

Looking beneath the surface: A visual rhetorical analysis of photographs about people in sustainability reports

Marcela Ziede

Universidad Católica del Norte, Chile

University of Pisa, Italy

mziede@ucn.cl

Abstract

Sustainability is disclosed to stakeholders via annual sustainability reports, displaying texts and images in line with the current visual era. Scholars have privileged the analysis of written language in this genre of communication and overlooked the visual support, especially the meanings of people's images as a component of the triple bottom line. This paper aims to explore how visual rhetoric of people's photographs contributes to the communication of messages of sustainability. Based on Barthes' semiology theory, a rhetorical analysis is conducted on 1639 photographs included in the last 18 annual sustainability reports of a large mining company in Chile. Findings suggest that 814 photographs that are portraying people reflect five connotative themes: cultural identity, vulnerability, capabilities, relationships, and happiness. Visual rhetoric embraces hegemonic ideologies like the consumption-predator paradigm, masculine superiority, short-term vision, and it raises issues such as organizational myth making, legitimization of practices, and political and colonial heritages. The paper contributes to a critical understanding of sustainability, where images transcend the globalization of linguistic standardization of reports and contain messages of ideologies and cultural myths that are naively presented and may avoid sustainability contradictions.

Key words:

visual rhetoric, Barthes' semiology, sustainability reports, cultural identity, ideology messages.