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Cherry Red Greenwashing: The Rhetoric Behind

Corporate Recycling Narratives

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ABSTRACT

Cherry Red Greenwashing: The Rhetoric Behind
Corporate Recycling Narratives

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As the public becomes more aware of environmental issues, corporations are pressed to consider and address the sustainability of their practices. Unwilling to drastically change business models, many corporations turn to greenwashing in an attempt to construct an environmentally friendly image while doing little to nothing to address sustainability issues. Using Kenneth Burke's work on identification and terministic screens, I analyze The Coca-Cola Company's "2020 World Without Waste Report" to illuminate how consumers come to believe in and identify with corporate greenwashing tactics. In line with Burke's theories related to identification, I argue that Coca-Cola's greenwashing strategies can be categorized into three main tactics: establishing common ground, creating antithesis against a shared enemy, and subtly invoking a sense of transcendence. Through my analysis, I also expand Burke's notion of transcendence and propose that established ethos and intertextuality can foster identification. By understanding how these rhetorical strategies operate within corporate texts, consumers can be more aware of greenwashing and hold corporations more accountable.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

In January 2018, The Coca-Cola Company launched its recycling initiative: World Without Waste. Acknowledging the world's waste crisis, the company unveiled their "ambitious" environmental program with the hopes of, as the initiative's name suggests, creating a world without packaging waste. This program is founded on the promise that Coca-Cola will collect and recycle a bottle or can for each one they sell by 2030. In addition, the company pledged to make their packaging 100% recyclable by 2025 and to use 50% recycled material in their bottles and cans by 2030. While these promises may seem revolutionary, there are strong indications that World Without Waste may simply be the latest iteration of the beverage giant's greenwashing tactics. Simply put, the term *greenwashing* refers to hypocrisy within corporate rhetoric. According to one definition, the discursive practice of greenwashing occurs when corporations "spend more time and money advertising that they are green than on actually putting into place environmentally friendly practices" (Orange 30). Though Coca-Cola may advertise their concern for environmental sustainability, their long history with anti-litter and recycling campaigns suggests the concern is disingenuous.

In 1953, Coca-Cola was involved in the founding and funding of Keep America Beautiful (KAB) along with more than twenty corporations and industry peers, including The American Can Company, PepsiCo, The Dixie Cup Company, and McDonald's. After the beverage industry switched from refillable glass bottles to throw-away aluminum cans, the American public grew concerned about the rapid increase in litter. Heather Rogers observes that the first effort to restrict single-use packaging came from dairy farmers, whose crops and cows were negatively impacted by the litter (141). The beverage industry responded with the Keep America Beautiful campaign and various lobbying efforts. As Bartow J. Elmore suggests, "KAB's central objective

was to deflect accusations that corporations were to blame for the country's growing litter problem" (234). Because the American public grew more concerned about environmental issues, Coca-Cola and its competitors had to act concerned as well.[1] Rogers notes, however, that despite campaigns like Keep America Beautiful, single-use packaging was the fastest growing type of solid waste by the mid-1970s (134). Unsurprisingly, during the late 2010s and early 2020s, Coca-Cola has mirrored the current generation's concern for environmental issues with another recycling campaign. The company's new campaign, World Without Waste, is rooted in the same underlying goal of deflecting responsibility away from Coca-Cola and its irresponsible use of single-use plastic packaging.

Instead of considering the ramifications of billions of plastic bottles that are consumed each week, greenwashed recycling narratives allow both corporations and consumers to rid themselves of environmental guilt. Brian Russell Roberts argues that campaigns like Keep America Beautiful merely exist to increase the "use of plastic packaging while assuaging customers' discomfort with single-use packaging" (234). In identifying with the greenwashed recycling narratives, consumers may perhaps even feel as though they are benefiting the environment when the opposite is true. This contradiction is the corporate payoff for greenwashing; the consumers buy into the eco-friendly narrative and continue to buy the company's products. Stacy Thompson likewise argues that greenwashing convinces consumers to make themselves busy "micro-ethically" through actions like recycling without having to consider the more systemic issues such as neo-liberalism and over-production (901). Pausing to deconstruct greenwashed narratives exposes tensions that are still inherent within many corporate sustainability initiatives, such as World Without Waste. Exposing these tensions

allows consumers to identify the larger, more systemic issues and hold corporations accountable for unsustainable business practices.

Over the last few decades, many scholars have analyzed corporate greenwashing tactics, particularly in fields related to business and law.[2] Some rhetorical scholars have also examined greenwashing in the context of corporate social responsibility and rhetorical theories.[3] Generally, such rhetorical analyses focus on company ethos and consumer trust, concluding that corporations ought to be more conscious of their social responsibility and malleable ethos. Building off these previous observations, I add to this conversation by analyzing greenwashed discourse through the lens of Kenneth Burke's theories on identification and terministic screens. Using Burke's cluster criticism as my methodology, I illuminate how consumers come to believe in and identify with corporate greenwashing tactics. To better understand how recycling initiatives shape public perceptions of single-use plastic and to examine the inherent tension that exists within greenwashed recycling narratives, I focus my analysis here on The Coca-Cola Company's "2020 World Without Waste Report." Before detailing my analysis, I first provide a brief overview of plastic to contextualize the problems surrounding plastic recycling. I then detail my methodology and go on to present my analysis of the sustainability report, focusing on the implications of Coca-Cola's rhetorical strategies.

In line with Burke's work on identification, I argue that the company's greenwashing strategies can be categorized into three main tactics: establishing common ground, creating antithesis against a shared enemy, and subtly invoking a sense of transcendence. These three strategies help divert readers' attention away from problematic aspects of the corporation's production chain as well as the unsustainability of the company's proposed solutions. Ultimately, my analysis shows that transcendence can occur in more ways than Burke originally proposed,

and I illustrate that intertextuality and ethos can also be tools for fostering identification. In general, being aware of these rhetorical strategies can help consumers identify a corporation's underlying motives.

Plastic Predicaments: A Brief History

Because it is cheap and easy to produce, plastic has become ubiquitous in almost every industry. Plastic has, as Maurizia Boscagli observes, become "the matter of modernity" (137). Plastic production reached industrial scale during the 1940s and has since made its way into every aspect of human existence. As Caren Irr and Nayoung Kim observe, "The work, play, medicine, sanitation, and sensations of modernity are literally wrapped up in plastic" (3). Plastic resides at the core of human existence: our foods come packaged in plastic, our beverages are often contained in plastic, our homes are insulated with plastic, and our clothes are woven with fibrous plastic. With plastic over-production and greenwashing strategies in force, most consumers hardly pay attention to society's over-reliance on plastic.[4] That lack of attention has evolved into the world's current waste crisis.

