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2019

A critical investigation of Bell Let's Talk

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Recommended Citation

A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION OF BELL LET'S TALK

By

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A Major Research Paper
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of Communication, Media and Film
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2019

A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION OF BELL LET'S TALK

by

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January 30, 2019

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ABSTRACT

In September 2010, Bell created the Bell Let's Talk campaign to help lessen the stigma of mental health illnesses in Canada. The objective of this paper is to tease out the "ambivalences" (see Banet-Weiser, 2012) surrounding a massive corporation's leadership in mental health awareness by analyzing both the importance and controversy surrounding Bell Let's Talk.

The first component of this paper is a literature review that seeks to answer the research question: "how may components of Bell Let's Talk Day be understood as both progressive and regressive?" Although "social media is the next step in the war against silence" (Campbell, 2017), I argue that Bell has underlying motives. Through the campaign, Bell seeks to strengthen its affective brand value by encouraging consumers to produce an ethical surplus via immaterial labour (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Arvidsson, 2006).

Second, I present the ambivalence of Bell Let's Talk under Banet-Weiser's theoretical framework of brand culture. My secondary research question is: "considering both the progressive and regressive aspects of the campaign, how does Bell Let's Talk exemplify the ambivalences of twenty-first century brand culture?" The works of Sarah Banet-Weiser and Samantha King are important for situating cause-related marketing in a much larger social and political-economic context – for example, the neoliberal trend of relying upon private corporations to solve what should be collective, social problems.

Third, I implement a small-scale reaction analysis of the comments of a Bell Let's Talk Facebook post. Although 64.5% of audience reactions are categorized as positive, there are Facebook users who are skeptical. This mini-case study seeks to make evident the ambivalence of contemporary brand culture within society.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this Major Research Paper to my mom, dad, and Tyler. Thank you for making my lunches, driving me around, reassuring me that I can do anything I set my mind to, and always being there for me through the good times and the bad. I owe all of my success to the three of you. I love you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank Dr. Vince Manzerolle for being one of the best professors, graduate assistant supervisors, and ice cream buddies. I am very grateful for your support throughout my graduate school experience. From recommending books and articles, to talking me out of a spiral of panic during my oral exam, you have always been so kind to me. Thank you for always pushing me to reach my full potential.

Second, I would like to thank Dr. Kyle Asquith, my MRP advisor, for always going above and beyond. Always. There are no words to summarize how much you have done for me over the past year. You truly are the best. Thank you for encouraging me when things seemed impossible, guiding me throughout the whole process, and truly caring about me and my work. I am extremely blessed to have worked with you.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to extend my sincerest thanks to Brett Giroux. I truly don't know what I would do without you. Thank you so much for your patience, reassurance, and love throughout the process of writing this paper (and in general). Your unwavering support means the world to me. You have been there for me through it all. I am eternally grateful for you.

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Introduction

Bell Let's Talk: The Campaign

According to the Canadian Mental Health Association, one in five Canadians will battle a mental health illness at some point in their lives (Miller, 2013). Additionally, mental health illnesses have "an annual cost of approximately $50 billion to the health care system… which makes up about seven percent of health care spending" (Quigley, 2016). Bell Let's Talk is an annual awareness campaign that is focused on four pillars: "fighting the stigma for mental health, improving access to care, supporting research, and leading by example in workplace mental health" ("Bell Let's Talk", 2018a). On a designated day each year, Bell donates five cents for every text message and phone call made, in addition to every tweet, Instagram post, Facebook video view, and Snapchat geofilter used with the hashtag #BellLetsTalk ("Bell Let's Talk", 2018a). Since September of 2010, the campaign has raised approximately $93.4 million ("Bell Let's Talk", 2018a). One of the purposes of the campaign is to lessen the stigma of mental health illnesses via the hashtag #BellLetsTalk. However, the campaign needs more than an online component to succeed, which is why Bell donates money to "help fund a variety of mental health services and initiatives across Canada" (Miller, 2013). The money is distributed to small agencies, some larger organizations, and universities to provide services and treatment options to communities who do not have the appropriate funds to do so (Miller, 2013). Mental health illnesses have created a bottleneck effect in hospital emergency rooms because people do not have anywhere else to turn (Miller, 2013). Bell ostensibly wants to help change that.

Bell promotes their campaign day as an opportunity for Canadians to discuss their personal stories and educate others about the negative stigma that surrounds mental health illnesses, such as anxiety and depression. According to Stuart (2016), stigma exists when people label a human difference as undesirable and decide to devalue or discriminate against those who are different (i.e., for the sake of this paper, people who have mental health illnesses) (p. 2). It is fantastic that this need has been identified… but why Bell, a Canadian media and telecommunications giant? Bell Let's Talk is a corporate-sponsored movement which may have ulterior motives, such as brand.

There are many critical academic works on the corporatization of AIDS (e.g., Kuehn, 2010) and breast cancer (e.g., King, 2007, 2013), but there are none interrogating Canada's most prominent social media cause-related marketing campaign. Despite the fact that Bell Let's Talk Day has been an annual campaign since September of 2010, there is a huge gap in the literature that needs to be filled.

Major Research Paper (MRP) Outline

The purpose of this major research paper (MRP) is to answer two research questions: "How may components of Bell Let's Talk Day be understood as both progressive and regressive?" and "Considering both the progressive and regressive aspects of the campaign, how does Bell Let's Talk exemplify the ambivalences of twenty-first century brand culture?" The first research question allows me to view the campaign through a variety of interdisciplinary literature, actual audience reactions, and my own critical perspective as a Communication/Media Studies student. In order to answer my first research question effectively, I have organized my paper in a way that separates the two dimensions. I hope that separating the two sides will give both me and

the readers of my work the chance to be open-minded. Understanding the pros and cons of both opinions is crucial to thinking critically, and to see how experiences in brand culture are, as Banet-Weiser (2012) points out, often ambivalent.

To operationalize my first research question, I will give each important word or phrase a functioning definition. The following definitions have helped me in the process of guiding my research to answer my first research question throughout my literature review.

Firstly, the term "components of Bell Let's Talk Day" will refer to not just the hashtag #BellLetsTalk, but audience reactions to a selected post as well. I find it helpful to look at examples when something is being described to me, so I have included real, word-for-word comments to make my work more accessible.

Secondly, the expression "understood" has two meanings. First of all, I am studying audience interpretations of the movement by looking at posted reactions from people who both witness and use various components of the campaign on Bell Let's Talk Day. The second component of the term "understood" refers to *my* research, analysis, and understanding of the campaign. I will include how I comprehend and perceive the campaign, which may be different than that of other people. Again, being reflexive throughout the research and writing processes is crucial.

Thirdly, the word "progressive" will be used to describe how people are inspired to help lessen the taboo regarding mental health illnesses. I would like to answer the question: how may the campaign contribute to reducing the negative stigma surrounding mental health? Initially, this was not a "how" question. I wanted to research *what* people changed about their online behaviours because of Bell Let's Talk Day, but the campaign

does not necessarily inspire everyone to make a change. Not to mention, it would be impossible to measure this impact. Focusing on "how" questions throughout my research have strengthened my arguments and allowed me to stay on-board with my research questions. I should not make suppositions nor assume that the campaign has an effect on everyone that witnesses it.

Fourthly, the term "regressive" will be used to determine how the campaign is problematic and a corporate ploy. The word "problematic" has the ability to branch off into two elements. First, I have learned about the oppressive nature of the campaign. Bell Let's Talk Day exploits social media users with mental health illnesses by profiting from their troubles. Moreover, the word "problematic" can refer to the paradox of Bell Let's Talk Day taking place on social media sites that may in fact contribute to deteriorating mental health. It can also be attributed to the paradoxical concern of Bell simultaneously being a top telecommunications provider and leader of the campaign.

Placing Bell Let's Talk within Social-Cultural Theory and Literature

The Progressive Nature of Bell Let's Talk

Miller (2013) states: "wouldn't it be wonderful when we no longer have to have [Bell Let's Talk] Day because talking about mental illness is just something that we take for granted, it's just something that we'll do and people would feel comfortable just mentioning it as they would anything else?" Campbell (2017) believes that "social media is the next step in the war against silence" (p. 3). There is a sense of fearlessness that is shaped by social media, perhaps due to the fact that people can see their support systems online. Bell Let's Talk Day allows people to no longer feel alone. The following themes:

The Power of the Collective, *Breaking the Silence*, and *Foucault's Theory of Biopower*, support the idea that Bell Let's Talk is a progressive campaign.

The power of the collective.

In an article about social media and oppositional movements in Egypt, Lim (2012) states that the "We are all Khaled Said" movement was a very strong "symbolic representation" (p. 241). In October of 2011, this Facebook group was created just days after Khaled Said's death; he was beaten by two police officers who were eventually convicted of manslaughter. The Facebook group allowed people all over the world to put a face to the life-long struggle with which people living under Mubarak's Emergency Law dealt. The collective identity of "we" in the mobilized online movement gave people the opportunity to relate to a "shared victimization" (Lim, 2012, p. 242). Similarly, in the article *Why Does Occupy Matter*, Pickerill and Krinsky (2012) state that Occupy's slogan, we are the 99%, "created a sense of inclusion and majority" between activists (p. 281). The collective identity of the word "we" has the power to shape societal norms. More recently, the online #MeToo movement has shone a light on workplace sexual harassment (Eckert & Steiner, 2018). Eckert & Steiner (2018) argue that media has the power to inform people of their rights and in turn they can stand up for themselves. Awareness spreads quickly online, and when a hashtag such as #MeToo or #BellLetsTalk goes viral through the power of the collective, it is difficult for social media users to look away. Similar to the purpose of Bell Let's Talk Day, the strong network ties that are created through these online social movements bring people closer together over the internet.

