

Environmental sustainability and social (in)justice in Nike's Space Hippie campaign video – a multimodal approach

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ABSTRACT

This article argues for the usefulness of assessing organisational sustainability communication from a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, exemplified by analysis of a campaign video for a new sustainable shoe by the global sportswear company Nike. I explore how the meaning of 'environmental sustainability' is created by the video and the shoe itself and show how Nike also creates an image of the people who produce their shoes. My analysis reveals that while Nike projects an image of itself as a progressive company as regards environmental sustainability, the video simultaneously reproduces a very traditional image of the global division of labour and global interpersonal relations.

KEYWORDS

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, environmental sustainability, social responsibility, visual communication, materiality and texture

1 Introduction

Sustainability is a hot topic on the global agenda and has become a buzzword for companies and consumers around the world – spurred, not least, by the UN Sustainable Development Goals, covering topics such as inequality, health, education, climate change and environmental degradation (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>). Different organisations (corporate, public, political, etc.) increasingly incorporate sustainability into their operations and activities, and as they do so they almost invariably communicate about these initiatives to customers, employees and other stakeholders in the wider society. While the sustainability efforts of some organisations are substantive and related to their core business activities, others engage in sustainability measures that are more peripheral to their core operations, while others again brand themselves as, for example, environmentally friendly or socially responsible when their actual environmental or social impact is negative (Wickert & Cornelissen 2017). When companies engage in misleading communication practices that do not align with actual commitment to sustainability they are *greenwashing* (de Freitas Netto et al. 2020).

As a growing number of organisations integrate sustainability into their business strategy, CSR and branding, the need to critically examine how these sustainability efforts are communi-

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cated makes itself felt. As pointed out by Schons and Steinmeier, it can be difficult to distinguish between real sustainability *walk* and mere *talk* – especially for “low-proximity external stakeholders” like customers and society more generally (2016: 366). Exposing acts of greenwashing often requires specialist knowledge about a specific company, the industry to which it belongs, its products and how they are produced, the sourcing of materials, the management of waste, transportation, and more. However, the importance of critically examining sustainability communication does not limit itself to unequivocal cases of greenwashing. It is equally important to explore how different actors (i.e. corporations, institutions, politicians and other opinion formers) communicate about sustainability issues altogether, since communication about sustainability not only *reflects* different conceptions of and attitudes to the concept, but also plays a role in *forming* people’s conceptions and attitudes, and ultimately helps determine whether and how they choose to act (cf. e.g. Morsing & Schultz 2006; Kornberger 2015).

This article is based on the assumption that communication research may contribute to a more sustainable world by raising awareness about how communication constructs specific versions of reality (including topics such as sustainability) which reflect the ideas, values, interests and ideologies of those who communicate (cf. Machin & Mayr 2012: 24-26), and by providing tools for decoding and critically evaluating *how* and *what* different actors communicate about sustainability. More specifically, the article argues for the usefulness of assessing organisational sustainability communication from a multimodal perspective. To that end it uses tools from Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (e.g. van Leeuwen 2008; Machin & Mayr 2012) for the analysis of a campaign video by the global sportswear company Nike.

Nike is a prime example of a company that has branded itself through different sustainability issues. Over the years, Nike has run advertising campaigns about the empowerment of women and LGBTQ+ people, racial inequality, ageism, disabilities, sustainability, and climate change, but the company has also been the subject of lawsuits and sustained boycott campaigns about some of the same issues, for example, gender inequality (Helmore 2018) and the working conditions in its factories overseas (Zager, Solis & Adjroud 2017). Regarding sustainability, two areas seem particularly contentious for Nike: the company’s environmental performance and the manufacturing practices in its supply chain. In terms of environmental impact, the fashion industry (including sports fashion) is characterised by excessive production and consumption, depletion of non-renewable resources, extensive energy and water use, serious pollution, massive waste and a large carbon footprint (Kozłowski 2012). Much of the environmental harm caused by the fashion industry happens in developing countries and emerging economies where the goods of Nike and other fashion brands are manufactured in order to reduce production costs. This is also where Nike and other brands have engaged in unethical manufacturing practices in terms of poor working conditions, low wages, long working hours, forced labour and disregard of basic labour rights (Gilbert & Huber 2017) as testified, for instance, by Ballinger’s frequently referenced 1991 report on Nike’s factory practices in Indonesia (cf. Ballinger & Olson 1997) as well as more recent reports by the garment industry’s alliance of labour unions and non-governmental organizations, Clean Clothes Campaign (<https://cleanclothes.org/>). While conditions appear to have improved in recent years (Lutz 2015) and Nike reports to have shaped up (<https://purpose.nike.com/reports>), stories about labour conditions in the company’s supply chain still make the headlines (e.g. Henley 2021; Johnson 2021).

