

# Plastic Politics of Delay: How Political Corporate Social Responsibility Discourses Produce and Reinforce Inequality in Plastic Waste Governance

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## Abstract

As the global plastics pollution crisis grows in severity and complexity, diverse solutions are being proposed across the public and private sectors. Notably, multinational corporations (MNCs) from the petrochemical and consumer goods sectors have become increasingly involved. From providing recycling infrastructure to directly participating in drafting action plans and policies, MNCs are engaging as political actors in plastics waste governance, influencing discourses and actions globally, a process referred to as political corporate social responsibility (CSR). In this article, I examine Coca-Cola's World Without Waste initiative as a case study of this process. I evaluate how Coca-Cola frames the problems of plastics waste, their solutions, and the roles that Coca-Cola asserts within this complex, transboundary environmental governance issue. Borrowing from literature on corporate climate delay tactics, I demonstrate how the initiative implements discourses and practices of delayed action, hindering comprehensive governance strategies. Through this analysis, I argue that political CSR actions can exacerbate the global plastics pollution crisis through ineffective and inequitable waste governance approaches that perpetuate uneven plastics pollution burdens.

**Keywords:** corporate social responsibility, equity, marine plastics pollution, environmental justice, plastics delay discourse

Plastics pollution is a global crisis with profound implications for economies, ecologies, and societies. In 2020, marine plastics pollution cost US\$ 21.3 billion annually, impacting industries like fishing, shipping, and tourism (McIlgorm et al. 2022). Plastic materials release hazardous chemicals into the environment (Muncke et al. 2020), affecting the health of people, wildlife, and ecosystems (Liboiron 2016). Land-based plastics pollution obstructs storm drains, leading to floods and the spread of vector-borne diseases (Krystosik et al. 2020). It

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directly threatens marine life, seabirds, and livestock through entanglement and ingestion (United Nations Environment Programme 2016). This crisis has prompted various approaches across scales, geographies, and sectors, from the ongoing United Nations Environmental Assembly plastics pollution treaty negotiations to community-organized beach cleanups and technological solutions such as marine debris booms, traps, and vacuums. Multinational corporations (MNCs), particularly those operating in the petrochemical and consumer goods sectors,<sup>1</sup> are becoming more involved in addressing plastics waste, often through voluntary corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts. While this signifies a trend toward corporate sustainability, it raises questions about the effectiveness of CSR initiatives in addressing MNCs' significant contributions to global plastics pollution.

These CSR actions focus predominantly on “end-of-life” solutions, such as supporting initiatives for marine litter cleanup or establishing coalitions to enhance plastics recycling. However, efforts to curtail plastics production at the source (“beginning of life”) are notably limited. CSR has expanded to include waste management through public–private partnerships with governments and even to national legislative action plan development, effectively casting MNCs into a plastics policy-making role, a form of corporate involvement often termed “political CSR” (Scherer et al. 2016). MNCs hold substantial influence and potential to drive the transnational change necessary for tackling the plastics pollution crisis. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the primary interests of MNCs, centered on economic growth and market expansion, frequently oppose effective strategies for addressing this issue. MNCs prioritize continuous plastics production, creating tension between their economic objectives and the radical changes required to combat the plastics pollution crisis, revealing the influence of broader economic and political structures (Levy and Newell 2005). Given this discord, it is essential to scrutinize how MNCs engage in plastics waste governance, including their discursive representations. Evaluating whether these representations align with actual impacts is a crucial step in assessing the validity of MNCs' role in plastics pollution and broader environmental governance. It also helps gauge the potential for political CSR to yield equitable governance outcomes.

I explore CSR's influence on global waste governance using a case study of the Coca-Cola Company and its World Without Waste (WWW) initiative. Coca-Cola plays a pivotal role in plastics pollution governance by promoting market-driven voluntary solutions on a global scale. By focusing on this influential corporation and its widely recognized initiative, I offer an in-depth analysis of how MNCs participate in plastics waste governance. This examination involves scrutinizing their specific problem representations, the actions they take, and the actual consequences of these actions on affected communities.

1. I use the term *consumer goods* in reference to fast-moving consumer packaged products produced at high volumes, intended for frequent purchase, and sold at relatively low prices, such as food items, cosmetics, or clothing (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2013).

By highlighting the discursive representations of inequality within political CSR discourse, this research extends the ongoing debates concerning the role of corporations in global environmental governance (see Clapp 2012; Dauvergne 2018a; Eckert 2019; Levy and Newell 2005; Mah 2021; Ponte et al. 2019). In particular, this research builds on political economy literature on the discursive power of business in global environmental politics (i.e., Dauvergne 2018a; Fuchs 2005; Levy and Newell 2005; Mah 2021; Ponte et al. 2019). I shed light on the intricate dynamics between corporate initiatives, public representations, and actual outcomes in the domain of plastics waste governance. Through this approach, I demonstrate how political CSR discourses are utilized to legitimize and perpetuate existing inequities among MNCs, host countries, and local communities. This study also underscores the value of interpreting these actions through a lens of race and inequality. It reveals the uneven representational rhetoric employed in CSR discourses and how MNCs' discursive power can obscure the uneven distribution of plastics waste burdens. In sum, this article brings further context to the global environmental governance and business literature by elucidating the connection between MNCs' global-level discursive power and the deeply inequitable outcomes manifesting at the local level.

