

A diachronic analysis of the visual representation of sustainability in Huawei's corporate reporting

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Abstract

A few previous studies have investigated the role of photographs in communicating corporate sustainability, but Chinese cases and their diachronic changes are neglected. Accordingly, this study aims at exploring how Chinese companies illustrate the concept of sustainability through using photographs and how the use has evolved. A case study was designed to analyze the use of photographs in the sustainability reports of Huawei, a leading global provider of information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure and smart devices based in China. Adopting the method of quantitative content analysis, this study relied on visual grammar as a framework to dissect a total of 1,405 photographs featuring in the sustainability reports published by Huawei from 2008 to 2022. These photographs were coded and classified with respect to their representational, interactive and compositional meaning potential, which consider both their motifs and structural aspects. The findings show that as Huawei's use of photographs in its sustainability reports over a 15-year span has evolved through three phases, its visual representation of sustainability has shifted from what it has done to how it is done better. Meanwhile, a tendency towards visual legitimation through drawing on the rhetorical functions of photographs has been revealed in Huawei's recent sustainability reports. These results can provide insights into future research on the visual representation of sustainability in digital channels.

Keywords: sustainability reporting, photographs, visual grammar, content analysis, visual representation.

Resumen

Un análisis diacrónico de la representación visual de la sostenibilidad en los informes corporativos de Huawei

Algunos estudios previos han investigado el papel de las fotografías en la comunicación de la sostenibilidad corporativa, pero los casos de China y sus cambios diacrónicos no han sido abordados. Este estudio tiene como objetivo explorar cómo las empresas chinas ilustran el concepto de sostenibilidad mediante el uso de fotografías y de qué manera ha evolucionado. Se diseñó un estudio de caso para analizar el empleo de fotografías en los informes de sostenibilidad de Huawei, un proveedor global líder en infraestructura de tecnologías de la información y comunicación (TIC) y dispositivos inteligentes con sede en China. A partir de un análisis cuantitativo de contenido, el presente estudio se basó en la gramática visual como marco para examinar un total de 1.405 fotografías presentes en los informes de sostenibilidad publicados por Huawei entre 2008 y 2022. Estas imágenes se codificaron y clasificaron según su potencial de significado representacional, interactivo y compositivo, considerando tanto sus motivos como aspectos estructurales. Los resultados muestran que, a medida que el uso de fotografías por parte de Huawei en sus informes de sostenibilidad ha evolucionado en un periodo de 15 años en tres fases, su representación visual de la sostenibilidad ha pasado de centrarse en lo que se ha hecho a cómo se hace mejor. Además, en los informes recientes de Huawei se ha revelado una tendencia hacia la legitimación visual mediante el aprovechamiento de las funciones retóricas de las fotografías. Estos resultados permiten incorporar perspectivas valiosas para futuras investigaciones sobre la representación visual de la sostenibilidad en canales digitales.

Palabras clave: informes de sostenibilidad, fotografías, gramática visual, análisis de contenido, representación visual.

1. Introduction

Sustainability reporting as an instrumental tool for corporate communication management (Šimunović, Murtarelli & Romenti, 2024) has been found to increasingly draw on visuals to influence stakeholders' perception of CSR-related topics (see, for example, Invernizzi et al., 2022). This “visual turn” (Lock & Araujo, 2020) manifests itself in not only the extensive use of graphs (Šimunović et al., 2024), photographs (Cañizares, 2022; Chong et al., 2019; Fernández-Vallejo, 2023) and their combinations (Hrasky, 2012; Momin et al., 2023) but also the manipulation of their structural dimension of size and color (García Sánchez &

Araújo & Bernardo, 2020). However, the conception of sustainability in corporate reporting has been evolving (Sarkar & Searcy, 2016), and the paucity of diachronic analysis on visual depictions mean that we cannot fully capture its historical evolution. At the same time, cross-national comparisons have revealed the effects of national culture on corporate sustainability reporting (Gallén & Peraita, 2018; Rim et al., 2019), yet previous research on visuals in corporate reporting, especially sustainability reporting, has focused on western countries where a radical shift from voluntary to mandatory non-financial information disclosure occurred (Aureli et al., 2020), leaving the situation in developing countries underexplored.

Addressing these gaps, this study aims to investigate the diachronic changes in the visual representation of sustainability by analyzing a corpus of Huawei's sustainability reports in China. We are particularly interested in the context of China as it is an interesting case that manifests the adaption and development of the sustainability idea (Goron, 2018). Specifically, when the concept of sustainable development appeared for the first time in Chinese official discourse in the mid-1990s, it was regarded as a national policy to sustain economic development while considering environmental protection, which well reflected the globally accepted idea of the Brundtland report; in the following three decades, a series of relevant concepts pursuing the socio-economic balance, such as the Scientific Outlook on Development and Ecological Civilization, have been coined by absorbing the ideas of ancient Chinese sages and Marxist-Leninist and Maoist legacies (Pan et al., 2021). Chinese enterprises as one of the vital actors in implementing the concept of sustainability were widely found to subscribe to a weak, eco-modernist version of sustainable development in which environmental and social problems are perceived to be less severe and not believed to cause fundamental problems to the continuity of human progress (Huang & Zhu, 2017). However, sustainable development "has been used to mean different things to different people in different contexts" (Bebbington, 2001, p. 129), and there are some Chinese enterprises sticking to the strong sustainability approach, among which Huawei is an outstanding case (Wonglimpiyarat, 2025). Meanwhile, Huawei has released its sustainability reports since 2008, which makes it an ideal subject for diachronic investigation. Therefore, in this study, a corpus of photographs from Huawei's sustainability reports is examined to see the visual representation of sustainability in photographs and its diachronic changes. On this basis, a further discussion is conducted to explore how

these reflect the visualized landscape of corporate sustainability reporting, or more generally corporate reporting in China.