When Nike communicates to its customers, employees and other stakeholders, environmental sustainability and social justice in the supply chain are thus controversial topics that must be navigated. Using Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, this article examines how Nike handles these issues in the company's launch video for a new line of sustainable sneakers, Space Hippie (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sm9r_Zs2z6s). Since the primary focus of the video is the design of the new sustainable shoes, I will first explore how the meaning of 'environmental sustainability'¹ is created in the video – verbally and visually, including representations of the materiality, texture, and colour of the shoes. Interestingly, the video also shows glimpses of the production of the shoes in what appears to be Asian factories. The second part of my analysis will examine the video's representation of the American and Asian employees and the interpersonal positioning of the viewer in relation to both. For this, I will focus on *visual representation* in terms of *participants*, *processes*, and *circumstances* (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 45-113) and *viewer positioning* in terms of *gaze*, *distance*, *angle*, and *modality* (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 114-74). Throughout my analysis, I will furthermore explore Nike's use of the discursive strategies of *inclusion*, *exclusion*, *foregrounding*, *backgrounding*, *addition* and *abstraction* (Fairclough 2003: 134-55; van Leeuwen 2005: 102-12; van Leeuwen 2008; Machin 2013). My analysis reveals that while Nike projects an image of itself as a company that challenges existing ways of thinking and acting with regard to environmental sustainability, the company simultaneously reproduces a very traditional and stereotypical image of the global division of labour and global interpersonal relations in the video.

2 Analytical approach

2.1 Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

The analytical approach used in this article is that of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (e.g. van Leeuwen 2008; Machin & Mayr 2012; Machin 2013). Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (e.g. Wodak 1989; Fairclough 2003) with a multimodal slant. Both are approaches to text analysis that explore how reality is transformed into *discourse* whenever it is communicated about. Where proponents of CDA focus on verbal communication, the concepts of text and discourse are extended in MCDA to comprise all the semiotic resources involved in meaning-making: language, images, typography, colour, sound, gesture, materials, texture, space, and so on. According to van Leeuwen,

Discourses are resources for representation, knowledges about some aspect of reality which can be drawn upon when that aspect has to be represented. There may be several discourses about a given aspect of reality, making sense of it in different ways, including and excluding different things, and serving different interests. Any given discourse may be realised by different genres and different combinations of semiotic resources. (2005: 275)

1 In this article, I use double quotes for quotations and single quotes to indicate meaning.

In short, real-life situations are transformed into discourse when communicated about; and discourse, in turn, constructs different versions (and hence interpretations) of real-life situations. At a general level, proponents of MCDA examine how these transformations involve different discursive strategies. Since no communicative act – be it verbal, visual, material, sonic, etc. – can “say it all”, all communication involves the *inclusion* of some aspects of the real-life situation that is communicated about and the *exclusion* of others. That which is included in a particular discourse may, in turn, be *foregrounded* or *backgrounded*, just as meaning can be *added*, *substituted*, and *rearranged* in the process of transforming an aspect of reality into discourse. *Addition* is seen in the case of *evaluations*, *explanations*, and *legitimations*; *substitution* can involve *abstraction* and *objectification*; and *rearrangement* is seen for example, when order is imposed where none exists (cf. Fairclough 2003: 134-155; van Leeuwen 2005: 102-112). Discourses are realised by different semiotic resources, and multimodal critical discourse analysts typically draw on detailed frameworks from multimodal social semiotics for analysing these resources and their multimodal interaction – for example, language (Halliday 1994), images (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006), typography (van Leeuwen 2006), layout (Bateman 2008), colour (van Leeuwen 2011), materials (Ledin and Machin 2020: 139-165) and sound (van Leeuwen 1999).

In my analysis of the Space Hippie launch video below, I will primarily focus on what is communicated by the visual side of the video, including the look of the shoes themselves. For this, I shall draw on Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) tools for visual analysis and Ledin and Machin’s (2020: 139-165) approach to analysing materials and textures. My analysis will also include considerations about language in terms of the discursive strategies employed. Where relevant, other semiotic resources will be considered, however more briefly. Throughout, my perspective will be critical, aiming to reveal the “ideas, absences and taken-for-granted assumptions” of the launch video and thereby the ideology and power interests that are “buried” in it (Machin & Mayr 2012: 9-10).