Though there are still many unknowns regarding the long-term effects of plastic, many geological and biological effects have already been documented. According to Irr and Kim, at least 8.3 billion metric tons of plastic have been created since 1950, and more than 60% of that plastic has made its way into aquatic ecosystems and landfills (2-3).[5] Scientists now estimate that plastic pollution affects every marine, freshwater, terrestrial, and atmospheric ecosystem globally (Borelle et al. 1515; Santos et al. 56). Santos and colleagues report that at least 1,565 documented species have ingested plastic, impacting all levels of the food web—from filter feeders to apex predators. It also affects various species around the world, including fish, insects, birds, and mammals, which ultimately results in population decline and risks population viability

(Santos et al. 59). Additionally, plastic deteriorates (but does not fully decompose) into microplastics, which can create changes in carbon and nutrient cycles, change soil properties long-term, and lead to adverse side effects when ingested (McLeod et al. 64). Within any environment, plastic is projected to take hundreds to thousands of years to degrade, depending on its chemical composition. However, as Max Liboiron points out, there is no way for scientists to accurately predict the length or effects of plastic breakdown because it has not existed for that long (17). Despite the relative newness of plastic, many deleterious effects have already been recorded. For instance, McLeod and colleagues note that ingested plastics can lead to issues related to particle and chemical toxicity, physical injury, changes in physiology, and impaired feeding, growth, reproduction, and oxygen consumption rates (65). These effects were initially observed in wildlife species, but scientists are now observing many of the same negative effects in humans. The National Institute of Environmental Sciences (NIEHS) explain that BPA and phthalates (chemicals that are often used in plastics) can disrupt the endocrine system and lead to developmental, reproductive, brain, and immune issues among others. The more problematic aspect of these plastic chemicals is that humans are exposed to them through a myriad of everyday products: food packaging, cosmetics, children's toys, detergents, pesticides, etc. (NIEHS). Plastic, and its toxic chemicals, have seeped into every aspect of existence.

Despite knowing many deleterious effects that come from plastic use, many industries continue to perpetuate the use of and reliance on plastic, arguing that most of these effects can be remedied by recycling. However, there are many practical and geological factors that make plastic recycling a non-viable solution. For one, Keep America Beautiful and similar campaigns have promoted anti-litter and recycling narratives for sixty-eight years. Though most Americans have been well-educated on the need to curb litter and plastic waste, 90% of plastics still go

unrecycled (Irr & Kim 1). Even in an ideal scenario where everyone always recycles, most plastics can only be recycled twice (Sedaghat). Then, it is practically straight to the landfill. That being said, many consumers have reason to wonder if the materials they recycle even end up at a recycling facility. Investigative journalists have discovered that some recycling programs simply take recycled contents to a landfill along with garbage waste, fully negating the purpose of recycling (CBC/Radio-Canada). Additionally, recycling is not an option in remote areas where plastic tends to accumulate, including remote ocean surfaces and coastlines, water columns in oceans and lakes, deep seas, and many municipalities around the world (McLeod 61). Even in aquatic areas that are more accessible, Borrelle and colleagues estimate that without major technological innovations, it is impossible to reclaim even 10% of the world's annual plastic pollution (1517). Liboiron gets closer to the heart of the recycling issue: "You can't 'clean up' plastics because they exist in geological time, and cleaning them just shuffles them in space as they endure in time" (17). The world produces 367 million metric tons of plastic per year (PlasticsEurope). Simply reshuffling that much plastic around will not eliminate the issue. Coca-Cola and other packaging-based companies have relied on greenwashing as a means of obfuscating their work to reshuffle—rather than to meaningfully address—the problem of plastic.

Public awareness surrounding the issue of plastic pollution has increased; however, plastic production continues to grow, and there is still much debate about how to solve the issue.[6] Borrelle and colleagues note that there are three main solutions for plastic pollution: reducing waste generation, improving waste management, and recovering plastics from the environment. The authors further observe that stakeholders (such as corporations) often advocate for only one solution when, in reality, we need to enact all three solutions simultaneously to make the drastic

changes that are necessary (1516). Companies who are largely dependent upon the production of single-use plastics primarily advocate for recovery solutions that take the shape of recycling initiatives. For instance, The Coca-Cola Company, who receives its bottles from third-party bottling companies, is one of the largest users of plastic worldwide (Garside 30). Additionally, despite the company's self-proclaimed devotion to sustainability, the Break Free from Plastic movement recently identified Coca-Cola as the world's worst plastic polluter for the fourth year in a row. Eliminating—or even significantly reducing—the production of plastic bottles would effectively divert plastic waste from landfills, waterways, and incinerators; however, the company is unwilling to part with the convenience and profitability of their plastic bottles. Coca-Cola and their industry peers instead push for ineffectual recycling solutions that they promote with greenwashing tactics.

Methodology: Cluster Criticism

Cluster analysis is based on the theoretical work of Kenneth Burke. He establishes this methodological framework in several publications, including *Attitudes Toward History* and *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. Setting the groundwork for this theory, Burke posits, "Now, the work of every writer contains a set of implicit equations. He [*sic*] uses 'associational clusters.' And you may, by examining his work, find 'what goes with what' in these clusters—what kinds of acts and images and personalities and situations go with his notions of heroism, villainy, consolation, despair, etc." (*Philosophy* 20). Simply put, Burke believes that the way terms are used in relation to each other reveals a rhetor's worldview on any given subject. Speaking to the importance of key terms and their functions, Hilary A. Sarat-St. Peter observes, "Key terms serve various functions in rhetorical artifacts: They function as lenses or 'terministic screens' that name and define situations, create identification of a 'common ground' of shared vocabulary,

and motivate or 'command' audiences to align their actions with the terms chosen by the rhetorician" (515). Two concepts Sarat-St. Peter isolates here are significant—terministic screens and identification.

In his 1966 publication, *Language as Symbolic Action*, Kenneth Burke develops his notion of terministic screens. In short, Burke recognizes that the terminology a rhetor chooses reveals a lot about their worldview and perceptions on any given subject. Burke explains, "Any nomenclature necessarily directs the attention into some channels rather than others" (*Language* 45). He further develops this theory by likening terminology to photographic filters. Though a set of photographs may capture the exact same image, different color filters reveal slightly different features of that object (45). This metaphor is relevant to language and the connotations that follow any selected terms. Thus, Burke asserts, "Even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality" (45). In other words, when communicating, a rhetor selects one term over other potential terms, which gives insight into their underlying motivations. Even if this selection and avoidance is done unconsciously, what goes unsaid is just as important as what is said. According to Burke, humans cannot escape terministic screens because all terms "necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen" that directs attention (50). Further, Burke believes that there are two types of terministic screens—terms that unify and terms that separate. He posits, "A can feel himself identified with B, or he can think of himself as disassociated from B" (49). In other words, Burke is arguing that in directing attention, terministic screens can lead an audience member to identify with a rhetor and their message or not.

Thus, identification is the goal of terministic screens because it enables cooperation. In establishing his work on identification, Burke quotes W.C. Blum, who contends, "In

identification lies the source of dedications and enslavements, in fact of cooperation" (*Rhetoric* xiv). This idea of cooperation—or this process of becoming consubstantial, as Burke would say—is at the heart of identification. Burke himself observes, "A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B. Or he may identify himself with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so" (*Rhetoric* 20). Here, Burke is arguing that to persuade an audience, a rhetor must first build a connection and help their audience to feel as though their interests are aligned, which often operates on an unconscious level. The building blocks of these connections are terministic screens. In order for an audience member to align themselves with a rhetor, they must resonate with the various terms and connotations that are inherent within the message. Gregory Clark expands Burke's notion of identification as he applies the theory to jazz performance and aesthetic experience. Clark asserts, "Burke's point about rhetoric is that to be persuaded we must be able to identify ourselves with the persuader, to recognize in that identification some commonality of beliefs, values, or purposes. Such recognition binds people together" (8). As Clark illustrates with his analysis of identification in jazz music, this binding process can occur in many rhetorical forms.

