the perceived economic benefit

enabled by the work of delivery drivers: ‘helping businesses stay afloat, they’ve brought home gyms, home offices, home schools, toys, flowers, tools, and *even* toilet paper. The deliveries that made life a little easier and those that literally saved lives’. Presumably Deliveroo drivers themselves would have gladly traded the campaign’s praise for better pay and fairer working conditions.

Although these examples suggest brands rely on consumer ignorance or apathy regarding wider social conditions of hyper-consumption, they also appealed to the public’s desire to support at least *some* frontline workers. The final image of the Deliveroo spot pairs the company logo with a ‘supporting the NHS’ logo, accompanied by the written words ‘Show your support. Donate now using the Deliveroo app. #HereToDeliver’. The broad message of the ad is distilled to its core through the inclusion of a direct call to action that encourages people to download and use the Deliveroo app: come for the NHS donation, stay for the restaurant food delivery. Like many ads, the Deliveroo spot is dependent on the assumption that most, if not all, of its audience have experienced working from home, studying from home, and gym-ing from home during the pandemic. The ad thus represents the pandemic as being experienced in relatively universal ways, obscuring the much more varied reality, a point we pursue in the following section.

Advertising: in it together with all of us?

The COVID-19 ‘outbreak and the lockdown it induced not only separated people from others, but also brought forced distancing between brands and their audiences, with harmful effects on consumer-brand relationships’ (Mangiò et al., 2021: 1), an outcome which necessitated unifying advertising messages. Although the December 2020 Deliveroo ad ‘Thank you to the deliverers’ does not include the words ‘we’re all in this together’, ideas about togetherness, and images of it, are evident in such heartstring-pulling content. Representations and rhetoric related to togetherness have played a central role in the advertising industry’s response to the pandemic and have contributed to advertising content that is intended to make people feel connected to brands and the products and services that they provide. Apparently, ‘we’re all in this together’, both brands and the people who purchase from them.

The ideas of togetherness and the camaraderie that brands have tried to invoke are sometimes rooted in commodified conceptualisations of care, human connection and community during crises (Sobande, 2020a), as well as an omission of distinct differences between people’s lives and material conditions. Despite COVID-19 having impacted many people across the globe, due to the pervasiveness of structural inequalities, it is inaccurate to imply that everyone has experienced the pandemic the same way or that everyone has access to forms of collective care (The Care Collective, 2021). Further still, contrary to what some brands may suggest, any form of connection that a brand may facilitate will always be tethered to capitalism rather than community and care.

Brands’ emphasis on a unified ‘we’, who, as Birds Eye put it, are ‘all trying to live together, laugh together, and do our very best to stick together’, seldom foregrounds the perspectives of key workers who haven’t been able to work from home, and who are often among the most structurally marginalised demographics in society, such as working-class Black and Asian people. Many brands, including those mentioned earlier in this

article, have actively addressed audiences in ways that uphold the idea that the togetherness experienced by many people throughout the pandemic has been anchored in moments of familial domesticity such as dinners around tables and home education. What has been less common in UK advertising during the pandemic is meaningful depictions or acknowledgement of the experiences of people who live on their own or are isolated (with the Durex advert being an exception), people who are houseless, people in care and people who have had to work in spaces outside of their home.

Even the ‘Thank you to the deliverers’ advert foregrounds other people’s perceptions of such ‘key workers’, rather than the perspectives of the workers themselves. Such key workers are often excluded from the ‘we’ and ‘us’ that many brands have attempted to construct and attract during the pandemic, even when such people may be representationally present in the advert in the form of images and footage of them. A key contradiction buttressing the marketed notion that ‘we’re all in this together’ is that the imagined ‘we’ brands represent is typically an exclusive one. This alleged ‘we’ obscures the nuanced experiences and challenges faced by those who are most vulnerable and particularly precariously positioned during this crisis. For example, extensive evidence indicates that ‘[e]ven where black people may have equal access, it doesn’t follow that there is no racism in the administering of medical services’ (Gordon, 2022: 10).

In other words, the exclusive yet ambiguous ‘we’ that brands construct is one that reflects specific groups of people that they seek to target and who have been identified as desirable consumers, as opposed to the providers of the products and services (e.g. the delivery drivers). Beneath the surface of brand claims that ‘we’re all in this together’ are forms of target marketing that enable brands to connect to those with disposable income during the pandemic, and more specific sub-categories of people (e.g. ‘millennials’ working remotely, parents home-schooling for the first time, wealthy families seeking to redesign interiors, women in search of so-called ‘Zoom-ready’ looks and first-time buyers eager to accelerate the mortgage lending process). Efforts to feature depictions of diverse groups of people in ads with the ‘all in it together’ appeal may distract from, but do not conceal, the reality that the ‘we’ in question is not inclusive of everyone, and that such a ‘we’ is constructed via the profit-hungry gaze of brands.