2.2 Visual analysis

In *Reading Images. The Grammar of Visual Design* (2006), Kress and van Leeuwen present an extensive framework for visual analysis. The aspects of their approach which are particularly relevant for my analysis concern how images represent (aspects of) the world (i.e. *experiential meaning*) and position the viewer in relation to that which is represented (i.e. *interpersonal meaning*). A third aspect of Kress and van Leeuwen’s approach is that of *compositional meaning*, which concerns layout and visual weight in images. While my visual analysis will focus primarily on experiential and interpersonal meaning, I will also draw on the compositional concept of *salience*.

Visual experiential meaning is analysed in terms of *participants*, *processes* and *circumstances* (e.g. Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 45-113; Ledin & Machin 2018: 51-59). In images, participants, can be represented as *individuals* or *groups* and are furthermore *categorised biologically* by biological signifiers of age, gender and ethnicity as well as *culturally* by their hairstyle, clothes and objects with which they associated. Added to this, participants are represented as engaging in different types of *process*: *material* processes of doing, *relational* processes of being, *verbal* pro-

cesses of communicating and *mental* processes of perception, cognition and affection. Finally, the participants and the processes they are involved in are represented against a background setting, called *circumstances*.

While images thus represent aspects – and versions – of the experiential world in terms of the people, processes and settings shown, they simultaneously position the viewer in relation to that which is represented. This is called *interpersonal meaning* and is analysed in terms of *gaze*, *angle*, *distance* and *modality* (e.g. Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 114-74; Ledin & Machin 2018: 59-61). With regard to *gaze*, participants can be represented as gazing directly at the camera, which creates a sense of engagement with the viewer, while no direct gaze creates a sense of detachment. This combines with the *angle of interaction* which has a horizontal as well as a vertical dimension. In terms of *horizontal angle*, participants can be represented from a frontal angle, which signals engagement; in profile or from various oblique angles, which signal different degrees of detachment; and from behind, which creates a strong sense of detachment but can, in some cases, signal that the viewer sees what the represented participant sees, looking over their shoulder as it were. *Vertical angle* in images is associated with a sense of power. The viewer can be positioned at eyelevel with the represented participants or see them from above or below. Where eyelevel signals equality, the above angle invites the viewer to ‘look down at’ the represented participants and creates a sense of their vulnerability, while seeing participants from below invites the viewer to ‘look up to’ them and creates a sense of their strength or status. *Distance* concerns whether the participants are represented as being close to or far away from the viewer and is realised through the visual choices of close shot, medium shot, long shot, etc., which create a sense of either intimacy or remoteness. The last interpersonal category, *modality*, concerns (not the truth but) the truthfulness of the representation, that is, whether what we see in an image looks the way we imagine it would have done if we had been there (cf. van Leeuwen 2005a: 160-77). There are several markers of visual modality: articulation of detail, background, light and shadow, depth and colour. If any of these markers has been perceptibly manipulated so that the representation no longer looks the way we imagine it would have looked if we had been there, an interpersonal signal is made, inviting the viewer to interpret the image in a particular way. For example, perceptible colour grading can add a sense of mood to an image, while decreased articulation of background details typically indicates that the circumstances are unimportant. In both cases the modality is lowered, and the viewer is thereby invited to interpret the image in a particular way.

Finally, *compositional meaning* concerns the composition of images in terms of where elements are placed in their layout (called *information value*); what is represented as belonging or not belonging together by means of *framing* and *linking*; and what is given visual weight and hence *salience* in an image. The aspect of compositional meaning that is most relevant for my analysis is that of *salience* (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 201-3; for a critical discussion of the concept, see Nørgaard 2019: 125-6). Salience concerns properties that make elements stand out and draw the viewer’s attention. This can be done in different ways in images. Certain elements (i.e. people, animals, objects, buildings) may carry visual weight because of qualities such as their size, shape, number, colour, mode of representation and sharpness of focus, which make them

stand out amongst other elements in an image. Arguably, some objects such as the human face and figure, animals and bright colours automatically attract attention (Bateman 2008: 60-2), as do potent cultural symbols such as a national flag, a gun and a crucifix (Machin 2007: 132). In addition to salience created by elements that stand out and draw attention because of their visual weight in an image, an element can also be contextually salient in cases where it “violates a perceiver’s prior knowledge and expectations” (Guido 2001: 10).

The meaning of a particular image is the result of the interplay of all the different choices made. For example, the combination of direct gaze and a frontal horizontal angle would signify high engagement between a represented participant and the viewer, and these interpersonal choices would interact with experiential choices such as whether the represented participant is involved in the process of smiling (positive engagement) or frowning (negative engagement). Added to that, the participant in question could be visually salient by wearing red clothes amongst a group of people in black or by being the only participant represented with direct gaze from a frontal horizontal angle in a group of participants who are represented from an oblique angle with no direct gaze.

