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# Multimodal Aspects of Corporate Social Responsibility Communication

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## *Abstract*

This article addresses how the multimodal persuasive strategies of corporate social responsibility communication can highlight a company's commitment to gender empowerment and environmental protection while advertising simultaneously its products. Drawing on an interdisciplinary methodological framework related to corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication, multimodal discourse analysis and gender theory, the article proposes a multimodal analysis model through which it is possible to map and explain the multimodal persuasive strategies employed by Coca-Cola company in their community-related films. By examining the semiotic modes' interconnectivity and functional differentiation, this analytical endeavour expands the existing research work as the usual textual focus is extended to a multimodal one.

*Keywords:* corporate social responsibility, discourse analysis, environmental protection, gender empowerment multimodality

## *1. Introduction*

Carroll and Shabana claim that “the idea that business enterprises have some responsibilities to society beyond that of making profits for the shareholders has been around for centuries” (Carroll and Shabana 2010, 85). However, in the contemporary context, this idea has rapidly developed in ways that might have been difficult to imagine or anticipate even a few decades ago. Engaging in CSR activities and communicating transparently about them are no longer optional steps that a company might take in its race for profit. It is no longer possible to avoid taking those steps without damaging reputation, image, competitive advantage and ultimately successful survival.



One of the main explanations of this rapid-paced development is to be found in the enhanced environmental awareness of the contemporary generations of multiliterate consumers who have access and expertise to understand and employ communicative means and strategies across multiple semiotic modes and media. Actually, environmental concerns pervade all contexts of contemporary life, and the urgency of these concerns is mirrored in the extensive and diversified communication related to them:

An increasing range of multimodal texts surfaces continuously in various media in order to facilitate public understanding of irreversible environmental changes, to educate future generations in ecoliteracy, to promote green or disclose greenwashed corporate images and practices, to entertain, to inform and facilitate appropriate actions as well as responses. (Maier and Cross 2014, 109)

In this context, the communication of greening practices of companies in the wider responsibility system has also diversified dramatically in terms of the employed discourses, genres and media. This diversified communication of greening practices represents an important part of CSR activities and it is closely linked to another aspect of CSR, namely the communication of companies' concern with gender issues.

Intending to clarify some relevant aspects of how the environmental and gender issues are communicated in corporate context, this study is focused on how a major company, Coca-Cola, communicate their involvement in society in order to enhance their image and reputation among their customers, employees and other stakeholders. More in detail, the main research questions addressed in the present paper are: what kinds of values are articulated in their CSR communication? How is the communication of these values intertwined with advertising strategies?

In this context, a multimodal approach offers the possibility to analytically separate the semiotic modes that are co-deployed in the communication of specific persuasive aims, to show the modes' meaning-making individual roles and to explain how their interrelations contribute to discursive transformations of reality in the chosen data. Certainly, the main task of any multimodal analysis is to highlight how the patterned interplay of semiotic modes is used strategically to project a certain version of reality.

Due to the length of this article, the analysis will be focused only on selected communication strategies employed in one of the company's main CSR programs, namely, *5by20*. Launched in 2010, *5by20* is a program designed to empower five million female entrepreneurs throughout the company's global business system by 2020. The program has received *2013 Catalyst Award* for its outstanding accomplishments. According to the company's homepage, "hundreds of thousands of women around the world are building stronger businesses, families and communities" (*5by20* homepage, 2013) due to the

implementation of this program. The environmental initiatives are embedded in all their activities. Charlotte Oades, global director of Women's Economic Empowerment for Coca-Cola emphasizes their commitment when she claims that "we believe providing access to training, finance and support networks are the best ways to help women overcome barriers, unlock their untapped potential and build their business in a sustainable way" (*5by20* homepage, 2013).

As the company's *5by20* communication landscape is quite vast on their homepage (including numerous reports, fact sheets, infographics, interactive maps, stories, conversations, 62 films, etc.) this article will explore in detail only a series of seven community-related films created for this program. The selection of the seven films is primarily related to the overall scope of this qualitative analysis, namely to illustrate how a multimodal approach to discourse can contribute to a more detailed exploration of patterned persuasive strategies related to the communication of CSR. As we shall see below, these films have a recurrent discursive schema and therefore the number of the selected films is related also to the length and not only the scope of the article. After the presentation of data and methodological tools, the persuasive communication of strategically selected knowledge about the social actors, actions, space and time from these films will be explored in the next part of the article from a multimodal perspective.