Though not as recent as Clark's, George Cheney's work on identification is also important to my analytical schema. Interested in Burke's theories, Cheney elaborates the practical dimensions of Burke's three proposed strategies about how to foster identification. Cheney was primarily interested in analyzing how employees become integrated into an organization's work culture. However, the strategies are relevant to a wide range of contexts. In line with Burke, Cheney argues that identification can be established in three ways: establishing common ground, placing emphasis on antithesis, and creating transcendence. Common ground

9

refers to the process of forming identification through shared interests or values. When using this technique, Cheney explains, a "rhetor equates or links himself or herself with others in an overt manner" (148). In other words, a rhetor will employ specific terms and phrases that relate to their audience's core values or identities. These carefully chosen words are what help audience members to feel consubstantial with the rhetor. Similarly, antithesis makes two parties consubstantial; however, this strategy focuses on uniting against a shared enemy. Cheney explains that a rhetor will "emphasize threats from 'outsiders'" and "implicitly stress identification with 'insiders'" to help foster cohesion and consubstantiality between themselves and the audience (148). Finally, transcendence unites parties, which are otherwise different, through subtle uses of unifying terms (e.g., *we* and *our*). Cheney notes that this strategy "often goes unnoticed as an appeal to identification between parties who may have little in common" (148-49). James P. Zappen expounded on the notion of transcendence more recently, adding that transcendence depends upon "the abstractive and transformative power of language" as well as "the power of poetic imagination" (291). Each of these three strategies that foster identification—establishing common ground, antithesis, and transcendence—are dependent upon terministic screens which then create the groundwork for audiences to identify with a rhetor and their message or not. The relevance of Burke's foundational theories is evident within corporate recycling initiatives like The Coca-Cola Company's World Without Waste campaign.

To conduct my analysis, I followed the three steps that Sonja K. Foss outlines for cluster analysis. I first isolated the key terms by identifying the phrases that appear most frequently and with the most intensity. To evaluate intensity, I paid attention to terms that were most closely associated with the three promises and goals that Coca-Cola outlined, both for the World Without Waste campaign and this individual report. Though many terms were both recurrent and

significant throughout the report, I narrowed my scope to four terms that are most related to the World Without Waste goals: *plastic, recycle, refillable*, and *partnership.* To determine the exact frequency of key themes and cluster terms (including their close derivatives), I used the search function within my PDF reader and searched for each individual term. For the second step, charting cluster terms, I first copy-and-pasted every sentence that contained one of the key terms and organized them into a spreadsheet. Isolating the terms in this way helped me to quickly identify themes and phrases that were commonly clustered around the four key terms. Finally, I performed my close textual analysis, noting various relationships within a cluster and paying attention to the details that Coca-Cola chose to include and exclude. My approach to textual analysis was largely inspired by Critical Discourse Analysis and one of its main proponents, Thomas N. Huckin, who explains various strategies that can be used to analyze a text (e.g., analyzing framing, foregrounding, backgrounding, presupposition, and agent-patient relations). To more effectively examine the relationship between key terms and their clusters, I printed out the report and highlighted every usage of key and cluster terms. I used a different color to highlight each key term and underlined cluster terms in the color that corresponded with its key term. Highlighting a physical copy of the report allowed me to visualize the relationship between various key terms and clusters and to better understand how various themes built upon or were secluded from others. Because cluster analysis evaluates a text both quantitatively and qualitatively, I was able to examine multiple layers of this report that reveal Coca-Cola's worldviews and rhetorical motives.

Analysis

Since World Without Waste was created in 2018, The Coca-Cola Company has released a sustainability report each year to follow up with their progress. My analysis focuses on the

most recent report, which discloses the company's progress throughout the year 2020. In their 2020 report, Coca-Cola reaffirms the three promises upon which World Without Waste was built: to collect and recycle a bottle or can for each one they sell by 2030, to make 100% of their packaging recyclable by 2025, and to use 50% recycled material in their bottles and cans by 2030. These promises orient consumers to Coca-Cola's recycling-heavy framework. As such, much of the language in the report revolves around themes related to designing recyclable packaging, collecting and recycling PET plastic, and partnering with organizations who support clean-up or recycling solutions.[7] To examine Coca-Cola's conceptual vocabulary and their rhetorical worldview, I have turned to cluster analysis for my methodological approach.

Because much of the rhetorical situation surrounding this report is ambiguous (e.g., there is no specified audience and thus no way to measure impact), I apply cluster criticism, which primarily focuses on understanding the worldview of a rhetor. Though many elements of the rhetorical situation are unknown, the rhetor's purpose and their message's intended effect can still be analyzed. In the case of Coca-Cola, I am interested in how a major contributor in the plastic waste crisis can rationalize its continual presence in the plastic production chain. The authors frame the report with the following statement, "We have a responsibility to help solve the global plastic waste crisis. That's why, in 2018, we launched World Without Waste—an ambitious, sustainable packaging initiative that is creating systemic change by driving a circular economy for our bottles and cans" (2). In other words, the purpose of this report is to further circulate Coca-Cola's recycling narrative in an effort to assure the public that the company is addressing this global waste crisis. I selected this artifact because it is presented as a holistic, transparent overview of Coca-Cola's environmental sustainability, and it allows me to analyze a much larger body of text (compared to what video or print advertisements could offer).

Coca-Cola's 2020 sustainability report was published in June 2021 and is similar to a

corporate Environmental, Social, and Corporate Governance (ESG) report. This genre is

typically centered around information and data related to corporate responsibility and impact,

though reports may differ among companies based on what categories they choose to emphasize.

Simply put, ESG reports are meant to create transparency between corporations and their

investors (Balzotti; Sphera). While many rhetorical artifacts can be attributed to specific speakers

or authors, corporate documents are often unique in that specific authors or contributors are not

named, as is the case with Coca-Cola's report. This anonymity allows corporate writers and

corporate administrators to hide behind the corporation's identity and avoid legal responsibility.

Deborah Brandt explains this notion further: "According to the Supreme Court, people do not

really write at work as citizens or free beings but rather as willingly enlisted corporate voices. . . .

They are not individually responsible for what they are paid to say. Consequently, they don't

really mean what they say" (20). As is the case with Coca-Cola's report, readers cannot ascertain

whether a good-faith rhetor is addressing them or not. Additionally, though the authors of the

report do not explicitly identify their target audience, it is likely—based on the genre—that they

are targeting stakeholders (e.g., shareholders, suppliers, business partners, consumers, etc.).

Though the company may share this document with primary investors directly, a more public

audience will not encounter the report unless they search for it on Coca-Cola's website. One clue

about intended audience is the document's design. Unlike many genres of technical reporting,

Coca-Cola's sustainability report is visually well-designed. Each of the twenty-eight pages in the

report features brand-appropriate colors, modern typography and design, plenty of white space,

and multiple images and figures. These visual components suggest that the report is intended for

a more general audience as a PR strategy as it does not require field-specific knowledge or close

reading. To help with navigability and ease of reading, the report is organized into six sections: Introduction, Design, Collect, Partner, What's Next, and Assurance Statement.

