

# FRAMING AND COUNTERFRAMING THE ISSUE OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The Communication Strategies of Nikebiz.com

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*This article reports on the communication strategies that sports shoe giant Nike used to successfully protect its corporate social responsibility (CSR) reputation during the late 1990s. The article opens with a brief discussion of CSR and its critical importance to transnationals such as Nike. The opening also includes four research questions guiding this study. The article then discusses why frame analysis offers such a potentially rich approach to analyzing public relations controversies like this one. The Analysis section of the article examines how an anti-Nike coalition initially succeeded in imposing negative frames on two CSR issues and how this framing generated highly negative media coverage. The remainder of this section provides a detailed commentary on eight Web texts from Nikebiz.com and how the framing strategy behind these texts enabled the company ultimately to defend, even to enhance its CSR reputation.*

**Keywords:** *framing; corporate social responsibility; issues management; websites*

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By the 1990s, building a reputation for corporate social responsibility (CSR) became a top priority for nearly all of the world's largest companies, especially major transnational corporations based in North America or Western Europe whose main business involved the delivery of consumer products or services. CSR, a notion that can be traced back to the 1940s and 1950s (Bowen, 1953), requires business organizations to encompass "the

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economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary (philanthropic) expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time” (Buchholtz & Carroll, 2008, p. 40). Carroll (1991), perhaps the most widely cited authority in the field, divides CSR into four segments. First, a business must consistently and successfully pursue maximum profitability as an economic responsibility. Second, a business must always be aware of and comply with all laws and regulations—at every level in the communities where it operates—related to its delivery of products or services in order to meet its legal responsibilities. Third, a business must go beyond legal or regulatory mandates and operate in a way that respects the concerns and values of society at large—and be prepared to adjust to new values and concerns in order to meet its ethical responsibilities. Fourth, a business must support—in the way it deems most effective—educational, religious, artistic, medical, social welfare, or other charitable endeavors in order to meet its philanthropic responsibilities.

The curriculum of business schools and the preparation of future business leaders also reflect the growing priority on CSR. In 2007, all academic stakeholders of the United Nations Global Compact initiated the formation of the six Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME; <http://www.unprme.org/the-6-principles/who-developed-prme/index.php>) for academic institutions. Academic institutions such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) helped draft the platform and endorsed the six principles. Most business leaders now have the resources available for comprehensive sustainability management in their organizations. Indeed, sustainability and CSR topics have become important issues that appear in annual reports and CEO letters (Conaway & Wardrope, 2010), and managers must now learn how to communicate CSR issues to stakeholders.

Recent surveys indicate an increasingly strong public acceptance of CSR among consumers in North America and Western Europe. The 1999 Millennium Poll found that almost half of the respondents in the United States had recently purchased a product from or spoken out in support of a company with a strong CSR reputation (Zadek, 2001). In the same year, a Fleishman Hillard survey reported that an impressive 86% of the 4,000 European consumers polled said that the CSR reputation of a company had a significant impact on their purchase decisions (Zadek, 2001). Cone’s 2004 survey of U.S. consumers recorded a dramatic 21% increase in public support for CSR over a 7-year period. Roughly 80% of Americans declared that a business’s CSR reputation influenced actions ranging from purchasing decisions to investment preferences. More than 70% of the respondents

would reject employment with a business with a low CSR reputation and would also likely boycott that business (Cone, 2004).

Despite the growing priorities of businesses based on CSR and overwhelming public support for sustainability, the past two decades of the 20th century witnessed a rapid rise in the number of anticorporate campaigns. These campaigns were generally initiated by labor unions, activist groups, or coalitions that combined both. These anticorporate campaigns were conducted primarily through nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and tended to make use of sophisticated media strategies (Manheim, 2001). The true aims of these campaigns, which were often little publicized, varied, including pressuring a company into changing its labor-bargaining position, forcing an unfavorable out-of-court settlement of litigation, and influencing a company to make major changes to its basic business model. Whatever the true aim, these campaigners almost invariably targeted the business's CSR reputation as the pressure point (Manheim, 2001). By using this tactic, anti-corporate campaigners achieved remarkable success, which meant negative consequences a majority of the time for the business or businesses involved (Manheim, 2001; Perry, 1987).

In the early 1990s, sports shoe giant Nike became the target of arguably the most intensive and widely publicized of these anticorporate campaigns up to that time. However, through an effective countercampaign, Nike not only avoided the typical negative outcomes but even enhanced its CSR reputation. Although Nike obviously possessed the resources needed to conduct a massive defense of its CSR reputation, its case is worthy of close strategic analysis for two reasons. To begin with, inasmuch as Nike's basic business model was absolutely essential to its spectacular financial performance, abandoning the company's Asian outsourcing operations, which were the focal point of the anti-Nike coalition, was never an option to deflect negative publicity (Goldman & Papson, 1998). In addition, the unparalleled success of Nike's image marketing program ironically made the company much more vulnerable to its critics, much more vulnerable than rivals Adidas and Reebok (Knight & Greenberg, 2002). Consequently, for more than 8 years, Nike's opponents dominated media coverage of the company's policies, procedures, and management. The primary purpose of this study, then, is to understand how after 1998 Nike deployed a counterframing effort that eventually and successfully ended this domination of media coverage by its adversaries and not only protected the company's reputation for CSR but actually elevated it to a new level. The implications of an in-depth understanding of the communication strategies involved in this framing effort can benefit corporate professionals with their messages

about sustainability and CSR reputations. The lessons learned from Nike's efforts may help direct them with CSR issues in public relations, written corporate communication, responses to crises, and especially with communicating strategies involved in outsourcing operations internationally.