In what follows, we first review previous research on visual elements in corporate reporting, with an emphasis on sustainability reporting. Then, we introduce the data and analytical framework developed on visual grammar. Afterwards, we report the findings of meaning-making processes in photographs depicting sustainability. Finally, this article concludes with a discussion showing how our analysis reflects the visualizing behaviors of sustainability reporting in China and provides theoretical and practical implications for relevant studies.

2. Literature review

The past few decades have witnessed a burgeoning academic interest in visual elements in corporate reporting. From the perspective of impression management (Merkl-Davies & Brennan, 2007), visuals have been extensively discussed as a rhetorical tool for manipulation and persuasion (Greenwood et al., 2019; Momin et al., 2023, p. 182), putting visual rhetorical analysis of corporate reports under the spotlight (Zeng et al., 2022, pp. 571-574). It merits our attention that though visual rhetoric as a form of human communication seeks to persuade through employing both visuals and their structural aspects (Kenney & Scott, 2003), previous studies focused their efforts mainly on the former, obviating the latter (García-Sánchez & Araújo-Bernardo, 2020, p. 1120). In terms of sustainability reporting, the use of photographs as a common form of visual has been studied to a large extent by academia, and researchers have devoted plenty of their attention to how photographs, particularly their selective contents, depict corporate social responsibility (CSR), a concept constituting the basis of sustainability (Belas, et al., 2021; Breeze & Fernández-Vallejo, 2026). For example, Zeng et al. (2022) targeted human rights, an important part of CSR, and conducted a content analysis of human rights photos utilized by Fortune 500 companies in their CSR reports. They found that the omnipresence of photos is a key feature of most human rights reporting, which concentrates on five specific categories. Focusing on the whole picture of CSR performance instead of its one aspect, Chong et al. (2019) found that the quantity of photos depicting environmental performance declined from 2005 to 2015 while those featuring product responsibility increased

significantly. This has been supported by Cañizares (2022), also a diachronic investigation, in which fashion catalogue photos were found to be widely used as a marketing tool in Inditex's CSR reports from 2006 to 2012 to promote its products. In addition, her findings revealed that since 2013, a shift from fashion photos to employee images has been emerging, thus projecting a more humanized image of this company. The recent prominence of human-related photos has also been discovered in corporate websites, an increasingly prominent genre in sustainable communication (Fernández-Vallejo, 2023; Breeze & Fernández-Vallejo, 2026).

Graphs are another widely-used form of visual in sustainability reporting and an appropriate use of them can bring additional communicative benefits (García Sánchez & Araújo Bernardo, 2020, p. 1120; Hrasky, 2012, p. 156), such as revealing and clarifying trends that may not be apparent from only scanning numerical data (Beattie & Jones, 2008). On this basis, Hrasky's (2012) findings suggested that firms that are more (vs. less) sustainability-driven present more quantified information by ways of graphs which can contribute to pursuing moral legitimation by their superiority in display. However, when distorted, graphs may be used as a strategic impression management tactic to manipulate stakeholders' perceptions of corporate performance, which is pervasive in the disclosure of financial information in annual reports (see, for example, Laidroo, 2016) and has appeared in sustainability reporting (Šimunović et al., 2024). Meanwhile, studies examining both graphs and photos in sustainability reporting are emerging, since the two forms of visuals have different communicative focuses. For example, Momin et al. (2023) in their analysis of 1,064 visuals in sustainability reports from 20 New Zealand Stock Exchange listed companies showcased variations in the appeal of photos, figures and tables to readers: photos work on emotions as their main way of impression management, while tables and figures work on the logical connection between readers and the favorable sustainability message.

When visual elements in sustainability reporting have gained more academic attention, their structural aspects are not completely overlooked. For instance, García Sánchez and Araújo Bernardo (2020) studied the structural dimensions of size and color of images in non-financial information statements from 35 Spanish companies and found differences among companies. Specifically, companies that issue less standardized information use images whose sizes are larger than half a page, and a wider range of colors is used by them to subtly evoke artificial feelings associated

with their environmental and social performance. On the contrary, companies reporting more relevant and comparable information prefer smaller-sized images and a smaller number of colors to lead readers' attention to important informative elements.

It is worth noting that the above-mentioned studies also referred to legitimacy theory to explain the strategic visual tactics companies employ to influence stakeholders' perceptions from the perspective of impression management (e.g. Hrasky, 2012; Usmani et al., 2020). According to Suchman (1995, p. 574), legitimacy is "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions". In sustainable reporting, when impression management is interpreted through the lens of legitimacy, it can be seen that "corporations are not passive reactors to stakeholder scrutiny but active agents shaping their legitimacy through both substantive and symbolic disclosures" (Elsayed, 2025). To put it another way, this combination highlights the active role of corporate narratives, especially visual narratives as discussed in this study in creating legitimacy for sustainability.

In summary, the above review showed that visuals and their structural aspects in sustainability reporting were separately discussed in extant literature. However, they were not independently designed in the production process to construct legitimacy, which means they should be examined simultaneously. Furthermore, diachronic analysis on visuals in sustainability reporting is still in its infancy. In the context of China, though the number of sustainability reports is growing (Guo et al., 2023), academia has paid scant attention to their use of visuals, leaving the landscape of sustainability reporting in this developing economy unclear. Given this background, our study specifically provides a diachronic description of the visual representation of sustainability in corporate reporting in China by concentrating on a representative company, Huawei.