The word "let's" in the Bell Let's Talk campaign name carries similar meaning. The word "let's" is a contraction for "let us" (although, it is important to note that the hashtag does not include the apostrophe). According to the online Oxford Dictionary (n.d.), the definition of "let's" is "a polite way of making or responding to a suggestion, giving an instruction, or introducing a remark." "Let Us Talk" is a strong message; it suggests that people's stories are otherwise hidden, yet Bell Let's Talk Day promotes these discussions. The Bell Let's Talk campaign gives society an opportunity to speak about an otherwise taboo topic that affects the daily lives of millions of people. A sense of community and collaboration are potentially formed on Bell Let's Talk Day, giving online users the power to recalibrate social norms regarding mental health. This campaign has the ability to alter the status quo and is considered by many to be an effective mode of organization.

More times than not, standing out in a crowd is considered a bad thing; this is why intentionally making oneself noticeable is so powerful. Normalized patterns of behaviour are considered the *average* or *mean*; however, average is impossible (Trufelman, Rose, & Harris, 2016). There is no such thing as average, because not one person from a larger group of people perfectly fits in the confinements of a mean of the larger group (Trufelman et al., 2016). The be all and end all is to be *liked* (sometimes quite literally on social media platforms). Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. remind users that people are watching them, and they in turn modify their behaviours. We are disciplined on social media to act in certain ways. Bell Let's Talk changes this common norm of "playing it safe" and "keeping quiet." The campaign is an attempt to dismantle the unperceivable power structure of what is considered normal versus abnormal in

society. In fact, it creates a new norm by doing so. It can be considered "cool" or "hip" to click and join in on the conversation that dominates the internet on a yearly basis. Yet, at the same time, this online activism can shift into a real-life, offline protest for change (Lim, 2012). The ability for Bell Let's Talk Day to shift this mindset from taboo to "cool" is a successful way to get important conversations started. If people hide their mental health illnesses, they may feel as though they are fighting a battle alone. Bell Let's Talk Day encourages people to find power in the collective.

Breaking the silence.

In Canada, approximately 27% of the population is allegedly fearful of being in the company of a person who suffers from a serious mental illness (Miller, 2013). According to a mental health project officer at Ottawa Public Health, the stigma surrounding mental health illness "robs people of having a support network when they are dealing with this illness" (Miller, 2013). Many people feel ashamed, self-conscious, and frightened to discuss their mental health with family members, friends, and doctors because they are unaware of their available treatment and support options. Assumptions are given the opportunity to be challenged on Bell Let's Talk Day. An astounding 138 million interactions took place online during the 2018 campaign, and celebrities such as Celine Dion, Shania Twain, and Ellen DeGeneres took part in the conversation as well (Forani, 2018).

Campbell's (2017) article on Black Lives Matter and Occupy describes the concept of a *suspended self*. According to Campbell, the suspended self can be defined as a person who moves fluidly between online and offline spaces "because when we are offline we are still becoming in relation to our digital experiences, those sediments of the

experience we hold in the back of our minds" (p. 6). The suspended self gives people an opportunity to build connections with one another, because digital spaces are frequently used to shape culture and provide places of support (Campbell, 2017). In other words, brand culture becomes culture – and this can be in a positive light (Banet-Weiser, 2013, p. 42). Social media campaigns allow people to speak out about their struggles, seek support from people with similar experiences, and educate those who may not be familiar with their mistreatment. Bell Let's Talk does just that by giving online users a powerful voice. Additionally, audiences of these campaigns construct political and cultural identities based on what they see online (Banet-Weiser, 2013, p. 42).

Lipsitz (1988) mentions that "it is difficult to identify exactly when oppositional ideology and action fails or succeeds" (p. 149). There are many hidden successes in failures, because society is constantly developing new norms and redefining subjective dimensions. Lipsitz (1988) states:

> … It is almost as if the ideological dog-catchers have to be sent out every morning to round up the ideological strays, only to be confronted by a new group of loose mutts the next day. Under those conditions, dominant groups can ill afford to assume their own society is wholly pacified, although of course it is in their interest to have others think that all opposition has been successfully precluded or contained (p. 147).

Baby steps, regardless of how small, can in turn change history and set the stage for future changes. The stigma surrounding mental health illness may continue to follow advocates of Bell Let's Talk Day, but with biopolitics, the stigma is alleviated as time progresses. The world can never be static, so every improvement leads to bigger and

better things. A long-lasting social change is possible through the persistence and reoccurrence of Bell Let's Talk Day.

Foucault's theory of biopower.

Listening, sharing, and seeking to collaborate with others builds a social movement and destigmatizes previous norms by communicating. Mental health is considered a taboo topic because not enough people are exposed to what it entails. Bell Let's Talk Day has the potential to lead a social recomposition through biopolitics. Biopolitics can be defined as having power over other bodies, such as control over populations (Foucault, 1978). Creating energy to make an idea grow is one of the most impactful effects of the Bell Let's Talk campaign. Technology allows us to create new public spaces for community, to understand the opinions of others, and successfully communicate with those who are similarly struggling. Making a societal change is a huge task, but social media has the potential to transform people into active agents. Bell Let's Talk is a long-term commitment to being a vehicle of progress.

Bell Let's Talk Day gives people the opportunity to see and be seen by others; in other words, it has the power to change normalized patterns of behaviour through society's belief systems. Foucault's (1978) theory of biopower contends that power is everywhere, yet we cannot see it. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault expands on this notion: "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (p. 93). Power is not a hierarchical structure, but rather, a network that is constantly and forever changing its nodes and edges. The beginning of biopower was marked by "an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving subjugation of bodies and the control of populations" (Foucault, 1978, p. 140). People's exposure to a

variety of different schools, churches, offices, factories, and hospitals (among many other institutions) was the commencement of a realization that people's views subtly and slowly morph by what they are exposed to on a day-to-day basis. Creating a new "normal" will make people feel heard and respected. According to Foucault, "techniques of power [are] present at every level of the social body" (p. 141). Every interaction that a person has is incorporated into their own concept of the self. Foucault coined the idea of *technologies of the self* – meaning that we are encouraged to be the "right" kind of person (Campbell, 2017). He states that:

> Power is not a structure or system: it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others; instead it acts upon their actions… the exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome (p. 4).

There are many abnormal and normal standards of mental health in today's society. Foucault (2007) believes that these patterns of normalized behaviour can be altered over time (p. 141). Foucault's work on the history of hospitals notes the idea of patients going to a hospital to be cured was a new concept in the year 1760 (p. 141). Before the end of the eighteenth century, hospitals were places to die. The overall architecture and space of a hospital were transformed into a place of healing and prolonging one's life on earth in the 1800s (Foucault, 2007, p. 149). A contemporary hospital is a place to watch people get better through various treatment options and surgeries. However, previous to the middle of the seventeenth century, "religious personnel exercised power and… were in charge of the daily life of the hospital, the salvation, and… could even dismiss the doctor[s]" (Foucault, 2007, p. 149). Religion

expressed that madness was to be controlled and not cured (Foucault, 1965, p. 244). Due to religious beliefs, madness, or mental illness, was considered childish and a form of minority status (Foucault, 1965, p. 252). Pastoral power dominated society. Yet, when people eventually adopted the idea that hospitals were places for curing, doctors assumed the main responsibilities for the organization of the institutions (Foucault, 2007, p. 150). Standards in health care have the tendency to change over time.

This is no different in education. At one point in time, teachers would call on students one by one to give him or her some one-on-one instruction at their desks and then sent him or her back to their chair to continue the same process with another student (Foucault, 2007, p. 147). Collective teaching was not an option at the time, because in the seventeenth century, discipline was deemed more important than the ease of lecturing multiple children at once. Over time the "norm" changes. There is not necessarily a specific moment in time that changes society, but rather a succession of minor events that make enormous impacts over time. This idea can be related to the stigma surrounding mental health, because Bell Let's Talk Day is one campaign that may contribute to an overall change in the education of society.

To decide what constitutes normalcy, most people turn to others and compare themselves to an ideal that does not exist. For instance, everyone's lives seem "perfect" on social media platforms – simply because users can tweak and alter pictures, statuses, and tweets until they are deemed suitable for Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Individuals are continuously enclosed in an invisible mode of online surveillance, because we wish to be accepted and quite literally *liked* by others. Bell Let's Talk Day challenges this anxiety of difference and encourages people to stand out; normalizing the

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stigma surrounding mental health could make these hidden illnesses more apparent thus raising the confidence levels of people who are struggling with the consequences of these illnesses on a daily basis. However, reliance on social media as the primary medium of communication for this campaign might also exasperate the problems associated with mental health in the first place.