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For some time, communication researchers have recognized frame analysis as a highly productive approach to examining a wide array of discourses. For example, Entman (1993) contends that frame analysis "consistently offers a way to describe the power of a communicating text" (p. 51). In spite of the power of frame analysis only a handful of studies have made a substantive connection between framing and public relations in general and issue management in particular. Hallahan (1999), whose study stands as the most elaborate and prominent, mainly seeks to create a theoretical foundation on which frame analysis can be applied to the public relations field. Others (e.g., Pan & Kosicki, 2001; Reber & Berger, 2005) focus almost exclusively on noncorporate rhetors. To fill this void, frame analysis will be used in the current study to answer four primary research questions:

1. What types of frames did Nike's opponents establish in the mass media during the initial phase of the anticorporate campaign?
2. How did Nike counterframe the sweatshop issue?
3. How did Nike's counterframing tactics on the human rights issue differ from those used on the sweatshop issue?
4. What implications for corporate communicators can be drawn from Nike's use of counterframing communication strategies?

The following section of this investigation provides an overview of the concept of framing, introduces some key frames, and discusses the relevance of frame analysis to this study. The next section will outline the context in which the anti-Nike campaign developed. This study will then proceed with an examination of the specific framing tactics used, first, by the anti-Nike campaigners and, second, by the Nike corporate communication

team. The study will conclude with an assessment of the findings and implications for further research.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF FRAMING**

Sociologist Erving Goffman (1974), among the first to explore the insights offered by frame analysis, conceived of the frame as a cognitive construct used to process the daily flow of experiences. A frame, according to Goffman (1974), is an interpretive schema that enables the “user to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its terms” (p. 21).

Frames are central to this study because by their very nature they play an essential, universal role in corporate communication. Frames are designed to deliberately reconstitute selected aspects of reality surrounding deliberation of a public issue. In essence, a frame binds together carefully chosen ideas, information, judgments, arguments, claims, and value statements into a tightly compressed noetic narrative that guides the frameholder’s interpretation of events as well as discourse related to a given topic (Entman, 2007; Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997; Schlechtweg, 1996).

Frames operate on three different levels. On the cognitive level, frames convey new thematic elements to the receiver and can also activate preexisting thematic elements and bind them all together, cue the frameholder as to what to attend to in a discourse by making desired elements singularly salient, suppress discourse material incompatible with the frame, and effect the formulation of decisions compatible with the frame’s thematic core (Entman, 1993; Hallahan, 1999; Kendall, 2005; Schlechtweg, 1996). On the rhetorical level, frames rely on metaphors and similes, appeals to ethos and pathos, figurative phrasing, and causal arguments (Andsager, 2000; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; Johnson-Cartee, 2005; Simons, Morreale, & Gronbeck, 2001). On an ideological level, frames contain information on how a society works—or should work—as well as the proper relationship among its members; frames contain fundamental assumptions regarding social priorities and problems (Kendall, 2005; Schlechtweg, 1996). In actual practice, frames function to emphasize the importance of an issue, to promote a specific interpretation of an issue in terms of causal factors, to introduce evaluative judgments on the parties to an issue, and to promote specific remedial action (Entman, 1993, 2007).

Policy elites and allied network constituents sponsor the creation of frames by actors (ranging from activist entrepreneurs to public relations

professionals to government officials) who consciously or unconsciously embed purpose-specific frames in issue-oriented discourses (Andsager, 2000; Entman, 2007; Johnson-Cartee, 1995). The format of these frame-bearing discourses include briefings, news releases, white papers, annual reports, CEO letters, corporate website texts, speeches, public letters, e-mails, audio/video clips, and other electronic messages (Holtz, 2002; Witmer, 2000). Many issue-oriented actors, particularly social movement proponents, deploy specialized frames called collective action frames (Reber & Berger, 2005). Gamson (1992) discerns a small set of these collective action frames: injustice frames, which are emotionally charged frames that focus on the perceived mistreatment of segment of society; agency frames, which aim to mobilize collective action against some seemingly intractable social problem; and identity frames, which intend to instigate action against social ills brought on by opponents acting on improper values. Virtually all other policy elites, including the business elite, support the creation of frames or counterframes that promote their own goals or agendas in terms of the climate of public opinion and related decision-making processes (Berger, Hertog, & Park, 2002; Entman, 1993; Zaller, 1992). Of course, these groups have differing objectives and interests, and so the inevitable result is a clash of the issue frames they sponsor and communicate through the mass media.