3. Method and data

Our study adopted quantitative content analysis as the method to count the frequency of visual elements in the examined reports and further reveal how reporting patterns changed over time. To analyze both visuals and their structural aspects simultaneously, we established a coding framework based on Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar theory which specifically

addresses questions of what is said in the visuals (the representational meaning), how the content is presented to readers (the interactive meaning) and how it is composed to make a meaningful whole from the single units (the compositional meaning). Since sustainability reporting in the past two decades inclined to disclose photographs relevant to products and people, as found in our literature review, and people and objects are represented through different visual resources (Fernández-Vallejo, 2023; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006), we chose options suited for both human- and object-related photographs, especially on the dimensions of representational and interactive meaning potential in the coding framework. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006, p. 48), the representational meaning concerns how visuals represent people or objects as participants that constitute the subject matter and their relation. In photographs for sustainable communication, when people are engaged in sustainable development activities, their behavior, feelings and outfits as well as the setting can visually indicate a company's perception of sustainability (Fernández-Vallejo, 2023). Hence, we look at four major variables in the representational structure of human-related photographs, namely, actions, reactions, outfits and settings, whose operational definitions have been clarified in Deng and Feng's (2022) analysis of the visual representation of academics in human-related images from university annual reports and will not be elaborated here. For object-related photographs, they all include material objects and only differ from each other in their settings; thus, their backgrounds and foregrounds are solely examined on the representational dimension. Table 1 summarizes the options in the representational meaning potential for both human- and object-related photographs.

Action	Reaction	Outfit	Setting*
Transactional	Smile	Professional	Naturalistic
Non-transactional	Non-smile	Formal	Abstract
		Casual	Decontextualized

Note: Options with an asterisk are explored for both human- and object-related photos.

Table 1. Options in the representational meaning potential.

The interactive meaning deals with the interaction between the producer and the viewer of the image (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 114) and can be dissected on three simultaneous systems, namely, contact, social distance and

attitude (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 148). Contact is established when the represented participants, especially people in pictures have direct eye contact with the viewer from whom they are demanding something (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 117). In our study, only the gaze of the participants represented in human-related photographs is analyzed since objects cannot communicate with the viewer in this way. Social distance can be realized in photographs mainly through shot distance, including close, medium and long shots, which can apply to the representation of both human and objects (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, pp. 124-129). Attitudes, especially subjective attitudes are implied through the selection of an angle, or a point of view, and images can have either a frontal or an oblique angle no matter what the represented participant is (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 135). Table 2 shows the above options in the interactive structure for both human- and object-related photographs.

Gaze	Shot distance*	Shot angle*
Direct	Close	Frontal
Non-direct	Medium	Oblique
	Long	

Note: Options with an asterisk are explored for both human- and object-related photos.

Table 2. Options in the interactive meaning potential.

The compositional meaning concerns the interrelated systems through which the representational and interactive elements are made to relate to each other and further integrated into a meaningful whole (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 176). It is worth noting that the composition principles apply not just to single pictures but also to composite texts combining both text and image, be it on a page or computer screen (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 177). Since this study aims at investigating the structural aspects of photographs as mentioned in the first two sections, we seek to look at the whole page as an integrated text which includes photographs as an indispensable part. In corporate reporting, especially sustainability reporting, the placement, size and color of images are common tactics used to achieve rhetorical functions, such as providing context and tone and showing relations between elements (García-Sánchez & Araújo-Bernardo, 2020; Greenwood et al., 2019). Following this, our study focuses on the above three options in the compositional meaning potential and does not distinguish between human- and object-related photographs since their

compositions instead of contents are explored. Figure 1 shows the possible placement of photographs on a page divided into four quadrants, and Table 3 presents their possible size and color based on García-Sánchez and Araújo-Bernardo (2020).

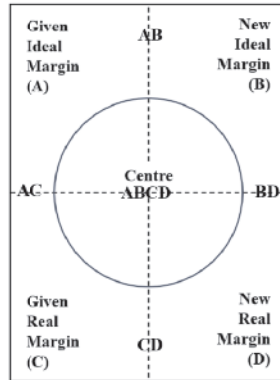


Figure 1. The dimension of visual space (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 197).

Size*	Color*		
>one page	Blue	Green	Turquoise
Whole page	Purple	Yellow	Orange
1/2 page	Grey	Black	Red
<1/2 page	Brown	Pink	White

Note: Options with an asterisk are explored for both human- and object-related photos.

Table 3. Options in the compositional meaning potential.

To provide a corpus for analysis, the sustainability reports issued by Huawei between 2008 and 2022 were downloaded from its website; the company began integrating sustainable reporting into its annual reports in 2023 and no independent sustainable reports have been released since then. Table 4 presents the numbers of pages and photographs contained in each report. In total, we collected 1,405 photographs and all of them were analyzed to preclude possible representativeness problems in sampling.

Year	Number of human-related photographs	Number of object-related photographs	Number of photographs	Number of pages
2008	52	21	73	41
2009	27	3	30	40
2010	50	14	64	58
2011	65	31	96	119
2012	62	48	110	111
2013	62	38	100	96
2014	50	43	93	107
2015	51	43	94	108
2016	55	37	92	100
2017	63	42	105	79
2018	45	39	84	94
2019	55	52	107	98
2020	86	55	141	126
2021	70	41	111	120
2022	69	36	105	108
Total	862	543	1,405	1,405

Table 4. The number of pages and photographs in Huawei’s sustainability reports (2008-2022).

To measure the extent of photograph use in Huawei’s sustainability reports, we followed Cañizares (2022) to calculate the number of photographs per report page and the proportion of reports devoted to photos. Figure 2 presents the number of photographs per page in Huawei’s sustainability reports from 2008 to 2022, which shows a clear division of the study period into three phases: 2008-2010, 2011-2016 and 2017-2022. In Phase 1, Huawei’s sustainability reports include an average of six photographs per five pages. This frequency drops to less than one in Phase 2; however, the third phase witnesses a slight increase, that is, a photograph appears almost per page. This diachronic change is also found in Figure 3 where the proportion of Huawei’s sustainability reports devoted to photographs is presented. Specifically, the proportion falls from 35% in Phase 1 to 31% in Phase 2 and then bounces back to 36% in Phase 3. For the second indicator, the recovery is more easily noticed, with the proportion in Phase 3 almost equal to that in Phase 1. Given this pattern, our diachronic analysis of the

visual representation of sustainability in Huawei's reports is based on the division of the above three phases.

