

Marquette University
e-Publications@Marquette

Communication Faculty Research and Publications

Communication, College of

1-1-2012

The World is a ... Network: Social Media and Cause Networks in the Girl Effect Movement

Kati Tusinski Berg

Marquette University, kati.berg@marquette.edu

Sarah Bonewits Feldner

Marquette University, sarah.feldner@marquette.edu

Published version. "The World is a ... Network: Social Media and Cause Networks in the Girl Effect Movement" in *New Media and Public Relations Second Edition*. Eds. Sandra Duhé. New York: Peter Lang, 2007: 169-177. [Publisher Link](#). © 2012 Peter Lang Publishing Group. Used with permission.



The World Is a...Network

Social Media and Cause Networks in the Girl Effect Movement

Kati Tusinski Berg
Sarah Bonewits Feldner

What if there were an unexpected solution to the problems of global poverty and disease? The Girl Effect, an online movement that began in 2008, offers an unexpected solution—a girl. This movement exists at the intersection of corporate social responsibility, corporate philanthropy, and the integration of social media in public relations practice. In this case analysis, we argue that the Girl Effect campaign is at the center of a “cause network” created through the use of social media.

In 2008, a provocative online video stating, “The world is a mess” began spreading virally (see <http://girleffect.org/>).¹ So began “The Girl Effect,” an initiative created by the Nike Foundation to encourage philanthropic and government investments in girls. The campaign focuses on the value of providing opportunities for women and girls to make simple but meaningful changes that can impact their own lives, as well as their communities.

The Girl Effect is notable because it has expanded beyond a “campaign” to become a movement—entirely through the innovative use of technology. We argue that the Girl Effect represents a new era of networking and coalition building in public relations theory and practice. Ultimately, we suggest the concept of *cause networking* as a means of understanding the ways in which technology shapes public relations practice as it relates to philanthropy and corporate social responsibility. In this chapter, we examine the Girl Effect campaign to explore network creation in an online environment and its impacts on corporate foundation and philanthropic work.

Corporations, social enterprise and communication in an age of social networking

As a case, the Girl Effect is both intriguing and enigmatic. Because the movement exists primarily online, it is difficult to characterize the nature of the organization itself. Further, although the cause itself is clear (i.e., the need to invest in girls for global economic development), what is less clear to the casual observer is who is backing the initiative and who (if anyone) is seeking to benefit from the movement. A visitor to the Girl Effect website would not immediately be aware of the origins of the movement. Indeed, it took the authors several visits to the website to trace the funding back to corporate giant, Nike, Inc. The line of funding is indirect and masked. Nike, Inc. mentions its Nike Foundation in its annual report as a part of its corporate social responsibility efforts. Yet, the Girl Effect is not noted on the Nike, Inc. website (www.nike.com) itself. However, a visit to the Nike Foundation website (<http://www.nikefoundation.org/>) suggests that the primary program of the Nike Foundation is, indeed, the Girl Effect.

Clearly, a relationship exists between Nike, Inc. and the Girl Effect, which suggests the Girl Effect movement might best be considered in the context of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate philanthropy. And yet, the movement does not seem to clearly fit within this framework as the links to the founding organization are masked on the primary online interface for the Girl Effect. We contend that the Girl Effect movement exists in the space of CSR and corporate philanthropy, but through its leveraging of the capabilities of social networking, it presents a new type of organizational form, the *cause network*.

Corporate roles in social enterprise

The Girl Effect is likely gaining traction because it fits within broader societal beliefs about the need for social innovations that solve social problems. Both scholars and practitioners are recognizing that publics have come to expect corporations to establish social value that exists beyond profits (Caroll, 1979; Kotler & Lee, 2005; Porter & Kramer, 2011; Werther & Chandler, 2011). At the same time, publics generally recognize that there are social problems that the civil sector cannot solve (Trivedi & Stokols, 2011). These two trends create a space for corporations to establish themselves as a part of the solution to social problems through CSR initiatives and corporate foundations.