This intense competition to leverage the communication capabilities of the mass media by issue-oriented actors through framing is an explicit recognition of the discursive practices of journalists and, at the same time, an understandable effort to appropriate some of the tremendous power these media actors exert over public opinion formation. Both Hall (1975) and Tuchman (1978) see framing as an inherent part of the journalistic enterprise in that frames establish the topical importance of an issue and dictate to a large degree what elements and sources are to be included and excluded. Both of them assert that whether acknowledged or not, frames govern the entire reporting process from topic selection to interviewing to final story editing. Gitlin (1980) contends that frames are almost without exception the point of reference for any event or issue that a media actor encounters. Because of the reach and scope of the mass media, especially in developed nations, the diffusion of media frames is extremely high, nearing the point of saturation (Kendall, 2005).

While receivers of mass media discourse internalize and personalize media frames (Gamson, 1992), individuals still acquire their interpretive repertory from a common source, media outlets, but select those frames that most resonate with their own ideological and cultural worldview. The

volume and ubiquity of media frames in developed societies make it very likely that an individual will have internalized competing frames linked to any specific issue, frames that can be activated with the proper communication strategy. It is important here to recognize that frames can vary significantly in their strength and that their actual strength depends on rhetorical efficacy, ideological fit, and relative cultural weight (Pan & Kosicki, 2001). It is also important to recognize that the dominance of a given frame can be challenged by a competing or counterframe (Simons et al., 2001; Snow, Worden, Benford, & Rochford, 1986). Just as surely as a frame can manage the audience's perception of an issue, a stronger counterframe can radically alter that initial perception (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996).

There is no doubt, though, that if a frame achieves sufficient prominence, it exerts a tangible, demonstrable effect on the discussion and resolution of a public issue. Empirical studies by Kahneman and Tversky (1984) and Price et al. (1997) show conclusively the capacity of frames to ensure high topicality, to guide the basic construction of an issue, and to influence the decision making that follows such a construction. Thus, frame analysis affords the communication researcher with a potent, precise approach with which to analyze the inner dynamics of the often complex and wide-ranging debate on issues in the corporate and public realm.

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As a result of this analytical power, scholars in a wide variety of fields have studied how frames affect public opinion and policy formation. A number of economics studies have used the frame concept to analyze public discussion of topics such as income distribution (e.g., Arts, Hermkens, & Van Wijck, 1991). Gamson (1992) reveals the fundamental role that frames play in shaping public opinion on U.S. domestic issues such as nuclear power and affirmative action. The frame concept has been used as well by legal scholars examining jury communication in courtroom settings (McCaffery, Kahneman, & Spitzer, 1995). Sociologists and media analysts have made the most extensive use of frame analysis. For example, several studies on

the AIDS epidemic have approached this issue by means of frame analysis (e.g., Levin & Chapman, 1990; Spears, Abraham, Abrams, & Sheeran, 1992); studies on social reform movements have also used frame analysis (e.g., Benford & Snow, 2000; Klandermans, 1992). Organizational communication experts have shown how frames enable companies to set and reach vital business objectives (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). Among the most notable from the large body of media frame scholarship are studies of Fiss and Hirsch (2005) on the reporting of economic globalization, Kendall (2005) on the depiction of social classes in popular U.S. media, Schlechtweg (1996) on televised reporting of environmental protest, and Pavlik (2001) on how Internet reporting with its hypermedia frames is engaging new audiences in the 21st century.

Of special importance here is the fact that framing and frame analysis have been tentatively applied to the public relations field. Hallahan (1999) has developed a theoretical model that suggests how framing facilitates the handling of seven common public relations discursive tasks. Pan and Kosicki (2001) analyze the central role of frames in the defeat of the Clinton Administration's health care reform plan. Reber and Berger (2005) investigate the frames that an activist group, the Sierra Club, uses to advance its environmental agenda. Currently, however, there is no extended analysis of a corporate rhetor's use of framing (or counterframing), and so this study of Nike's defense of its CSR reputation intends to fill this knowledge gap. Business communication is a field well suited to use of framing analysis in the corporate context.

## **THE CONTEXT**

Driven by a rapid rise in public concern about physical fitness and in the popularity of professional sports leagues, demand for athletic-style shoes soared throughout the 1980s. At first, Nike failed to capitalize on this emerging consumer trend. For this reason, Nike was a distant second in the domestic athletic shoe market during the early 1980s, trailing Reebok by more than 10 percentage points (Goldman & Papson, 1998). Near the end of the decade, however, Nike made some farsighted strategic moves that allowed the company to dominate the sports shoe market for the remainder of the 20th century. Nike assembled a research and development team that designed multiple lines of stylish specialty shoes for the Nike brand and subbrands (Bedbury & Fenichell, 2002; Goldman & Papson, 1998). Nike repositioned itself from being strictly a supplier of shoes to high-level competitive athletes



to being a purveyor of shoes for a wide variety of popular fitness and exercise activities (Bedbury & Fenichell, 2002). As part of Nike's repositioning, the company began to target women consumers, thus adding a potentially vast new market for its products (Goldman & Papson, 1998; Knight & Greenberg, 2002).

In the 10 years between 1987 and 1997, Nike's marketing budget increased almost exponentially (Bedbury & Fenichell, 2002; Goldman & Papson, 1998). Nike marketing executives working with outside consultants developed the world-renowned, award-winning "Just Do It" campaign and signed an impressive array of athletes to the company's endorsement program. This campaign as well as subsequent ones effectively aligned Nike in the popular imagination with the socially conscious philosophy that physical activity leads to a better life and enables individuals to overcome obstacles to self-improvement regardless of their race, gender, age, physical challenges, or economic status (Bedbury & Fenichell, 2002; Goldman & Papson, 1998; Knight & Greenberg, 2002).