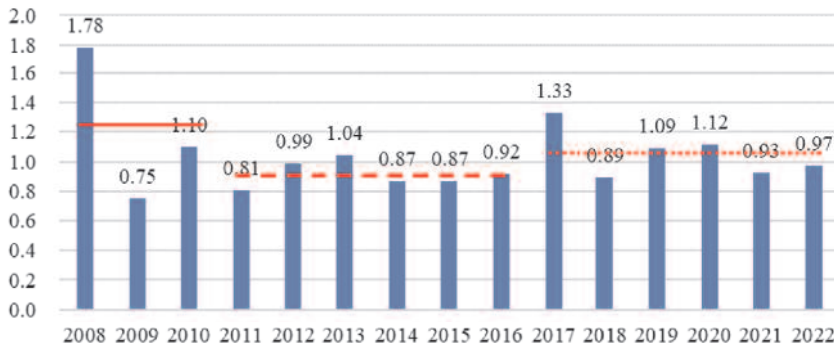


Figure 2. The number of photographs per page in Huawei's sustainability reports.

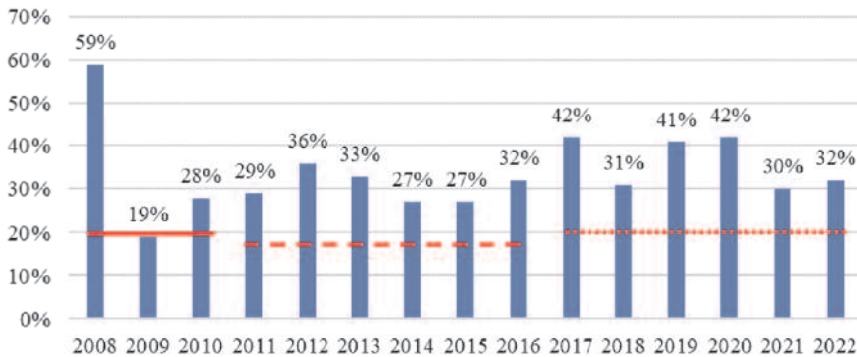


Figure 3. The proportion of Huawei's sustainability reports devoted to photographs.

4. Results

Founded in 1987, Huawei is a leading global provider of information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure and smart devices. It currently operates six main businesses, namely: ICT infrastructure, consumer business, cloud computing, digital power, intelligent automotive solutions and the chipset and component business; among these, the first three constitute its core. After entering the 21st century, Huawei went through

three major transformations: first, from 2002 onwards, when it experienced the first and only negative growth in history, it began to implement a globalization strategy by moving from the domestic market to the global market; second, in 2011, it officially announced the establishment of the consumer business group (BG) and the enterprise network BG, marking its transformation of the business model from B2B to B2b and B2C (Lan, 2022); third, in 2017, it established a Cloud business unit (BU) and further announced six Cloud innovations designed to help enterprises with digital transformation. These critical moments clearly correspond to the three phases described in our study, providing a solid background for the diachronic analysis. This part will present the representational, interactive and compositional meanings of the visuals and their diachronic changes in Huawei's sustainable reports in detail.

4.1. Representational meaning

Actions. As shown in Table 5, in 69.6% of the human-related images, people are depicted as involved in transactional actions. Figure 4 is an example of the represented participant performing transactional actions. To be specific, Topher White, the initiator and CEO of Rainforest Connection, is installing some device in the rainforest with his right hand grasping a rope and his left hand holding the device. Meanwhile, his body is swinging backwards and his eyes looking at his left front. All his posture and eye contacts constitute the transactional actions. Thus, this image illustrates the text that describes Huawei's vision of sustainable operation by cooperating with international environmental protection organizations. Photographs including transactional actions like Figure 4 capture one motion of Huawei's stakeholders including but not limited to its employees and users, with the primary communicative function of providing viewers with a glimpse of the real working scenes where the concept of sustainability is practiced. Regarding diachronic changes, the majority of human-related images draw on transactional actions to indicate what actions are taken rather than who the actors are in every phase, though there is a constant drop in proportion from Phase 1 to Phase 3.



Figure 4. Example of people with transactional actions (Huawei, 2019, p.27).

		Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Total
Action	Transactional	100 (77.5%)	257 (74.5%)	243 (62.6%)	600 (69.6%)
	Non-transactional	29 (22.5%)	88 (25.5%)	145 (37.4%)	262 (30.4%)
Reaction	Smile	82 (63.6%)	186 (53.9%)	164 (42.3%)	432 (50.1%)
	Non-smile	47 (36.4%)	159 (46.1%)	224 (57.7%)	430 (49.9%)
Outfit	Professional	28 (21.7%)	49 (14.2%)	83 (21.4%)	160 (18.5%)
	Formal	39 (30.2%)	147 (42.6%)	136 (35.1%)	322 (37.4%)
	Casual	62 (48.1%)	149 (43.2%)	169 (43.5%)	380 (44.1%)
Setting of human-related photos	Naturalistic	123 (95.3%)	281 (81.4%)	298 (76.8%)	702 (81.4%)
	Abstract	0 (0%)	13 (3.8%)	13 (3.4%)	26 (3%)
	Decontextualized	6 (4.7%)	51 (14.8%)	77 (19.8%)	134 (15.6%)
Setting of object-related photos	Naturalistic	31 (81.6%)	152 (63.3%)	175 (66%)	358 (65.9%)
	Abstract	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
	Decontextualized	7 (18.4%)	88 (36.7%)	90 (34%)	185 (34.1%)

Table 5. Distribution of types of actions, reactions, outfits and settings.