The Regressive Nature of Bell Let's Talk

Does breaking the silence for one day a year really matter? Bell Let's Talk Day occurs once a year, and according to Quigley (2016), "it's up to the public to ensure its impact extends beyond that" during the other 364 days of the year. At times, "ill-conceived cause marketing efforts slip through the cracks" and audiences do not critically analyze their true purposes (Stole, 2008, p. 32). The following analysis of the regressive nature of Bell Let's Talk weaves the ideas of others through six themes: *Affective Economics and Branding*, *Immaterial Labour and "Prosumers"*, *Data Mining*, *Cause-related Marketing*, *Neoliberal Pressure on Individual and Personal Responsibility*, and *Brands Sell Cultural Capital to Fulfill the Project of the Self*.

Affective economics and branding.

Industrial capitalism has been replaced by informational capitalism. During the Fordism era, purchasing, creating, and selling tangible goods (such as automobiles) was deemed the best way to make a profit and formulate social norms (Beniger, 1986). By the twenty-first century, the creation of feelings and experiences is more beneficial to companies. In other words, we have seen a shift from the production of goods (in factory settings) to the production of culture and identity (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 43). For example, Walt Disney World provides consumers with an immaterial, affective aspect; Disney is

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known for selling emotions and positive moods in a happy atmosphere. The value that Disney generates is accumulated from creating life-long memories and cheery experiences that keep people coming back (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 92). Jenkins, an American media scholar and Communications professor, coined the term "affective economics" to describe this creation of feelings and experiences (Ouellette, 2013, p. 68).

Like experiences, brands are ubiquitous virtual goods. They are not tangible, but they exist everywhere in our culture. According to Arvidsson (2006), "brands do not so much stand for products, as much as they provide a part of the context in which products are used" (p. 8). Brands allow individuals to act, feel, and be a certain way; rather than controlling consumers, brands enable and empower people to discover the world around them with particular schemas. Consumers are paying for access, rather than ownership, to brands (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 131). Socially-constructed "auras" are offered at premium prices. For example, both Starbucks and 7-Eleven convenience stores sell coffee and other caffeinated beverages; however, at Starbucks, consumers pay more money for access to a relaxed atmosphere and an Instagram-worthy experience.

A brand "should be conceived as a personality with emotional or even ethical dimensions" (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 67). Arvidsson (2006) goes as far as stating that brands are like friends; they play various roles in people's personal lives (p. 83). Banet-Weiser (2012) agrees with Arvidsson and believes that brands are like people in many ways (p. 72). Brands "have qualities, attributes, and personalities" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 72). She suggests that corporate brands are built when companies have 'personal' social media pages that are used for engaging in authentic relationships with consumers (i.e. Bell Let's Talk) (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 8). When an experience feels distinctly non-

commercial, it can be perceived as authentic and genuine (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 11).

The Bell Let's Talk campaign successfully projects the message that Bell cares about the future of mental health. Through the campaign, the corporate image of Bell is enhanced. The brand "facilitates 'relationships' between consumers and branders and encourages affective connections based on authenticity and sincerity" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 36).

It is important to note that audience exposure is not the same as audience engagement (Napoli, 2013, p. 127). We are currently in a shift from an attention economy to an engagement economy. An attention economy involves broadcasting advertisements to a large number of people at once. In contrast, an engagement economy can be related to narrowcasting to individual people by using their social media accounts, search history, etc. as data points and metrics. According to Zwick and Bradshaw (2013), "everything starts with engagement" (p. 164). Nowadays, large corporations like McDonald's and Wendy's have their own Twitter accounts to interact with customers on a more personal basis. Workers are paid to be active on social media accounts in order to give brands a specific, online persona (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Unmarketed marketing is "the desire of marketers to make themselves disappear as the other of the consumer" (Zwick & Bradshaw, 2013, p. 166). I would argue that this concept ties in nicely with co-creative capitalism – "where firms become enablers and resource providers for customers to create economic value" (Zwick & Bradshaw, 2013, p. 169).

The emergence of authentic relationships and the development of social activism are possible through branding; however, there is a hypocrisy that surrounds this idea. Consumers must be involved in a brand identity's co-creation, because without them, no shared understanding of a brand will develop (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 82). Companies must

utilize the immaterial labour of humans to "profit an industry… that helped further the problem these participants are protesting" in the first place (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 43). Arguably, mental health is disintegrating with the development of social media. People have no choice but to evaluate and compare themselves to others on these online platforms of constant visibility, which mostly seem to highlight the good aspects of people's lives (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 83).

Bell – the largest telecommunications company in Canada – is the leader of the Bell Let's Talk campaign. For Bell, this marketing strategy is brilliant. Bell sells telecommunications services such as phone plans, cable packages, access to high speed and wireless internet, and residential phone services. None of these products require packaging, so affect and human communication are vital. In order to successfully one-up its competitors, Bell has created a campaign that promotes the sharing of feelings. This placelessness of the brand is difficult to advertise and sell, but I argue that Bell has found a way to generate online discussion – not only about mental health, but about Bell itself. Banet-Weiser (2012) compares the co-production of brands to the co-production of religion (p. 208). Beliefs exist because people follow and preach them; religions rely on people to spread the word and practice around. Religions exist through rituals because without them, they would cease to exist.

One of the differences between commodification and branding is that commodification is usually a top-down process and branding is developed from the ground up via feedback and consumer labour (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 128). Bell Let's Talk Day is the epitome of bottom-up branding. The campaign uses a viral marketing strategy to encourage social media users to "generate a 'word of mouth' that distributes

or speaks of the [brand]… it is real life product placement" (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 68). In summary, companies have the ability to take advantage of already existing social networks and communities to add cultural value and in turn increase their profits (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 69). Social responsibility is both a competitive business strategy and an "instrument of profitability" (Ouellette, 2013, p. 62).

Littler (2013) discusses green marketing, believing that "it can be used to update a company's image while the products remain unchanged… or through all-out greenwashing a company can use green branding to try to hide a destructive environmental record" (p. 82). I argue that Bell does just that. Firstly, one of Bell's underlying objectives for the Bell Let's Talk campaign is to create an authentic relationship with consumers. Encouraging people to open up about mental health is a very personal request, but through this human communication is when feelings regarding the company develop (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Secondly, it is no coincidence that Bell is attempting to promote positive mental health after many public controversies regarding the way Bell treats its employees who struggle with depression and anxiety (Fekri, n.d.). To summarize, "commodity activism is becoming a two-for-one endeavour that promotes feel-good consumption through fundraising for social and/or health campaigns that promote a public good" such as mental health (Castañeda, 2013, p. 273).

According to the online Oxford Dictionary (n.d.), the word "talk" is defined as "speaking in order to give information or express ideas or feelings; conversing or communicating by spoken words; having the power of speech; and discussing personal or intimate feelings." Does Bell Let's Talk Day *truly* give people the chance to talk to one another? Kent and Lane (2017) argue that Facebook and Twitter are not places of

dialogue "unless two people [give] themselves over to each other completely, and [find] an online and private space to have the conversation" (p. 570). They believe that personal and intimate conversations cannot take place on newsfeeds or through comments and that social media (as a public tool) does not give users an opportunity to use dialogue. However, private messaging options within these platforms could be used to exchange opinions and thoughts. This is not in Bell's interest because private messaging does not promote Bell's company. The public postings of the hashtag, pictures, and stories are the user-generated advertisements that promote Bell (Serazio, 2015, p. 608). Serazio (2015) states that "campaigns and platforms that draw upon user-generated content submissions are the industry's attempt at embedding commerce in that fabric of identity exploration that takes place online: building communication 'environments' around particular brands, encouraging individuals to use them as a way of defining who they are to their friends and acquaintances." (608)

Immaterial labour and "prosumers".

The growing popularity of technology and use of social media are promoting the free labour of humans in their so-called leisure time (Dyer-Witheford, 1999, p. 80). Consumers are now producers of the media they are surrounded by (Arvidsson, 2005). Arvidsson (2005) states: "brand management works to ensure that the productivity of consumers *becomes* productive labour" (p. 249). After a platform (such as Facebook) is created, it is solely the work of the users to keep the business up and running. That is, users dedicate their unwaged time to work for the company. Serazio (2015) refers to this business model as "the holy grail" for advertisers (p. 609). Capital is dependent on labour; therefore, the CEOs and stakeholders make a profit while sitting back and

watching users do the work necessary for the company's survival (Dyer-Witheford, 1999, p. 80). For instance, the users of social media sites dedicate their time for no wage on Bell Let's Talk Day to advertise by using the hashtag #BellLetsTalk. Bell created the hashtag for users to begin democratic conversations, however, it also saves money on "advertising and promotional expenses for the business involved" (Stole, 2008, p. 29). The company recognized their power over Canadians, and used it to their full advantage; this is why Bell Let's Talk Day may be viewed as an advertising ploy for the largest media company in Canada (Magder, 2013).

Many social media users may believe that Bell is starting an online conversation for the sake of improving the negative stigma surrounding mental health. This may be true, but in reality, Bell is also attempting to strengthen its affective economic value by encouraging consumers to produce an ethical surplus via immaterial labour. Bell directs people with the annual campaign's platform, and lets a crowd of active social media users take over and advertise its 'generosity.' There is a blurring of work and leisure in post-Fordism times, and this is central to both informational capital and contemporary brand management. That is, we participate in brand campaigns as part of leisure, but meanwhile this is the *work* of brand-building.