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In addition to these marketing initiatives, Nike dramatically expanded its product supply by outsourcing manufacturing work to a huge network of contractors and subcontractors in Asia. From its inception, Nike imported most of its products from Asia, first from Japan and then from South Korea (Pollach, 2003; Post, Lawrence, & Weber, 2002). During the 1980s, Nike did develop a small manufacturing network in New England; however, Nike executives eventually decided to terminate its relationship with this domestic supply network (Hollender & Fenichell, 2004; Pollach, 2003). Turning away from domestic production, Nike embarked on an ambitious outsourcing program that tapped the huge complex of factories in East and Southeast Asia, owned and operated by South Korean and Taiwanese contractors. These factories offer almost unlimited production capacity, low-cost labor, and proximity to vast reserves of necessary raw materials. Just

as attractive to transnational corporations such as Nike, these factories operate in the almost total absence of government regulation or union work rules (Goldman & Papson, 1998; Manheim, 2001). Once Nike made the transition to this manufacturing arrangement, its triangular business model was complete: design, marketing, finance, and distribution functions were centered in Beaverton, Oregon, Nike's corporate headquarters; manufacturing took place in East and Southeast Asia; and products were imported back to retailers in North America and Europe (Goldman & Papson, 1998).

The combination of these marketing and operational initiatives produced spectacular results. Nike far surpassed all its competition by 1997, grossing 9 billion dollars and gaining a 43.6% domestic market share to rival Reebok's 15.9%. Nike CEO Phil Knight's stock portfolio was valued at more than 5 billion dollars, advancing him on the *Forbes* list of wealthy individuals from 138th place to 7th (Goldman & Papson, 1998). At the same time, Nike's decision to "hollow out," to divest itself of its domestic manufacturing capabilities, had already earned it a number of determined enemies, especially labor unions and activist groups, which were successfully making the company's labor practices and human rights record a highly visible, reputation-threatening issue with real potential to limit the company's future growth.

In all likelihood, the anti-Nike campaign had goals as diverse as its participants. Unions were attempting to pressure Nike into substantially altering its basic business model and returning at least some manufacturing jobs to the United States, or if that proved to be infeasible, organized labor sought to significantly reduce Nike's profitability and thereby dissuade other businesses from outsourcing their manufacturing functions (Manheim, 2001). NGOs, social activists, and religious groups wanted to force Nike and other transnational corporations to recognize and to follow higher, international workplace standards rather than the lower standards existing in the Asian nations that supply nearly all of Nike's products (Hollender & Fenichell, 2004).

Two union-sponsored white papers, the Ballinger Report in 1989 and the Asian American Free Labor Institute (AAFLI) Report in 1991, signaled the beginning of the anti-Nike campaign. These were followed by several televised reports, including reports on Thames TV in the United Kingdom and CBS's *48 Hours*, CBS's *Street Stories*, and the *CBS Evening News* (Hollender & Fenichell, 2004; Post et al., 2002). Following is a partial list of print publications that carried one or more articles on the Nike controversy: the *Boston Globe*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Economist*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Life*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post* (Hollender & Fenichell, 2004; Manheim, 2001; Post et al., 2002). Nike's

opponents were particularly active on the Internet; following is a representative list of anti-Nike websites: (a) Oxfam's Community Aid Abroad, [www.caa.au](http://www.caa.au); (b) Press for Change's, [www.nikeworkers.com](http://www.nikeworkers.com), [www.nikewages.com](http://www.nikewages.com); and (c) Vietnam Labor Watch's, [www.saigon.com](http://www.saigon.com), [www.nikesweatshop.com](http://www.nikesweatshop.com) (Pollach, 2003; several of these links are now inactive). Many of the print and Internet outlets listed here also carried cartoons that addressed the Nike controversy. These cartoons commented on Nike's labor practices and human rights record, CEO Knight, and some of Nike's most prominent sports endorsers, including Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods (Pollach, 2003).

The task of influencing media coverage in a way that favored Nike's opposition was assumed by the Working Group on Nike, a coalition of labor and activist NGOs, which included the Campaign for Labor Rights, the National Organization of Women, Global Exchange, the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, Amnesty International/USA, and the Pension Board of the United Methodist Church (Manheim, 2001). This coalition made effective use of news releases, speeches (to the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative), white papers (by Ballinger and the AAFLI), special events (the debate sponsored by the International Association of Business and Society), pseudo-events staged for the media (the "dirty sneakers to Phil Knight" event), personal contact (labor activist Jeff Ballinger maintained a close relationship with CBS and other news organizations), and corporate board meetings (the labor practices proposal made by the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility made at Nike's 1995 annual meeting (Manheim, 2001; Post et al., 2002). In 1992, the anti-Nike Made in the USA Foundation (MUSA) expended more than 1 million dollars for advertisements in 20 mass circulation newspapers across the country (Manheim, 2001).

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In the second phase, Nike wrote a credible corporate code of conduct and eventually ordered two audits to document resulting improvements.