## 2. Data

Generally, the community-related films, similar to "The making of" corporate films (Maier 2014b), share with the documentary genre several traits: organizing logic, evidentiary editing, and a prominent role of speech directed at the viewer (Nichols 2001). Simultaneously, these films are different from the traditional documentary genre because they promote both the company and its product. Actually, the characterization of "The making of" films which documents the birth of a commercial, suits the community-related films too because a distinctive feature of this genre is also a tension between a sober documentary discourse and recurrent persuasive discursive strategies.

Each of the chosen community-related films reveals this kind of tension. First of all, each of the films revolve around the life story of a woman empowered by the company: Preeti Gupta (a mother, wife and rural shopkeeper from Agra, India), Malehlohonolo Moleko (bakery owner, shop keeper and mother from Vander Bijlpark, South Africa), Zilda Barreto (recyclables collector, mother, grandmother and wife from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), Maya Ibrahim (mother, wife, bottle recycler from Manado, Indonesia), Teresita Antonio (shop keeper, mother and wife from Palawan, Philippines), Bernardita Ribamonte (shop keeper, mother and grandmother from Palawan, Philippines), and Margaret Kungu (mother, wife and mango farmer from Sagana, Kenya). Secondly, in each of the films, the company, its representa-

tives, products and activities are persuasively shown as being involved in these women's lives in an unprecedented way. The recurrent discursive schema is rather simple. The initial problems are explicitly related to the utter poverty of powerless women and to an indifference towards environment when survival is at stake. The traditional solution to the first problem has always been the hard and relentless work of these women, but it has had rather problematic outcomes: poverty perpetuation and environmental deterioration. The solution offered by the *5by20* program is revealed to solve these problematic outcomes because through the financial and educational empowerment of these women, sustainable communities that have also the environment in focus are built all over the world.

The transcription and analysis of these data has been made by segmenting each of the films at the level of shots and by using the analytical parameters mentioned above, namely social actors, social actions, time and space, in order to reveal some of the multimodal persuasive strategies employed in the CSR communication of the company. In the present analysis the focus has been on the interplay of images, speech and written texts. The table below exemplifies the method employed for recording the transcription and analytical results.


Shot Time	Visual attributes	On & off screen verbal components	Social actors and actions	Time and space
 00:27	Long shot Background (squalid environment) Middle ground (solar panes on the roof) Foreground (huge Coca-Cola billboard)	Off screen:  Preeti Gupta's words <i>I think Coca-Cola has made a huge contribution to us</i>	Company and Preeti Gupta Multimodal presentation of the company: visual representation enhanced by concurring verbal evaluation: <i>huge</i> Cognitive reaction of Preeti Gupta: <i>I think</i>	Multiple contrasting visual evaluations Temporal synchronization: past and present/future Spatial contrasting evaluations: old squalid living quarters, new solar panes and billboard

Table 1 - Sample from the table with the multimodal transcription of *Preeti Gupta* film

### 3. Theoretical framework and methodological tools

The multimodal analytical work meant to map and explain multimodal persuasive strategies employed by Coca-Cola in their CSR communication draws on an interdisciplinary methodological framework related to CSR communication, multimodal discourse analysis, gender studies and environmental communication.

As far as environmental communication is concerned, the research background for this study includes a wide range of theoretical perspectives and data: comparative analysis of environmental business discourses (Rutheford 2006), analysis of green corporate marketing (Moschini 2007; Maier 2011a and 2012a) genre analysis of corporate environmental reports (Skulstad 2008), critical historical analysis of political discourses about environmental issues (Reisigland and Wodak 2009), analysis of green advertising (Hansen 2010),

multimodal discourse analysis of online learning resources (Maier 2010), etc. The concept of “environmental discourse” adopted here is related to Mühlhäuser and Peace’ understanding of it (2006). According to them, environmental discourse refers to “the linguistic devices articulating arguments about the relationship between humans and the natural environment” (Mühlhäuser and Peace 2006, 458). Certainly, it is necessary to extend this definition through a multimodal perspective because the data explored in this study includes several other semiotic modes apart from language.

We have always communicated multimodally, namely through several semiotic modes apart from language, but the long standing focus on language as a starting point in traditional research has hindered the exploration of all semiotic modes and their meaning-making interplay for quite a long time. However, during the last two decades, it has been acknowledged that we need to avoid a partial view on communication and to explore how “people orchestrate meaning through their selection and configuration of modes” (Jewitt 2009, 15). The potential of multimodal research has been demonstrated in studies about various contexts from art to business and politics. In the study of corporate communication, multimodal approaches have been employed for investigating issues related to advertising (Kress 2010; Kress and van Leeuwen 2001; Machin and van Leeuwen 2007; Stöckl 2004), trans-media franchises (Lemke 2009), multimedia resource kits (Maier 2008a, b), corporate films (Thibault 2000; Maier 2011b), corporate communication in general (Maier 2012b, 2014a), etc.