Reactions. The facial expression of the participants in an image is construed as a reactional structure in Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006, p. 67) system. For example, the actor in Figure 4 is smiling at his left front as if he is responding to something in that direction. Our findings show that 50.1% of the human-related photographs manifest themselves in the representation of smiling. However, our diachronic analysis reveals a steady decrease in the proportion of images with people smiling, which means the proportion of the representation of non-smiling maintains a sustained

growth throughout the three phases. This tendency suggests Huawei's serious attitude towards and dedication to sustainability work.

Outfits. The choice of outfits as a frequent strategy for visually realizing membership categorization (Breeze & Fernández-Vallejo, 2026; Okazawa & Kawamura, 2022) is an analytical process which relates participants in terms of a part-whole structure (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p.87). Our study concerns three types of outfits, namely, professional outfits such as fieldwork gear in Figure 5, formal outfits such as business suits in Figure 6 and casual outfits (see Figure 4). In our data, professional outfits account for 18.6%, while formal outfits make up 37.3% and casual outfits 44.1%, and a similar distribution pattern is found in each of the three phases. Meanwhile, there are fluctuations observed on the use of all three types of outfits through a diachronic lens. A V-shaped pattern is found in the share of professional outfits while an inverted V-shaped pattern in the proportion of business outfits. For casual outfits, the proportion declines slightly from Phase 1 to Phase 2 and is maintained at the same level in Phase 3. These findings may indicate Huawei's strong awareness of professionals' roles in sustainable development, which further brings benefits to the public who are represented by people wearing casual outfits in the examined photographs.



Figure 5. Example of professional outfits (Huawei, 2019, p. 6).



Figure 6. Example of business outfits (Huawei, 2019, p. 44).

Settings. Settings as one of the modality markers relates to the reality of message in an image (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 87). Table 5 shows three primary types of settings in our data: naturalistic settings (81.4%, see Figures 3 and 4), abstract settings (3%, see Figure 6) and decontextualized settings (15.6%, see Figure 7). Diachronically, the proportion of naturalistic settings decreases constantly from Phase 1 to Phase 3 though it is the highest in all three phases. By contrast the share of decontextualized settings undergoes a leap from Phase 1 to Phase 2 and a further increase in Phase 3. As for abstract settings, they are predominantly used in Phases 2 and 3 with a proportion of 3% respectively.



Figure 7. Example of decontextualized settings (Huawei, 2011, p. 2).

Different from photographs depicting people, object-related images mainly draw on naturalistic and decontextualized settings. In our data, the majority (65.9 %, 382 out of 543) of object-related images include realistic scenes as their backgrounds. Photographs of this type are normally scenarios where Huawei's products are used (see Figure 8 providing a snapshot of its lab), or its office blocks and the natural landscape. As for the rest (34.1%, 185 out of 543), they feature a blurred or plain background with no indication of the whereabouts and are used to display Huawei-produced products (see Figure 9). A diachronic analysis shows that the proportion of naturalistic settings decreases markedly from Phase 1 to Phase 2 and slightly increases in Phase 3. By contrast, the proportion of decontextualized settings increases from 18.4% in Phase 1 to 36.7% in Phase 2 and slightly decreases to 34% in Phase 3.



Figure 8. Example of object-related photos with realistic settings (Huawei, 2016, p. 41).



Figure 9. Example of object-related photos without background (Huawei, 2019, p. 77).

4.2. Interactive meanings

Gaze. Social contact between the represented human participants and the image viewer is primarily realized through gaze. When the gaze of the represented human participants directly addresses the viewer, an imaginary relation between them is established (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p.87). Table 6 shows that human-related photographs with direct gaze (see Figure 7) account for 37.1% of the total. In photographs of this type, the represented human participants are demanding that the viewer enter a close and personal relation with them, thus engaging him/her in relevant activities. An indirect gaze (see Figure 4 and Figure 5), by contrast, indicates that the viewer is scrutinizing the represented participants as the object, thus playing the role of ‘an invisible onlooker’ (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 119). The represented human participants in 62.9% of our data address the viewer indirectly since they are ‘offered’ to the viewer as ‘items of information and objects of contemplation’ (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 119).

Diachronically, the percentage of images with direct gaze towards the viewer has reduced dramatically from Phase 1 to Phase 2, followed by a slight increase in Phase 3. In contrast, there is a sharp increase in the proportion of images without gaze from Phase 1 to Phase 2; it then drops slightly in Phase 3. These findings demonstrate that initially human-related photographs are predominantly used to establish interpersonal contacts with the viewer, an intentional attempt to market Huawei and its efforts in sustainable development. In later phases, when they know they are not being looked at, the represented human participants do not deliberately pose for the photoshoot, thus they are objectified and remain detached from the viewer as part of the offered information. This shift echoes our preceding finding of the decline in smiling as a form of reaction.

		Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Total
Gaze	Direct	71 (55%)	106 (30.7%)	143 (36.9%)	320 (37.1%)
	Non-direct	58 (45%)	239 (69.3%)	245 (63.1%)	542 (62.9%)
Shot distance of human-related photos	Close	13 (10.1%)	90 (26.1%)	110 (28.4%)	213 (24.7%)
	Medium	68 (52.7%)	144 (41.7%)	131 (33.8%)	343 (39.8%)
	Long	48 (37.2%)	111 (32.2%)	147 (37.9%)	306 (35.5%)
Shot distance of object-related photos	Close	12 (31.6%)	31 (12.9%)	36 (13.6%)	79 (14.5%)
	Medium	21 (55.3%)	136 (56.7%)	144 (54.3%)	301 (55.4%)
	Long	5 (13.2%)	73 (30.4%)	85 (32.1%)	163 (30%)
Shot angle of human-related photos	Frontal	77 (59.7%)	171 (49.6%)	219 (56.4%)	467 (54.2%)
	Oblique	52 (40.3%)	174 (50.4%)	169 (43.6%)	395 (45.8%)
Shot angle of object-related photos	Frontal	19 (50%)	143 (59.6%)	177 (66.8%)	339 (62.4%)
	Oblique	19 (50%)	97 (40.4%)	88 (33.2%)	204 (37.6%)

Table 6. Distribution of types of gaze, shot distance and shot angles.