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In the first phase of managing this issue, Nike simply rejected claims that it bore any direct responsibility for conditions and practices in the factories of its Asian contractors and subcontractors. In the second phase, Nike wrote a credible corporate code of conduct and eventually ordered two

audits to document resulting improvements. Both audits were performed in 1997, one by Ernst & Young and the other by former U.N. ambassador and civil rights leader Andrew Young; unfortunately for Nike, both proved to be public relations embarrassments (Pollach, 2003). Near the end of the decade, Nike backed the formation of, first, the Fair Labor Association (1998) and, second, the Global Alliance (1999). These two groups were intended to improve conditions in Asian apparel factories through industry-developed codes, self-monitoring supplemented by audits conducted by local NGOs, and voluntary instead of legal accountability (Pollach, 2003; Post et al., 2002). Of more significant long-term consequence is the fact that Nike took the initiative to create a Division of Corporate Responsibility and named Maria S. Eitel as the vice president in charge; in this position she oversees the Nike Compliance Team and regularly engages journalists, activists, union officials, and NGO representatives (Hollender & Fenichell, 2004; Post et al., 2002). It may well be that one of Eitel's most important duties was to oversee the development of Nikebiz.com, a special purpose website intended to reposition the company in relation to the emotionally charged sweatshop controversy and related human rights abuse allegations and, thereby, strengthen Nike's claim to being a socially responsible corporation.

Although Nike modified its operational policies, management structure, and reporting procedures, it steadfastly refused to deviate from its triangular business model. Therefore, the challenge for the Eitel team was the same challenge that Heath (2002) envisions for all corporate issue managers: "Communicate in appropriate ways to counter unwarranted claims that could affect the organization's brand equity" (p. 212). That is, the Eitel team had to counterframe the debate on the labor practices of the company's Asian contractors as well as the treatment of the young female workers employed in those Asian factories in order to preserve and enhance its reputation for social responsibility and, thereby, to protect its brand equity.

## **ANALYSIS**

At the outset of the Nike controversy, the preponderance of media discourse—while there were some attempts to achieve balance—framed the main issues in ways that portrayed the company as an outlaw organization

that violated long-standing, internationally recognized labor standards in order to grossly enrich its wealthy stockholders, top executives, and sports celebrity endorsers. It is crucial here to point out that this media discourse had strong credibility due to the subject matter itself. The Nike controversy involved what Johnson-Cartee (2005) terms high-threshold issues, issues that most of the audience has likely not had any direct experience with, thus making the audience almost completely dependent on the media's construction of such issues.

The authors' analysis of print and electronic reporting on the Nike controversy reveals how news assemblers used framing to call into question the company's motives, values, and conduct. To begin with, news assemblers have the option of conceptualizing a discourse with either an episodic or a thematic frame. An episodic frame develops a narrative around a specific individual or a small group of individuals; a thematic frame approaches an issue from an abstract perspective with a narrative that relates general situations or conditions (Iyengar, 1991). In covering Nike, news assemblers consistently used episodic frames with dramatic effect. The widely read article in *Life* magazine cited by Post et al. (2002) featured a memorable photograph of young, poor Pakistani children on a dusty plot of ground stitching soccer balls, and the photograph was augmented by text connecting their seeming plight directly to Nike's corporate labor practices. The 1996 CBS *48 Hours* program featured accounts from young Vietnamese laborers at a Nike contract facility who were regularly beaten by their South Korean supervisor (Post et al., 2002). This broadcast and many similar print articles juxtaposed the billionaire status of Nike CEO Knight and multimillion dollar compensation for sports stars such as Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods on one hand with the below-subsistence pay to thousands of workers in Nike's Asian contract factories (Manheim, 2001; Pollach, 2003; Post et al., 2002). This juxtaposition produces what Johnson-Cartee (2005) calls a consequence frame, a frame in which almost criminal corporate greed and indifference to human suffering clearly lead to ruthless exploitation of poor, powerless workers in underdeveloped nations. The media barrage of these consequence frames evoked intense, sympathetic emotions for the Asian contract workers and equally strong, negative moral judgments toward Nike's corporate policies, practices, and management. These consequence frames, in turn, activated two other types of frames, frames that Gamson (1992) terms collective action injustice and identity frames. Injustice frames aim to mobilize the public and direct its

indignation into some sort of punitive action against the alleged perpetrator; in this case, it is Nike, and the punitive action could include unfavorable changes in the corporate tax code, some sort of litigation in U.S. courts, or a vigorous domestic boycott. The aim of the identity frames is to stigmatize an identifiable human agent, in this case Nike CEO Knight, for holding values that clearly have produced the injustice under consideration.

In the initial phase of this study, the corporate website Nikebiz.com dedicated to public relations was thoroughly surveyed for texts related to sweatshop labor or human rights issues. First, we excluded CSR texts related to domestic philanthropy or environmental initiatives. Next, eight full-length texts (one or more full screens) were captured from the website to be used for analytical purposes. Moreover, the primary frames used in the anti-Nike campaign were noted and classified. The three major frames in the anti-Nike campaign were identified as follows: negative identity frames, collective action injustice frames, and negative consequence frames. Further analysis yielded three parallel frame sets deployed by Nike to counteract its opponents' negative messages: positive identity frames, collective action remediation frames, and positive consequence frames. Finally, it was noted that Nike critics typically relied on episodic frames while Nike's tactics predominately relied on thematic frames.