The Girl Effect can serve as an example of social enterprise. Social enterprises are geared toward “reversing an imbalance in the social, structural and political system by producing and sustaining positive social change” (Trivedi & Stokols, 2011, p. 4). All of the messaging tied to the movement speaks to the goal of creating systemic change through “the girl effect.” Social enterprise, while often considered in the context of NGOs, also can be tied to corporate efforts. Indeed, several major outlets (e.g., *Harvard Business Review*, the Page Society, and *The Wall Street Journal*) that advise and speak to corporate issues suggest that not only *can* corporations be involved in social enterprise but that they *should* be involved.

Within the corporate context, social enterprise might best be recognized as corporate social responsibility.

Corporate social responsibility is defined as a company, firm, or brand’s “commitment to improve societal well being through discretionary business practices and contributions of corporate resources” (Kotler & Lee, 2005, p. 3). As such, CSR encompasses the “economic, legal, ethical and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time” (Caroll, 1979, p. 500). Corporate philanthropy is considered by many to be one particular aspect of CSR (Porter & Kramer, 2002). Corporate philanthropy can take many forms, but a primary vehicle for achieving philanthropic goals is the corpo-

rate foundation. These foundations are established by corporations with the aim of helping corporations fulfill the role of good corporate citizenship (Westhues & Einwiller, 2006). Corporate foundations often operate as separate entities but retain the goal of enhancing the reputation of the corporate founder. Given these defining attributes, one might imagine that the Girl Effect represents corporate philanthropy and foundation work. Yet, this case suggests that the Girl Effect's online presence and constantly evolving structure demand a more nuanced analysis.

Social networking and the networked organization

A primary challenge for classifying the Girl Effect is the nontraditional structure of the organization itself. The Girl Effect represents what many organizational communication scholars refer to as the "network organization" (see Cheney, Christiansen, Zorn, & Ganesh, 2011), which is made possible through its innovative use of social media and new technology. Social media, in this case, represent both the strategies used by movement organizers and the structure that holds the movement together.

Because social media allow for organizations to connect with multiple stakeholders, public relations practitioners and scholars are turning their attention to the role of social networking in professional communication with increasing frequency. Though there are multiple definitions of social media available, social media are characterized by the use of technology to allow for user participation and user supplied content (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009). Kent (2010) argued that social networks are best characterized by real-time interaction, reduced anonymity, propinquity, short response time, and the ability to time shift.

To date, most research on social networking/media focuses on the ways in which various organization types utilize social networking and/or how users feel about their use of social networking (e.g., Curtis et al., 2010; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Seo, Kim & Yang, 2009; Waters et al., 2009; Wright & Hinson, 2009b). These are certainly important factors to be considered. However, as Kent (2010) argued, there is more to be said about the role of social media in public relations practice. In particular, Kent asserted that public relations research should move beyond the *outcomes* of social media use to consider the *strategies* that will best inform practice. Further, scholars should seek to provide more theoretical and critical perspectives on the emerging role of social media in public relations. In this vein, we argue that although the Girl Effect certainly employs technology in innovative ways, the integration of social media in the Girl Effect creates a new kind of public relations initiative rooted in a particular type of organizational structure.

Advances in technology have led not only to changes in how we think about the interaction between organizations and individuals, but also changes in how we think about organizations themselves. The Girl Effect is referenced as a movement, but at the same time it represents a new organizational form that is structured by a network of relationships between several organizations. The network organization is "comprised of two or more organizational units from different organizations involved in a long-term, and more or less formalized relationship. The relationships of network organizations are often global in scope and reach" (Cheney et al., 2011, p. 167). The Girl Effect is an interorganizational network comprising funding organizations, philanthropic efforts, and government organizations. The website, coupled with social media, provides a vehicle for tying these organizations together into a single network.

Interorganizational relationships exist for several reasons. Shumate and O'Connor (2010) suggested three primary theories for explaining interorganizational alliances: transaction cost economics, stakeholder management theory, and collaboration theory. The Girl Effect best represents collaboration theory, which suggests that organizations partner when one organization alone cannot solve a problem. In this way, interorganizational relationships allow for a combining of resources (Cheney et al., 2011). The issue

of global economic development and the struggles of girls within this context are formidable. By creating an online interorganizational network, the Girl Effect leverages the strengths of each organization involved, thus providing greater potential for large scale impact.