Shot distance. The spatial distances people keep depend on their social relations; meanwhile, they also determine how much of others is in our field of vision, which can be measured by the size of frame in a shot (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, pp. 124-125). Our study has identified three types of shots: close shot which indicates an intimate personal distance; medium shot which shows an interpersonal social distance; long shot which implies an impersonal public distance. As shown in Table 6, human-related images

mainly project an interpersonal social distance with the widest use of medium shots (39.8%). For example, Figure 5 shows a close social distance at which ‘impersonal business occurs’ (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 124). Long shot used as an indicator of public distance is also prevalent in our data (35.5%). Figure 4 is an example of long shots which concerns both the represented human participant and his surroundings. Photographs of this type tend to highlight the real environment where sustainable activities take place. Close shot is the least used with a proportion of 24.7%. It is chiefly found in portraits which foreground individuals and blur their surroundings (see Figure 7). Our diachronic analysis as shown in Table 6 reveals a steady drop in the percentage of human-related images with medium shots over the three phases, and an opposite change takes place in the proportion of close shots. These changes indicate that the social distance between the represented human participants and the viewer has been becoming more personal. By contrast, the proportion of long shots does not change sharply and always ranges from 30% to 40%. This suggests that Huawei’s makes attempts to reproduce the scenes of its sustainability work in the photographs and thus project an image of a real doer.

For object-related photographs, over half (55.4%) of them draw on medium shots. Photographs of this type (see Figure 8) are like print advertisements where objects are represented as within the viewer’s reach but not as actually used (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 128). In our data, long shots are employed in 30% of object photographs. Figure 10 is an example of long shot which creates an invisible barrier like a shop window between the building and the viewer. Object images with close shots account for only 14.5% of the total. In this type of image, the object is shown as if the viewer is using it (see Figure 9). The diachronic analysis reveals a tiny fluctuation in the proportion of object-related photos with medium shots. However, a marked rise is uncovered in the proportion of long shots over the three phases; in contrast, there is a steep fall in the proportion of close shots. These findings show that the photographed objects tend to not invite the viewer to their workplace, projecting a professional image of Huawei.



Figure 10. Example of object-related photos with long shot (Huawei, 2021, p. 56).

Shot angle. Camera angles provide the viewer with a possibility to express attitudes towards represented participants, be human or objects. The viewer of images with the front angle is normally involved with the represented participants through a built-in perspective, thus his/her subjectivity being subjective (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p.131). In contrast with this, the oblique angle causes the viewer to look at the represented participants in a relatively detached way, fostering an objective, outsider's attitude towards them. As shown in Table 6, 54.2% of people-related images are taken from a frontal angle (see Figure 7) while the rest have an oblique angle (see Figure 7). The difference between these two angles is more significant in Phase 1 and Phase 3, though a different pattern appears in Phase 2. The wider use of a frontal angle reflects that people-related images tend to involve the viewer in the activities, consistent with our findings regarding the shot distance.

Meanwhile, it is interesting to discover a similar pattern on object-related photographs. Table 6 shows that nearly two thirds (62.4%) of object-related images are taken from a frontal angle (see Figure 10) and over one third from an oblique angle (see Figure 8). The diachronic analysis shows how this pattern is established. In Phase 1, the two angles are equally taken for object-related photographs. However, the proportion of object-related images with a frontal angle remains a gradual increase in the later phases while that with an oblique angle continues decreasing. Considering the prevalence of both frontal angles and long/medium shots, we can see that object-related images relate the viewer to the represented object participants in a certain way: he/she is made to look straight at them and see them as if to view a window display.

4.3. Compositional meaning

Placement. The placement of elements on a page endows them with the specific informational values. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006, pp. 179-201), the left element on a page is the side of the already given while the right seems to be the side of the key information which merits special attention of the viewer; similarly, what has been placed on the top is presented as the idealized or generalized essence of the information whereas the bottom element presents the real which is more specific, down-to-earth or practical information; besides, the centered element is presented as the nucleus of the information on which other elements are dependent. In our data shown in Table 7, the two types of photographs manifest themselves in the same pattern of placement: overall both are frequently seen at the lower, right or center part of a page, and occasionally appear at the top-left quadrant, indicating that they are used in corporate reporting to provide new, real and vital information. The diachronic changes of placement of object-related photographs aligns with this: the proportions of those placed at the lower part and the top-left quadrant are constantly dropping over the three phases while more and more photographs of this type are being placed at the upper-right quadrant or the center. However, the diachronic analysis displays a more complicated situation for people-related photographs: they mostly occupy the lower and right parts, but there is a marked tendency to place them at the center or in the top-left quadrant, which portray top managers or well-known experts.