As the purpose of any multimodal investigation is to understand how the semiotic modes and their intermodal relations recontextualize social reality in complex texts, a social semiotic perspective upon discourse has also been adopted. According to Kress and van Leeuwen, “discourses are socially constructed knowledges” (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001, 4) and, from this point of view, “knowledge is selective, and what it selects depends on the interests and purposes of the institutions that have fostered the knowledge” (van Leeuwen 2005, 109).

Van Leeuwen’s conceptual framework lies at the core of the analytical work of this study. When analysing discourse, van Leeuwen (2008) explores how reality is recontextualized or transformed in various texts through selection of knowledge in processes of *inclusion* (*identification, functionalization, passivation, association, etc.*), *exclusion, rearrangement, addition* (legitimations and evaluations) and *substitution* (*generalization and symbolization*). Indeed, if social actors are included or excluded from a discourse, this has a transforming impact upon how a specific social practice is recontextualized. In connection with this process, van Leeuwen shows that “some exclusions leave no traces in representation, excluding both the social actors and their activities” (van Leeuwen 2014, 277). However, when social actions or their consequences are included and only some social actors are excluded, “the

exclusion does leave a trace” (van Leeuwen 2014, 278), and questions about the identity and roles of those excluded actors are bound to appear. Reality is definitely altered when certain categories of actors are excluded from the discursive representation of that reality and such processes can also prevent understanding how specific social practices actually take place. The processes through which the order of events is rearranged in the discourse in order to suit certain communicative purposes contribute to the alteration of the reality too. When social actors are included in discourse through processes of *identification* and *functionalization*, they become more prominent in the discursive representation as they are identified in terms of both their particular identities (race, age and gender) and their occupations. So, while through *functionalization*, their identity is represented “in terms of an activity, ... for instance an occupation or a role” (van Leeuwen 1996, 54), through *identification*, social actors are individualized “in terms of what they, more or less permanently, or unavoidably are” (van Leeuwen 1996, 54). If they are represented through processes of *passivation*, then their role in a social practice is backgrounded because they are represented as being “at the receiving end of it” (van Leeuwen 2008, 33). The process of *substitution* also affects the representation of social actors because substitutive processes such as a *generalization* imply a form of abstraction, namely “they abstract away from the more specific micro-actions that make up actions” (van Leeuwen 2008, 69) highlighting the impact of the social actors involved in those actions or glossing over their responsibility. Furthermore, through a process of *symbolization*, social actors can be conferred heroic proportions. In the case of this transformative process, they are represented “as participating, at the same time, in more than one social practice” (van Leeuwen 2008, 47) as, for example, in one of these films where the empowered women characterize themselves as “the saviours of the world” (*Zilda Baretto* film). In order to be represented as a homogeneous group, “an alliance which exists only in relation to a specific social action or set of activities” (van Leeuwen 2008, 39), social actors can also be recontextualized through processes of *association*. In the process of recontextualization, reality is also transformed through the *addition* of legitimating or evaluating (multimodal) elements which depend on the specific communicative purposes connected to a discursive representation.

A wide range of research work has been done upon how discursive choices can produce evaluative effects which influence attitudes and practices in relation to women; among others, Cameron (2009), Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2007), Holmes (2008), Meyerhoff (1996), and Tannen (1994). As a gender researcher argues, “our discourse is drenched in gender” (Holmes 2008, 26). Therefore, the key issue of gender is addressed in this study in close connection with the social semiotic understanding of discourse. The necessity is obvious because investigating gendered discourse “entails con-

sideration of the interaction between individual agency and the larger constraining social structures within which that agency is enacted” (Holmes and Marra 2010, 4).

In what follows, the focus will be on how the relevant social actors and social actions are recontextualized in the filmic discourse because the main analytical aims of the study are related to revealing the persuasive communicative strategies that are employed in order to highlight the corporate impact on building sustainable communities.

#### *4. Social actors and actions – from gender empowerment to environmental protection*

The ways in which each category of social actors are included in the *5by20* films facilitate the communication of specific knowledge about them and the social practices they are involved in.