### **Political CSR, Discursive Power, and the Global Governance of Plastics Waste**

Since the 1970s, MNCs have expanded their rule-setting power in governance processes, leveraging their structural power through control over resources, markets, and supply chains, and their institutional power via self-regulatory frameworks and public-private partnerships (Clapp and Swanston 2009; Fuchs 2005). These distinct forms of power make MNCs influential as economic and political actors, enabling them to reshape rules governing their business operations, often moving toward privatization. Privatization involves transferring control of public assets and services to private entities through arrangements like self-regulation and public-private partnerships (Falkner 2008; Fuchs 2005). This shift gave rise to "political CSR," distinguishing it from traditional CSR, which is confined primarily to voluntary corporate actions. Political CSR encompasses MNCs' active engagement in public discourse, collective decision-making, and address of public issues when governmental authorities are unable or unwilling to do so (Scherer et al. 2016). Through political CSR, multistakeholder partnerships have emerged among corporations, states, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), transcending historical conflicts of interest and pursuing mutually beneficial outcomes while reinforcing MNC institutional and structural power (Foster 2014). This convergence, known as liberal environmentalism, often prioritizes maintaining the liberal economic order over environmental protection (Bernstein 2001; Corson 2010). I use the term *political CSR* to make the distinction from other multistakeholder

partnerships or collaborative arrangements that are formed to achieve regional and global sustainability objectives. Focusing on political CSR centers on the role MNCs play within these partnerships, emphasizing their power and how it might influence democratic processes of consensus building assumed of multistakeholder arrangements (Fougère and Solitander 2020).

Political CSR enables MNCs to wield influence in global political economies, even though many are headquartered in a handful of high-income countries. While intended to facilitate deliberative and democratic exchanges through multistakeholder arrangements, political CSR functions as a mechanism for MNCs to define governance goals, determine how they are achieved, and influence who participates in decision-making—a process criticized by scholars as neo-colonial and fundamentally inequitable (Raman 2007; Shamir 2005; Utting 2007). This exercise of power can further marginalize vulnerable stakeholders and, in some cases, lead to conflict and harm against these groups (Akpan 2006; Dauvergne 2019; Welker 2014). For example, there are currently more than 700 ongoing conflicts worldwide between corporations and communities regarding the social and environmental impacts of industrial resource extraction projects in more than sixty countries, despite CSR efforts to engage local groups in community development projects (Banerjee 2018). The prevalence of such cases suggests that these forms of CSR practice predominantly serve the interests of corporate actors rather than those of the local communities they claim to support.

MNCs' discursive power has been pivotal in bolstering their rule-setting authority (Fuchs 2005). This power refers to business actors' capacity to influence public discourse and policy agendas, primarily through practices like political CSR. Businesses have harnessed this power to advocate corporate norms and promote neoliberal ideologies, emphasizing individualized responsibility, market efficiencies, and the limits of government intervention (Fuchs 2005; Levy and Newell 2005). Furthermore, they have employed discursive power to delay regulatory measures (Herzog 2024). For example, the "tobacco strategy" exemplifies an industry delay tactic employed by the tobacco industry to foster scientific uncertainty and postpone regulation concerning smoking-related health hazards (Oreskes and Conway 2010). Similar delay tactics have been deployed in various industries to obscure scientific knowledge about environmental and human health issues, including ozone depletion, climate change, and plastics pollution. This discursive power situates MNCs as "epistemic agents" who create, transmit, and use knowledge (Herzog 2024). Through this process, MNCs legitimize corporate-led regulations as a valid form of governance, thereby reinforcing their institutional and structural power (Elbra 2017). This influence enables MNCs to wield economic and political authority, shaping prevailing discourses and knowledge creation (Banerjee 2018). Some argue that this discursive process inevitably leads to inequitable outcomes and sustained extractive and harmful practices, especially in regions marked by social or environmental instability (Banerjee 2018; Ehrnström-Fuentes 2016; Gilberthorpe and Banks 2012).

Critical CSR scholarship often focuses on resource-extractive and commodity-producing industries like mining, forestry, and textiles (Akpan 2006; Banerjee 2018; Rajak 2011; Welker 2014). CSR initiatives in these sectors typically focus on addressing the negative impacts of industrial action that are imposed on communities that live near corporate facilities. In these scenarios, there are clearer links between relevant governments, communities, and corporations. For example, a forestry company may provide infrastructure like roads and hospitals in exchange for community support. In contrast, plastics pollution (both land based and marine) is uniquely complicated by its materiality—its fluidity, ubiquity, and postconsumer nature. Plastics span all societal sectors, with less apparent links between corporations, consumers, and affected communities. It is a global and transboundary issue where plastics production in one country can harm communities in another. The absence of a singular pollution source complicates attributing environmental damage directly to an individual producer or action. This complexity allows MNCs to obfuscate the problem through discursive power and global influence, shifting environmental costs into distant ecosystems and onto historically marginalized people, creating “ecological shadows of plastic consumption” (Dauvergne 2019). Simultaneously, these economic and political processes distance consumers from understanding their choices’ ecological consequences, further isolating social and ecological feedback loops related to plastics consumption (Princen et al. 2002).