Analysis of the four Nikebiz.com Web texts grouped together that address the sweatshop issue indicates the counterframing tactics Nike deployed to defend its corporate practices, policies, and values. In the lead-in to the first text, "Workers & Factories: Our Business Model & Its Challenges" (<http://www.nike.com/nikebiz/nikebiz.jhtml?page=25&cat=businessmodel>; retrieved July 7, 2004, link now inactive), Nike presents its outsourcing in terms of the marketplace and global economics, and it also characterizes these operations, not in terms of exploiting low-cost labor in underdeveloped countries but rather in terms of worldwide job creation: "The Nike business model, as it has from the beginning, supports manufacturing jobs around the planet." "Our Business Model" goes on to construct Nike as a company committed "to operate in an ethical and lawful manner" despite the fact that it employs "more than 660,000 contract manufacturing workers in more than 900 factories in more than 50 countries." The frame for "Our Business Model," like the three that follow, is thematic in that it focuses on general conditions prevailing in Nike's vast network of contract factories and the resulting complexity. This frame helps reduce the emotional tension surrounding the sweatshop labor issue

and implicitly criticizes those who sensationalize isolated incidents and oversimplify the nature of existing problems. Furthermore, the text activates frames linked to the concept of Western-style business management, frames that privilege a management style based on the processes of setting, measuring, and reporting on performance objectives. Of Nike's efforts to manage its far-flung manufacturing network, the text says, "It's not a perfect record, but we're committed to the process." This process orientation makes for action-oriented frames in which the corporate actor, Nike, is seen as setting its "own standards," consulting with "independent third parties," and "disclosing the results of our own internal monitoring programs." All the actions described reinforce the central frame: compliance, a word and its variants used repeatedly in the four texts collected here. These frames communicating Nike's elaborate, costly efforts to comply with "realistic," enforceable standards counterframe media discourses depicting the company as a reprehensible organization that routinely violates international labor standards and local laws and regulations as a part of its basic business model.

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Furthermore, the text activates frames linked to the concept of Western-style business management, frames that privilege a management style based on the processes of setting, measuring, and reporting on performance objectives.

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The second text in this series, "Workers & Factories: Monitoring and Assessment/Global Alliance" (<http://www.nike.com/nikebiz/nikebiz.jhtml?page=25&cat=monitoring&subcat=global>; retrieved September 29, 2005, link now inactive), reiterates the compliance frame in several notable respects. The text is ostensibly a description of the collaboration between Nike and the Global Alliance for Workers and Communities between 1999 and 2004, but its tactical purpose is to counterframe several major arguments advanced by Nike's opponents. The text alludes to the fact that the World Bank was a major partner in the Global Alliance, a fact that rebuts the contention that Nike had become an international outcast

because of its exploitative labor practices. Perhaps the most important frame created by this text is that Nike values the opinions and views of all its workers. The lead-in to this text is "Giving voice to workers: The Global Alliance legacy," and it is this metaphor of the voice that is developed at length in the last half of the text. In conjunction with the Global Alliance, Nike implemented a confidential grievance system, which along with the company's monitoring activities, substantially advanced both its remediation and compliance efforts. The partnership with the Global Alliance increased Nike's management competencies in dealing with labor standards issues abroad and providing management training to diffuse these management skills throughout the Nike production chain.

"Workers & Factories: Code of Conduct" (<http://www.nike.com/nikebiz/nikebiz.jhtml?page=25&cat=code>; retrieved July 7, 2004, link now inactive), the third text in this series, aligns Nike's core values with what are likely those of the audience for this text and creates a locus of agreement intended to dispose those stakeholders to view Nike as an ethical, socially responsible actor. The text begins by declaring that Nike drafted the code in 1991, which suggests that the company made an attempt early on to cope with the sweatshop issue and which, thereby, implies that the company made an important effort to be proactive regarding this issue. In this text, Nike emphasizes its opposition to forced labor, child labor, wage law violations, excessive overtime, and unsafe/unhealthy work environments. The code has been expanded and modified as needed over the years and is prominently posted in all factories in the Nike manufacturing system. Nike claims that the values stated in the code are precisely those that inform its management of its contract manufacturing facilities and that the company systematically monitors and documents compliance with these values. This values frame constitutes a key component of Nike's counterframing strategy; it insinuates that despite media reports to the contrary, Nike's core values are highly compatible with those of its mostly Western stakeholders. A value frame like the one communicated by this text is so basic, so central that it can almost completely shape or reshape the way that an audience relates to an issue (Price et al., 1997). It is likely for this reason, then, that there are many hyperlinks to the "Code of Conduct" embedded in a wide variety of other texts carried on Nikebiz.com.