In the end, the Girl Effect is a campaign that exists at the intersection of CSR, corporate philanthropy, and new communication technology. The movement utilizes technology both to create and promote partnerships between organizations and to draw numerous users into the network through social networking sites (i.e., Facebook and Twitter). The movement represents a sort of hybrid organizational form that is emerging as both the capacity of technology and our understanding of its power expand. The Girl Effect may be best understood as cause networking. By this, we suggest that the communication efforts create a virtual network that is geared toward addressing a particular cause and that cause is then advanced through network creation.

Building a cause network: The case of the Girl Effect

The Girl Effect initiative was developed and funded by the Nike Foundation along with significant financial and intellectual input from the NoVo Foundation and Nike, Inc. (Elliott, 2010; Nike Foundation, 2008; Roberts, 2010). The Girl Effect is a self-described movement that seeks to invest in girls with the aim of raising the standard of living globally. The movement has developed via social networking and the creation of partnerships with other organizations that are tackling the same issues. The hallmark of the movement is the short online videos, which not only serve as the front page for the Girl Effect website, but also appear on YouTube and Facebook. These videos have been viewed more than 2 million times, and they serve as a launching point to draw stakeholders into the movement. Beyond the videos, the Girl Effect movement largely exists in the context of the website (<http://girleffect.org/>). The website includes information on how others can join the movement, a press kit for media, and several embedded links that connect site visitors to other partnering organizations such as the Coalition for Adolescent Girls, the Population Council, and the United Nations Foundation. The aims of the movement are to create awareness about the issues, educate multiple publics, and support others who wish to become involved either through grant opportunities or by assisting them in planning their own events/organizations.

Why girls? Framing a rationale for the Girl Effect

Public relations campaigns cannot be created in a vacuum, and the Girl Effect is no different. The cause of investing in adolescent girls was developed as the result of careful research and planning (Elliott, 2010; Roberts, 2010). The movement is grounded in extensive research on the global status of adolescent girls. The research was possible because Nike, Inc. allocated resources to address these initiatives.

As a brand, Nike is known for its innovative product design, edgy advertising, and ability to push boundaries. Nike has also been a long-time advocate for girls and young women. In 1995, Nike's advertising campaign "If you let me play" drew considerable attention and praise because it advocated the benefits of girls and young women participating in sports (Elliott, 2010; Nike Foundation, 2008). In 2004, Nike's focus shifted from sports to education when the corporation established the Nike Foundation. According to Nike's corporate website:

The Foundation leverages the brand's drive for innovation and positive change, and its ability to inspire both. We believe that when girls receive support and realize opportunity for their futures, they can become an unexpected and powerful force in transforming their families, communities and the world. ("Nike Foundation," 2011, para. 2)

Subsequently, in 2008, the Nike Foundation began the Girl Effect.

The foundation provides a rationale for the campaign by suggesting that girls are the unexpected answer to global poverty. "Nike believes in the power of human potential to accomplish anything: on the field, on the court, in life. We're applying that belief to poverty in the developing world, an issue that impacts everyone's future" (Nike Foundation, 2008, para. 1). In many parts of the world, girls as young as 12 years old are forced to quit school, get married, and have children. During this time, they are also highly likely to contract HIV/AIDS. In a 2010 *New York Times* article, Leslie Lane, vice president and managing director of the Nike Foundation, explained that Maria Eitel, president and chief executive of the foundation, and Phil Knight, chairman of Nike, decided their "best investment" was an effort to "break the cycle of intergenerational poverty" by focusing on "the future mother of every child born into poverty" (Elliott, 2010, para. 15).

The Girl Effect website acknowledges that little research has been done to understand how investments in girls impact economic growth and the health and well-being of communities. However, research from a variety of sources, including but not limited to the United Nations Population Fund, Human Rights Watch, Global Coalition on Women and Aids, and the International Center for Research and Women, on issues such as population trends, educational gaps, child marriage and early childbirth, and health indicate a positive rippling effect when young women are empowered with resources (<http://www.girleffect.org/learn/the-big-picture>). For example, Fortson (2003) reported that when women and girls in developing countries earn income, they reinvest 90% of it into their families, compared to only 30% to 40% for men. Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2002) found that an extra year of primary school boosts girls' eventual wages by 10% to 20%, and an extra year of secondary school increases wages 15% to 25%. A variety of other reports is available on the Girl Effect website (<http://www.girleffect.org/learn/more-resources>) that indicates the potential impact and rippling effect of investing in girls.