Scholars have previously charted the role of MNCs in shaping plastics pollution governance, primarily through discursive and institutional power. Some have investigated how industry employs discursive power to normalize plastic materials as integral to daily life (i.e., Clarke 2007; Elmore 2014; Foster 2008; Hawkins 2011). Others have critiqued the neoliberal underpinnings of plastics pollution discourses, particularly notions of individualized responsibility and self-governance (i.e., Dauvergne 2010, 2018b; Dunaway 2015; Maniates 2001; Tangpuori et al. 2020). Additionally, Mah (2021, 2022) examined how corporate actors promote “risky” circular economy technological solutions that sustain economic growth and “future-proof” capitalism. Scholars have also examined antiplastics policies that emerge despite industry’s discursive efforts to delay regulatory action (i.e., Clapp 2012; Clapp and Swanston 2009; Dauvergne 2018a; Loges and Jakobi 2020; Pathak 2023). Notably, Clapp and Swanston (2009) and Clapp (2012) highlight significant antiplastics movements originating in the Global South, dispelling misconceptions that such environmentalism is exclusive to the Global North.

Research within the fields of discard studies and environmental anthropology has explored equity and justice issues regarding plastics and their waste. Scholars have examined how the global waste trade and municipal waste management systems often assume access to Indigenous lands for waste disposal, a form of waste colonialism (e.g., Liboiron 2021; O’Neill 2019). Others have argued that the legitimization of plastics as government-authorized “everyday consumer goods” obscures the slow violence of plastics and other systemic

inequities experienced by marginalized populations (i.e., Chalfin 2014; Fuller et al. 2022; Morinville 2017; Njeru 2006; Pathak and Nichter 2019). Studies have also examined injustices resulting from political CSR in the fast-moving consumer goods sector, although they focus primarily on discursive and institutional power related to consumer products like bottled water and baby formula rather than on their plastic packaging (i.e., Lacy-Nichols and Williams 2021; Raman 2007; Serodio et al. 2020). Scholars across these fields elucidate complexities related to plastics waste, consumer goods, and political CSR. However, limited attention has been given to the interaction between global policies and interventions and local realities. My aim is to bridge this gap by demonstrating how corporate discourses and rhetorical representations work to normalize and perpetuate local experiences of inequitable plastics waste burdens.

### Coca-Cola's World Without Waste Initiative

Coca-Cola is not unique among fast-moving consumer goods companies in setting ambitious waste reduction goals and implementing plastics waste CSR initiatives. Many of its initiatives involve partnerships with other major MNCs. Coca-Cola makes an illustrative example of political CSR because of its global presence and influence. Gerald Butts, former president and CEO of World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Canada, has suggested that Coca-Cola's institutional power may be more significant for sustainability than that of the United Nations.<sup>2</sup> Coca-Cola leads in purchases of sugar and aluminum and is a major player in the glass, plastics, and coffee markets. A decision by Coca-Cola can rapidly reshape a market and its environmental impact (Dauvergne and Lister 2013). Most importantly, Coca-Cola is the largest global producer of plastics waste. Since 2018, the Break Free from Plastic global audits have consistently identified Coca-Cola as the foremost plastics polluter. The 2022 report documented 85,035 plastic items (e.g., bottles, sachets, wrappers) linked to Coca-Cola across seventy-eight countries (Break Free from Plastic 2022). For comparison, Pepsico followed with 50,558 items in sixty-six countries and Nestlé with 27,008 items in sixty-four countries (Break Free from Plastic 2022).

The Coca-Cola Company actively embraces political CSR, particularly emphasizing public-private partnerships—a core element of its “connected capitalism” business model introduced by CEO Neville Isdell (2010). Isdell envisioned “connected capitalism” as a way for profits and progress to coexist harmoniously, aligning with broader sustainable development goals (Foster 2014). One notable example is the ongoing collaboration between Coca-Cola and WWF, initiated in 2007, focusing on water conservation, climate action, and plastics reduction. This partnership enables Coca-Cola to support large-

2. Simon Houpt, “Beyond the Bottle: Coke Trumpets Its Green Initiatives,” *Globe and Mail*, January 13, 2011.

scale conservation projects by WWF while enhancing the sustainability of its supply chain. However, this partnership has faced significant criticism. Water shortages persist in communities neighboring Coca-Cola bottling operations, and the company remains a major contributor to plastics pollution. More recently, Coca-Cola faced backlash for sponsoring COP27, prompting approximately 240,000 people to petition the Egyptian government, the host of COP27, to remove Coca-Cola as a corporate sponsor. Critics argue that such corporate–state partnerships allow companies to engage in environmentally friendly activities and align their brands with sustainability without addressing their own destructive industrial practices (Corson 2010).

The WWW initiative was launched in 2018 in response to the urgent plastics pollution crisis. It frames plastics pollution as a consequence of inadequate waste mismanagement, with millions of plastic items, such as bottles, wrappers, sachets, lids, and bags, entering the environment annually due to shortcomings in waste management infrastructure. However, the initiative falls short of directly addressing the root cause—the overproduction of toxic and wasteful plastics (Tangpuori et al. 2020). While presenting plastics waste as a complex but solvable issue, the initiative outlines three overarching goals aimed at improving recycling technologies and economies: first, collecting and recycling a bottle or can for each one sold by Coca-Cola by 2030; second, making packaging 100 percent recyclable by 2025; and third, using 50 percent recycled material in bottles and cans by 2030 (Coca-Cola Company 2018, 2019, 2021a, 2021b).