The fourth text, "Workers & Factories: Monitoring and Assessment/Factory Compliance Life Cycle" (<http://www.nike.com/nikebiz/nikebiz.jhtml?page=25&cat=monitoring>; retrieved September 29, 2005, link now inactive), uses what Johnson-Cartee (2005) labels a depiction frame, one that constructs the character of the narrative's main actor. The text



appears to be simply a description of a three-stage factory compliance program; however, closer examination reveals that it is creating a framework of essential attributes possessed by Nike's supply chain management. These Nike managers are experienced as is demonstrated in the passage on how they detect the forbidden practice of unauthorized subcontracting. Nike managers are methodical. As the life cycle metaphor suggests, Nike managers follow a comprehensive process to ensure a high level of sustained compliance with the Nike Code of Conduct and all related policies. Nike managers are demanding in that they require factories that directly supply the company to undergo a thorough compliance audit, and their demanding nature is also evidenced by the fact that 43% of the facilities audited in FY2004 earned a disapproval rating. Nike managers are supportive inasmuch as they are committed to providing the advice and training needed for overseas suppliers to comply with Nike corporate standards. This depiction, this characterization, of course, is meant to counterframe media characterizations of the company's management as uninformed or indifferent to unacceptable labor practices and conditions prevalent in the operations of its Asian contractors.

The four "Workers & Factories" web texts, along with others like them, convey the notion of Nike's full compliance with international labor standards as well as local laws and regulations, and thus they directly counterframe the perception that an injustice exists and urgent collective action against Nike is demanded.

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The human rights abuse issue involving Nike was basically an outgrowth of the sweatshop controversy.

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The human rights abuse issue involving Nike was basically an outgrowth of the sweatshop controversy. Because some 90% of the employees at Nike's Asian contract factories are female (Post et al., 2002), many of the charges of labor abuse were eventually transformed into highly damaging charges of human rights abuse. Obviously, if Nike paid below-subsistence wages, this practice weighed most heavily on women, and *Harper's Magazine* gave credence to this charge by publicizing the pay slip of a Nike contract employee who earned an average of 14 cents an hour during one pay period (Post et al., 2002). The media also carried reports on how women

were disproportionately exposed to dangerous machinery and chemicals (Post et al., 2002). A 1996 U.S. tour of Indonesian and Vietnamese female factory workers attracted extensive media coverage; participants in the tour, which was organized by the anti-Nike coalition, made sensational charges of sexual and physical abuse against several of Nike's purported Asian contractors (Goldman & Papson, 1998; Manheim, 2001; Post et al., 2002). Furthermore, the tour promoted charges that Nike denied its mostly female contract workforce freedom of speech and freedom of association (Goldman & Papson, 1998).

Of course, the Nike Code of Conduct, hyperlinked to numerous other texts on Nikebiz.com, directly counteracts the frames communicated through the media by Nike's opponents about its human rights record. However, in contrast to the direct framing measures taken in regard to the sweatshop issue, Nikebiz.com takes an essentially indirect approach to the human rights abuse issue as the following four Web texts illustrate. Collectively these texts do not directly address accusations that Nike abuses the human rights of its female Asian contract workers; instead, these texts construct Nike as a dynamic organization that supports the empowerment of women everywhere—especially in underdeveloped countries.

The first of the four Web texts selected that address the human rights issue, "Community: Giving" (<http://www.nike.com/nikebiz.jhtml?page=26&item=globalization>; retrieved April 17, 2007, link now inactive), approaches the topic of female poverty in underdeveloped countries with a thematic frame that distances the discourse from the inherent emotion of the issue and introduces the empowerment frame that dominates Nike's discourse on this topic. The text opens with what Johnson-Cartee (2005) calls a roots frame to explain the fundamental causal factors behind the poverty that women experience in countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and China. The "root causes" of poverty in such underdeveloped countries, according to this text, is the lack of access to capital. While the media framed Nike as an important party to the injustices inflicted on impoverished women in these and other underdeveloped countries, through this text and the three that follow, Nike includes itself in what Gamson (1992) terms a collective action agency frame, which in this case conspicuously associates Nike with other actors endeavoring to remedy the plight of these women. To that purpose, the text claims that the Nike Micro Enterprise Program "is a proven development strategy, expected to benefit 100 million of the world's poorest families by 2005." The text then uses exemplification to support its claim by describing the Micro Enterprise Program's successful partnership with the Population Development & Community Association, the Vietnamese Women's Union,

Opportunity International of Indonesia, Mercy Corps of China, and the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation.

The next two Web texts, “Nike Foundation: Who We Are” (<http://www.nike.com/nikebiz/nikefoundation/who.jhtml>; retrieved April 19, 2007, link now inactive) and “Nike Foundation: Why Focus on Girls?” (<http://www.nike.com/nikebiz/nikefoundation/focus.jhtml>; retrieved April 19, 2007, link now inactive) reintroduce the frames of empowerment and remediation. Once again the frames are both action and value oriented. Nike is seen as investing, contributing, and envisioning. “Why Focus on Girls?” declares that Nike is committed to “empowering girls and young women” because this “increases the pace of social and economic progress. When girls miss out on opportunities, the world misses out as well.” Both texts introduce, yet again, collective action agency frames that align Nike with actors engaged in socially desirable problem solving. Additionally, all three of these web texts make use of thematic frames, frames dealing with general conditions and, in so doing, magnify Nike’s contribution to improving the economic conditions and social status of millions of women in the world’s poorest countries.