Informational capitalism thrives on immaterial labour – a term coined by Lazzarato to describe both salaried and free labour of workers, social media users, consumers, and online gamers (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 10). An ethical surplus, or shared meaning of a brand, is formulated because of human interaction and communication. This concept is not related to labour or profit, but rather, the ability of people to feel connected by experiences that involve brands. Both marketers and consumers work simultaneously

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to establish and reinforce brand values. It is this ethical surplus – or common – that produces value for a company (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 13). In addition, branding involves the making and selling of feelings and affects. Informational capital is produced via immaterial things rather than tangible goods. Banet-Weiser (2012) states that "consumer labour both tightens the hold of the corporation over the consumer and also reveals the contradictions within the structure of 'informationalized capitalism' by loosening some of the control from the corporation as far as determining the final product" (p. 42). Unpaid consumer-generated content is a large part of the co-production of brands (Banet-Weiser, 2013, p. 47). Once a brand establishes its affective goals, it is the consumers who are the active partners of a corporation's success in achieving these goals (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 70).

Read (2002) discusses the idea of "living labour"; he states that "labour is not an object, but an activity" (p. 140). Rather than producing and consuming tangible objects, labour is now a lifestyle that shapes the way people think and perceive the world. Arvidsson (2005) believes that social media consumers are no longer passive audiences, but rather, they actively engage in the creation of advertisements that they consume (p. 242). Serazio (2013) suggests: "More than ever, digital platforms are providing this opportunity and advertisers are seizing it: campaigns need to invite millennials into the ad process and allow them to get involved with the brand on a deeper level" (p. 609). The symbolic level of exploitation that affects the minds and hearts of individuals has an impact on the way people interpret Bell Let's Talk Day. The "participatory culture" of online campaigns is a form of exploited labour (Banet-Weiser, 2013, p. 51). Consumer-generated labour makes those who are oppressed feel *empowered*, as if they are creating

change (Serazio, 2013, p. 149). It is quite controversial that users are active in the circulation of the campaign, yet Bell has the ability to data mine and take advantage of these "workers" during and after-the-fact (Manzerolle, 2010, p. 460).

Compared to a time of predominantly using billboards, radio stations, and broadcast television networks to advertise, there are now many delivery platforms that are available to audiences (Napoli, 2013, p. 115). Computers, tablets, and smart phones have the capability to store a countless number of applications which serve as platforms for audience engagement. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat are some of the popular platforms that come to mind. In regards to self-promotion, Andrejevic (2013) states "what once seemed almost metaphorical now seems all too literal" (p. 205). Businesses are now investing less capital for better, more personal feedback and advertising opportunities. Blogging, tweeting, and posting online are believed by many to be forms of unpaid work, simply because users are creating the content that companies collect and exploit. Bell Let's Talk Day is not the only campaign to blame, this happens every day in the marketing world.

If one's self-worth is partially determined by the feedback collected from his or her social media accounts, should Bell Let's Talk Day take place on social media? This can be considered a paradoxical use of social media that is used to combat mental health illnesses that may stem from social media itself. Stole (2008) states that "in most cases, cause marketing is merely a cleverly disguised ploy to mask some of the fundamental problems for which the very same marketing forces are directly or indirectly responsible" (p. 34). For instance, if someone posts a story about their negative experience with a mental health illness and no one, or very few people, acknowledge it (perhaps even in a

damaging way) – one's mental health can deteriorate even more than it already has. Social media is not always a safe place to express one's emotions. The production of images (or in the case of Bell Let's Talk Day – stories) must be impactful to have an effect on societal norms. If these stories are not considered inspirational or fall on deaf ears, there could be an opposite effect on social media users that are trying to find hope.

Serazio (2015) agrees that "marketers seek, through new media platforms, to weave brand messages into the 'cultural dialogue' of youth" (p. 608). The fact that Bell makes money from every call, text, and hashtag on Bell Let's Talk Day is one that demands more attention (Magder, 2013). The Bell Let's Talk campaign is a multi-platform movement that is supported by the unpaid labour/engagement of social media users. Bell is a service provider receiving a financial award in exchange for the publicity of the campaign. Prosumers are active (rather than passive) participants in the campaign (Zwick & Bradshaw, 2013, p. 170). Bell provides the platform and hashtag, while the users do all of the advertising for the company and campaign itself. One might argue that it is necessary to have the support of a large corporate entity to help break the silence; however, this may in fact make the movement less impactful. Encouraging people to text, call, and use a hashtag with the company's name coming before the movement's goal of encouraging Canadians to talk is quite powerful. Jackson (2018) states an interesting fact: "They had a debate about whether to call it Bell Let's Talk or simply Let's Talk, but decided to use the Bell brand to combat the stigma around mental health issues."

If Bell truly wanted to expose Canadians to the stigma surrounding mental health to its maximum capacity, one would assume that a collaboration of companies would be more successful than just Bell. However, Telus and Rogers have yet to participate in a

similar initiative. In addition, there is a challenging assumption attributed to the paradoxical concern of Bell simultaneously being a top telecommunications provider and only leader of the campaign. If Bell truly wanted to promote mental health rather than their company, the more companies involved, the better. Instead, Bell is incorporating positive mental health – a very brandable topic, and one that works well with their target segment of younger people – with their advertising campaign to encourage Canadians to be activists. This is a perfect example of "cause-brand fit" (Leiss, Kline, Jhally, Botterill, & Asquith, 2018, p. 352).

Data mining.

The foundation for new products and services stems from data (Srnicek, 2016). Data is a resource which distinguishes consumer preferences and successfully determines which advertisements would benefit who and where (Srnicek, 2016, p. 40). Algorithms are used to coordinate advertising on users' profiles, and ultimately, these platforms bring together "customers, advertisers, service providers [such as Bell], producers, suppliers, and physical objects" (Srnicek, 2016, p. 43). Traditional business models did not have the technology to data mine. A platform, such as Facebook, is positioned between social media users and advertisers – and brands are using these relationships to their advantage (Serazio, 2015, p. 608). A vast collection of diverse data is more important than the quality of the data; in other words, the more people using a platform, the more valuable the platform is for those users (Srnicek, 2016, p. 45). Network effects are prominent during Bell Let's Talk Day. When people use the hashtag, all of their online friends can see it, and in turn, some of these people will share the hashtag as well. Hashtags can easily spread like wildfire, making their way through the overall network of the internet. I

argue that the increasing popularity of Bell Let's Talk Day proves that it has been successful in creating a name for itself ("Bell Let's Talk", 2018a).

Not only can social media positively promote corporations through campaigns such as Bell Let's Talk, but social media websites have the ability to provide marketers with information that will in turn benefit advertisers (Einstein, 2017, p. 186). Subsequently, Facebook, Twitter, etc. have the opportunity to sell advertising space to companies who may benefit from this data extraction (Einstein, 2017, p. 186). Self-care books, essential oils, anti-anxiety medications, and stress relievers, among countless other products, can be targeted to those who feel as though they need to buy products to feel relief from their mental anguish. Psychographic and behavioural profiling allow companies to sell products to people feeling their worst (without consulting users about this technology). If the underlying motives are released and cause an uproar, businesses apologize for using surveillance capitalism and then continue to dominate the e-commerce platform (Srnicek, 2016, p. 57).

Smythe (2013) states that "consumers don't buy things. They buy tools to solve problems" (p. 39). He believes that we validate our purchases by believing that the goods we buy can make a positive impact on our lives. Giddens' work agrees by stating "consumer culture technicizes the project of the self by treating all problems as solvable through various commodities" (Slater, 1997, p. 86). We live in a modern information system that pinpoints our insecurities and desires. In order to make more money, companies strive to make more problems that can be solved with their products.

Throughout the 1860s to the 1890s, "producers had to teach consumers to use more than they formerly had used and to discriminate between different sellers" (Beniger,

1986, p. 264). Commodity aesthetics flourished, and more choices for the same basic products became available. Rather than selling things in bulk (e.g. oats, soap, cotton, canned food), packaging controlled consumer demand, distribution, and consumption (Beniger, 1986, p. 271). The production of seemingly-new commodities created demand to support the economic cycle.

If companies have the ability to control consumer demand by selling the same products with new names and packages, it is entirely possible that individuals who post their personal stories on Bell Let's Talk Day are targeted and exploited with advertisements for products that can "assist" with their mental health illnesses. Anti-anxiety blankets, anti-depressant vitamins, and self-help books are just a few examples of goods that would (so-called) "treat" people who admit they are struggling. Not only is this taking advantage of people's economic capital, but it also fools their cultural capital into thinking that commodities are the answer to their illnesses. Ultimately, Bell Let's Talk Day can provide companies with data on who is mentally struggling and more likely to purchase goods and services for help. With regards to future studies, more research is needed on the relationship between surveillance, capitalism, and social movements.