Coca-Cola actively engages in recycling and waste management programs worldwide, collaborating with various partners, including national governments (e.g., South Africa and Kenya), NGOs (e.g., WWF and the Ocean Conservancy), investment funds (e.g., Circulate Capital), and technology companies (e.g., Ocean Cleanup and Ioniqa Technologies). Coca-Cola executives have served on steering committees to draft national action plans on plastics waste in countries like Ghana and Indonesia. The company has also been instrumental in establishing large-scale recycling systems, often in collaboration with industry peers like Nestlé, Unilever, and Danone, particularly in the Global South. Such involvement has, at times, shaped state regulatory frameworks to favor voluntary, self-regulated approaches championed by Coca-Cola and its industry partners. This influence highlights both Coca-Cola’s institutional and its discursive power. It enables the prioritization of voluntary standards, waste management public–private partnerships, and the problematization of plastics, while obscuring industry responsibility and justifying ongoing and unchecked plastics use.

### Uneven Discourses of Plastics Delay

My analysis draws on West’s (2016) theoretical notion of “uneven rhetorics of representation,” which asserts that there are socially embedded representational rhetorics that underlie all uneven development. These rhetorics are deployed to

normalize logics driving capitalist accumulation and white supremacy. Through this lens, I uncover inequities hidden in Coca-Cola's discursive representations of plastics waste problems, solutions, and responsibility. I employ critical discourse analysis methodologies to examine language that expresses, signals, constitutes, and legitimizes inequality (Meyer and Wodak 2001). I engage a discourse perspective that makes an analytical distinction between powerful actors' self-representations and how their actions are perceived by those affected (Benjaminsen and Svarstad 2010). I situate these discourses within the broader context of historical and mainstream environmentalism to identify patterns of industry influence over mainstream environmental norms and values.

MNCs with the power to shape dominant discourses can exert hegemonic control by projecting a single discourse as the sole viable and legitimate perspective on tackling problems and devising solutions (Holzscheiter 2005; Raman 2007). In this context, "discourse" refers to both spoken and written language and how language is harnessed to convey meaning, create coherence, or achieve specific objectives, such as through narratives, dialogues, reports, and descriptions (Gee and Handford 2012). Discourses play a role in shaping collective understandings of issues, thereby facilitating action. However, discourses can be intentionally constructed in ways that prevent their proponents from recognizing alternative interpretations and actions (Benjaminsen and Svarstad 2010). Certain dominant discourses, in turn, influence the ways society perceives environmental problems and potential remedies (Dryzeck 1997). My analysis focuses on representational meanings and discourses exploring questions of power and agency, such as, How does Coca-Cola represent its practices and relevant stakeholders (including itself) through the WWW campaign? How do these representations reflect relationships of power and dominance in the real world (including realities of uneven plastics waste burdens) (Fairclough 2000)?

I utilize discursive typologies from the climate delay literature, which I term *discourses of plastics delay*, to demonstrate similarities and differences between these distinct yet entangled issues (Table 1). The plastics and climate crises are undeniably linked, as plastics are derived from fossil fuels and are the fastest-growing source of industrial greenhouse gases (United Nations Development Programme 2022). Given this current pace of production, alongside global efforts to reduce fossil fuel use in the energy and transportation sectors, plastics are projected to become the primary driver of oil demand by 2050, jeopardizing efforts to achieve global climate targets (International Energy Agency 2018). Through this lens, I emphasize the interconnection between these environmental crises and highlight that influential actors employ similar discursive strategies within both spheres, aiming to divert governance attention toward "end-of-life" solutions and away from extraction and production.

The discourses of plastics delay that I examine draw from a typology initially developed by Lamb et al. (2020) to describe climate delay discourses employed by industry and government across various contexts, including community workshops, media and advertisements, and lobbying activities, as well



**Table 1**  
Discourses of Plastics Delay

<i>Delay Discourse</i>	<i>Discursive Strategy</i>
Redirecting responsibility	<p><i>Individualism.</i> Individuals and consumers are ultimately responsible for taking action to address plastics waste.</p> <p><i>Responsibility scapegoating.</i> Using plastics in our products is consumer driven. We are obligated to provide products to consumers that accommodate their needs.</p> <p><i>Universal responsibility/vulnerability.</i> Industry, consumers, and governments are all equally responsible for and capable of addressing the plastics waste crisis. All actors are similarly all vulnerable to the impacts of plastics pollution.</p>
Pushing nontransformative solutions	<p><i>Technological optimism.</i> We should focus our efforts on current and future technologies, which will unlock possibilities for addressing the plastics waste crisis.</p> <p><i>All talk, little action.</i> We are the world leaders in addressing plastics waste. We have approved an ambitious target and have declared a plastics waste emergency.</p> <p><i>Plastic solutionism.</i> Plastics are part of the solution. Our plastics are becoming more efficient and are the bridge toward a circular, low-waste future.</p> <p><i>No sticks, just carrots.</i> Society will respond only to supportive and voluntary policies; restrictive measures will fail and should be abandoned.</p>
Emphasizing the downsides	<p><i>Policy perfectionism.</i> Policy solutions must be perfectly crafted, with input from all stakeholders, before adoption.</p> <p><i>Appeal to well-being.</i> Plastics are vital for social development and the provision of essential goods. Abandoning them will jeopardize the health and well-being of those who rely on them.</p> <p><i>Appeal to social justice.</i> The plastics waste and recycling economies provide essential livelihoods and financial security for formal and informal waste workers. Eliminating this sector will eliminate valuable livelihood opportunities.</p>