2.3 Analysis of materials and textures

The semiotics of materials and textures is receiving increasing attention in social semiotics and MCDA. For example, Abousnnouga and Machin (2013) investigate the materiality of war monuments; Aiello and Dickinson (2014) examine the material features involved in the redesign of a number of Starbucks stores; Johannessen and van Leeuwen (2019) address the materiality of writing; and Nørgaard (2019) explores the meaning created by paper and other material choices in the novel. As pointed out by Ledin and Machin in their *Introduction to Multimodal Analysis* (2020: 139-65), materials and textures are increasingly deployed not only for their functional properties but also for the meanings they can create. If we wish to understand how textures and materials are used in communication, we need a descriptive language to describe these resources in a systematic way. Ledin and Machin present a preliminary system of tools that can be applied for analysis of meaning-making through such resources. They list common materials (e.g. wood, concrete, plastic, paper, metal) and dimensions of texture (e.g. resistance, regularity, naturalness, viscosity) and consider the meaning potential of both. The authors emphasise that the meaning potential of a given material depends on its texture and *vice versa* as well as on the specific context of use. An example of this is seen in my analysis of the Space Hippie sneakers below. Even though a material such as (synthetic) rubber is not usually associated with sustainability, such meaning is arguably activated contextually by the rough texture and colour of the soles.

In my analysis, I include considerations about the meanings created by the Nike Space Hippie shoe itself through its materials, textures, and colours. Since my object of analysis is the Space Hippie launch video, my analysis will not include tactile features that I have actually felt when touching the shoes, but only consider such features as they are represented in the video. This is not very different from the experience of seeing the shoes worn by someone else in real life. As pointed out by Ledin and Machin, “textures can not only be touched but also be seen and imagined as tactile experiences. When we walk into a building, we need not touch the surfaces

to experience them as having textures” (2020: 139). Even when we cannot touch them, textures and materials play a role in our experience of objects.

Textures and materiality are areas that deserve more attention in multimodal studies, as testified, for instance, by the preliminary nature of Ledin and Machin’s approach. However, even though their basic list of common materials does not include rubber and textiles, which are the (visible) materials of the Space Hippie sneakers, their list of textures includes dimensions that are relevant for the analysis of those materials. Despite its preliminary nature, the approach is furthermore analytically relevant in a more general sense, by encouraging the acknowledgement that all materials and textures may have a meaning potential and be deployed for communicative purposes.

3 Analysis of the Nike Space Hippie launch video

3.1 Environmental sustainability: the shoe

The Space Hippie launch video presents a new line of sneakers, announced in February 2020 and released in June the same year. The shoes are made from recycled materials such as factory scraps, recycled water bottles, T-shirts and yarn (<https://www.nike.com/dk/en/space-hippie>). The video tells the story about trash that is transformed into new sustainable shoes and is characterised by a discourse of environmental sustainability throughout. It is structured as a classic narrative with a beginning, a middle and an ending: beginning with piles of trash; continuing with the process of the Nike designers developing the ideas and the shoe; and ending with images of the final product. From a multimodal perspective, even a short video like this 2.39-minute launch video is rich in elements that could be chosen for analysis. In the following, I will focus on key elements that contribute to the construction of the video’s environmental sustainability discourse.

In narrative terms, the first shots of the video set a scene of *disequilibrium* that ensures *tellability*, i.e. that which provides narrative interest and makes the story worth telling (cf. Herman 2007: 9-10; Maagaard 2016: 2).² We here see piles and bales of waste materials accompanied by first a male and then a female voice adding the negative *evaluation* of respectively “We’re in a **race to save ourselves**” and “You’d be crazy not to have **anxiety around climate change** right now”. Where “anxiety” and “climate change” in the second utterance are evaluative nominals with clear negative connotations, the nature of the evaluation involved in the metaphor of being in “a race to save ourselves” may be more ambiguous. While the post-modification, “to save ourselves”, has negative connotations, presenting the situation through the nominal construction’s head noun, “race”, arguably softens the negative evaluation in the given context. A race can, of course, be stressful and lost. However, it can also be won, and in the context of Nike’s characteristic discourses of “just do[ing] it”, “what it takes”, etc. and the company’s focus on successful sports stars, connotations of possibly winning the race may be activated. Alto-

² Where narratives typically begin with a state of equilibrium (i.e. balance or order), then progress to disequilibrium and finally restore equilibrium (Herman 2007: 9-10), Nike’s omission of an initial state of equilibrium adds to the urgency of the narrative, emphasising that humanity is already in a precarious state of imbalance.

gether, the metaphor taps in with Nike being a sports fashion company. In addition to helping people win races through the right choice of sportswear, attitude and lifestyle, the video seems to imply that Nike also aims to help us win another race, the race against climate change, by means of yet another new shoe, Nike Space Hippiie.