Since the mid-19th century, humans have lived in a Third Wave era where information dominates our society (Beniger, 1986, p. 3). Beniger (1986) argues that consumer feedback is crucial to the economic cycle. Markets "that survive reveal continuous exchange of information about market conditions, prices, and expectations, a struggle to overcome the conditions responsible for their opportunity but also much of their risk" (Beniger, 1986, p. 172). A continuous flow of communication between producers, distributers, and consumers makes for a successful business. In 2018,

companies have the opportunity to track the relationships between advertisements and purchases (e.g. the "swipe up" function on Instagram stories). Seeing which advertisements and influencers are most successful for particular audiences is quite valuable; in order to produce surplus value, it doesn't matter whether or not an audience watches and understands a message, what matters most is the response (i.e. if an audience actually purchases a commodity). Feedback allows industries to produce for individual consumers that are spread over the entire world; however, too much communication may backfire in regards to sensitive topics, such as mental health.

Advertising is not characterized strictly by what mass media put into the audience (i.e. messages), but by what they take out (i.e. value) (Jhally, 2013, p. 110). In order for these businesses to realize value, someone has to watch or participate in the media. In fact, "audiences sell watching-power to media owners" (Jhally, 2013, p. 103). Whether they know it or not, audiences hold power as well. Audiences have a choice to purchase goods, and especially in the case of sensitive topics, have the right to feel upset and give negative feedback. This may cause more harm than good to a company. Therefore, automatic feedback control may at times be a weakness rather than strength for businesses.

Cause-related marketing.

There is a common paradox associated with corporate activism, which involves simultaneously spreading awareness for an issue while promoting a positive corporate message. The concept of pink ribboning, for example, involves a company's ability to both support breast cancer research and show compassion for a good cause. The symbolic representations of pink ribboning strikingly relate to Bell Let's Talk Day. The

destigmatization of breast cancer through pink ribboning has provided many women with an opportunity to openly talk with one another about their experiences and struggles with the disease (King, 2007, p. 477). At the same time, the popularity of participating in the breast cancer movement leads consumers to believe that they are truly making a difference with their active citizenship (Stole, 2008). In other words, purchasing a product stamped with a pink ribbon that symbolizes breast cancer support allows people to feel as though they are fulfilling a political responsibility through accountable actions (King, 2007, p. 480).

Since the early 2000s, encouraging breast cancer campaigns has become a central aspect of marketing for prominent corporations. For instance, Avon, Ford Motor Company, Hallmark, the NFL, and Pier One have turned to breast cancer contributions as a "new and profitable strategy through which to market their products" (King, 2007, p. 481). Breast cancer marketing has become a widespread form of promotion due to the fact that companies can show compassion for a cause while catering to the interests and desires of modern consumers (Einstein, 2017, p. 184). Breast cancer has been labeled a "dream cause," simply because people can easily relate to the effects of the disease and feel as though they are making a positive change when consuming products that are also supporting research (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 141).

The National Football League (NFL) is one of many corporate sponsors whose motives are questioned. Many NFL players were in trouble with the law and wanted to rehabilitate their image after the so-called character crisis (Pool et al., 2012). Breast cancer awareness and pink campaigns have "become a sort of feel good catch all associated with screening and early detection, and the ubiquitous pink a marketing

opportunity for companies of all type" (Hill & Thompson-Hayes, 2017, p. 73). Simply placing a pink ribbon on products, football equipment, or gloves does not imply that the company is directly supporting the fight against breast cancer; however, the exposure with a $7.24 billion industry broadens the basis of a movement by forcing people to see a need (Hill & Thompson-Hayes, 2017, p. 72). Massive, captive audiences have no choice but to consume and accept this pink image as "warm and fuzzy" – similar to social media users on Bell Let's Talk Day (Pool et al., 2012). Like any campaign, this can be interpreted as both good and bad.

The assumption is that when people can empathize with a cause and personally relate to its goals, they are more likely to participate in a movement. According to Stole (2008), 84% of people have a more positive image of a business if it does something to make the world a better place (p. 28). The popular event, Race for the Cure, is designed to raise money and public awareness of breast cancer. However, it is necessary to consider its ulterior motives. Publicity is a large factor in the success of this event (King, 2007, p. 488). The way in which the Washington Monument is paired with the widespread pink ribbon image is one that represents a "partnership between the nation-state, the nonprofit sector and the corporate world… together they comprise a pedagogical tool for the post-welfare reform era in which well-intentioned, charitable individuals must share the burden of governing and the fulfillment of their needs with the state, the market and the nonprofit sector" (King, 2007, p. 488). Bell Let's Talk has very similar incentives to breast cancer awareness campaigns.

The limitations of Bell Let's Talk Day may be seen as regressive towards community growth. However, some people would argue that a brand is necessary for the

development of such a campaign. Davis and White (2015) discuss this controversy of whether or not a corporation should be put in the spotlight of social movements. Businesses profit from their decisions to support social movements. For instance, Bell's identity is at stake through the campaign's reputation. Bell Let's Talk Day is "a quest to create what [the company] perceive[s] to be positive change" (Davis & White, 2015, p. 4). Not only does Bell Let's Talk promote Bell's services, but it has "an impact on [Bell's] ability to recruit new employees" and customers based on their choice of language throughout the campaign (Davis & White, 2015, p. 2).

Davis and White (2015) suggest: "The choice of language used within [an] organization provides a window into the values and principles upon which the company culture rests" (p. 5). For example, by promoting the mental health of one's family members and friends, Bell has the capability to seem kindhearted, sensible, and compassionate rather than competitive and infatuated with wealth and monopolizing Canadian media. These family-based characteristics are more attractive to society, which leads to more community engagement with the company (Davis & White, 2015). Similar to breast cancer awareness campaigns, Bell Let's Talk Day becomes more successful when businesses tug on consumers' heartstrings (King, 2007).

In regards to power relations, the brand seems to be the expert in the Bell Let's Talk campaign. Certainly, the entire campaign revolves around the words *Bell* Let's Talk (Jackson, 2018). The case study of green consumerism in Atkinson's (2014) *Green Moms* article is quite different than my major research project in regards to topic. However, I argue that the theme of framing and reinforcing a proper motherly identity successfully relates to biopolitics. Environmental advertising suggests to society that the only way to

be a good mother is to buy green products for children (Atkinson, 2014, p. 560). The brand is considered the expert in this circumstance; therefore, the brand has the power to define what is (and is not) deemed acceptable behaviour. Bell Let's Talk Day has a similar effect on its audience. Advertising (such as the hashtag or posts) creates meaning and normalcy in society; these "values expressed in advertising mirror the dominant ideological themes" (Frith, 1997, p. 13). In this case, Bell has the power to influence societal norms, one day a year, by encouraging people to speak out about their mental health.

Banet-Weiser (2012) argues that corporate brands have a social responsibility to display appropriate cultural norms. It does not matter *what* a company is selling, but rather, *in what way* are they promoting it as good for the world. Stole (2008) asks, "Is the emerging system of cause marketing and commercially-driven philanthropy the most rational way for society to address fundamental social issues?" (p. 35). Consumers want to make "ethical" purchases based on what companies themselves are trying to promote as such (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 136). Consumers like to see themselves as activists, which is why "the question of what 'ethical' consumption means has transformed 'from the ethics of consumption' (how do my actions impinge on other people, ecosystems, and nations?) to the personal effects of consumption (how does what I buy change me?)" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 141). Perhaps people are posting the hashtag on Bell Let's Talk Day to seem like ethical, caring citizens – which is exactly what Bell intends to promote during the campaign.

From the outside looking in, most people look at Bell and think that the company is concerned with the stigma surrounding mental health; however, at the same time, the

company is advertising itself (Serazio, 2015). In 2018, Bell donated approximately $6.9 million to mental health initiatives, which is a fraction of the publicity value the company received if that publicity has to be purchased via more traditional advertising (Jackson, 2018). Stole (2008) discusses the deception surrounding the money that is used to promote the generosity of companies. In the late 1990s, Philip Morris (a tobacco company) sponsored a cause-marketing campaign to combat domestic violence (Stole, 2008, p. 30). The company raised $60 million for the cause; however, consumers were unaware of the fact that "Philip Morris spent an additional $100 million – $40 million more than it was giving away – to promote its own generosity" (Stole, 2008, p. 30). In regards to Bell Let's Talk, it would be interesting to discover how much Bell spends on advertisements on days leading up to the annual campaign. These numbers are currently unavailable to the public.

Neoliberal pressure on individual and personal responsibility.

Neoliberalism has an emphasis on individual responsibility (Banet-Weiser, 2013). Individual in the sense that it is a separate task for each person, rather than participating in collective movements as a group. Neoliberalism involves a sense of freedom against the power of government, and encourages free markets that are subjective (Banet-Weiser, 2013). There is a new pressure for individuals in a neoliberal era, because social responsibility is becoming very personal. For instance, cause-related marketing is replacing more collectively-organized activism. Rather than devoting time, energy, and money to traditional protests, people are encouraged to purchase goods and support fundraisers that contribute to their own self-branding.

The Avon Walk for Breast Cancer and the CIBC Run for the Cure are a few examples of walk/run "thon" fundraisers that are replacing protests (King, 2013, p. 204). Rather than collecting money for breast cancer research, these thons compete with one another for participants. The campaigns are "more effective at building name recognition for non-profits and corporations than at raising funds" (King, 2013, p. 208). A very limited amount of money is collected for select causes, and instead the focus is on producing a fun atmosphere. It is important to note that people must have "both economic and cultural capital" to participate in personal responsibilization (Johnston & Cairns, 2013, p. 228). Only people who can afford to participate are welcome. In the case of Bell Let's Talk, only those who can afford the technology to participate on social media are included in the campaign. Cause-related marketing relies on money, but what makes commodity activism different from donations is that it is "centered on donors reaping the benefits of their economic contributions" (Castañeda, 2013, p. 273).