as other political platforms. These discourses advocate for incremental solutions that divert attention from transformative efforts and binding standards, often by emphasizing narrow definitions of success and positive framings rooted in entrepreneurial values (Lamb et al. 2020). Similar discourses are used by industry to influence plastics waste governance. I focus on three key discursive

strategies central to the WWW campaign: “redirecting responsibility,” “pushing nontransformative solutions,” and “emphasizing the downsides.”<sup>3</sup> Through interconnected neoliberal environmental discourses centered on sustainability, individualized responsibility, and technological solutionism, the text and images throughout the WWW initiatives not only serve as rhetorical tools to delay action but also normalize inequitable representations of plastics waste burdens and responsibilities. In the following sections, I describe how these discourses are used in the WWW initiative. As evidence, I rely on a variety of publicly available texts and images from the WWW initiative published between 2018 and 2022, such as annual reports, web articles, interview transcripts, and conference presentations. I draw on both texts and images because they work in partnership to legitimize and project intended narratives. To evaluate local consequences of CSR programs, I use a range of evidence, including public letters from grassroots groups, local newspaper articles, and other archival sources.

## Redirecting Responsibility

The WWW campaign implements discourses that deflect attention from industry responsibility for the plastics waste crisis toward individuals. Coca-Cola is presented as a collective victim to the problem through language that invokes a sense of universal vulnerability. Meanwhile, individual consumers are depicted as the driving force of plastics waste, positioning them as the target for policy action. These representations are achieved through the consistent use of the pronoun “we” in the annual WWW reports. “We” is used to refer to Coca-Cola, its WWW initiative partners, and the global population. When describing the plastics waste problem, it is framed as an issue that affects everyone. By framing the problem in this collective manner, Coca-Cola is distanced from its role as a source of the problem and its corresponding obligations. This discourse not only recontextualizes Coca-Cola as part of the collective “we,” implying “universal vulnerability,” but also humanizes the corporation, presenting it as a common victim of plastics pollution. This persuasive approach aims to foster trust and relatability with the company. However, it universalizes the problem,

3. Lamb et al. (2020) identified another form of climate delay discourse, termed *surrendering*. However, I do not explore this specific delay discourse in detail, as it does not prominently feature in the World Without Waste initiative. This particular discursive strategy conveys the idea that any action taken at this point is too little and too late, emphasizing the futility of current efforts. While this strategy is prevalent in climate delay discourses, it does not play a major role in the plastics debate. The central theme in the plastics delay discourse is that plastics production is not inherently problematic; the issue arises when waste leaks into the environment. Industry typically adopts an optimistic perspective, focusing on the idea that current waste can be addressed, while future plastics can be transformed into reusable resources within a specific version of a circular economy.

overlooking the systemic inequities inherent in plastics production benefits and waste burdens.

The shift of responsibility is also accomplished by employing discourse that individualizes both the problem and its solutions, highlighting the roles and obligations of individual consumers. These strategies assume that individuals possess autonomy and adequate information, enabling them to make informed decisions and potentially incentivizing them to act in specific ways (Lamb et al. 2020). For instance, the 2019 WWF report (Coca-Cola Company 2019) highlights a Coca-Cola campaign in Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands with the slogan “Don’t Buy Coca-Cola If You’re Not Going to Help Us Recycle.” Coca-Cola introduced this campaign as a “bold approach” to reducing their waste contribution, claiming to be the first in its sector to make a clear commitment towards recycling by using their brand to encourage consumers to recycle their packaging.<sup>4</sup> Against the backdrop of the classic Coca-Cola red, the campaign depicts the aforementioned slogan underscored by two white outstretched arms reaching towards one another and forming the shape of a bottle where their hands meet. The campaign ran through the 2019 summer on billboards in major city centers, TV advertisements, and at public events and festivals. This campaign exemplifies the discourse of individualized responsibility. It shifts the responsibility for plastics waste issues onto individual consumers, emphasizing the importance of environmental citizenship in consuming Coca-Cola products. This discursive approach is observable in numerous other WWF programs, such as recycling competitions in India, canal cleanups organized by schools in the Netherlands, sustainable tourism education initiatives in Indonesia, and antilitter campaigns in Estonia. These programs and the discourses they advance reinforce the notion that the primary issue concerning plastics waste lies with end-of-life consumers, which I argue is a process of “scapegoating responsibility.”

Deflection onto individuals is also achieved by framing the use of plastics for packaging as consumer driven. Bea Perez, Coca-Cola’s senior vice president for sustainability and public affairs, stated in a 2020 interview with the BBC at the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos that “business won’t be in business if we don’t accommodate consumers.” She explained that some customers prefer plastic due to its lightweight and resealable nature and that moving away from plastics may alienate them. Presenting this decision as an accommodation for consumers portrays the issue as a business choice driven by public demand. This framing avoids corporate responsibility and the “constellations of influence” (i.e., media, marketing, pricing, etc.) impacting individual actions, including decades of targeted marketing campaigns by the plastics and petrochemical industries aimed at normalizing single-use plastics (Lamb et al. 2020; Meikle 1995).

4. Arthur, Rachel (2019). “Don’t buy Coca-Cola if you’re not going to help us recycle!” Coca-Cola launches recycling campaign.” Beverage Daily.