While the visuals of this part of the video show images of piles and bales of waste materials, it is worth noticing that the viewers are positioned interpersonally at a certain distance in relation to the represented waste as exemplified by Figure 1. This has the effect of not only distancing the viewer from the waste, but also of making the amount of waste look less vast than would be the case with the choice of a closer distance. The far distance results in shots where the trash does not take up the entire frame but is surrounded by buildings, trees and blue sky (i.e. positive visual *evaluation*) and furthermore allows the viewer to discern the limit to the extent of the trash. By including the images of waste, Nike seems honest and transparent in its communication, yet at the same time, the visual grammatical choice of distance makes the environmental problem of which the company itself is a part seem less overwhelming than might otherwise have been the case.

Figure 1. Piles of waste (Nike Space Hippiie launch video, © NIKE, Inc.)



The short and relatively negative beginning is immediately followed by images of machines processing different materials and of Nike designers talking directly to the camera, now producing verbal expressions of positive *evaluation*: “We have this **optimistic urgency** that we have to get after things” and “We’re **on a journey to make the most sustainable shoe ever**”. Where the meaning potential of “urgency” can be both negative and positive, the evaluative adjective “optimistic” here adds a positive quality to the noun. As for being “on a journey to make the

most sustainable shoe ever”, this is clearly also a positive statement in a climate-change context. What is worth noticing here is the *abstraction* involved in representing this as a “journey”. This is a positive metaphor, yet like many other metaphors, it is not very precise regarding, for example, what the journey involves and how long it will take. In van Leeuwen’s words, examples like this “abstract away from the more specific micro-actions that make up actions” (2008: 69).

The video continues on this positive note, showing people involved in and talking about the process of designing a sustainable shoe – gathering materials, sketching, talking, piecing things together. Here, the journey metaphor is elaborated verbally by the designers suggesting that sustainability is an on-going process for Nike and not just a one-off. This is emphasised not only through the experiential contents of the sentences, but repeatedly also by the use of the progressive form of the predicator: “we **have been spending** a lot of time trying to figure out how to reduce our carbon footprint”, “we **kept going** back to this phase called in situ utilisation” and “we **are working** on what it means to become a fully closed-loop economy”. That sustainability is not a one-off is furthermore stressed later in the video by the short (simple present) statement that “sustainability at Nike though is not new”, which may be seen as a kind of prolepsis, anticipating and countering criticism in advance.

The middle part of the narrative also comprises footage from space missions, comparing these to the current state of the world, explaining that

There’s this idea in space exploration that if you’re going to fly to the moon, fly to Mars, and stay there and do something, you have to create things with what you find there. You can say that there’s no resupply mission coming to Mars. There’s no resupply mission coming to Earth either. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sm9r_Zs-2z6s)

The inclusion of the space mission footage and the voiceover text is another case of *addition*, legitimising Nike’s work as an ambitious innovative mission set on producing its shoes without “resupplies”. This is a stretch since Space Hippie is only one out of Nike’s many lines of sneakers and since even this allegedly sustainable shoe is only partly sustainable. Closer scrutiny of written information provided towards the end of the video reveals that by weight it is only around half of the shoe that is made from recycled materials. However, this information is *backgrounded* multimodally by the small size of the text, the layout and consequent vertical reading direction of some of it and by its very brief occurrence on the screen – choices which make the information difficult to read (cf. Figure 2 and 3). Like the “journey” metaphor above, this talk of a “mission” is also a case of *abstraction* with positive connotations yet lack of precision (van Leeuwen 2008: 68-70).

The video ends at a state of *equilibrium* (cf. Herman 2007: 10) with trash finally turned into shoes, realised by close-up images of three different models of Space Hippie sneakers. The ending furthermore includes shots of Nike designers producing abstract one-liners such as “our job is also to help protect the future of sport” and “our job is to leave the world a better place”; a shot of the name of the shoe in a funky yellow typeface against a colourful background; and a final shot providing the same information about the sustainability of the shoes as mentioned above.

This time the information is presented in a more reader-friendly format of white text against a black background, yet again it is displayed so briefly that average readers will not be able to read much of it.

Figure 2. Space Hippiie model 01 (Nike Space Hippiie launch video, © NIKE, Inc.)



Figure 3. Space Hippiie model 03 (Nike Space Hippiie launch video, © NIKE, Inc.)