From a business perspective, Bell is a company that has intervened in, and arguably exploited, a time where government-subsidized mental health care is not available for everyone. Neoliberalism lets markets and people have control over decisions; in other words, it is up to individuals to improve their mental health by talking with family and friends, practicing self-care, and seeking private therapists who charge a small fortune. Every year, Bell brags about the amount of money the campaign donates towards mental health initiatives, but money itself does not solve deteriorating mental health. In looking for solutions, we are ignoring the potential source of the problem. Bell formulates a quantitative, capitalist solution to a problem that involves a lot more than just money. Broader structural changes are needed – not extra money and higher

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investments. The coordination of our funding is causing societal problems, and a qualitative solution is needed. Instead, cause-related marketing is ubiquitous and disguising this issue with celebratory campaigns and thons filled with happy stories, clapping, chanting, and easy ways to donate more and more money (King, 2013). Cause marketing is unique to capitalism (Pool et al., 2012). These experiences, and the overall practice of cause-relating marketing, "distract attention… as to why these social problems continue to exist" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 145). In addition, Banet-Weiser (2012) critiques that corporate social responsibility politics are always going to be "safe politics" because consumers generally like the idea of contributing to the betterment of society. At the same time, corporations want to avoid topics that are too politically-divided. Breast cancer, for example, cuts across political lines.

Thons are created around the idea of personal responsibility. People donate their hard-earned money to participate in experiences that keep them coming back year after year (King, 2013, p. 208). Perhaps companies are tugging at consumers' heartstrings by linking fundraisers to very personal causes – such as breast cancer or mental health. It is the companies that choose the cause in these circumstances. Individual, consumption-based generosity differs from traditional protests that take lots of effort and represent causes that people choose (King, 2013, p. 204). Unlike protests, cause-related marketing campaigns are narcissistic and "all about me and my interests." For example, those who attend breast cancer awareness runs are likely to post pictures of themselves on social media with their friend groups sporting matching t-shirts, colour-coordinated knee-high socks and pink tutu skirts (Pool et al., 2012). The purpose of sharing their experiences online is to build their self-brand by showing their followers that they are 'kind,

generous, and an advocate' – they truly feel as though they are supporting a cause, regardless of the amount of money that is actually raised for breast cancer research (which is only 3-5% of the raised funds) (Pool et al., 2012). Very little has come out of this investment over the years. The public believes that donating money for a cure is the answer to breast cancer; we want a marketable product at the end of this, rather than preventing it from occurring in the first place (Pool et al., 2012). This is how capitalism survives… by expanding a market (Pool et al., 2012). In addition, attending these types of fundraisers reinforces the idea in participants' minds that they are fit and supporting their own health while running for a cause (King, 2013). In summary, consumers pay into thons and similar fundraisers for "the opportunity to participate and to receive an official t-shirt… which, like other commodities, become vehicles for fashioning their identities and expressing their values" (King, 2013, p. 216).

Brands sell cultural capital to fulfill the project of the self.

Cultural capital can be clearly contrasted with economic capital. Cultural capital includes the ability to make decisions and live up to a particular status (Bourdieu, 1986). It involves education, social skills, and the ability to cater one's personality to interact with different (i.e. the "right") people. Economic capital, on the other hand, is the capacity to purchase goods with money. In short, cultural capital entails the social assets of a person that allows him or her to "fit in" with different members or groups of society. This, in turn, helps to create a person's identity.

According to Slater (1997), "modern identity is best understood through the image of consumption" (p. 85). In pre-modern times, identities were fixed based on where you were born (not just geographically, but where you fell on the social hierarchy)

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(Slater, 1997). Traditional needs involved religion and family history, so people's unique characteristics and personalities formed on the basis of where they lived, what their parents did for a living, and values they obtained from their churches. Modernity reflects a change towards progress, and in 2018, people can be who they want through consumption. This requires, primarily, economic capital.

Giddens coined the theory of the reflexive project of the self (Slater, 1997). He believed that "we have no choice but to choose" and self-brand ourselves (Slater, 1997, p. 84). I like to think of this as the self as an ongoing project – constantly and forever adding to an image that is perceived and understood by others based on cultural representations. Modernity includes the product of the self with eyes of others on us, so the simple fact of knowing that people are watching our every purchase directs us to consume particular commodities. We create our own identities through consumption, which is a concept that needs more attention in relation to Bell Let's Talk Day. For instance, we have to question why we participate in the campaign. Do we jump on the bandwagon because everyone else is sharing the hashtag, and we feel as though we must participate in order to show compassion for mental health illnesses? Or do we want Bell to donate five cents on our behalf (i.e. we feel as though five cents will make a positive change and it makes us feel good about ourselves for participating)?

I believe that brands sell cultural capital to fulfill the project of the self. When we purchase something, we are exchanging our economic capital for cultural capital. Our identity and status are morphed by the goods we consume, because humans have the tendency to "construct and maintain an intelligible social universe through the use of goods by classifying, comparing, [and] ordering the things we have and use [to] make

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sense of and organize our social relations" (Slater, 1997, p. 150). This informational approach to identity-formation is new to modernity, and has been growing since the development of digital technology in our post-traditional society. Social media and online shopping have given the saying, "I shop therefore I am," a whole new meaning (Slater, 1997, p. 38). Slater (1997) states that consumers are constantly attempting to acquire more cultural capital; in fact, "they cannot allow a split between commerce and culture" (p. 205). Ubiquitous advertising makes up our consumer culture, and encourages people to buy products in order to fulfill wants and needs in relation to what personality and demeanour they want to portray.

Branding and commodification are two distinct factors of value. Commodification describes the transformation of tangible things or labour into money. Branding, on the other hand, "is a cultural phenomenon more than an economic strategy" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 4). Banet-Weiser believes that branding is a cultural process, whereas Arvidsson does not. This is a big difference I noticed between the two authors' ideas. In *Brands*, Arvidsson (2006) does not evaluate the cultural phenomenon of branding because he takes capital institutions into account (p. 14). Arvidsson's economic theorization of branding is partially accurate; he is limited in thinking that these economic dimensions of how value is derived are separate from culture.

We, as a society, live our busy lives through brands (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 14). We become self-empowered through ideals that brands demonstrate, whether it be through beauty from buying Dove products, feeling healthy from purchasing a Booster Juice smoothie, or feeling like a mental health advocate on Bell Let's Talk Day. Rather than focusing our time and energy on collective movements, self-branding is becoming

the norm. Self-branding can be defined as the process by which consumers match their self-concept to the products of a particular brand. We concentrate on ourselves as individuals rather than as a whole, and shift our social values accordingly (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Generally, other than direct labour costs, commodification does not acknowledge human labour as an intrinsic value. We do not know of or care about the people who create tangible goods and commodities. In fact, this labour is usually hidden. Conversely, during the process of branding the self, human labour is embraced and celebrated (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 60).

The product of the self is never finished. It is a never-ending, identity-building process that individuals must constantly maintain. Some people see this as permanent labour with no off-time, and a blurring of leisure and work time. Bell Let's Talk Day effectively utilizes the online technologies that feed into this daily narcissism (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 88). By tweeting the hashtag, using a Snapchat filter, or texting via a Bell phone plan, some users feel like they are sincerely making a positive difference one day a year. However, continuous identity-building every day of the year may actually be quite damaging for mental health. Persistently comparing oneself to others, always feeling connected to family, friends, acquaintances, and/or strangers, and technology in and of itself should be further researched in relation to mental health illnesses.

Ambivalence

Like culture, branding is ambivalent (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 14). Brands develop our culture, and "they are often unstable like culture itself" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 215). Conflicting good and bad ideas are often seen as problematic; however, ambivalence has potential to be helpful in research and marketing. Uncertainty and instability are parts of

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life. That is, meanings and representations of "brands, genres, [and] products circulate [and differ] in culture" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 218). Different people have different meanings for the same brands and commodities, because likes and dislikes, tastes, and moods affect the way people perceive the world around them. Although brands are traditionally designed for stability, they are difficult to accurately predict and explain because individuals have varying opinions. No brand has 100% loyalty and positive reviews from every single consumer, which is completely understandable. In the case of Bell Let's Talk Day, there are many progressive and regressive aspects of the campaign. There are likely to be varying degrees of agreement with, and opinions on, Bell's leadership in Canadian mental health. It can be seen as an empowering "starting point for societal change" or a form of exploitation (Banet-Weiser, 2013, p. 40).

There are many pros and cons of such business ventures. Commerce and politics used to be oppositional forces (e.g. civil rights boycotts as an example of organizing against the marketplace for a cause); however, in today's era of marketing we tend to see a combination of the two (Comella, 2013, p. 247). There is value in raising money, because money leads to more education opportunities, and in turn more reach and awareness. Doing good has the potential to "trump profit making" (Comella, 2013, p. 251). I have chosen to relate the concept of ambivalence to my own research. Banet-Weiser (2012) summarizes how companies can be seen as both good and bad perfectly with the following statement: "it is important that contemporary culture be understood as a compromise rather than a dichotomy or a binary" (p. 48).

