AFAANZ Grant Report

(1)   Name, Position, Contact Details for each applicant

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(2)   Project Title

Utilisation of photographs for CSR disclosure by Australasian companies: A visual razzle-dazzle?

(3)   Updated Project Summary (500 words) including any variations between the project undertaken and the original application

The original aim of the project was to investigate the use of photographs for CSR disclosures in corporate annual reports of listed Australasian companies over a ten-year period. Specifically, we intended to analyse the trends, themes and "messages" encoded in those photographs. Our research question was "To what extent are listed Australasian companies utilising CSR associated photographs, and what "messages" are those CSR associated photographs communicating?" The sample for the study were the top 200 companies by market capitalisation listed on New Zealand Stock Exchanges (NZX) and Australian Securities Exchange (ASX). We had planned to access the websites of the sample companies and obtain electronic copies of annual reports for ten years, from 2005 to 2015. This would then be analysed for CSR associated photographs. The five areas as identified in the sustainability reporting guidelines of Version 3.1 of Global Reporting Initiative (Global Reporting Organisation, 2000-2011) would be used as themes to guide data collection and analysis. The study would employ a visual content analysis based on Banks' (2001) 'ways of seeing' to explore the CSR associated photographs.Theoretical constructs of impression management and visual propaganda would be used to discern the potentially hidden motives in the use of photographs depicting CSR.

However, due to the funding constraints, we were only able to engage a research assistant to collect part of the data for the top 100 listed New Zealand companies. Therefore, we amended our project aim, research questions and methodology to the following:

Project Aim:

To investigate the use of photographic images for web-based sustainability disclosure of listed New Zealand companies. Specifically, web-based features namely the dissemination medium, location, accessibility, content variety, and the extent of usage of CSR photographs will be analysed.

Research Questions:

1) What is the most utilised dissemination medium for sustainability disclosure using photographic images?
2) What is the most utilised location for sustainability disclosure using photographic images?
3) How accessible are these sustainability related photographic images?
4) What is the most presented content variety by these sustainability related photographic images?
5) How extensive are these web-based photographic images utilised for sustainability disclosure?

Methodology

The sample for the study are the top 100 companies by market capitalisation listed on New Zealand Stock Exchanges (NZX). We accessed the websites of the sample companies for sustainability related photographs and textual information related to those photographs as at December 2017. The five areas as identified in the sustainability reporting guidelines of Version 3.1 of Global Reporting Initiative (Global Reporting Organisation, 2000-2011) were used as guidance for data collection and analysis. Web-based features, namely the dissemination medium, location, accessibility, content variety and extent of content of sustainability related photographs utilised for disclosure were identified and measured. As per our original proposal, we still employed a visual content analysis based on Banks' (2001) 'ways of seeing' to explore the sustainability related photographs. In addition, theoretical constructs of impression management and visual propaganda were used to analyse the preparers' possible motives in the utilisation of web-based sustainability related photographs.

(4) Funds Granted

AUD$4,000

(5) Detailed Report on Expenditure of Funds against Budget Items, with variations explained

There is no variation between the expenditure of funds and the budget items. The funds were used to engage a research assistant for data collection (184 hours x AUD$21.70)

(6) Outcomes, for example, working papers, presentations and publications (give full details, including abstracts)

We have written a conceptual paper which we presented in the Accounting Department seminar at Auckland University of Technology on 21 November

2018. We are making another presentation at the 2018 Australasian Centre for Social and Environmental Accounting Research (ACSEAR) Conference hosted by Monash Business School in Melbourne from 4-7 December 2018.

The following is the abstract of our paper:

Abstract
Purpose
The aim of the paper is to propose a framework for examining the nature and extent of visual persuasion of photographs in sustainability disclosures. Specifically, the paper determines the elements of visual persuasion in sustainability related photographs and measure the level of persuasion of these photographs.

Design/methodology/approach
The paper analyses how sustainability related photographs are being presented by corporations in a visually persuasive manner. Aristotle's (1984) persuasive appeals of *ethos, pathos* and *logos* and Peirce's (1991) semiotic system of *icon, index* and *symbol* are drawn to build a visual persuasion framework to determine the elements of visual persuasion that present in sustainability related photographs. By extending the visual persuasion framework, a visual persuasion scoring is constructed to measure the persuasion level of the photographs.

Findings
Aristotle's *ethos, pathos* and *logos* can be applied effectively to visual persuasion by identifying and categorising the semiotic characteristics of *icon*, *index* and *symbol* signs of the photographs. These categorisations render the photographic images as credible, capable of emotion elicitation, and logical. A visual persuasion scoring is constructed and subsequently tested on its applicability. The findings show that visual persuasion level of sustainability related photographs can be determined and measured when their content images are deconstructed using the semiotics of *icon, index* and *symbol* into persuasion elements of *ethos, pathos* and *logos*.

Practical implication
The study contributes to a greater understanding of the power of sustainability related photographs in visual persuasion. By exposing companies' visual persuasion strategy underlying the utilisation of photographs in sustainability reporting, the paper creates awareness amongst the stakeholders about the need to bring about changes to improve the quality of sustainability reporting.

Originality/value
By proposing a method of systematic analysis of the nature and extent of visual persuasion, the paper provides a solution to methodical understanding of visual persuasion in sustainability reporting.

(7)   *Future Intentions for this Project (give full details)*

   a) Future paper
   We plan to write an empirical paper on the visual persuasion of web-based sustainability related photographs for impression management purposes.

   b) Conference submissions
   We plan to present the paper at The 9th Asia-Pacific Interdisciplinary Research in Accounting (APIRA) Conference in July 2019

   c) Journal submissions
   We plan submit our paper to a high quality peer reviewed journal for publication.

(8)   *Summary of Outcomes and Benefits*

The research grant has provided us the financial resources to carry out our research on the use of photographic images for visual persuasion in sustainability communication. It also enables us to address the gap in the persuasion and sustainability literature which currently is dominated by the examination of textual disclosures.

On a personal level, the grant has been particularly beneficial to the first applicant, who is an emerging researcher. She has been able to develop in depth knowledge and other intellectual skills of critical analysis, resource management and data handling during the research process.