Human-related photos					Object-related photos				
	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Total	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Total	
Placement	a	8 (6.2%)	41 (13.5%)	36 (11.1%)	85 (9.9%)	5 (13.2%)	20 (8.3%)	7 (2.6%)	32 (5.9%)
	b	22 (17.1%)	45 (14.8%)	54 (16.7%)	121 (14.0%)	3 (7.9%)	30 (12.5%)	40 (15.1%)	73 (13.4%)
	c	22 (17.1%)	56 (18.4%)	50 (15.4%)	128 (14.8%)	7 (18.4%)	52 (21.7%)	33 (12.5%)	92 (16.9%)
	d	22 (17.1%)	74 (24.3%)	56 (17.3%)	152 (17.6%)	14 (36.8%)	46 (19.2%)	45 (17.0%)	105 (19.3%)
	ab	9 (7.0%)	9 (3.0%)	46 (14.2%)	64 (7.4%)	1 (2.6%)	9 (3.8%)	24 (9.1%)	34 (6.3%)
	cd	11 (8.5%)	21 (6.9%)	47 (14.5%)	79 (9.2%)	0 (0.0%)	16(6.7%)	39 (14.7%)	55 (10.1%)
	ac	11 (8.5%)	25 (8.2%)	15 (4.6%)	51 (5.9%)	2 (5.3%)	16 (6.7%)	13 (4.9%)	31 (5.7%)
	bd	13 (10.1%)	33 (10.9%)	20 (6.2%)	66 (7.7%)	2 (5.3%)	22 (9.2%)	22 (8.3%)	46 (8.5%)
	abcd	11 (8.5%)	41 (13.5%)	64 (19.8%)	116 (13.5%)	4 (10.5%)	29 (12.1%)	42 (15.8%)	75 (13.8%)
Size	>1	0 (0.0%)	7 (2.0%)	6 (1.5%)	13 (1.5%)	0 (0.0%)	8 (3.3%)	10 (3.8%)	18 (3.3%)
	=1	1 (0.8%)	26 (7.5%)	65 (16.8%)	92 (10.7%)	2 (5.3%)	15 (6.3%)	33 (12.5%)	50 (9.2%)
	=1/2	123 (95.3%)	303 (87.8%)	308 (79.4%)	734 (85.2%)	34 (89.5%)	208 (86.7%)	217 (81.9%)	459 (84.5%)
	<1/2	5 (3.9%)	9 (2.6%)	9 (2.3%)	23 (2.7%)	2 (5.3%)	9 (3.8%)	5 (1.9%)	16 (2.9%)
Color	Blue	15 (39.5%)	142 (59.2%)	154 (58.1%)	311 (57.3%)	83 (64.3%)	223 (73.4%)	264 (81.5%)	570 (66.1%)
	Green	15 (39.5%)	95 (39.6%)	126 (47.5%)	236 (43.5%)	73 (56.6%)	151 (49.7%)	147 (45.4%)	371 (43.0%)
	Turquoise	2 (5.3%)	16 (6.7%)	21 (7.9%)	39 (7.2%)	9 (7.0%)	25 (8.2%)	45 (13.9%)	79 (9.2%)
	Red	10 (26.3%)	75 (31.3%)	100 (37.7%)	185 (34.1%)	82 (63.6%)	208 (68.4%)	188 (58.0%)	478 (55.5%)
	Pink	2 (5.3%)	12 (5.0%)	9 (3.4%)	23 (4.2%)	24 (18.6%)	68 (22.4%)	59 (18.2%)	151 (17.5%)
	Purple	0 (0.0%)	12 (5.0%)	8 (3.0%)	20 (3.7%)	11 (8.5%)	29 (9.5%)	38 (11.7%)	78 (9.0%)
	Yellow	3 (7.9%)	44 (18.3%)	59 (22.3%)	106 (19.5%)	34 (26.4%)	113 (37.2%)	131 (40.4%)	278 (32.3%)
	Orange	3 (7.9%)	47 (19.6%)	54 (20.4%)	104 (19.2%)	25 (19.4%)	75 (24.7%)	111 (34.3%)	211 (24.5%)
	Brown	13 (34.2%)	56 (23.3%)	84 (31.7%)	153 (28.2%)	102 (79.1%)	253 (83.2%)	216 (66.7%)	571 (66.2%)
	White	23 (60.5%)	165 (68.8%)	170 (64.2%)	358 (65.9%)	107 (82.9%)	294 (96.7%)	324 (100%)	725 (84.1%)
	Grey	35 (92.1%)	198 (82.5%)	149 (56.2%)	382 (70.3%)	115 (89.1%)	289 (95.1%)	265 (81.8%)	669 (77.6%)
	Black	33 (86.8%)	191 (79.6%)	195 (73.6%)	419 (77.2%)	124 (96.1%)	324 (100%)	324 (100%)	752 (87.2%)

Table 7. Distribution of types of placement, size and color.

Size. Visual studies have established that the size of an image on a page can determine its salience, the degree to which it can draw attention to itself (Lohse, 1997; Proulx & Green, 2011). Table 7 shows that around 85% of both human- and object-related photographs are taken in a half-page size, but the proportion continues to drop over the three phases. Meanwhile, the proportion of both types of photographs in a full-page size is gradually increasing while there is a sustained decline of that of those in a less than half-page size. It is also interesting to find that more and more object-related photographs in an over full-page size are used while the proportion of human-related photographs in the same size ascends in the first two phases while falls slightly at Phase 3. These findings indicate that Huawei does not

overuse large photographs to impress its most immediate stakeholders and then seek pragmatic legitimacy despite the minor diachronic changes observed.

Color. In corporate discourse, color can be configured as a persuasive visual rhetoric technique by manipulating its amount and utilizing its psychological associations (García-Sánchez & Araújo-Bernardo, 2020). As shown in Table 7, all 13 colors can be found from Phase 1 to Phase 3 in both people- and object-related photographs. Meanwhile, our finding regarding the technical use of color is in line with previous studies. That is, the common colors are blue, green, red and brown as well as the neutral colors of black, white and grey, though their proportions vary in the two types of photographs. For people-related photographs, blue is the most common color (57.3%), followed by green (43.5%), red (34.1%) and brown (28.2%), and the diachronic analysis reveals a constantly growing use of the first three colors. For object-related photographs, both brown (66.2%) and blue (66.1%) are most commonly used, followed by red (55.5%) and green (43%). Diachronically, the proportion of blue steadily increase while those of brown and red first climb and then fall; besides, the use of green is dropping. These findings indicate that Huawei draws on specific colors with evocative tones: among them, blue is widely used to clearly and credibly convey a CSR message to stakeholders and green to be associated with sustainability and respect for the environment; as for red, its unusually extensive use may suggest a reference to the predominant color of the company's logo though it is typically avoided in sustainable reporting because of its evocation of strong emotions like anger, violence and danger (García-Sánchez & Araújo-Bernardo, 2020).