I focus my attention here on four terms and their clusters that frequently appear throughout the report's six sections. Three of the terms appear in all six sections: *plastic, recycle,* and *partnership*. The fourth term, *refillable*, appears in five of the six sections. I argue that each of these clusters acts as a terministic screen, attempting to direct consumers' attention towards and away from various worldviews. Additionally, each cluster reveals subtle tactics that Coca-Cola uses to gain consumer confidence in their proposed solutions for eliminating plastic pollution. Ultimately, these identification strategies also undercut the supposed viability of plastic recycling. Throughout the remainder of this section, I will analyze the key terms in the following order: *plastic*, *recycle*, *refillable*, and *partnership*.

Plastic

Because Coca-Cola's purpose in the report is to respond to growing concerns about plastic waste, it is unsurprising that *plastic* is one of the central terms. Additionally, since the corporation is seeking to distance themselves from the problematic nature of plastic waste, it is important to observe how the authors employ this term as part of the company's greenwashed narrative. The key term *plastic(s)* is used 110 times throughout the World Without Waste report. Though it may seem counter-intuitive for the authors to focus on the term *plastic* if the company is trying to detract attention from its contribution to the plastic waste crisis, the overall message of the report still feels rooted in sustainability and solutions during a casual read-through. It is interesting to note, however, that the authors also employ the terms *PET* (polyethylene terephthalate) and *rPET* (recycled polyethylene terephthalate) 81 times throughout the report. As types of plastic, *PET* and *rPET* are used synonymously with the key word—upping the total

reference to plastics to 191 usages. Additionally, *PET* shifts the implications of the term *plastic*. Coca-Cola is in a predicament with this report: they must denounce plastic because of its status as a pollutant, but they must also find a way to portray plastic in a positive light so they can continue to commodify it. As a solution, the authors employ what theorists like Burke and Richard Weaver conceptualize as "ultimate terms," which are often characterized as either "god terms" or "devil terms." For Coca-Cola, *plastic* becomes a "devil term" in this report, which the authors use in relation to *pollution*, *waste*, *reduction*, and *low value.* As Weaver explains, a "devil term" is a "term of revulsion" that evokes negative feelings for most readers (222). On the other hand, *PET* is used as a "god term," which the authors positively use in relation to Coca-Cola's *packaging*, *usage*, and *high value*. In contrast with devil terms, Weaver suggests that "god terms" are words that invoke a sense of superiority or power and convey positive meaning to the intended audience (212). By implicating strong emotions related to high and low market values, Coca-Cola begins to unfold their profit-driven agenda while still enrolling readers into the greenwashed narrative. The authors foster this identification by appealing to a sense of common values and ideals by using ultimate terms. Additionally, despite the fact that PET is plastic, the authors successfully separate the two terms and construct different realities around them. This tension between high and low value is recurrent throughout the report.

Though Coca-Cola claims that its focus is environmentally sustainable solutions, terms that cluster around the term *plastic* reveal that the company is more interested in profit than environment. The tension between profit and sustainability can be seen in the plastic hierarchy Coca-Cola creates. The authors posit, "There are different types of plastics. Some have high value and can easily be part of the circular economy. Others are hard to recycle and have little value. PET bottles are the preeminent high-value plastic; when recovered, they are the most

widely recyclable plastic in the world and can be recycled to make new beverage bottles" (15).

Here, Coca-Cola sets up a hierarchy to establish identification through antithesis. Whereas other, ambiguous, hard-to-recycle types of plastic are allegedly a detriment to the environment, the PET plastic for which Coca-Cola advocates is supposedly valuable and beneficial. Later in the report, the authors similarly suggest, "Balancing the value of PET against other, lower-value plastics is important for a successful recycling system. We are thinking expansively to include other types of plastic in the recycling infrastructure but believe that companies using lower-value materials need to play a bigger role in financing the collection and recycling of their packaging" (15). Here, the authors reinforce the value hierarchy they set up: Coca-Cola's high-value PET plastic versus other companies' low-value plastic. The term *plastic* is similarly associated with value-related themes over forty times throughout the report. In effect, they also establish a hierarchy between good and bad companies, obviously categorizing themselves as the former. Though it seems fair for Coca-Cola to argue for plastics that could be recycled several times in a circular economy, current recycling rates show that 90% of plastics go unrecycled regardless of how many times they *can* be recycled. The corporation, as is the case with the beverage industry at large, then places blame on individual consumers for not recycling instead of acknowledging the underlying issue of over-production and accepting responsibility (Rogers 143-44). Additionally, the authors' assertion is ironic considering that Coca-Cola's plastic packaging is not 100% recyclable. Even Coca-Cola's recyclable PET can only be recycled up to seven times (according to the company's own generous estimates) before it devolves into a low-value plastic which they disparage other companies for using (15). The authors divert attention away from these realities and force readers into a false dichotomy: consumers can align themselves with the supposedly good and virtuous Coca-Cola or they can support other careless companies who are

anti-environment. By establishing these hierarchies, Coca-Cola sets up an opportunity for readers to identify and cooperate with the company against a shared enemy.

Like the value hierarchy, Coca-Cola attempts to create antithesis surrounding the term *plastic* to explain their lack of progress in using 100% recycled materials in their bottles. The authors again ask consumers to find solidarity with the company—this time arguing that external entities and factors have hindered its progress. For instance, the authors claim, "Currently, there is not enough food-grade recycled plastic available to eliminate all virgin plastic in our packaging, and in some markets, we are not currently authorized to use recycled PET" (6). In this passage, the authors make two excuses to account for why they are not already using 100% recycled materials. Both excuses are placed on ambiguous enemies—general lack of food-grade plastic and unspecified regulations. This tactic encourages readers to identify with the corporation. However, on deeper levels, it exposes tensions within greenwashed narratives which promote recycling as the cure-all solution. Though there are billions of metric tons of plastic pollution in the environment, the authors claim there is supposedly still not enough plastic that is up to regulatory standards. Though this claim may be true, this argument implies that corporations must continue to produce more plastic—at the risk of even more pollution—to create a circular economy where plastic bottles are made of recycled plastic. Additionally, though Coca-Cola seems to argue against governmental regulation here, it is important to note that a regulation like this would be put into place to stop the use of materials that a government has deemed hazardous to consumer health. Coca-Cola currently operates in more than 200 countries and territories throughout the world, and more than 25% of their markets do not authorize the use of rPET (recycled PET plastic) (6). Though the company is blaming ambiguous

governments for its lack of progress, this admission perhaps reveals a stronger argument for increased regulation when it comes to plastic production.

Recycle

The term *recycle*, along with its derivatives, is the most frequently used term in Coca-Cola's sustainability report (aside from articles and prepositions). Despite its frequency, this term does not offer much depth when it comes to justifying Coca-Cola's reliance on recycling as a solution. The term *recycle* (along with its derivatives: *recycled, recycling, recycler,* and *recyclability*) is used 153 times throughout the report. The term is most often used as an adjective (93 uses), though it also appears as a verb (37 uses), a noun (18 uses), and as part of organizations' names (5 uses). As an adjective, the terms *recycled* and *recyclable* do not add much depth to the notion of recycling. These usages simply modify nouns and stand as a constant reminder of Coca-Cola's proposed solution. For example, *recycled* is most commonly used to modify the terms *content, PET,* and *materials*, as is seen in the following sentence: "Globally, we have set a target of 50% recycled content by 2030 and are going further, faster, where and when we can" (5). Though the term is used as an adjective in this sentence, the emphasis is largely on the subject of the sentence—Coca-Cola and its progress. This pattern is common throughout the report. Recycling is the core of the World Without Waste initiative, and the term *recycle* is the most frequently used term throughout the report. However, while the frequency does perhaps remind readers of this proposed solution, when reading the report more carefully, recycling feels somewhat removed from the identity of Coca-Cola because of its fluffier, adjectival usages.