The shoe itself looks notably different from more conventional Nike sneakers (cf. Figure 2 and 3). The sole is made of light blue rubber foam with an uneven bubbly surface, speckled with distinct flecks of material in different colours. The upper part of the shoe is made of rough knitted fabrics in a beige colour that is often associated with natural textiles such as unbleached linen. Two of the models are seemingly patched together from fabric of different textures and nuances. The shoes furthermore feature an irregular embroidered orange version of the Nike logo. The logo is visually salient because of its orange colour, but it is also contextually salient (cf. Guido 2001: 10) because of its irregular embroidered nature which makes it stand out against Nike's famous streamlined swoosh.

Since the shoes are made of rubber foam and textile like many other Nike sneakers, it is not the materials in themselves but rather their textures and colours that make Space Hippie so different from the company's other lines of shoes. The dimensions of textures from Ledin and Machin's work that are most relevant for the analysis of the Space Hippie shoes are those of regularity and naturalness (cf. Ledin & Machin 2020: 152-54). Altogether, the shoes are characterised by uneven irregular textures: the uneven bubbly surface of the soles, the rough knitted fabrics of their upper part and the irregular embroidered logo. As pointed out by Ledin and Machin, regular even surfaces tend to suggest something processed, whereas uneven irregular textures suggest something more natural and unprocessed (2020: 142). From a sustainability perspective, processing requires energy and therefore has a larger negative environmental impact than something which is less processed. By its rough knitted nature and earthy beige colour, the upper part of the shoes furthermore signals something natural. As suggested by Ledin and Machin, "naturalness may be associated with what is authentic, organic and environmentally friendly" (2020: 153).

Altogether, the physical form, materiality, textures and colours of the shoes appear to create meanings such as 'rough', 'imperfect', 'natural' and maybe even '(partly) handmade' and 'recycled' because of the knitted nature of the fabric, the "embroidered" logo and the patched together design. Added to this, the accompanying utterances by the designers in the video encourage consumers to understand the meaning of the colourful flecks of the soles as 'recycled trash' and to interpret the look of the shoes as carrying the meaning potential of 'sustainable': "They look weird - that's because they are made of trash". This is another case of *addition* which is also given prominence in Nike's newsletter, on the Nike website and in other promotional materials where the look of the shoe is explained in the following way: "the unconventional appearance was part of a larger mission to reduce carbon footprint", "the roughness is part of this idea of radical transparency" and "a look that implied progress over perfection" (<https://www.nike.com/dk/en/a/sustainable-shoe-design-basics>).

When considered against the backdrop of Nike's other lines of sneakers, the look of Space Hippie makes it contextually highly salient (cf. Guido 2001: 10). It clashes with the consumers' previous experience and consequent expectations regarding the appearance of a pair of Nike sneakers and invites us to think about its meaning. The special look of the shoes is a semiotic choice that plays a significant role in branding the shoes as sustainable and the company that produced them as concerned with sustainability.

To sum up, the launch video has a clear focus on environmental sustainability and the design of the shoes. It is characterised by a central environmental sustainability discourse which is primarily realised verbally by what the designers say about the shoes and visually by the represented materiality, texture, shape and colour of the shoes themselves. In terms of discursive strategies, the video is characterised by visual and verbal *foregrounding* of the design process and of the transformation of trash into shoes. Another strategy used is that of *addition* in terms of positive evaluative statements and of the visually and verbally realised space travel analogy. While the video focuses on the recycling of materials it *excludes* other information about the environmental impact of the shoes in terms of, for example, energy use, transportation, and carbon footprint. In all fairness, it should be noted that the format of the short video only allows the company 2.39 minutes to make its point. With that and the video's otherwise clear focus on the design of the shoe in mind, it is worth noticing that some of that limited time is spent on including footage from the production of the shoes in Nike factories overseas. In the light of the company's backstory regarding social injustice in relation to its manufacturing practices, the next part of my analysis will examine how the Nike employees are represented in the video.

3.2 Social (in)justice: people, processes, settings and the positioning of the viewer

At a first glance, Nike may seem just in not only representing the designers who developed the new shoes, but also the workers who produce the shoes. Even so, my MCDA analysis below will show how the company reproduces a traditional and stereotypical image of the global division of labour and of global interpersonal relations in the video. Analytical focus will be devoted to the visual representation of the Nike employees in the video as well as to the viewer positioning in relation to these participants. My analysis also reveals how a relatively positive image is created of Nike's Asian factories by inclusion of positive visual evaluation and backgrounding of potentially negative visual evaluation.