First of all, the identity of each empowered woman is established linguistically through her full name superimposed on the first shots and through functionalization: she is a business owner. All women are also identified through visual and verbal individualization. They are visually categorized in terms of race and age in various types of shots, but mostly close ups, usually maintaining eye contact with the viewers while telling their life story. The strategic usage of recurrent close-ups performs a relevant persuasive function. First of all, these shots are meant to minimize the distance between the represented social actors and the viewers of these films because the represented social actors and the viewers are visually brought in close proximity to each other. Furthermore, together with the women’s accompanying words and the way in which these words are uttered, these close-up shots are supposed to contribute multimodally to the overall persuasive effect of the whole film. The individualization is also realized through their words, for example as in the self-identification of a 77 years old Filipino grandmother who presents herself as “the sole breadwinner of my family” (*Bernardita Ribamonte* film).

They are also represented as homogeneous groups with common purposes and backgrounds both through visual associations and verbal generalizations and symbolizations. For example, Zilda Baretto’s words, “we are earth’s saviours” which she utters in a medium close up, are followed off screen by her proud statement “we are the saviours of the world” which accompanies a long shot of Brazilian women rejoicing in their work as recyclables’ collectors, and then a medium shot of the women smiling and holding each other (*Zilda Baretto* film). In the same film, Zilda’s concrete actions are substituted by a generalization: “We take care of the environment and that means health for everyone”. Consequently, their identity is no longer uniquely represented by their race, age or gender, but it is primarily related to their activities that have a positive impact on the environment.

The empowered women are presented as having specific relations to the other main social actors in order to strengthen the identity change representation chosen by the company. As far as the husbands are concerned, visual and verbal passivations are the preferred strategies of their visual representation. They are visualized either with the back towards the camera, in long shots or in shots which puts them in an inferior position, as in the one in which a bigger wife embraces a smaller husband. The verbal passivation is subtler, because it is implied through the stronger role of the woman in the household: men have to be helped. For example, while still acknowledging the traditional status of a wife, a woman confesses “as a wife, it is a big thing to be able to help my husband” (*Teresita Antonio* film).

Apart from the empowered women and their husbands, the other main social actors included in the films are the representatives of the Coca-Cola company. Both the company and its representatives are multimodally foregrounded. First of all, the identity of the company’s representatives included in these films is established linguistically through their full names superimposed on the first shots and through functionalization as, for example, “corporate communication manager”. They are also visually categorized in terms of race and age in mainly close up and medium shots maintaining eye contact with the viewers while explaining the company’s role in the women’s lives. It might be relevant to highlight that all the company’s representatives appearing in the films are also women. Visually, the company’s colour, logo, products appear recurrently in each film. Most of the empowered women whose lives have been improved by the company wear symbolically the red Coca-Cola clothes. Verbal and visual relational identification with the company and physical identification of the company are multimodal promotional strategies employed recurrently in these films in order to reinforce the major role of the company in the lives of the empowered women. One of the women, Malehlohonolo Moleko, says “that is my dream” (*Malehlohonolo Moleko* film) and in the next shot with a Coca-Cola container-shop, the color and logo are the first things to be seen. So, the dream can be equated with Coca-Cola. Such multimodal connections across shots push the discourse of women empowerment into plain advertising. The end of each film with the animated drawing of the Coca-Cola bottle accompanied by the company’s promotional words, “every bottle has a story, open happiness”, links once again multimodally the women’s life stories with the company and its products. The films’ continuity is in fact secured not only due to the rather thin narrative thread, but because the shots are linked multimodally through the company’s presence.

Choosing these means of multimodal representation, the selection of knowledge related to social actors contributes both verbally and visually not only to the discursive allocation of specific roles and the communication of specific values, but also to the communication of the changes undergone by



these roles and values with the concrete help of the company. The present situation of the women is verbalized through a series of *cognitive reactions* and rather *negative evaluations* of family members. For example, a family member confesses that “in our family, *we think* Maya is *a bit crazy* because she is *so ambitious*” (*Maya Ibrahim* film). However, the empowered women use only *affective reactions* and *positive evaluations* when talking about their life changing experiences provoked by the company’s initiatives: “*It feels so good* to have your own business”. The women’s cognitive reactions are related to the company’s influence and are also accompanied by positive evaluations: “*I think* Coca-Cola has made a *huge* contribution to us” (*Preeti Gupta* film). See Figures 1 and 2. The *legitimations* that colour the communicated actions reinforce the values attributed to the interrelations between the company’s initiatives, women empowerment and environmental protection. For example, one of the company’s representatives claims that “the reason why we are doing this is because we would like to build sustainable communities” (*Teresa Antonio* film). The direct involvement of the company in environmental protection activities is not visualized, but it is addressed implicitly through the way in which the women empowered through the financial and educational support of the company talk about the environment and their responsibility towards it.