Upon closer evaluation of this key term and its clusters, it becomes clearer that the frequency of the term *recycle* merely obscures Coca-Cola's lack of real effort to actively

participate in the core solutions upon which World Without Waste was built. As a verb, the term

is most often constructed in passive voice (23 of 37 usages), as seen in the following example:

"Without current recycling systems, PET material can be recycled . . ." (15). By using passive

voice, the authors obscure what subjects are actually doing the recycling. Often, the company

relies on the efforts of consumers themselves or waste pickers and third-party recyclers in

countries like Turkey, Vietnam, Malaysia, Laos, and India (Garside 17). In reality, the solution

of recycling takes little to no effort on the part of Coca-Cola themselves, as they are not the ones

actively collecting and recycling their plastic bottles. The passive structure both reflects and

obscures this reality, showing that Coca-Cola does not view themselves as an actor who is

engaged in issues related to recycling. A careful reading of the report's sentence structure

suggests that the company's engagement is strictly financial. For casual readers, the passive

sentence structure and its implications may go unnoticed. However, this subtle obfuscation is

simply another illustration of tension within the greenwashed recycling narrative.

Aside from the linguistic functions of this key term, *recycle* generally clusters around one

primary theme: *infrastructure*. Coca-Cola draws on positive connotations related to

infrastructure and systems to help readers believe in recycling as a solution. The terms

infrastructure and *systems* generally indicate that a process is organized, efficient, and effective.

To further capitalize on the positive connotations of these terms, the authors use them in relation

to notions of cycles and circularity—two terms which further imply a sense of natural processing

and holistic proficiency. To develop the notion of circular economies and looped recycling

systems, the authors of the report assert, "We strive to make beverage packaging part of the

circular economy. Our goal is to create closed-loop systems, extracting the maximum value from

packaging materials and products while in use, then preventing them from becoming waste

through recovery, recycling, and reuse" (12). Here, the authors emphasize the supposed circularity of their system, drawing attention to aspects of the recycling infrastructure that perhaps appear more reliable and natural. The solutions mentioned at the end of the sentence also bear resemblance to the popular motto "reduce, reuse, recycle"—though the company has inverted the recommended sequence of action. Instead, Coca-Cola advocates for recovery, recycling, then reuse. Later in the report, the authors similarly posit, "We're creating circular solutions for collection around the world, working with key partners across different recycling infrastructures" (13). Again, the term *circular* makes it seem as though recycling is natural and complete—as spherical and whole as the planet itself. And, as readers come to believe in the notion of circular systems, they are less likely to envision the millions of single-use plastic bottles that fall out of the looped system each year. One of the main problems with plastic recycling is that not enough people actually do it. However, Coca-Cola makes it seem as though they have organized a system where *every* plastic bottle is collected, cleansed, restored, and returned. The state of natural perfection that seems to accompany a circular economy helps to alleviate guilt and concern for an uncritical reader.

In line with Burke's original conceptualization of identification through transcendence, the explicit and recurrent *we*-type language that is used to introduce circular economies evokes a sense of collectivity and cooperation. When Coca-Cola writes "we are creating circular solutions," audience members who read the term are unconsciously included in the action. As Cheney notes, this type of identification often goes unnoticed by the audience because it is so subliminal (154). And, as Zappen observes, these "higher-level generalizations" allow any differences between the reader and the company to be obscured and transcended (281-82). Especially when the action is supposed environmental success, it feels like a great achievement

to be categorized as part of Coca-Cola's organization. The transcendent pronoun, in combination

with the authors' continual use of active verbs (e.g., *strive, create,* and *work*) renders the

company as a community leader and a force for good, which further encourages consubstantiality

between the company and its consumers. However, many of those verbs, though active and

positive, are also abstract. With a term like *recycle*, the implied action is concrete and

measurable. In contrast, terms like *engage, explore*, and *support*—all terms which Coca-Cola

uses to describe their solutions—are ambiguous and difficult to assess. Zappen would refer to

these as high-level generalizations that can account for a large range of individuals and

motivations (286). Unfortunately, because they sound important and productive, a casual reader

may not pause to question them.

　　While the notion of recycling infrastructures may appear largely positive on the surface,

the viability of plastic recycling breaks down upon further examination. The authors assert,

"Ultimately, we aim for every package we sell to be recycled and reused. None of our packaging

should end up as litter. Every year, an estimated 8 million metric tons of plastics enter the

world's oceans—on top of the estimated 150 million metric tons currently circulating in marine

environments" (13). Here, Coca-Cola acknowledges the severity of the plastic waste crisis. The

constructed agency in this passage, however, shifts the blame away from Coca-Cola. The

company releases themselves from any blame by first stating they have intentions for all of their

packaging to be recycled and by then asserting that none of their packaging *should* end up as

litter. In the first sentence, they attempt to deflect responsibility—by using passive voice—before

reporting the pollution statistics. Oddly, however, when the authors do report the statistics,

plastic becomes the agent of the sentence, a switch in agency that also works to absolve Coca-

Cola of responsibility. The authors directly follow this passage by asserting, "We are supporting

organizations and technologies working to protect the biodiversity of oceans" (13). These vague

solutions also work to direct attention away from Coca-Cola's contribution to the plastic waste

crisis. The logic behind the corporation's push for recycling as a solution to this issue is also

counterintuitive. In response to rising levels of plastic waste, Coca-Cola argues that plastic

should continue to be used for packaging because it can or *should* be recycled, though the 90%

of unrecycled plastics definitively show this solution will not work.

These facts negate the reality of Coca-Cola's proposed closed loop system. The company

portrays a reality in which every plastic bottle can be accounted for. However, even the authors

of the report admit that their proposed solution has limited traction:

> Around the world, more packaging is currently used and discarded than is collected and
>
> recycled. In some regions, this is due to a lack of collection or recycling infrastructure. In
>
> others, greater awareness and education are needed to shift perceptions and behaviors.
>
> Various packaging types (with varying degrees of recyclability) and collection systems
>
> compound the challenge. And everywhere, coordination and collaboration among
>
> packaging producers, governments, and the recycling industry and civil society is
>
> essential. (13)

This passage further illuminates tensions within Coca-Cola's greenwashed narrative. The authors

acknowledge that some regions of the world do not have a recycling infrastructure, though they

continue to produce and sell single-use plastics in those regions. If there is no way to account for

those plastic bottles via closed-loop recycling systems, then the closed-loop system is neither

closed nor looped at all. Additionally, recycling has not failed due to lack of awareness or

education on the issue, at least not in the United States. Keep America Beautiful has been

pushing anti-litter and recycling messages since the 1950s, yet the American public is still

largely unwilling to recycle. Many residents are not even willing to avoid littering. Keep America Beautiful's 2020 National Litter Study indicates that nearly 50 billion pieces of litter were found along U.S. roads and waterways, which breaks down to 152 items of litter per U.S. resident. Further considering that various packaging types and unsystematic collection systems make the issue of recycling that much more complex, it is a wonder that Coca-Cola could consider it a solution at all. Finally, the authors again obscure their responsibility in the plastic waste crisis and their lack of effective solutions by implementing the strategy of transcendence. The corporation shifts responsibility to everybody else—plastic producers, government officials, recycling industries, and civil society. Astonishingly, this greenwashed narrative leaves the worst plastic polluter in the world with only a sliver of responsibility, absolving the company from almost all culpability. By placing responsibility on everybody else, Coca-Cola rids itself and its consumers of environmental guilt and responsibility. Though issues like plastic waste are global matters and will certainly require collaborative effort to resolve, the problem will only be fixed once mega-corporations eliminate or significantly reduce the use of plastic packaging. Simply put: Coca-Cola reveals that their plan to curb plastic waste by recycling plastic bottles is unsystematic, unreliable, and improbable.

