**A study of the discursive construction of CSR through the use of stock and non-stock images- Multimodal Discourse Analysis approach**

Rajeev Vazhappully

PhD Scholar,

Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University

rajeev.vazhappully@northumbria.ac.uk

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Building on previous discursive research in CSR (Campbell, 2000; Livesey, 2002, Cho and Roberts, 2010), this research examines CSR communication by aligning with the view that CSR is a socio-cognitive construction (Bartlett and Devin, 2011; Gond and Matten, 2007; Siltaoja, 2006) which promotes the theory that organisations develop their own definitions of CSR that becomes embedded in the discourses that they indulge in. When an organisation has to communicate on a topic that does not have a universally accepted formulation (such as CSR), it indulges in a discursive struggle in order to frame the concept and make sense of it (Cornelissen, 2012). This need to communicate on CSR can be viewed as a disruption that prompts the organisation to contemplate and redefine existing meanings in order to meet the demands of its stakeholders (Iivonen and Moisander, 2015). CSR is thus rendered ‘discursively open’ (Guthey and Morsing, 2014). Consequently, CSR is manifested in responsibility devices that are carefully crafted by both organisational and non-organisational actors each with a stake in CSR through the process of CSR sensemaking. The sensemaking theory proposed by Karl Weick (1995) is useful starting point in developing an understanding of this process. This theory fundamentally focuses on the cognitive map of the sense-maker as critical in understanding how organisations deal with the issues that it faces. Sensemaking refers to the ways by which organisations construct reality by providing representations and explanations for their actions through cognitive and communicative practices that they indulge in (Iivonen and Moisander, 2015).

This thesis agrees with the view of Hanke and Stark (2009, p. 509) who state that ‘‘any strategic behaviour in an organisation is either to legitimize action or to make sense out of organizational action and quite often there is a balance between both’’. Taking into account the main tenets of the sensemaking theory, the argument that will be made in this research will be that the semiotic choices that an organisation makes use of in its CSR communication reflects their comprehension of the social reality in which they exist and more specifically the specific symbols that have been institutionalised in the social world. Also, a constructionist view is necessary to be elaborated since unlike the functionalist, culturalist or socio-political view of CSR (Gond and Matten, 2007), it sees CSR as a negotiated order that is supported by devices that are created by social actors, a view that is a central premise of this research.

Castello et.al (2013) provide an account of how the existing conceptualisations of legitimacy are linked to the questions of consent and conformity to certain societal values and essentially posit legitimacy as an instrument or outcome that can be manufactured. It is only through communication that an actor can become regarded as being legitimate and so the role of language in legitimation is an important aspect to explore since issues can be framed in particular ways with the intention of advancing or resisting the legitimation of decisions or practices that the organisation indulges in (Creed et.al, 2002). Berger and Luckman (1991) have in fact argued that legitimation is present whenever language is used. This tactic of legitimation involves presentation of manipulative rhetoric that promotes the power positions of certain actors (Brown and Jones, 2000). Erkama and Vaara (2010) find that one essential requirement for such framing to be successful is for the audience to be able to relate the framed message to other discourses and this involves the rhetorical legitimation strategies that make use of specific elements of the discourse for their rhetorical justification. Livesey (2002) believe that social actors attempt to shape reality to serve their interests in ways they prefer by referring to and combining various discourses. At times, these discourses become hegemonic and social understandings are reproduced unconsciously (Higgins and Walker, 2012). In consonance with the constructionist view of CSR, an exposition of the literature on the discursive legitimation of CSR will unravel the nature of the legitimating tactics and rhetorical strategies involved and how certain discursive elements become dominant in discourse.

It is difficult to pass a day without seeing a photograph or being exposed to the visual medium. The pervasiveness of the photographs is considered to be a part of postmodern life and is often equated to ‘white noise’ that underlies the contemporary existence in the digital age (Breitbach, 2001). There are several instances in literature that highlight the role played by digital technologies in furthering this surge in the use of images and it is believed the contemporary society expresses itself through images (Hansen and Machin, 2013). Hollerer et.al (2013) theorize that from an anthropological perspective, the representation and construction of meaning using visual forms has always been a crucial aspect of society and culture and this has only gained momentum following the proliferation of image use. The use of digital technologies however, has in their opinion created new avenues for the use of visuals thereby enabling them to construct reality in different ways. Within visual communication, the use of stock photograph which has been referred to as “wallpaper of consumer culture” (Frosh, 2013, 132) serves the purpose of conveying a concept that only selectively represents social reality which when associated with a product or experience will work rhetorically towards persuasion to buy or agree (Frosh, 2003b). A discussion on the primacy of visuals will provide reasons for the focus on visuals in this research and serves to introduce and advocate the study of stock images. The stock image industry dominates the visual content industry by promoting and distributing images that have been used extensively in marketing, advertising, news articles, multimedia and websites besides being used in corporate documentation. Although it is clear that the use of stock images is dominant in discursive practice, there have been no elaborate studies that have explored their role in CSR communication.

This thesis thus seeks to examine the following questions

*How do organisations make sense of CSR and discursively represent their commitment to CSR using images?*

*What is the impact of the stock image industry on the way the organisations discursively construct CSR?*

*How does the meaning conveyed by images used in CSR reports complement the meaning conveyed by the text associated with these images?*

The methodological choice in this dissertation is guided by the work of Tashakkori and Teddlie (2009) who state that the choice of the most appropriate method for research needs to be guided by the research question and should not be approached from a position of epistemological purity. Rossman and Wilson (1985) take a very similar stance within what they identify as a situationalist perspective which while recognising the mutual exclusiveness of the different research methods and their associated epistemological and ontological assumptions, also advocates their inclusion in the same study on the basis of their usefulness in answering the research question.