In their rush to appear relatable, relevant and ‘one of us’ during times of crisis, the advertising strategies of brands which hinge on manufactured notions of togetherness emerge. At first glance, such adverts may simply seem like schmaltzy yet harmless gestures that can bring a smile to the faces of some. However, upon closer inspection, these adverts – and their attempts to define what (‘normal’) life is like in the United Kingdom during the pandemic *for everyone*, while also framing themselves as heroic and essential – exemplify the lengths that brands go to in a bid to protect their longevity and highlight the subject positions/narratives that they draw on to do so.

The cloying words accompanying LinkedIn’s #InItTogether campaign in 2020 are indicative of how brands have attempted to replicate the sentiments of community-oriented togetherness and support: ‘We could all use a little help right now. We can give a whole lot of it, too. Reach out, welcome someone in – we’re stronger when we’re #InItTogether’. While it may be unsurprising that brands continue to advertise and manage their reputations during times of crisis, the audacious ways that they try to position

themselves as being both in community with and dutifully serving people are still ripe for critique, especially as such advertising strategies can involve the co-opting of radical and grassroots notions of care, mutual aid and kinship.

Conclusion

Public critiques of the relationship between racism, sexism, colonialism, classism and capitalism have been expansive and ongoing during the current COVID-19 crisis. If there is a silver lining here, it is that the worse things get, the more likely they are to be exposed and publicly critiqued. In the words of Kay and Wood (2020) on the COVID-19 pandemic:

The radical intellectual work that has been undertaken over many years by black, feminist, anticolonial and queer theorists may even be entering a new phase – providing the imaginative energies and intellectual tools with which to survive this moment and fight for a liberated future. (p. 1020)

Critical coverage points to ‘an open door for change’ (Everingham and Chassagne, 2020: 564), and part of that process may entail collectively pushing back against advertising and marketing messages that depict particular experiences of life that are (re)presented as being universal to all and nothing other than (a new) ‘normal’.

Mangiò et al. (2021) note, ‘[a]s the Covid-19 pandemic unfolded, academics and practitioners alike wondered how and to what extent brands should adapt their advertising and communication efforts to remain resonant and to engage their audiences’ (p. 1). Our analysis suggests one way that advertisers responded in the face of crisis was with gestures towards normality; acknowledgement of change only insofar as it serves the brand; and a cloaking of the structural inequalities highlighted and exacerbated by crises (e.g. both COVID-19 and ongoing antiblackness). As noted above, while we have focused on the COVID-19 pandemic, our analysis offers a window into how advertisers adapt during a state of crisis more generally and their inability to incorporate questions of morality into consumer pitches.

The endurance of advertising strategies in the face of crisis reflects the normalisation of promotional culture across almost all areas of life: advertisers took the gamble that consumers would find their COVID-19 campaigns a comfort rather than an inappropriate intrusion at a difficult time. Positive outcomes of these campaigns will no doubt strengthen the belief of those in marketing that addressing crises without addressing root causes (with all the self-reflection that might entail) is a successful strategy that can be applied to future instances. Advertising appears to be accepted as a natural part of everyday life and, as Birds Eye claims, a reassurance that simply responds to consumer needs, even in times of crisis.

At the same time, the pandemic has highlighted vulnerabilities in the public face of marketing which, paired with campaigns to support local business and media coverage tying the emergence of new diseases to consumerism, offer critical consumers the opportunity to interrogate the messages communicated by brands. If advertising during the pandemic encouraged some consumers to challenge rampant consumerism and

commercialism, and to want to hold consumer brands to account, the big question is how we harness that energy as we brace ourselves for future crises and their attendant advertising campaigns.

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ORCID iD

Francesca Sobande  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4788-4099>

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Biographical Notes

Francesca Sobande is a Senior Lecturer in Digital Media Studies at Cardiff University, United Kingdom. She is the author of *The Digital Lives of Black Women in Britain* (2020) and *Consuming Crisis* (forthcoming, 2022), as well as co-editor of *To Exist is to Resist: Black Feminism in Europe* (2019) and co-author of *Black Oot Here: Black Lives in Scotland* (forthcoming, 2022).

Bethany Klein is a Professor of Media and Communication at the University of Leeds, United Kingdom. She is the author of *Selling Out: Culture, Commerce and Popular Music* (2020) and *As Heard on TV: Popular Music in Advertising* (2009), and co-author of *Understanding Copyright: Intellectual Property in the Digital Age* (2015).