Case Study: An Analysis of Post Comments

Throughout the development of my small-scale study, I used Comeforo's (2017) article as a *methodological model*. Comeforo used a qualitative content analysis of audience comments that were created on a Facebook post to study audience reactions to an advertisement, and inspired me to do the same. The Red Bull advertisement she studied was entitled "Energize Equality", a post with Red Bull cans formed in the shape of an equal sign; which was controversial. Typically, Red Bull does not have any association with the LGBT community. Essentially, her research involved an audience analysis to answer the research questions: "What are the meanings that commenters make of Red Bull's message? What processing strategies do commenters use to make these meanings? What effects do these meanings have on brand evaluations?" (Comeforo, 2017). In addition to the methodological model, I found the use of Stuart Hall's *theory of audience positions* quite helpful (Comeforo, 2017). To study biopolitics, one must have an understanding of the emotional effects that Bell Let's Talk Day has on its audience members. The *Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)* in Comeforo's article studies how consumers of media are persuaded by the messages they see, and how these messages facilitate a change in purchasing behaviour. In essence, with Comeforo's work as a guide, I have selected a moment in time (one post) and recorded how it is being made sense of by its audience; I analyzed the written comments and categorized them under a specific position (i.e. dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, or oppositional). This approach has given me a concrete example of positive vs. negative reactions to Bell Let's Talk Day and the use of branding to take stances on political and social issues.

As does any other researcher, I hold biases and have a particular standpoint. That is, I am taking a critical perspective on Bell Let's Talk Day. Reid, Greaves, and Kirby (2017) state that "*all* research reflects a point of view, whether it is declared or not" (p. 47). In my work, it should be made clear that I was born and raised in LaSalle, Ontario: a "bubble world" as I like to call it. I was raised by a very privileged, white, middle-class, educated family, and grew up surrounded by families of the same culture, race, class, and ethnicity. I must include this biography in my work because total transparency and reflexivity are extremely important (Reid et al., 2017, p. 17). I should be mindful and honest of the biases I bring to my research, even if I am simply stating whether or not I believe an audience reaction is positive or negative.

In addition, I have to remind myself that I am focusing on Canadian content. I have to be careful to not use terminology such as "everyone" or "society as a whole" because I am studying one country's campaign. I am connecting Bell Let's Talk Day to a broad scope of people; however, I must remember that it is an online social movement to which fortunate people are exposed. When discussing audience reactions, I should make it very clear that the post's audience entailed Facebook users that are privileged enough to have access to a computer, phone, or tablet with internet or data connection. Additionally, perhaps those in Canada most in need of mental health support are not people scrolling on Twitter and Instagram all day. It is imperative to note that homeless people, war veterans, and the elderly (i.e. those who are not traditionally on social media) are affected as well. Mental health illnesses are not limited to social media users. Furthermore, I have to be wary of who in fact commented on Bell Let's Talk's Facebook post. Not only did people who follow Bell Let's Talk's page see and comment on the

post, but friends of people who shared the post would have been able to have access to the post's content as well. The post is public (i.e. not set to private); therefore, it can be shared and seen by more than the 290 000 followers on the campaign's Facebook page (Bell Let's Talk, 2018b).

I have chosen to implement a reaction analysis on one Facebook post's comments for the purpose of studying audience reactions to the campaign itself. The Facebook post I have selected was posted by the Bell Let's Talk page on February 1st, 2018 (i.e. the day after Bell Let's Talk Day in 2018). I chose this post for a variety of reasons. First of all, there are 217 comments on the post, which I believe is a fair sample (Bell Let's Talk, 2018b). Categorizing 217 reactions is not too few nor too many. In addition, the post has approximately 10 000 Facebook reactions – which involves about 7800 likes, and the rest include "love," "haha," "wow," "sad," and "angry" (Bell Let's Talk, 2018b). This means that at least 10 000 people gave the post attention. Furthermore, the post has 6677 shares, meaning that a wide range of people had access to it (Bell Let's Talk, 2018b). The average number of Facebook friends is 338 (Smith, 2017). If we multiply 6677 shares with 338 Facebook friends, we get an astounding 2 256 826 people potentially seeing the post. Obviously, some of these Facebook friends are mutual and some users are not active every day, so the exact number of people would be lower; however, the post had a large enough outreach for my analysis. Lastly, I chose this post because it took place the day after Bell Let's Talk Day. This limited the amount of #BellLetsTalk hashtags, and increased the amount of opinions that were shared.

It is important to note that, understandably, not everyone who saw the picture posted their thoughts and opinions on the campaign. Only 217 people responded to the

Bell Let's Talk post; however, usually people who are very passionate about their opinions (whether they are positive or negative) are willing to share. I want to make sure that I remain ethical throughout my research, and although I have made a conscious decision to study audience reactions on a public domain, I have to be sure to include all of the available comments in my analysis and include direct quotes from Facebook's website. Henceforth, I believe it is ethical to use these comments without consent because Bell Let's Talk Day is an ongoing public discussion. When people post their opinion on Facebook, they should be aware that their content is intentionally broadcasted on a public domain. I want to include a true representation of what the population stated online because my data is the expert in this circumstance – not me.

Documenting a random sample of Facebook users' comments helps to demonstrate the ambivalences present in regards to Bell Let's Talk Day. It is as if multiple people are giving their opinion on the campaign, even though I do not have the time or appropriate resources available to conduct interviews or administer surveys. According to Table 1 (see below), 140 (64.5%) of the 217 comments are validating and celebrating Bell Let's Talk Day. In contrast, only 12 (5.5%) of the comments by users are against its motives. Only 16 (7.4%) of the comments show a mixed reaction to the campaign; specifically, the users question Bell Let's Talk Day and do not accept the entire premise. Combined, approximately 13% of the Facebook users that commented on the post were questioning the underlying motives of the campaign. Lastly, 49 (22.6%) of the comments were categorized as neither a positive, negative, or mixed audience reaction. This category includes friend tags (i.e. Facebook users who simply typed out their friends' names with no additional comments), conversations between friends that

did not give an opinion about the campaign (e.g. "we added a decent amount to this" and "here's the final count"), and other random responses that did not fit under the other three categories (e.g. "RECORD" and "I hope they round up to $7 million").

Type of Audience Reaction	Number of Comments
Positive	140 comments (64.5%)
Negative	12 comments (5.5%)
Mixed	16 comments (7.4%)
Other	49 comments (22.6%)
Total	217 comments

Table 1

Positive Audience Reactions

The following are some examples of positive audience reactions:

- Kevin B.: "Good job Bell, and thanks for what you are doing"
- Sarah B.: "This is an amazing campaign- it means a lot that you do this every year!"
- Tasha C.: "Thank you Canada!!!! Bell Let's Talk has been a wonderful initiative bring to light such a difficult subject to be talked about!! My hope is to see Mental Illness be treated just like another health problem"
- Sonya F.: "Fantastic!!!!! Nicely done #BellLetsTalk participants and excellent cause Bell 💕"
- Trina Loreen F.: "I am so very thankful for Bell and all that you do for mental health. I can't thank you enough."
- Gerrie H.: "Finally Bell will do some good with what I pay to them each month. I am so glad at the response from Bell Let's Talk day! Yes!"
- Nancy M.: "Kudos to Bell for powering this amazing initiative year after year"

- Nina M.: "CANADA ROCKS!!!!! We did it again wth everyone! I have hope for future generations. ❤"

- Joss M.: "This is excellent news. I trust that it will be carefully considered where the money will go. :-)"

- Amy M.: "Awesome!! This year was different-we weren't sure about video views, but our daughter was certain about Snapchat...so we did as many as we could of everything! What a great cause, thank you!!!"

- Lynn N.: "THANK YOU Bell for doing this! What a wonderful initiative to take on!! You should be very very proud."

- Marc V.: "Thank you Bell Canada for this great initiative!"

- Barbara W.: "That is wonderful. We have to keep it going and talk about it people live everyday with mental health and struggle with it ."

Negative Audience Reactions

The following are some examples of negative audience reactions:

- Niki A.: "I love this campaign but Bell is hypocritical because they've been known to run their employees to the ground all for the sake of profits. How many of their employees are on stress leave! Bell if your going to talk the talk then walk the walk."

- Megan B.: "Or, Bell, you could just donate the money. That would be far more impressive than making my friends fill my inbox with repetitive pro-Bell rhetoric."

- Scott B.: "just wondring bell as you made all that money off our lifes how much are you going to put in the pockets of the mules you used to make your work place get all that money you pay your workers to do there job are you going to pay me and the 100000000000000000000s of others a pay check after all you used our lifes as your work place pitch if you pay them they you should pay us we are not free rides for you to use as buisness we are real life people might want to rember that"

- Heather H.: "Now if only that money can translate into lessening wait times for people to get in to see counsellors, doctors, psychiatrists, etc. It's all great to blow

your own horn &say look how much we raised, but that is definitely not enough. I personally know people who need professional help NOW!!! Fix this broken system so more broken people can be helped."