Benett, Gobhai, O'Reilly, and Welch (2009) described Nike as a brand that "extols the incredible potential of the human body—and the human spirit" (p. 14). So even though the Girl Effect does not include any swooshes on its website or mention of Nike, Inc. in its narrative, a movement focused on systemic change that begins with empowering individuals strategically fits with who Nike is as a corporation.

Impacting global poverty one girl at a time

Although the specific, measurable objectives of the campaign are unknown, it is clear that the Girl Effect seeks to raise awareness about the importance of empowering girls and women through three key components: Learn. Give. Mobilize.

Learn. As a movement, the Girl Effect wants to educate people about the importance of investing in girls and women around the world. Additionally, the Girl Effect encourages people to join the conversation, talk it up, and spread the word. According to Eitel (as cited in Roberts, 2010), "The first step has been to get the world to realize the power of the Girl Effect. When you improve a girl's life, everyone benefits: her brothers, sisters, parents, future children and grandchildren" (para. 6).

Give. In order to create holistic solutions, the movement needs funds to provide opportunities for women and girls to make simple but meaningful changes that can impact their own lives, as well as their communities. Thus, the Girl Effect also encourages visitors to donate money via online or text messaging. The Girl Effect website includes the following text on the *Give* page (<http://www.girleffect.org/give>, *How Can I Give?*): "Send a girl to school. Help fight her legal case. Give her a microloan. Start making a difference. Start the Girl Effect."

Mobilize. Since the Girl Effect is a movement driven by girl champions around the globe, the website (<http://www.girleffect.org/mobilize/connect>) encourages people to become agents of change by joining "the most important conversation on the planet" because "when the power and potential of girls is raised into the global consciousness then the Girl Effect really begins and change starts to happen" (<http://www.girleffect.org/give>, *Get Involved*). Furthermore, people are invited to connect with the Girl Effect networks via Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. Followers are encouraged to share the videos, emails, tweets, and messages with others. Finally, site pages suggest that followers should wear the Girl Effect on their sleeves, on their computers, and in their offices by downloading the Girl Effect tool kit.

Ultimately, the Girl Effect is an educational awareness campaign that seeks to use strategic, innovative partnerships coupled with technology and social networking to spread the word about the importance of investing in girls and women around the world.

Championing girls: The Girl Effect's network of solutions

In part, any success of the Girl Effect can be attributed to the stylized nature of the campaign with its catchy videos and provocative messaging strategy. The Girl Effect website is the hub for information, networking connections, and motivation. However, in order to raise awareness and educate its audience, the Girl Effect relies on innovative partnerships and social networking to create a movement focused on changing the world by saving a girl.

As described on its website, "The Girl Effect is a movement driven by girl champions around the globe" (<http://www.girleffect.org/about-us>, *Girl Champions*), and these champions include a range of organizations including multi-national NGOs and government agencies, school teachers, mothers, and community leaders. In addition to the NoVo Foundation and Nike, Inc., other key partners include the United Nations Foundation and the Coalition for Adolescent Girls. The website also lists other girl champions including the International Center for Research on Women, the Population Council, CARE, the White Ribbon Alliance for Safe Motherhood, the Center for Global Development, Plan, and the Girl Hub. Additionally, BRAC (a development organization committed to fighting poverty) is included as a Girl Effect pioneer. And lastly, the Girl Effect thanks all those who work for girls every day, in schools, villages, cities, offices, agencies, and governments. Clearly, the Girl Effect is supported and endorsed by active partnerships with significant philanthropic organizations and leading non-governmental organizations. These partnerships have brought credibility, legitimacy, and international attention to the Girl Effect. The relationship between the Nike Foundation and other girl champions underscores our classification of the Girl Effect as cause networking because the organizations promote and support each other in order to solve a larger social issue.