To direct readers' attention away from these shortcomings, Coca-Cola relies on fostering identification through antithesis. The authors of the report do not want readers to perceive Coca-Cola and their plastic production as the issue, so they emphasize external challenges and larger enemies to help readers feel sympathetic towards the mega-corporation. The authors explain that, due to the pandemic, many municipalities suspended return and recycling programs, "which affected collection rates and availability of recycled PET or aluminum to be used for new packaging" (15). Using the pandemic as a scapegoat is an easy, yet effective move. Because it is

likely that readers encountered some degree of hardship throughout the pandemic, the company can use this shared animosity to fuel identification. By framing the pandemic as a challenge, the small success the company does report then becomes incredible. The authors also gain traction by shifting the attention to the pandemic because it weakens the urgency of the global waste crisis. Because the pandemic is much timelier and more tangible than plastic pollution, which operates on a much longer wavelength, the urgency and threat of the global waste crisis becomes weakened. Though "challenged" by the pandemic, Coca-Cola makes it seem as though they can successfully navigate both crises. The authors assert, "Collection has largely resumed, and we see this as a temporary obstacle that will be resolved as things return to a more 'normal' state. We remain focused on our 2030 Collect goal" (15). This sampling of hope and call to higher-level, abstract transcendence further allows readers to believe in Coca-Cola's recycling solution, even though it is flawed.

As the World Without Waste report makes clear, *PET* and *recycling* are key terms that do significant work for Coca-Cola. It might, then, also be important to consider the rhetorical work that plastic bottles themselves do. To better understand the dynamics that exist within greenwashed narratives of recycling plastic bottles, I turn to John Hartley's framework of public writing. Hartley breaks down public writing genres into three elements: speed of creation, frequency of circulation, and wavelength of consumption. Though Hartley focuses on more traditional written genres, I propose that the communicative properties of Coke bottles fit within Hartley's framework of public writing. In terms of speed of production, approximately 1.9 billion Coke products are sold worldwide every day, many stamped with a recycling logo. Of those 1.9 billion products, 44.9% (or 836 million) are packaged in single-use plastic.[8] The frequency of circulation is short once a beverage reaches the customer's hand; generally, the

plastic bottle is only retained in the consumer's consciousness as long as the beverage lasts. Then it is recycled, trashed, or littered—out of sight, out of mind. From the perspective of Hartley's theory, plastic's communicative properties would end there. However, the longevity of plastic means the wavelength of its communication will persist from the roadsides, landfills, and/or waterways where it accumulates. As Roberts observes, the consumer's use and removal of the plastic bottle is not the end of the story—it is but a prologue (230). The materiality of plastic, particularly in places where it ought not be, contradicts Coca-Cola's rhetoric that plastic bottles are recyclable and benign. Further, the contradiction of a recycling logo inscribed on a plastic bottle that endures in the environment communicates its own rhetorical message about the efficacy of recycling plastic.

Refillable

Despite the fact that Coca-Cola glorifies PET plastic, and despite the fact *recycling* is the most frequently used term throughout the report, the authors also need to show evidence that their sustainability initiatives are resulting in progress. As such, much of the weightier solutions within the report centers around the key term *refillable*, which is used in the context of refillable containers. Each of the 69 uses of this term attempt to emphasize that the company actually has sustainable actions on its resume. The irony of Coca-Cola's recent chase for sustainable packaging is that the company's original packaging practices were sustainable in the past. According to Elmore, The Coca-Cola Company developed the returnable bottle system where bottling companies expected consumers to return the glass bottles after each use (225). To prevent consumers from simply trashing the expensive glass bottles, most bottlers used a deposit system where consumers would put down a 1- or 2-cent deposit on the bottle, which the consumers could collect once they returned the empty bottle (Elmore 225). This returnable

distribution system (a mostly closed-loop system, to use Coca-Cola's current terminology) allowed bottles to be washed and reused upwards of twenty times (Rogers 134). However, in 1953, the brewing industry shifted to one-way packaging. Coca-Cola shifted their own packaging model in 1955 and, after seeing a significant increase in profit, made the permanent switch to single-use bottles and cans (Elmore 231). Despite Coca-Cola's long history with refillable systems, the authors present the company's "new" refillable pilot program as revolutionary and groundbreaking.

While Coca-Cola counts refillable pilots as a progressive success, this key term primarily functions to boost the company's ethos and build common ground with consumers. The authors of the report assert, "We are fundamentally rethinking how we get our products to consumers, including what kind of packaging to use and whether a package is needed at all. . . . Returnable and refillable packaging supports our World Without Waste collection goals and is among the best packaging options for reducing our carbon footprint" (7). Here, the authors acknowledge that refillable options are one of their most sustainable packaging options. Based on this information alone, it is a wonder why the corporation does not make their refillable portfolio the pillar of their sustainability initiative. The authors even go on to explain that much of this success is driven by consumers: "Refillables are experiencing strong growth in certain regions, outperforming non-refillables in Germany and parts of Latin America. Refillable growth rates have increased during COVID-19. According to research conducted with Ipsos, the pandemic has made consumers more aware of packaging waste and driven preference for refillable packages" (7). For consumers reading this report, this note briefly fosters identification by establishing common ground. It seems as though Coca-Cola is noticing what types of packaging consumers prefer and are willing to adjust the company's packaging models accordingly.

At a quick glance, it seems that Coca-Cola and its consumers are consubstantial—that

their interests are joined. However, an underlying tension exists in the fact that the authors

include fountain drinks in their refillable packaging portfolio. Though the fountain cups that are

distributed at fast food restaurants can technically be refilled and reused, they rarely make it past

a second or third refill before being trashed. Because of various plastic coatings, fountain cups

do not even hold the potential to be recycled, as is illustrated by the fact that the authors footnote

fountain cups as exceptions to the company's recycling goals and statistics (4; 13; 14; 25; 26).

Similarly, refillable options at gas stations are typically more durable forms of plastic that can be

used multiple times, but these more durable plastics are generally the same types of low-value

plastics which the company condemns. By counting fountain drinks among refillable options, the

authors conflate disposable cups with the more ideal returnable glass bottle system. The authors

boast of the company's refillable/returnable models, but this conflation makes it unclear just how

much effort they are putting into those packaging options. The company knows their interests are

not aligned with their consumers' interests, but as long as a consumer "assumes that they are, or

is persuaded to believe so," the company can influence and capitalize on their behaviors through

greenwashed narratives (Burke, *Rhetoric* 20).