In terms of experiential meaning, we see two general categories of participants in the video: the designers who developed the Space Hippy design and the people who produce the shoes. The designers are categorised biologically as white male and female Americans and culturally as 'hipsters' with trendy clothes, glasses, haircuts, beards, and tattoos. While the appearance of these participants does not reveal their nationality, this meaning is realised sonically by their language and accent. The American designers are represented as engaging in material processes involved in designing the new shoe as well as in verbal processes when they talk directly to the camera and thereby to the viewers about the design process. In terms of circumstances, the designers are seen in different settings – several of these are industrial backgrounds empty of people and many of the shots have aesthetically pleasing colourful (and colour coordinated) backgrounds of shelves full of textiles, large coils of thread and shoe lasts (cf. Figure 4).

Figure 4. American designer (Nike Space Hippiie launch video, © NIKE, Inc.)



Figure 5. Asian workers (Nike Space Hippiie launch video, © NIKE, Inc.)



The people who produce the shoes are characterised biologically and culturally as male and female Asians by their biological traits as well as by the characteristic conical Asian hat worn in one of the shots. One participant is represented as Asian by his accent. Furthermore, these participants are mostly shown to wear work uniforms and are represented as being engaged in the material processes involved in the actual production of the shoes (e.g. Figures 5 and 6 and the women in the background of Figure 8). As regards circumstances, the Asian workers are represented in different work-related settings: a warehouse, a sewing factory, among large production machinery and at an assembly line. In contrast to the dismal settings often seen in news items about manufacturing facilities in developing countries, the represented circumstances in the video are relatively neutral and/or *backgrounded* by lowered modality in terms of decreased focus. In Figure 8, for example, where Asian female workers in the background are sitting (presumably uncomfortably) on boxes while sewing, this potentially negative *evaluation* is decreased (i.e. *backgrounded*) by the low modality of the defocused circumstances of which the women are a part. In another shot of Asian women working at an assembly line, the background circumstances even add positive visual *evaluation* to the scene, showing a window through which trees and sunny weather is seen (cf. Figure 6).

Figure 6. Women at assembly line (Nike Space Hippy launch video, © NIKE, Inc.)



Regarding the representations of people as groups and individuals, further differences are seen. The American designers are represented as individuals in terms of what they wear and because they primarily occur in shots with only one participant. In contrast, and with only one exception, the Asian workers are represented in groups and are furthermore typically homogenised by wearing work uniforms.

Altogether, an analysis of visual experiential meaning in the video reveals a clear division of participants in terms of their biological and cultural categorisation and as regards the processes they are involved in. This division reflects the typical division of labour in multinational corporations, where employees in the industrialised part of the world are in charge of product development and design, marketing, etc. while less well-paid workers in developing countries and emerging economies produce the goods (Gilbert & Huber 2017: 451-52). Clearcut examples of this are seen in a couple of shots where people from the two groups of participants occur together, exemplified by Figure 7. In these shots, the Asian workers are represented as getting (and by implication needing) instruction, while the American participants are represented as those who provide instruction.

Figure 7. American and Asian employees (Nike Space Hippy launch video, © NIKE, Inc.)



In terms of interpersonal meaning, the video is also characterised by very clear patterns. The designers are typically seen from a frontal horizontal angle, at a relatively close distance, with a direct gaze at the viewer in high modality representations (cf. e.g. Figure 4). Together, these choices create a direct visual address and thereby invite a high degree of engagement between the represented participant and the viewer (cf. Ledin & Machin 2018: 61). These interpersonal visual choices combine with the fact that the designers talk directly to the camera and hence to the viewer.

In contrast, the Asian workers are consistently represented from oblique horizontal angles or from behind, at a further distance and without direct gaze (cf. e.g. Figure 5, 6 and 8). In several

Figure 8. “Are you serious? Are we gonna really making the shoes like that?” (Nike Space Hippie launch video, © NIKE, Inc.)



cases, the modality is furthermore lowered as seen in Figure 6 and in the representation of the women in the background of Figure 8. This visual positioning of the viewer creates detachment (cf. Ledin & Machin 2018: 61) as the viewer is not invited to get involved with these participants. In contrast to the represented American designers, the Asian workers in the video are neither “allowed to” look at nor talk to the viewer. There is one exception to this pattern in a shot featuring an Asian man who appears to be an overseer or factory partner (Figure 8). This participant is placed in a more powerful position than the rest of the Asian participants, as he is represented in a close-up frontal position and is allowed to speak to the camera. Even so, his positioning in relation to the viewer is less powerful than that of the American designers, since his frontal position is oblique, and he is not given the power of gazing directly at the viewer. Where the American designers talk at great length, his line is furthermore very short (3 seconds), grammatically incorrect, and with a touch of humour in his expression of scepticism: “Are you serious? Are we gonna really making the shoes like that?”