In addition to its use of strategic partnerships, the Girl Effect relies on technology to educate, inform, share, connect, and continue the movement. In an online environment, the conventional role of the public relations agency shifts to the user who is expected to spread the message via the networking options. The campaign encourages people who visit the website to share, connect, and wear the message of the Girl Effect. In addition to the website, the campaign actively implements a social media strategy that includes YouTube videos, a Facebook page, and a Twitter account.

The Girl Effect utilizes social media to share facts and information, inspiring stories, and networking opportunities. In other words, the Girl Effect becomes the nucleus of the cause network. One way in which they do so is by posting status updates on Facebook that link to other organizations and causes. One example of a Facebook post is: "Fact: Pregnancy is the leading cause of death worldwide for women under 19. Disheartening? Yes. But, thanks to NextAid's 5Alive Campaign, here are five things you can do

RIGHT NOW to change this statistic: <http://www.nextaid.org/women/>." Even though NextAid is not a funding partner with the Nike Foundation, the Girl Effect is most concerned about sharing significant information with a captivated audience who wants to be the difference in the world. By using Twitter, the Girl Effect can respond to specific stories and opinions from other organizations such as when they tweeted, "@MicrofinanceWWB. We love this—so exciting! Thanks for sharing with us. Teaching girls to save: <http://inv.lv/m5Sapk> #banking #education." The Girl Effect also uses social media to praise its girl champions as they did with this tweet: "3 girl champs are completing 5 Ironman triathlons in 5 days 2 raise \$ for the #girlseffect—but they need ur help! <http://inv.lv/hdqYwD>." Social media also allow the Girl Effect to participate in dialogues about the various social issues facing girls and women around the world. Thus, the ability to share and connect via technology inevitably expands the cause network.

Has the Girl Effect changed the future?

The initial video suggests that investing in a girl will impact the future of humanity. Thus, one may ask if the Girl Effect has had such an impact. Since the Girl Effect is an ongoing campaign, we can only provide a programmatic evaluation of the campaign. If the number of videos viewed, Facebook likes, and Twitter followers is any indication of awareness, then the Girl Effect is making progress. As of this writing, the website has been visited more than 2.3 million times and shared more than 100,000 times. The videos have been viewed more than 2.8 million times. More than 247,000 people like the Girl Effect on Facebook, and the Girl Effect has more than 12,350 followers on Twitter.

Obviously, great strides in awareness are being made, but more substantial changes are still in the works. Jennifer Buffett (as cited in Roberts, 2010), president and co-chair of the NoVo Foundation explained:

There has been a tremendous amount of awareness-raising about the importance of empowering girls and women. However, are we moving systems toward meaningful action in terms of modifying attitudes and patterns of behavior and moving larger dollars and resources for more equitable distribution? I think we are just scratching the surface. (para. 7)

Additionally, Eitel (as cited in Roberts) noted, "Together we have touched the lives of more than two million girls, and through the Girl Effect, their families, communities and nations" (para. 13). Because limited information is available about the specific programs and opportunities created through investments from NoVo and the Nike Foundation, it is difficult to evaluate the impact of the initiatives at this time.

Enacting global stewardship

The Girl Effect has been operating since 2008 and by all appearances the movement continues to grow. Facebook updates and tweets continue to suggest that more individuals and organizations are joining the network. In this way, the network created by the Girl Effect has contributed to a larger public dialogue about the role of adolescent girls in the global economy. Only time will tell the lasting effect that the movement will have. There is certainly room for growth, and yet, if we allow the programs and individual efforts to speak for themselves, the current impact appears substantial. The Girl Effect has advanced social change by creating a large online network that joins organizations and their stakeholders and leverages the resources of this network to advocate for change.

Conclusion

The world is a mess. All girls are valuable. Invest in a girl and she will do the rest. It's not a big deal. Just the future of humanity.

The messages of the Girl Effect movement are powerful indeed. However, to have the impact promised, the movement will need to be more than powerful messages. Although a comprehensive analysis of the success of the campaign cannot yet be offered, there are a number of key issues and questions that an examination of the Girl Effect raises.