Strategies of redirecting responsibility are widely recognized as key tactics for deflecting industry accountability for the plastics crisis (Tangpuori et al. 2020). They also highlight the enduring entanglement of industry and mainstream environmental narratives that have shaped policy approaches by emphasizing individual conduct and responsibility based on ideals of environmental stewardship (Levy and Newell 2005). For instance, the infinite recycling symbol, initially embraced by environmentalists in the 1970s, was later co-opted to advance corporate agendas to normalize individual responsibility for recycling, effectively shifting blame away from industrial production practices (Dunaway 2015).

These representations oversimplify complex environmental issues, diverting attention from the structural inequalities intertwined with plastics consumption and waste disposal. They assume universal access to adequate and safe waste management facilities, a far cry from reality for many. In some regions, waste management resources are disproportionately allocated to wealthier neighborhoods, leaving low-income and historically marginalized communities underserved. In cases in which waste management resources are lacking, a common scenario in low-income Global South communities, consumers often resort to alternative, harmful methods like burning plastics waste, which releases toxins and heavy metals into the air. These pollutants lead to various health problems, including rashes, nausea, headaches, nervous system damage, and heightened risks of heart disease and respiratory conditions like asthma and emphysema (Verma et al. 2016). Representations of universal responsibility and vulnerability diffuse accountability across all stakeholders, disregarding how factors like race, class, gender, and sociocultural characteristics influence both responsibility and vulnerability. As Dunaway (2015, 77) points out, “the idea of environmentalism as salvation through self-improvement [threatens] to deflect attention from the power of collective agents and to focus instead, relentlessly and obsessively, on the individual self.”

### Pushing Nontransformative Solutions

The WWW initiative promotes solutions for a circular economy that are fundamentally nontransformative, employing neoliberal discourses that embody technological solutionism and market efficiency. These discourses ultimately present plastics and industry actors as central to the solution. Technological advances are presented through discourses of “technological optimism,” a discursive strategy that diverts attention from (near-term) regulatory approaches by emphasizing the long-term (and sometimes highly uncertain) potential of technological solutions (Lamb et al. 2020). Future promises of technologies take precedence over tangible progress toward achieving Coca-Cola’s plastics waste reduction goals. Technological feats are characterized as “progress toward an exciting future beyond fossil fuels” (Coca-Cola Company 2019, 14), having “big potential” (15), and serving as “proof of concept for what the technology

may achieve in time" (15). The use of forward-looking statements emphasizes how technological optimism can conceal past technological failures and create "technological myths" of sustainable and circular economic futures just a few years away (Tangpuori et al. 2020). These discourses also promote the notion that technological fixes are ideologically neutral, obscuring the reality that complex ecological problems, like plastics pollution, are politically charged (Taffel 2021).

For decades, Coca-Cola has been setting and falling short of sustainability goals contingent on technological improvements. As early as 1990, Coca-Cola pledged to source 25 percent of polyethylene terephthalate (PET) from recycled materials (Tangpuori et al. 2020). However, as of 2021, its use of recycled materials stands at only 9.7 percent. This failure to achieve recycled material design goals underscores a significant drawback of voluntary industry pledges and exemplifies the discursive strategy of "all talk, little action." While corporations may be applauded for their ambition to meet specific self-prescribed governance goals, they frequently fall short of these benchmarks and face little accountability for their failures (Clapp 2005; Dauvergne and Lister 2012).

Similar issues of shifting targets and lack of accountability are evident in the current WWW campaign. For example, PlantBottle, introduced in 2009 as a partially plant-based packaging material technology, was initially presented as a solution to reduce Coca-Cola's plastics usage in its bottles. The 2018 WWW report (Coca-Cola Company 2018) extensively referenced PlantBottle as a central element of Coca-Cola's design strategy to achieve plastics waste reduction targets. This launch was accompanied by a commitment that all PET plastic bottles would transition to PlantBottles by 2020, with a 30 percent plant-based material composition. However, in the subsequent 2019 WWW report (Coca-Cola Company 2019), PlantBottle was mentioned only once, with no reported progress on its expanded usage. Instead, the report emphasized multiple bio-based plastic alternatives in development. The 2020 report (Coca-Cola Company 2021a) made no mention of PlantBottle or previously cited bio-based materials, shifting the focus back to earlier pledges regarding enhanced plastic recycling technologies. In the 2021 WWW report (Coca-Cola Company 2021b), PlantBottle reappeared, with plant-based plastics described as a material technology destined to "play a critical role in our overall PET mix in the future." Yet, there was no acknowledgment of the unmet 2020 objective. The PlantBottle example again illustrates the lack of accountability for meeting self-prescribed corporate environmental governance goals.

To promote recycling as a solution, Coca-Cola employs "no stick, just carrots" discourses, portraying market incentives as the primary driver of change, while depicting regulatory policies as burdensome and paternalistic. For instance, marine plastics pollution is framed as an opportunity linked to the advances in debris capture and enhanced recycling technologies. The Clean Currents Ocean Coalition, a partnership between the Coca-Cola Foundation and the Benioff Ocean Initiative, characterizes the enormity of the marine debris

problem as “an opportunity for implementing high-impact, cost-effective intervention strategies in polluted rivers around the world.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the 2019 WWW report (Coca-Cola Company 2019, 15) states that progress in “enhanced recycling” technologies demonstrates that “one day, even ocean debris can be recycled and reused in food and drink packaging ... reducing the amount of virgin PET plastic needed from fossil fuels.”