To sum up, the video presents a clear division of the Nike employees in terms of biological and cultural categorisation, groups and individuals, and in terms of the processes in which the different participants are shown to be involved. As this division very much reflects the current state of affairs as regards the typical division of labour in multinational companies, the video arguably presents an honest representation of reality in that respect. From a more critical perspective, I would argue that through these experiential choices the video maintains and reinforces a traditional view of the global division of labour, and that Nike actually consolidates the

status quo in a video that makes a virtue of challenging existing ways of thinking and acting. The traditional view of global work relations is furthermore justified by representing the Asian participants, not as individuals, but as homogenised groups of workers in need of instruction, while the American participants are shown as individuals who have the power to provide it. This representation of unequal power relations is further strengthened by the fact that the American designers are represented as engaging in the verbal process of talking directly to the viewer, while the Asian workers are not granted that power.

All these experiential meanings interact with and are complemented by the interpersonal signifiers in the video. Through gaze, distance, angle and modality, the viewer is positioned in a relation of engagement with the American designers. In contrast, the Asian workers are not granted the same interpersonal authority since their relation to the viewers is one of detachment. Not only are these participants often shown from a distance, consistently represented from oblique angles and never “allowed” to gaze directly at the viewer, but many of these participants are furthermore represented as relatively unimportant through the lowered modality of decreased focus (cf. e.g. Figure 6 and the women in the background of Figure 8). While the viewers are thus invited to feel a sense of involvement with the American designers through the visual interpersonal choices made in the video, no such connection is made in the case of the Asian workers.

4 Discussion and conclusion

According to Morsing and Schultz (2006: 336), “CSR is a moving target, making it increasingly necessary [for corporations] to adapt and change according to shifting stakeholder expectations, but also to influence those expectations”. This is arguably what Nike does with its Space Hippié campaign in different ways. The campaign quite obviously addresses issues of environmental sustainability and climate change that have gained significant weight in public, political, and organisational discourses in recent years. Through MCDA analysis of the Space Hippié launch video, I have shown how the meaning of ‘environmental sustainability’ is created multimodally in the video by a visual narrative from trash to shoe, by what the designers say in the video, and by the materiality, texture, and colour of the shoes themselves. Through the launch video and the shoes, Nike projects an image of itself as a company that is conscious about its environmental impact and engages in finding new solutions. While this image aligns with the company’s activities and actual commitment to sustainability (cf. Wickert & Cornelissen 2017) with regard to the production of the specific line of sneakers, the MCDA approach encourages the analyst to consider how the video’s environmental sustainability discourse also backgrounds and excludes less sustainable facts about the shoes and Nike’s production of sportswear in general.

As also pointed out by Morsing and Schultz, companies that communicate about CSR issues make themselves vulnerable to scrutiny and criticism – especially if the company is “stigmatized beforehand with a bad reputation” (2006: 332). Since Nike is still struggling to rid itself of its negative reputation as regards unethical manufacturing practices in its supply chain abroad, communicating about social justice in that respect is still a controversial issue. My MCDA analysis uncovered ways to see Nike addressing and possibly deflecting critique in this respect in

the Space Hippie launch video. I pointed to the video's *inclusion* of glimpses of the production of the shoes in Nike's Asian factories, in spite of the video's focus on the design of the shoes. By including images of the Asian workers in the video, Nike appears to address and possibly counter potential criticism of excluding a controversial part of their business from their communication. Furthermore, my analysis showed how including these images allows the company to create a relatively positive image of the working conditions in the supply chain overseas as seen, for example, in Figure 6, where background settings add visual positive *evaluation* to the footage, and in Figure 8, where potentially negative evaluation is *backgrounded*. Finally, MCDA tools enabled a detailed analysis of how the Nike employees are represented and how the viewers are positioned in relation to the different employees. This part of my analysis revealed that although the video accentuates Nike's wish to challenge the *status quo*, specific visual grammatical choices made in the video, in fact, reproduce and sustain a very traditional and stereotypical image of the global division of labour and global interpersonal relations.

Through analysis of Nike's launch video for a new sustainable line of sneakers, I have demonstrated how tools from Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis can be employed for analytical assessment of organisational sustainability communication from a multimodal perspective. A significant benefit of the approach lies in its broad range of tools which enables systematic detailed analysis of the specific semiotic choices made in a given piece of communication. Another strength of the approach is its focus on the discursive strategies through which different communicators construct specific versions of reality the way it is seen with Nike's discourses about environmental sustainability and social justice in the Space Hippie campaign analysed above. Depending on the aim and scope of analysis, MCDA can stand alone or be combined with other approaches to organisational sustainability communication when tools are needed to handle multimodal meaning-making and to anchor analytical claims solidly in the multimodal text.

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