The fourth and final web text in this sequence is “Nike Foundation: Case Studies/Bangladesh/Ethiopia/Zambia” (<http://www.nike.com/nikebiz/nikefoundation/approach.jhtml?pg=casestudies>; retrieved April 19, 2007, link now inactive). This text is an exception to almost all the others on Nikebiz.com in that it uses episodic frames. It introduces Naseema of Bangladesh who married at 14 years, 11-year-old Kidan of Ethiopia, and young Patricia of Zambia. Of course, these episodic frames shorten the emotional distance between these young women’s narratives and the undoubtedly sympathetic audience. Again, the text deploys Gamson’s (1992) collective action agency frame; the text frames the problem that these three young women—and by extension millions like them—face in dysfunctional societies in which adolescent pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and marital violence are the rule. Again, Nike conspicuously situates itself as an actor capable of remedying—at least in partnership with others—these seemingly intractable social ills and empowering the women who are the main victims of these social ills primarily through access to capital, financial and business training, and information on reproduction and legal rights.

Collectively, “Community: Giving,” the three “Nike Foundation” web texts, and similar ones on Nikebiz.com substantially but indirectly counterframe media constructions of Nike as a human rights violator and instead depict the company as a catalyst for positive change by empowering millions of women in underdeveloped countries to lead better lives.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

There are those who still argue that Nike has failed to fully address the sweatshop issue (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004; Klein, 2000), and there are those who argue passionately that Nike still refuses to address human rights issues related to its Asian female contract workers (Boje, 2001). Nike's opponents even appeared to win a decisive legal victory in 2003 when the U.S. Supreme Court let stand the California Supreme Court's ruling in the *Kasky* case that Nike deliberately deceived the public about labor conditions in its Asian contract factories (Kang, 2003).

In reality, however, the opposite case proved to be true. All Nike had to do to comply with the courts' ruling was to adhere to its stated labor standards—no matter how inadequate those standards might be (McHale, Zompetti, & Moffitt, 2007). Thus, Nike managed to manipulate its connections with key social institutions, the court system included, to “reframe the cultural landscape toward Nike's interpretation of reality, namely, that it had done nothing wrong and should be viewed as a sympathetic victim who had been falsely accused” (McHale et al., 2007, p. 390). Ultimately, the company reframed the debate on its labor practices and related human rights issues in a way that won over key media actors, the investment community, a broad range of young consumers, and even some activists and academicians. *Newsweek* came to the conclusion that Nike has moved into a leadership position on labor reform overseas; the *Journal of Business Ethics* and *Business & Society* carried pieces that lauded Nike's corporate values and its cooperation with human rights NGOs (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004). In addition, a *New York Times* editorial called Nike a standard setter for contract labor practices abroad, and the *Washington Post* declared that Nike had significantly advanced the human rights agenda (Hollender & Fenichell, 2004). Perhaps most tellingly of all, consumers and the investment community financially rewarded Nike for its successful repositioning efforts. Although the company's sales and stock share prices stagnated in the late 1990s at the height of the anti-Nike campaign (Klein, 2000), Nike's sales, earnings, and stock price had all regained their former momentum by 2003 (Nike, n.d.).

We now address the research questions posed earlier in the article. This investigation reveals the primary framing tactics pursued by both sides of the Nike controversy. Early on the anti-Nike coalition dominated media coverage with a multitude of episodic frames meant to characterize Nike's

outsourcing operations as little more than an immense sweatshop system. In this way, Nike's opponents deployed Gamson's (1992) collective action injustice and identity frames to generate a strong negative emotional reaction to the company's outsourcing operations and to demonize CEO Knight, other Nike management, and celebrity endorsers. Under Nike corporate Vice President Eitel, the company adroitly counterattacked with thematic frames that greatly reduced the emotional intensity of the whole debate on the company's labor-related issues. Nikebiz.com also deployed action frames related to its standards, its compliance program, and the managers assigned to it. Moreover, Nikebiz.com metaphorically framed the company's commitment to give its Asian contract workers a "voice." Nikebiz.com informs the website's audience of the company's core values and thus seeks to displace media frames of lawlessness, negligence, and exploitation. Ultimately, Nikebiz.com constructs a management team that is experienced, methodical, demanding, and supportive in pursuit of the company's compliance goals and objectives.

In contrast to the direct framing of the sweatshop issue, Nikebiz.com uses episodic frames to emphasize the company's commitment to economically empowering individual women in underdeveloped countries and thus to respond indirectly to charges that it routinely tolerates the violation of its Asian female workers' human rights. Moreover, Nikebiz.com reinforces these episodic frames with Gamson's (1992) collective action agency frames to associate Nike with those working for positive change in the lives of poor women across Asia and Africa.

Media coverage of business has accelerated in recent years to the point that it is a stand-alone topic for newspapers, newsletters, magazines, trade journals, academic journals, blogs, websites, business-specific news programs, business-specific news channels, and other media outlets (Argenti, 2007). The results of this study suggest that frame analysis might well yield important insights on how media outlets cover business news topics generally as well as how they cover specific organizations, particularly on stories involving CSR. Of course, business organizations are constantly modifying and refining their communication output in order to aggressively get their message through to the appropriate stakeholders, and to fit and function in the various media formats. Despite the multiplicity of new media channels and their fragmented hypermedia environment, frame analysis appears to afford a promising methodology with which to study the full range of CSR communication from and about organizations in the age of the Internet.

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