Fig. 1 - *Preeti Gupta* film, shot 1



Fig. 2 - Preeti Gupta film, shot 2

Even time is manipulated multimodally in order to provide opportunities for the enhancement of the promotional touch. For example, verbally, in the temporal *rearrangement* manifested in Preeti Gupta's words: "The most important moment in my life was when I started my own shop" (*Preeti Gupta* film). These words communicate implicitly also the change of life priorities (with marriage and children taking a secondary place) caused by the company's involvement in her life. Visually, several temporal *synchronizations* materialized through spatial juxtapositions serve a similar promotional role. For example, in the same shot with Preeti Gupta talking, a cow is placed in the background and a Coca-Cola crate in the foreground, suggesting the past and the present/future of the empowered woman.

The space to which the social actors belong is marked by visual and verbal contrasting evaluations in each film. Long shots of seemingly unspoiled Eden like nature or close up shots of fresh fruits are combined with desolating long shots of polluted environment or close up shots of polluting objects. Consequently, through this choice of shots, the environment is not visualized as a background and it is thus foregrounded as a context in which social practices can take place. Verbally, contrasts are used in order to highlight the positive effect of the women (and implicitly the company) upon the environment: "She brought together a business solution to *this dry area* that grows this crop" (*Margaret Kungu* film). The sustainable business environment is foregrounded through multimodal contrasting evaluations. In *Preeti Gupta* film, the multimodal contrasting evaluation has several temporal and spatial layers: in the background, a squalid thin roof with some persons walking under it, in the middle ground on another roof, some solar panels, and in the foreground, on the bricked wall of the roof with the solar panels, a huge billboard on which a young beautiful woman is drinking a bottle of Coca-Cola while looking at the company's logo in front of her. On this shot, Preeti Gupta's words, "I think Coca-Cola has made a huge contribution to us" are superimposed.

It thus becomes evident that the physical identification and naming of these empowered women who talk so positively about the company confirm that the company is interested in minimizing the distance not only between the viewer and those women, but also between the viewer and the company. The multimodal direct address not only explicitly acknowledges the viewers as verbal direct address also does, but it also establishes an imaginary contact with the viewers, demanding something from them: to acknowledge the company's initiatives and results, and to become a part of them. At the same time, the selection of discursive processes through which men are backgrounded and local decision makers are completely excluded, is also motivated by the company's specific communicative purposes. Apart from contributing to the reinforcement of women's power to decide their fate and the fate of their environment, these discursive processes of backgrounding and exclusion might be also interpreted as a way of placing the blame for the damaging treatment of women and environment in the past and outside the company's past responsibilities.

### *5. Conclusions*

As demonstrated in this explorative multimodal analysis, the company communicates in the *5by20* community-related films how its CSR initiatives contribute to gender empowerment and environmental protection while promoting not only these initiatives but also its products. The women empowerment is multimodally communicated as a means of facilitating the transitions of women from powerless patients to confident agents that envision themselves as responsible citizens of the world and that contribute to environmental protection through building sustainable communities. By employing all the presented multimodal discursive strategies, apart from communicating changes of identities, of gender roles and of attitudes towards the environment, the films foreground Coca-Cola's core values related to human and environmental resources. The overall aim of their communicative endeavours is to provide an image of a company whose present and future community-related activities rely on values of global sustainability both in terms of enhanced awareness and recurrent initiatives. These values are articulated in their CSR communication by revealing both the company's concern with building awareness about sustainable communities and the concrete practices that the company is involved with at community level in order to insure a greener future for the whole planet. On the other hand, this documentary-like representation of the positive and concrete impact on local communities of their CSR solutions for individual enterprises is continually intertwined with advertising strategies as the company's logo and products are constantly visualized in various ways.

The present qualitative study which is focused on exemplifying the multimodal approach does not claim to provide a full-fledged analysis of all the

meaning-making strategies employed across semiotic modes in the company's community-related films. In this article, I have suggested ways in which the multimodal approach can be employed on a small multimodal corpus. Certainly, this analytical work can clearly be followed by a quantitative exploration of all the similar community-related films of the same company or of several companies. Apart from this, a more detailed analysis of a single film could also be attempted on the basis of the present study. In such an analysis, the focus could be not only at the level of the modes' meaning-making interplay, but also at the level of the sub-modes (Stöckl 2004) that can construct a semiotic mode and at the level of their distinct features too.

Such approaches are still underrepresented in academic research although various similar films have already become well-established genres in corporate communication. Therefore, we may say that it is definitely relevant to continue the detailed multimodal analysis of such genres in order to reveal how the tension between a pretence of an "objective" recount of a documentary and the strategies of the promotional discourse of a commercial is persuasively and recurrently used in contemporary corporate communication.

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