5. Discussion and conclusion

By analyzing the meaning-making process of photographs in Huawei's sustainability reports over a 15-year span (2008-2022), we have traced the diachronic development of its visual representation of sustainability, adding evidence to extant visual studies of corporate reporting, especially sustainability reporting. At the earlier phase, sustainability is visualized in specific sustainable practices and their surroundings, which is realized by a predominant use of photographs with transactional actions, naturalistic settings or smaller sizes and those occupying the lower part of a page. To put

it another way, in its early depiction of sustainability, Huawei used more specific photographs which can be easily and clearly identified as specific economic, environmental or socially reflective actions to impress its most immediate stakeholders. In the later phase, sustainability is depicted as a serious matter that requires professional hands and specialized equipment. With a high degree of professionalism, which is realized by an increasing use of non-smiling, indirect gaze and professional or formal outfits, the human participants in the examined photographs have been distancing themselves from the viewer. This attitude is also reflected by a marked rise of object-related photographs with a long shot or frontal angle, which seem to be window displays and invite no involvement from the viewer. In addition, the increasing use of photographs colored blue and green and those put in the center of a page indicates that Huawei is tending to represent itself as a credible sustainability-driven firm.

The above diachronic changes can be explained by legitimacy theory in two ways. First, Huawei's perception of sustainability has shifted from what it has done to how it is done better, as evidenced by the large number of photographs depicting uniformed employees and high-tech equipment. This is an apparent change from consequential legitimacy to procedural legitimacy, both of which fall into the category of moral legitimacy with the aim of inducing stakeholders to make favorable evaluations. We may attribute this change to the evolution of international sustainability disclosure standards which have a close correspondence with international sustainable development goals. To be specific, when the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as the centerpiece of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development were adopted in 2015 to replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), more specific targets were put forward within each of the 17 goals to achieve global, universal and interconnected sustainable development, correspondingly setting high standards of sustainability work and thus asking for high efficiency. Acknowledging its significance and influence, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), a global organization providing standards for sustainability reporting, integrated SDGs in its framework which requires companies to disclose not only economic, environmental and social impacts but also how they manage these impacts. As a result, companies are obliged to provide more information about how sustainability efforts are effectively made. For Huawei, the research object, it has been using technology, which is its own specialty, more intensively to achieve sustainability since its implementation of the "Digital First" strategy in 2016 (Tao, 2022). In our data, the photographs of

professionals and equipment are the embodiment of technology. These findings add visual evidence to Li and Fontaine (2024) which revealed Huawei's emphasis on technology to attain sustainable development in its discursive construction of corporate ecological identity in sustainability reports from 2016 to 2020.

Second, apart from moral legitimacy, Huawei has also been pursuing pragmatic legitimacy through deliberately projecting an honest and trustworthy image with the aim of impressing its most immediate stakeholders. This may be driven by its sustainability strategy which evolved from its CSR strategy and was officially announced in 2012. By focusing on four specific initiatives, i.e. bridging the digital divide, safeguarding secure and stable network operations, promoting environmental protection and seeking win-win development, this strategy not only provides clear goals for Huawei's sustainable development but also specifies the direction of its sustainable reporting, both of which act together to construct a certain corporate image. In this study, we found that the emerging utilization of photography's rhetorical functions in Huawei's sustainable reports contributes to its pursuit of pragmatic legitimacy. In other words, the findings demonstrate how visual pragmatic legitimation is now recontextualized in corporate sustainability reporting at China. For example, the images of uniformed employees and high-tech equipment, which are given salience through various visual features, are commonly seen in not only Huawei's sustainability reports, as found in this study, but also those of Sinopec, a Chinese state-owned oil corporation (Wang & Liu, 2024). This shows that Chinese companies nowadays tend to draw on certain images to denote their professionalism and capabilities in addressing sustainability issues, thus visually legitimating their eco-friendly corporate images. What is more, color has also been widely used as a persuasive visual rhetoric technique in sustainability reporting by Chinese companies, since it can vividly project an image of a pragmatic company fulfilling its social responsibilities in the reader's mind (Zhang et al., 2023). As their international counterparts, Chinese listed manufacturing companies of the A-share Shanghai Stock Exchange from 2015 to 2019 have been found to extensively use blue in their visual disclosure of corporate environmental information through CSR reports and social media platforms (Bai, Ding & Jiang, 2024), which is consistent with our findings.

To conclude, this study reveals how sustainability is visually represented in corporate sustainability communication and its evolution through analyzing

photographs used in Huawei's sustainability reports from 2008 to 2022. It provides new insights into the visual representation of sustainability in corporate reporting by adding evidence from developing countries and adopting a diachronic approach. The findings provide visual discursive evidence that international sustainability disclosure standards and SDGs are important factors impacting Chinese companies' perception of sustainability. Meanwhile, this study draws on visual grammar to analyze the representational, interactive and compositional meanings of photographs in corporate sustainability reports, demonstrating that visual legitimation can be achieved through manipulating both the motifs of photographs and their structural aspects. This framework may provide a more comprehensive approach to analyzing the visual representation of sustainability or CSR in corporate discourse. For issues addressed in this study, future work can look at how companies publicize their sustainability work on short-video platforms (e.g. TikTok) which offer a new vehicle and channel for communication in the digital world, which will cast additional light on the visual representation of sustainability in corporate discourse.

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