- Mary H.: "HOW MUCH OF THIS GOES TO CEOS"
- Elizabeth H.: "Stigma continues to exist. We have a long way to go."
- Stephanya L.: "My post was marked as SPAM because the power and politics behind the Pharmaciutical industry is able to silence the victims of indiscriminate use and abuse of psychiatric drugging practices. Medical Doctors who have not a clue about how these drugs affect people's brains are playing Russian Roulette with people's lives."
- Thelia M.: "Would also be nice if all our charges for data overages went towards it aswell!"
- Amandine M.: "spam spam spam"
- Lonnie M.: "I bet there's a spike in your revenue for that day. Nice marketing campaign. In 2000 my brother killed himself, the day before Bell Canada cut his phone off for a mere 150.00 late payment. My brother was only 32 years old, had three young children, two of whom are autistic, Bell Canada knew that too. He was using a payphone the day he died, trying to get a hold of anyone but, he didn't, probably because no one recognized the number and didn't answer. Had you goofs not disconnected his phone for a measly 150.00 late payment, he might still be here. Your marketing campaign is a joke at best, more money in your pocket using a hot button social issue. Your company disgusts me for so many reasons, this is just the newest. You can delete this, I imagine you will, that's okay, I have taken screen shots. Here is a photo of him a year or two before he died. Steven William Mowers: June 23 1968 - July 27 2000. Rest in everlasting Peace. Post Script: The day after he died, he received in the mail 2500.00 in cheques that he told your representative he was waiting for."
- Mike S.: "Let's see them give their own employees proper treatment instead of forcing them into stress leave by pushing aggressive sales tactics on them."
- Shami S.: "I am wondering when the Canadian government will start covering psychologists visits? I am paying $340 to $460 every week."

Ambivalences within the Comments

The following are some examples of mixed audience reactions:

- Patti D.: "Can you please direct me to a list of past year recipients of the donations targeted to fund mental health related programs and initiatives? Looking to see names of specific organizations, programs and initiatives funded with these dollars."

- Alicia F.: "Now hopefully ALL of that goes toward mental health & NOT into administration's pockets!"

- Terry F.: "Let's Talk was such a wonderful initiative when it started. It's so sad that it deteriorated into an ad campaign that encouraged people to spam their friends list with unwanted personal messages. I will continue to acknowledge the need for compassion regarding mental wellness but now it is in spite of Bell... not because of them"

- Gayle H.: "Let's hope all this money is used in ALL the right places n for ALL the people who deserves it !!!! Amen !!!"

- Noreen H.: "My only hope is that corporate greed doesn't get this money and is actually put into these mental health initiative. 🙏"

- Amy M.: "Now, can we make sure that part of these funds go to Maternal Mental health as well as Child and Youth Mental Health please"

- Shannin M.: "It should be distributed within schools. Schools are lacking mental health programs. #stopthecrisis"

- Tricia M.: "With this much funding..... How much longer of a wait for people, to actually get the help they need?? Please do the right thing, and not make this about "BELL" however, for the people!..... Corporate greed unfortunately will get most of the profits then Mental Health fundings..... COMPASSION, we ALL need some....."

- Susan M.: "Raising awareness and funding programs are wonderful initiatives. This is a very complicated issue, however, and sometimes, intensely private. Everyone's journey is different and it is a monumental task to try and provide answers for individuals; especially ones with complex needs. I have seen so many

posts from people who think, or actually believe, that they have the answer. Just "do what I do" or "think the way I think". That is where the judgment and stigma play such a huge role. So many people have said to me that "we'll get together", or "I'll let you know when I'm in town", but the follow-through is what is lacking. I used to have many gatherings but stopped when I realized no one ever reciprocated. It can take a toll on self-esteem and whether or not one feels empowered when people back away. There are many stages and phases of coping with mental illness and there can be a lot of interplay between symptoms, triggers and coping. What I believe is a universal approach is to always act with patience and respect - toward everyone. If you don't see it, you might just have to walk away."

- Paul R.: "And it shouldn't stop here, keep the conversation going. This is an everyday problem, not just one day. Let's keep up the awareness and the help. 😬"

- Dale T.: "Although this initiative is great for allowing people to feel able to talk about their mental health issues, there is still a long way to go before they are accepted.

  Sometimes I feel that maybe this type of initiative has gone a little too far, meaning people are now looking at the ones suffering from mental health issues and seeing that they are strong enough to talk about it, so they assume that they are also strong enough to deal with it, and don't need help. Maybe a new focus should be directed towards the "healthy" people, to remind them that just because someone may appear strong, they still need your help. Stop with the "call me if you need anything" as many will not make that call. Pick up your phone and call or text then once in awhile. Don't ask them if they would like company, just show up and visit. People have to understand and remember, that those of us that have suffered for a long time, still feel inferior, and a times useless to society, and the act of asking for help, just makes those feelings so much stronger."

Conclusion

In summary, the Bell Let's Talk campaign makes people feel socially responsible to make mental health a less taboo topic, while at the same time promoting Bell's positive reputation and mindlessly endorsing its services via basically "free publicity and increased sales" (Stole, 2008, p. 29). In other words, Bell Let's Talk Day gives citizens an opportunity to feel inclusive and responsible by tweeting the hashtag #BellLetsTalk to show support. There are similar trends with Bell Let's Talk as Kuehn finds with product RED, King finds with breast cancer, etc. Similar to these initiatives, Bell Let's Talk Day encourages the formation of personal connections and the sharing of stories to make mental health illnesses more understood and accepted by society. A new wave of hope for freedom from judgment is created through Bell Let's Talk Day. Nevertheless, the purpose of this paper is to analyze both the importance and controversy surrounding the commodification of the Bell Let's Talk campaign. Looks can be quite deceiving, and "most cause-related campaigns tend to highlight the cause and downplay the business objective… [that is,] the true nature of business's contribution is not [always] explained to the public" (Stole, 2008, p. 29). In my opinion, one of the reasons as to why Bell Let's Talk Day has yet to be challenged is simply the fact that academics are afraid to question the campaign with the fear that they will seem unsympathetic to mental health initiatives if they challenge Bell Let's Talk Day's motives.

My secondary research question: "Considering both the progressive and regressive aspects of the campaign, how does Bell Let's Talk exemplify the ambivalences of twenty-first century brand culture?" can be unpacked via the Facebook comments cited above in relation to my earlier literature review.

Firstly, many of the positive audience reactions involve users thanking Bell for Bell Let's Talk Day. Those Facebook users believe in the power of the collective, and hold the mindset that Bell Let's Talk has the ability to make a positive social change. As stated in my literature review, collaboration is formed on Bell Let's Talk Day, giving people the opportunity to speak out about their concerns with the way society is functioning. As Foucault (2007) believes, human behaviour and ideas can be altered over time. Just as standards in health care and education have dramatically changed, the stigma surrounding mental health has the ability to alter.

As Miller (2013) mentions, mental health illnesses are taking over hospital settings because people do not have anywhere else to go and are unware of their support options. However, Bell Let's Talk is a digital space that attempts to bridge this gap (Campbell, 2017). The Facebook comment: "CANADA ROCKS!!!!! We did it again w[i]th everyone! I have hope for future generations." brings light to this subject (Bell Let's Talk, 2018b). Nina M. is one of many Facebook users who believe that with continuous support in this endeavor, Bell has the potential to "lead by example in workplace mental health" ("Bell Let's Talk", 2018a).

Secondly, negative audience reactions support the idea that Bell has ulterior motives. Remarks such as "spam spam spam" and "nice marketing campaign" show a connection to Jhally's (2013) work (Bell Let's Talk, 2018b). Jhally suggests that audiences have the right to give both positive and negative feedback on the media messages they are consuming; this campaign is no different. It is important to note that mental health is a very complex issue. As one comment suggests: "There are many stages and phases of coping with mental illness and there can be a lot of interplay between

symptoms, triggers and coping" (Bell Let's Talk, 2018b). There is not just one way of approaching and tackling the negative stigma of mental health.

The ambivalent comments noted above show that contemporary brand culture often leaves us feeling contradictory. Many of the ambivalent comments involve questioning where the funds are going and suggestions for where the money should be donated. For example, two comments state that the funds "should be distributed within schools. Schools are lacking mental health programs. #stopthecrisis" and should "…go to Maternal Mental health as well as Child and Youth Mental Health please" (Bell Let's Talk, 2018b). Perhaps there are larger social problems taking place; it seems as though schools and hospitals are lacking funds with regards to mental health education and resources. King (2013) agrees that broader structural changes are needed to implement social justice. Rather than raising more funds, we should focus on what the current funds are being allocated to. Comments such as "Now if only that money can translate into lessening wait times for people to get in to see counsellors, doctors, psychiatrists, etc… Fix this broken system so more broken people can be helped" and "I am wondering when the Canadian government will start covering psychologists visits? I am paying $340 to $460 every week." suggest that structural changes need more attention in society (Bell Let's Talk, 2018b).

In conclusion, when brands intersect with social issues under neoliberalism, the situation is complex. It is never black and white; there is always good and bad, and hence ambivalence. The ambivalence of Bell Let's Talk is the result of broader social forces and the state of society and culture, such as corporations becoming leaders for social causes. This 'always good and bad' dichotomy is a standard part of life when brands

become advocates for important social issues, and when we use private for-profit communication platforms to discuss these issues collectively. Ambivalence is unavoidable with so many blurred lines between the marketplace and society, consumers and citizens, commerce and culture, the individual and the collective, and profits and politics under the overarching umbrella of neoliberalism.

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