Coca-Cola supports its framing of plastics waste as a commodity by describing existing and emerging economies that will facilitate its commodification. Casper Durandt, head of sustainable packaging and agriculture, stated, “If you guarantee a market for your [used] bottles, people will start collecting them,” regarding a bottle buyback program in South Africa (Coca-Cola Company 2018, 27). The assumption is that recycling infrastructure and technological solutions will be sustained by the potential market value of recycled plastics and the growth of a recycled plastics economy. This pervasive discourse, rooted in logics of neoliberal environmentalism and market efficiencies, simplifies human behavior, assuming that individuals are solely influenced by fiscal incentives and underlying environmental ethics (Bernstein 2001; Pathak 2023). These logics obscure the factors that influence an individual’s engagement with plastics waste economies while justifying behaviors of overconsumption (Taffel 2021). Moreover, this particular framing of a circular economic future underplays the public health hazards and exploitative labor practices needed to attain this future.

Plastics recycling poses significant health risks, particularly for low-income and marginalized communities living near or working in recycling facilities (Mah 2021; Martuzzi et al. 2010). Exposure to petrochemicals and heavy metals through plastics production and recycling processes is associated with diseases like cancer, lung disease, and neurological damage (Mudu et al. 2014). Dioxins have been detected in the breast milk of women engaged in recycling labor, putting infants at risk of increased developmental and neurological damage (Tue et al. 2014). This simplistic framing of recycling conceals the complexity of the plastics pollution problem and the hazards of recycling solutions. It renders the problem technical in a way that lends itself to purely technical fixes without addressing the root cause of the crisis, which is the overproduction of toxic and wasteful plastics (Li 2007).

## Emphasizing the Downsides

The WWW campaign employs texts and images that suggest the downsides of plastics mitigative actions, using discourses that make an “appeal for social justice” and an “appeal for well-being.” These discourses position the livelihoods

5. Benioff Ocean Science Laboratory, “Cutting River Plastic Waste,” available at: [https://boi.ucsb.edu/active\\_projects/river-plastics-pollution](https://boi.ucsb.edu/active_projects/river-plastics-pollution), last accessed February 5, 2024.

that stem from plastics waste commodification and recycling economies as mechanisms for achieving social justice and improved well-being. Conversely, regulatory approaches are presented as ineffective and burdensome to society (Lamb et al. 2020).

For instance, the 2018 WWW report (Coca-Cola Company 2018) highlights a South African case in the early 2000s in which plastics waste was widespread and recycling rates were low; in response, the government proposed a package tax. Coca-Cola advocated for an alternative approach, the PET Recycling Company (PETCO) model, presenting it as a more cost-effective alternative to a government-run deposit–return system. This narrative is repeated throughout the reports, emphasizing Coca-Cola’s role in enhancing recycling governance in various countries, such as Estonia, Mexico, and the United States, without relying on regulatory policies. Concurrently, the images that accompany this text depict local individuals happily engaged in waste-related activities. Pairing these texts and images reinforces the notion that these solutions align with the social and economic justice goals of local communities. However, I argue that such paired images and texts perpetuate uneven representational rhetorics of waste labor, further normalizing unequal waste burdens.

Uneven representational rhetorics serve as a discursive strategy to legitimize power asymmetry and authority of certain actors over others. These rhetorics have been found across legal, conservation, political, and corporate discourses, justifying why (or why not) external actors intervene in governance arrangements (see Dunajeva and Kostka 2022; Stella 2007; Welker 2014; West 2016). For instance, Regis Tove Stella (2007), in *Imagining the Other: The Representation of the Papua New Guinean Subject*, explores the production and impact of uneven representational rhetorics concerning the colonial representations of Papua New Guinean people. Stella highlights how the “savage” stereotype in Western thought was legitimized through a discursive strategy he terms “twinning,” which associates specific people with particular environments. In the Papua New Guinean context, twinning occurred by contrasting the perceived primitiveness of the native landscape with the supposedly civilized and developed colonial landscape. This approach linked Papua New Guinean people to their untamed surroundings, enabling European colonizers to mask their unfamiliarity with the landscape while asserting their superiority and right to control it.

Much like this case, twinning is evident in the images used in the WWW reports, creating an uneven representation of plastics waste labor. Images, scattered throughout the reports, portray people of color, predominantly from the Global South, engaging in various activities related to plastic waste, such as sorting packaging for recycling, processing plastics in recycling facilities, or participating in beach and waterway clean-up efforts within programs presumably supported or led by Coca-Cola's WWW initiative. People of color, predominantly from the Global South, are portrayed engaging in various activities related to plastics waste, such as sorting for recycling, processing plastics in recycling facilities, or participating in beach and waterway cleanup efforts within

programs presumably supported or led by Coca-Cola's WWW initiative. Notably, out of the forty-one photos of individuals involved in plastics waste-related tasks found in the WWW reports spanning from 2018 to 2021 (Coca-Cola Company 2018, 2019, 2021a, 2021b), thirty-three depict people of color, while only four feature white individuals participating in such activities. Photos depict anonymous and seemingly happy individuals engaged in waste work. For example, one photo shows a group of women assumingly somewhere in southern Africa based on the text that the image is paired with, smiling at the camera as they sort through mounds of plastic bottles. Another photo presents a similar scenario with a different group, beaming while working alongside the conveyor belt of a recycling sorting system. These images representing waste workers and accompanying texts serve to normalize and legitimize plastics waste economies for specific people in specific geographies. They depict local people as willing and able solutions to the problem, seemingly motivated by the commercialization of plastics waste while concealing the associated risks and exploitation tied to waste-based livelihoods. Their anonymity also universalizes these solutions, demonstrating that these technical fixes and market-based solutions are universally relevant and effective. Their absent voices throughout the WWW reports indicate a lack of representational sovereignty over their labor and livelihoods, obscuring the lived realities of their work and concealing the exploitation and harm for which such programs have been criticized.