Partnership

The final key term that Coca-Cola depends upon throughout this report is *partner*. The

term is used synonymously with two other key terms throughout the report: *collective* and

collaboration. Combined, these three terms appear 71 times throughout the report and are

predominantly used in the same context—to emphasize Coca-Cola's age-old message of unity

and community. This message is displayed, for example, in Coca-Cola's 1971 "Hilltop"

commercial, where the actors sing "I'd like to teach the world to sing / In perfect harmony / I'd

like to buy the world a Coke / And keep it company" (Coca-Cola "Creating"). This catchy jingle, which proclaims a message of unity, is the center of one of the most beloved and influential advertisements in history (Hamilton & Tylee). The tune has been featured in six follow-up commercials by Coca-Cola since 1971. What Clark argues about jazz musicians "quoting" riffs from other musicians can be true in this case as well. Hearing the familiar tune and its message can foster identification through recognition; it becomes an aesthetic experience that bridges the viewer and the company (Clark 10).

The Hilltop notion of community is a pillar of Coca-Cola's regular, public ethos, and they bring it into their sustainability initiative as well. Throughout their section on partnership, Coca-Cola ties themselves and their efforts to communities, governments, and non-profit organizations in an attempt to show that they are working to resolve the plastic waste crisis. By using a few synonymous terms that carry the same meaning, the authors are able to reinforce their message that Coca-Cola is about bringing the world together. For example, the authors call for collaborative partnership by asserting, "COVID-19 has created a sense of unity that transcends borders and demonstrates that multiple sectors are capable of massive shifts to meet crises head-on. The pandemic has amplified the need for collaborative, cross-sector solutions to plastic waste and other critical environmental and social issues" (18). Additionally, the terms in this cluster are generally paired with strong, active verbs (e.g., *engage, act, launch, scale,* and *evolve*), which portray the corporation as a proactive entity. Coca-Cola's community involvement promotes identification through common ground and transcendence. The company primary associates itself with three groups: businesses and industry peers, non-profit organizations, and governments.

To foster a sense of common ground with readers, the authors largely attempt to unite readers against the global waste crisis itself. As an unwieldy and often discouraging matter, readers can perhaps identify with the difficulty of addressing the environmental concerns described in this report. The authors depend upon terms like "crisis" and "challenges" in relation to environmental sustainability to magnify the supposed difficulty of what they are facing. For instance, the authors posit, "Today's global waste challenges call for collective action between industry peers, the wider business community and the nonprofit and civil sectors. . . . Industry cannot shoulder the entire cost of effective waste management for all materials and products on their own" (22). By rallying all the troops against environmental issues, Coca-Cola makes it seem as if the changes and contributions they can make are limited. Widening the scope to industry peers and the business community at large also makes Coca-Cola's contribution to plastic pollution seem less significant. Individuals can likely relate to this feeling of limited effect and responsibility, so they buy into the notion that Coca-Cola is already doing as much as they can against a larger issue. By meeting on this common ground, it is perhaps easy to forget about the company's dependence upon plastic production and recycling programs.

Unlike the rhetoric that established common ground with general readers, the report uses nonprofit "partners" as a mechanism to encourage identification through transcendence. The report tries to blur the lines between Coca-Cola and nonprofit partners who are innovating solutions. One of the main partnerships the authors flaunt is with The Ocean Cleanup project. The authors state, "We are partnering with The Ocean Cleanup as the first global implementation partner for their river project, working to stem the tide of plastic pollution entering the world's oceans by first capturing waste in rivers" (20). The construction of "we are partnering" and "working to stem" allow for ambiguous readings about who is actually performing the work.

This obscurity allows the company to appear as an active member of the organization instead of just a financial donor who helps pay for The Ocean Cleanup's river research and machine development. The authors continue, "Two Interceptors included in this partnership have already been installed by The Ocean Cleanup in Santa Domingo, Dominican Republic and Can Tho, Vietnam. . . . Together, we intend to take our learnings from this partnership to evolve and scale this work for greater impact" (20). Here, the authors hint that the heavy lifting of the project is primarily accomplished by The Ocean Cleanup crew, though they diminish The Ocean Cleanup as an agent by using passive voice. Wanting to portray Coca-Cola as an engaged partner, however, the authors quickly move back to third person pronouns to imply a more equal partnership.

Arguably more important is the way Coca-Cola frames its collaboration with governments and legislative bodies. To describe this partnership, the authors posit, "We are taking a more proactive approach to collaborating with governments and other stakeholders to develop an economy where packaging materials are collected" (15). Though this proactive collaboration may seem like applaudable effort, it is likely that the corporation is lobbying for its own solutions to appear engaged and concerned about the environment. Close collaboration also allows the company to direct attention away from more effective policies, such as tighter regulation on single-use plastics. The authors even go as far as to advocate for increased regulation. To this point, the authors mention that Coca-Cola is "partnering with NGOs, industry peers and local and state governments to advance bottle collection and recycling. For example, we joined the U.S. Plastics Pact, championed by The Recycling Partnership and WWF, and part of the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's global Plastics Pact Network, to partner with governments to ensure the plastics we use stay in the circular economy and out of the environment" (3). These

partnerships target circular economies and recycling infrastructures, further advancing Coca-Cola's non-viable solution of recycling. So long as policies and regulations advance their solution, the company is all for cooperating with government bodies.[9]

However, when governmental regulation does not support the development of recycling infrastructures, the authors present regulation and partnership differently. At one point in the report, the authors emphasize that Coca-Cola signed "a business manifesto calling for a UN treaty on plastic pollution to urgently address the fragmented landscape of regulation and complement existing voluntary measures, putting our support behind this initiative of WWF, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and others" (3). In this statement, the authors frame regulation as *fragmented*, implying an inability for governments to pass successful environmental regulation on their own. The authors also place emphasis on their collaboration with other businesses and foundations which support corporate end-goals. For instance, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation pushes for circular economies. When governments do not approve of the usage of rPET plastics or do not prioritize recycling infrastructures, the authors frame government as a "they" that "we" must transcend. As Rogers asserts, "If the public believes that industry is responsibly handling natural resources, if they think production under a free-market system is sustainable, and if beverage consumers accept that they are to blame when waste gets out of control—an Orwellian flipping of the script—then laws will not be enacted, government won't intervene, and production can continue on industry terms" (144). In other words, if corporations can convince consumers that no further work or government regulations are necessary to solve environmental crises, it will be business-as-usual. The plastic waste crisis will continue until more consumers can critically analyze greenwashed narratives.

Discussion

Though The Coca-Cola Company's 2020 World Without Waste report seems to suggest that the company is making strides towards environmental sustainability, much of the initiative is grounded in greenwashed rhetoric. By encouraging casual readers to identify with the company and cooperate with their proposed solutions, Coca-Cola is able to divert attention away from their unsustainable packaging models. Readers, more problematically, may come away from the report feeling as if they are helping resolve the plastic waste crisis by supporting Coca-Cola. While I have focused solely on Coca-Cola and their report throughout this analysis, it is crucial to acknowledge that it is not uncommon for other corporations and industries to utilize the same identification strategies—i.e., creating common ground, antithesis, and transcendence—to promote their own greenwashing narratives. As this analysis shows, Burke's theory of identification can help the public to critically analyze corporate sustainability initiatives. Though corporate language may appear straightforward and concise, it still—like all language—directs attention into certain avenues and can reveal a rhetor's underlying motivations. This concept is especially significant when readers are discerning whether sustainability initiatives and claims are greenwashed. In general, consumers and stakeholders alike need to be more conscious and critical of these reports.