First, the case continues to illustrate the power of social networking and online communication for distributing information to broad and dispersed audiences. The issue of girls and global poverty is not a new issue. Yet, relatively few people ostensibly know about the connection between investment in adolescent girls and global economic development. The Girl Effect movement helps to draw attention to the issue in important and effective ways. Certainly, the Girl Effect can be a model for other causes that seek to deliver messages in powerful ways. However, we argue that the lessons of the Girl Effect are far greater than viewing social media as a new and efficient way to communicate a message. The Girl Effect demonstrates the ways communication technology allows for the creation of emergent organizational structures that facilitate powerful partnerships and strategic networking. The website coupled with the Girl Effect's presence on social networking sites allows the movement to gather followers and collaborators, thus strengthening the movement. The ultimate effect is the creation of a network of organizations collaborating to address a cause or what we call here a cause network. In this way, the Girl Effect stands as a model for other organizations and individuals seeking to advance a particular cause or engage in social enterprise.

At the same time that the Girl Effect provides an example for network creation via social networking, the case also suggests some ways in which the use of social networking can improve. One of the cited advantages of social media is the opportunity for stakeholder participation and stakeholder created content. Yet, the Girl Effect seems to be largely focused on pushing out information and serving as a conduit for success stories rather than engaging stakeholders and creating new meanings for the Girl Effect. The movement could explore ways in which it might embrace technology to embrace a more dialogic stance (see Feldner & Meisenbach, 2007; Kent, 2010). Adopting a more dialogic stance might allow for better enactment of the empowering messages that the movement embodies, thus creating a more significant and substantial impact. The opening video suggests that individual viewers can be a part of the solution. However, it is unclear how the current strategy truly creates a sense of agency² in visitors to the website.

Although the Girl Effect is provocative and suggests new ways that public relations practitioners could use technology in the areas of corporate philanthropy and corporate social responsibility, we suggest a certain degree of caution in this regard. First and foremost, we contend that it must not be forgotten that the Girl Effect is tied in significant ways to a larger corporate initiative. In the end, its existence online allows Nike, Inc. to be noted in the movement's messaging without being highlighted. The connection between Nike, Inc. and the Girl Effect is not hidden, as it is noted on the About Us section of the Girl Effect website, but it is certainly not prominent. This necessitates a consideration of the ethics surrounding this strategy and the aims of this philanthropic effort.

From an ethical standpoint, Nike, Inc. has put itself in a position where skeptics might perceive there to be a lack of transparency and full disclosure. Although a bit obscure, Nike's sponsorship affiliation is stated on the Girl Effect website, in Nike, Inc. press releases, and in multiple news stories. However,

since the Girl Effect is not a branded cause marketing campaign like the Nike Livestrong Collection (from which all profits from the sales of certain products are donated to Lance Armstrong's Livestrong Foundation), stakeholders might question Nike, Inc.'s involvement and intent.

Others might question whether Nike Inc.'s interest in girls and women in developing countries is a reactive approach to offset issues, such as labor and working conditions that have troubled Nike, Inc. in the past, rather than a proactive initiative to solve a social problem. In the end, The Nike Foundation denies that any commercial interests are tied to the Girl Effect (Elliott, 2010), but it does not put to rest whether this relationship is one to be modeled by other corporate foundations. In addition, we are left to wonder what the relationship between Nike, Inc., the Nike Foundation, and the Girl Effect means for each organization. That is, in what ways does the relationship enhance the reputation of each of the participating organizations? The Nike Foundation claims that the Girl Effect is purposely not branded as Nike so that the effort can more directly address issues of public policy without seeming to be directed by Nike's business needs (Elliott, 2010). Any response that we articulate at this point is largely speculative. However, we think the question is a significant one. The technology in some ways allows Nike to be connected—but only through a few hyperlinks. And, the connection and links are unobtrusive and subtle.

We will continue to monitor the Girl Effect, and we suggest that other public relations scholars and practitioners do the same. The campaign offers key insights into how we can think of technology as not simply a medium for public relations messaging but rather as a means of creating alternate organizational structures for public relations efforts. The creation of cause networks provides a simple, yet powerful solution to the challenge of making changes that address big social problems. It's not a big deal. It is just the future of public relations and corporate philanthropy.

ENDNOTES

- 1 At the time of this writing, the video was accessible through the home page, and the campaign was fully active.
- 2 The belief that one can act in ways that will actually lead to change.