The WWW campaign highlights the PETCO in southern Africa as a notable success story in developing a local recycling economy. Established in 2004 by a Coca-Cola executive as an alternative to state-run waste management, PETCO South Africa is said to have substantially increased recycling rates from less than 10 percent to 67 percent while creating approximately 65,000 "income opportunities" (Coca-Cola Company 2018).<sup>6</sup> In 2018, the program expanded to Kenya, which Coca-Cola also praises for raised recycling rates from 5 to 40 percent. However, this narrative stands in stark contrast with a recent plastics pollution audit in Kenya, revealing that 41.57 percent of PET plastics were linked to the Coca-Cola Company (Clean Up Kenya 2021). PETCO Kenya has been both lauded for offering livelihood opportunities by formalizing the plastics recycling economy and criticized for maintaining poor working conditions and establishing a recycling monopoly that pays unlivable wages.

A local Kenyan NGO, Clean Up Kenya, expressed these concerns: "We, therefore, want to protest in the strongest terms possible that the way Coca-Cola is handling the plastic bottles crisis meets all the characteristics of corporate con-man-ship and slavery, and human rights and child labor violations. We are then left disgusted by your media campaigns highlighting the success of PETCO

6. The statistics on household recycling rates from other sources range from 10 to 46 percent.



Kenya recycling initiatives while being openly blind to the human cost of your programs.”<sup>7</sup> This stark contrast between corporate narratives and lived realities illustrates how oversimplified depictions of plastics economies and market incentives can produce unjust and even harmful outcomes in the communities where these programs are implemented. False narratives of success not only directly impact vulnerable communities involved in these systems but are also used to justify the expansion of such solution making. This program has now expanded into Tanzania and Ethiopia and serves as a model for recycling solutions in Southeast Asia. These forms of representation strip individuals and communities of their representational and rhetorical sovereignty while persuading the global consumer citizen that waste labor and the material relations between plastics waste and people in the Global South are productive and beneficial for all.

## Conclusions

This research challenges the effectiveness of political CSR in addressing the global plastics pollution crisis. Focusing on Coca-Cola’s WWW initiative, it raises questions about problem representations advanced by MNCs, the actions they undertake, and the consequences of these actions on directly affected communities. Despite MNCs’ potential to drive transnational change in tackling the plastics pollution crisis, I illustrate the tension that emerges between corporate agendas and environmental imperatives. Coca-Cola’s discursive power frames the plastics pollution problem in ways that limit the political horizons of solutions to neoliberal, market-based approaches that deflect blame and instead allow them to further marginalize impacted populations.

Texts and images work in dialogue to construct the WWW narrative of the global plastics waste crisis and the specific pathways to solving it. Nontransformative solutions that prioritize corporate agendas are legitimized through scientific rhetorics of seemingly objective and straightforward technological fixes. Racialized representations of waste workers further justify uneven burdens of plastics waste labor, crucial for globalized circular economic futures. This analysis shows how CSR discourses entrench corporate values into mainstream norms of plastics waste and justify the forms of action that MNCs implement. It also demonstrates how the materiality of plastics pollution complicates plastics governance and empowers corporate influence in ways that obscure “ecological shadows of plastics consumption” and allow MNCs to assert leadership in governance systems globally (Dauvergne 2019).

By examining corporate discursive representations of plastics pollution problems, governance actions, and local consequences, this study contributes

7. Betterman Simidi M., “Coca-Cola’s Despicable Operations in Kenya,” Clean Up Kenya, May 10, 2010, available at: <https://cleanupkenya.org/coca-colas-despicable-operations-in-kenya/>, last accessed February 5, 2024.

to ongoing debates on the role of corporations in global environmental governance, demonstrating that MNC influence in environmental governance can lead to inequitable governance outcomes. Specifically, this research unveils the complex dynamics between corporate initiatives, public representations, and actual outcomes, exposing how discourses legitimize and perpetuate inequities among MNCs, host countries, and local communities. By interpreting these actions through a lens of race and inequality, this study sheds light on the uneven representational rhetoric within CSR discourses, revealing how MNCs' discursive power obscures the unequal distribution of plastics waste burdens.

To address the plastics problem, it is crucial to emphasize equitable collaboration that considers the significant influence and potential of MNCs in global environmental governance. Recognizing the inherent tension between MNCs' primary interests, which are centered on economic growth and market expansion, and the transformative approaches needed to address plastics pollution highlights the broader influence of economic and political structures shaping corporate behavior (Levy and Newell 2005). This tension underscores the importance of prioritizing just and transformative approaches to plastics governance that aim to reduce the production of toxic and wasteful plastics while challenging dominant corporate visions of a circular economy. If equitable solutions to global plastics pollution are to be realized, we must think critically of the systemic inequities linked to CSR and whether CSR approaches can be structured in a way that can lead to effective and equitable approaches to plastics pollution.

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