My analysis also contributes to more general theories of communication that build on Burke's theory of identification. While Cheney originally applied Burke's theories and provided practical descriptions of how they work in the context of enrolling employees into corporate identities and values, his application of the theory can help us understand how businesses also work to enroll consumers into corporate identities and values. The World Without Waste report illustrates the relationship between identification and ethos. Coca-Cola's sustainability initiative

relies on much of the ethos the company has built over more than a century. Coca-Cola has spent decades advertising its products in conjunction with values like unity and togetherness. The intertextuality of Coca-Cola's communicative texts—such as sustainability reports, advertising campaigns, and plastic bottles—strengthens Coca-Cola's identification efforts, allowing identification to operate on a much larger, global scale. Consumers who have seen Coca-Cola proclaim global unity with the Hilltop commercial and its iterations will not think it is out of place for the company to portray itself and its consumers as good global citizens. The rhetorical work in this sustainability report re-activates and adds to the company's rhetorical work in the forms of written, visual, and musical advertising campaigns. Simply put, it appears that established ethos and intertextuality can help foster identification with audience members.

While its World Without Waste reports are where Coca-Cola's greenwashing is most visible, most consumers will likely never encounter it; however, the same greenwashing strategies are present in the company's more public-facing texts. In the company's advertising campaigns, the same strategies of establishing common ground, creating antithesis, and subtly building transcendence are still at work. For example, the "Share A Coke" campaign was designed to "create a more personal relationship with consumers and inspire shared moments of happiness" (Coca-Cola, "Share A Coke"). This campaign reactivates Coca-Cola's age-old message of harmony and community—values on which the company tends to build common ground. When the campaign debuted in the United States in 2016, it had evolved into "Share A Coke and a Song," which bears striking resemblance to the lyrics in the Hilltop commercial. Additionally, the company's iconic polar bears have reactivated similar messages in advertisements since 1922. Over the last few decades, polar bears have become symbolic of global warming and environmental crises. The pairing of these two images—thriving polar bears

and cold bottles of Coke—contribute to the company's natural and environmentally friendly image. The company's recent "Christmas 2020" commercial also builds common ground, antithesis, and transcendence. The advertisement was featured during the COVID-19 pandemic and reactivates messages of hope and togetherness. These two values again act as building blocks for common ground, with the pandemic and its cause for separation acting as antithesis. The end of the commercial features a father reuniting with his family for Christmas, all thanks to Santa Claus who is featured driving a Coca-Cola delivery truck—a visual reminder that Coca-Cola can help the world transcend any problem. These texts, in combination with many other campaigns, form a web of intertextuality that allows Coca-Cola's messages to build off each other to enroll consumers more fully. Having these campaigns as a groundwork then allows the company to be more successful with its greenwashed initiatives.

Throughout this analysis, I have also shown that transcendence can occur in a variety of ways. Burke, Cheney, and Zappen each have notions about how transcendence can encourage identification. Cheney explains that the assumed "we"—which comes with an implied "they"—often creates identification on a subliminal level (148). Additionally, as I illustrate throughout this analysis, transcendence can also occur as rhetors construct relationships between act, agent, and agency and by using strong, active verbs. In this report, for instance, Coca-Cola's syntax often obscures the agents and their actions by frequently writing in passive voice. This ambiguity in discussing collaboration allows readers to assume that Coca-Cola and themselves are included in the actions the authors describe. When the authors do utilize the pronoun "we" throughout the report, transcendence is then strengthened because it allows more individuals to include themselves in the action. In greenwashed communication, this move is significant because it allows corporations to capitalize on ambiguity and take or avoid responsibility, as the case may

be. Understanding how identification and terministic screens operate within a text is important generally; however, when it comes to addressing environmental crises, Burke's theories on identification and terministic screens become crucial to exposing greenwashed narratives and disingenuous rhetoric.

Notes

1. For additional conversations related to Keep America Beautiful, see Bartow J. Elmore's book, *Citizen Coke: The Making of Coca-Cola Capitalism*, Heather Rogers's book, *Gone Tomorrow: The Hidden Life of Garbage*, and Brian Russell Roberts's chapter, "Spiraling Futures of the Archipelagic States of America."

2. For examples of this conversation, see Greg Northen's essay about greenwashed organic labeling; Debashish Munshi and Priya Kurian's work about corporate social responsibility and greenwashing; and Menno D.T. De Jon, Karen Harking, and Susanne Barth's study on the effects of greenwashing on consumer trust.

3. Bree Devin and Jennifer L. Bartlett examined green environmental communication from several companies and established a guideline for determining what counts as legitimate and illegitimate sustainability claims. Stephen J. Scanlan also contributes to the conversation with his discussion of greenwashing in the oil and gas industry. Additionally, Emily Plec and Mary Pettenger focus their analysis on greenwashed advertising campaigns from ExxonMobil.

4. Though I critique the perpetual use of single-use packaging throughout this essay, I'd like to pause and differentiate between single-use bottles and medical plastics. As Max Liboiron reminds us: "The #suckitableism movement and thinker-advocates such as Alice Wong have been very clear that plastic bendy straws are used by people with disabilities to create livable worlds and that bans are ableist. Without differentiating between medical plastics (while also making them less toxic, as Health Care without Harm is advocating) and other single-use plastics . . . it is impossible to be responsible to the problems and ethics of plastic pollution" (28).

5. Irr and Kim break down this unwieldy figure by explaining that eight billion tons of plastic equates to each of Earth's seven billion inhabitants hypothetically being responsible for one ton

of plastic waste. However, they carefully add, "Although in reality, of course, plastic use and waste is concentrated in high-consumption nations of the global North and West" (3).

6. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, has led to an influx of plastic use worldwide (Irr & Kim; Adyel). Though much of this plastic takes the form of medical equipment and personal protective equipment, Irr and Kim observe there has also been an increase of items like take-out containers and single-use water bottles (1). Adyel also adds that the plastic packaging market was projected to increase from USD 909.2 billion in 2019 to USD 1,012.6 billion in 2021 (1314). In other words, despite increased awareness of plastic pollution, plastic production and pollution have not decreased.

7. PET (polyethylene terephthalate) is a lightweight plastic that has been used for disposable soda bottles since 1975. Though it is technically considered to be 100% recyclable, one piece of PET plastic can only be recycled two or three times before it degrades enough that it can no longer be used (Sedaghat).

8. For a more comprehensive breakdown of their packaging types, see The Coca-Cola Company's "Packaging Distribution Mix of The Coca-Cola Company Worldwide in 2020, by Type."

9. This same strategy was utilized in the past with Keep America Beautiful. The organization supported stronger regulations and policies when it came to enforcing punishments for littering, including fines and jail time for repeat offenders (Rogers 142). As Rogers notes, "Such solutions suited the KAB leadership because they distracted the public from other options that might inconvenience industry, like production restrictions or forcing can, bottle, and beverage makers to reinstate the vastly less profitable refillable container" (Rogers 142-43). In other words, the beverage industry has a history of directing attention to certain regulations and away from others.

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