Since, this research aligns with view that CSR is a socio-cognitive construction, a social constructivist approach with a subjectivist epistemological stance that examines the ways in which reality is constructed by social actors through the study of language use is found to be most useful and this view dominates majority of the empirical research. However, a positivist approach with an objectivist epistemological stance is also found to be useful to be included in the study in order to explore trends on a larger scale. The details of the three empirical studies included in this research have been tabulated in Table 1 below. It needs to be noted that although Study 2 has been termed as falling under the neo-empiricist paradigm, as noted by Merkl-Davies et.al (2011), there is a considerable overlap in the philosophical assumptions of neo-empiricism and social constructivism in practice with their shared emphasis on meaning making by social actors. So, although neo-empiricism has been stated to be the research paradigm for Study 2, it could very well have also been termed to be social constructivism going by the definition of social constructivism by Guba and Lincoln (1994). The analytical framework developed for Study 2 as shown in Table 2 is an amalgamation of relevant concepts and approaches that have been utilized in various other fields such as linguistics, discourse analysis, advertising, communication, journalism, semiology, rhetorical studies, document design, photography, cinema studies and art design. Study 3 will be carried out using the analytical framework developed for analysing intersemiotoic complementarity in multimodal document by Royce (2010) as shown in Table 3 below.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Study 1 | Study 2 | Study3 |
| **Research paradigm** | Positivist | Neo-empiricist | Social constructivist |
| **Ontology** | Realist | Realist | Social constructivist |
| **Epistemology** | Objectivist | Objectivist | Subjectivist |
| **Methodology** | Quantitative | Qualitative | Qualitative |
| **Text analysis approach** | Form oriented content analysis- Numerical count of the number of stock and non-stock images | Meaning oriented content analysis for analysing meaning making in images in isolation as well as in the context of their use in a CSR context and in a multimodal document such as the CSR report | Multimodal discourse analysis for analysing intersemiotic complementarity between visual and verbal meaning |
| **Data** | **Nature of data** | Images obtained from non-financial reports of Fortune 500 companies for the last 10 years | Same as study 1 | Same as study 1 |
| **Source** | PDF documents available on company websites | Same as study 1 | Same as study 1 |
| **Population ‘N’** | 75000 images (estimated) | Same as study 1 | Same as study 1 |
| **Sample ‘n’** | Same as N | 500 stock images and 500 non-stock images  | Purposive sample of up to 20 images chosen from Study 2 |
| **Notes** | The image will be assessed as being a stock image or not using reverse Google Image search | The images will be analysed using the analytical framework designed for the purpose | The images will be analysed using the framework developed by Royce (2010) |
| **Associated framework** | None | Please refer to Table 2 | Please refer to Table 3 |

Table 1. Empirical research overview

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| CSR Context | CSR categories Symbolism |
| Image Properties | Non-stock imageStock ImagePlacementSource attributionColourSizeLocation DepictedDoes the image depict people?YesNoParticipant characteristicsActivity depictedImage act and gazeSocial distance Social distanceIntertextualityHorizontal angle perspectiveVertical angle perspectiveModality |
| Multimodal context | Picture to associated text ratioVisual-textual consistencyInformation valueFraming |

Table 2 Analytical framework for Study 2



Table 3 Analytical framework for Study 3 (Royce, 2010, p. 68)

**Work done so far**

Work done during the one and a half years of the project has focussed on detailed literature review to identify relevant themes in literature, followed firstly by a detailed study on methodologies that have been used in the past in accounting research. However, efforts have been made to also explore methodologies outside of accounting research in order to ensure that the empirical research ties in more closely with the research questions. In doing this, various aspects of research that examines meaning making, rhetoric and representation in various other disciplines as mentioned previously have been explored and the effort was to combine relevant aspects from these various disciplines in the creation of the analytical framework for Study 2 which is as comprehensive as it can get as far as accounting research pertaining to visuals is concerned.

Apart from developing and identifying the analytical frameworks to be used in this research, a codebook has been developed for Study 2 and a pilot study has been commenced with. An exploratory study was carried out during the initial phases of this research which helped shape the direction of exploration as far as literature review and methodology is concerned. I am sharing below one example which is quite revealing.

The image shown in Figure 1 below is from the CSR report of Turner and Townsend for the year 2015. It appears on the 18th page of this report and is on a page tiled ‘Environmental Stewardship’.



Fig. 1 Corporate Social Responsibility Report (Turner and Townsend, 2015, Pg.18)

This picture displays the New York Central Park and is a stock image available in the popular stock image website called shutterstock under the description ‘Beautiful foliage colors of New York Central Park’ and a Google search of this image also reveals that it has been used extensively on several web pages dedicated to promoting tourism in New York. However, there is no reference to the park in the accompanying text on the page in the CSR report, it merely serves as an attractive background perhaps to draw the attention of the reader towards it.

**Expected contribution**

The study through an analysis of images used in the CSR reports of Fortune 500 companies over the last 10 years will reveal how extensively stock images have been used in CSR discourse. Although some estimates are available of the extent of stock image use in advertising and marketing discourse (70% by Ward (2007)), this to the best of the author’s knowledge will be first one of its kind that explores stock image use in CSR discourse. The analytical framework developed for Study 2 integrates the various strands of research on the nature of the image and its use in a multimodal document and can as such be used to analyse visual meaning making in other such multimodal documents as well. Also, with further research, there is a potential for the framework to be used for sustainability assessment using visuals on the lines of RobecoSAM’s Corporate Sustainability Assessment. The use of the framework for analysing intersemiotic complementarity between visual and verbal meanings in CSR report in Study 3 will further highlight the fact that organisations can sometimes indulge in visual rhetoric and this is displayed in the incoherence between the meanings associated with the visual and verbal semiotic.

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