

Visualising Corporate Social Responsibility: The evolving role of photographs in Inditex's corporate reporting

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Abstract

A few previous studies have dealt with the role of photographs in communicating Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). In general, however, this remains a neglected field. Accordingly, this study seeks to investigate the extent to which corporations make use of photos to illustrate concepts related to CSR, as well as to shed light on how that use has evolved. To these ends, a case study was designed to analyse the use of images in the CSR reporting of Inditex, the world's biggest fashion retailer (www.inditex.com). The methodology applied was that of quantitative content analysis (QCA). This uses quantification to establish the frequency of visual elements in a defined corpus and provides information that is especially valuable for diachronic studies. In the study, QCA was used to analyse a total of 1,725 photographs featuring in the reports published by Inditex between 2002 and 2019. These images were coded and classified with respect to: (i) their size; (ii) the concept about which they provide visual information; and (iii) the various visual motifs used to communicate these concepts through images. The findings show how Inditex's use of photographs in its corporate reporting over the last two decades has evolved through three different stages, with photographs playing a different role in each. These results can provide the basis for other, broader studies designed to establish a general pattern.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility; corporate reporting; photographs; CSR reporting; visual communication.

Resumen

Visualizando la Responsabilidad Social Corporativa: la evolución del papel de las fotografías en los informes corporativos de Inditex

Aunque existen ya algunas investigaciones que se ocupan del papel que desempeñan las fotografías en la comunicación de la Responsabilidad Social Corporativa (RSC), en general se trata de un campo poco estudiado. El objetivo de este trabajo es averiguar hasta qué punto las empresas usan fotografías para comunicar conceptos relacionados con la RSC y cómo ha evolucionado esta práctica. Con esta finalidad se diseñó un estudio de caso para analizar el uso de imágenes en los informes corporativos de la empresa Inditex, el líder mundial en el sector textil (www.inditex.com). La metodología aplicada fue el análisis cuantitativo de contenido, que permite establecer y cuantificar la frecuencia de elementos visuales en un corpus determinado, proporcionando así información clave en el caso de estudios diacrónicos. Se analizaron 1725 fotografías incluidas en los informes de RSC publicados por Inditex entre 2002 y 2019. Las imágenes fueron codificadas y clasificadas respecto a las siguientes categorías: (a) tamaño, (b) tema sobre el que proporcionan información visual y (c) los distintos motivos visuales usados para comunicar esos temas a través de imágenes. Los resultados muestran que, a lo largo de las dos últimas décadas, Inditex ha pasado por tres etapas en lo que concierne al uso de fotografías en sus informes y que, en cada una de ellas, estas cuentan con una función distinta. El presente estudio puede servir como base para futuros trabajos que investiguen tendencias generales sobre el uso de fotografías para comunicar la RSC.

Palabras clave: Responsabilidad Social Corporativa (RSC); informes corporativos; fotografías; informes de RSC; comunicación visual.

Introduction

Even if Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become a ubiquitous concept, it remains a contested one; there is no universally accepted listing of companies' responsibilities towards society. As a result, each individual company may have its own distinctive vision of what CSR is all about. That vision may be based on a myriad of different factors (e.g., the sector in which the company operates, the customers it targets or the personal opinions of its top management), and it is expressed through various channels, the most important of them being its corporate reports devoted, in whole or in part, to the subject of CSR. In recent years, visuals of various types, and photographs in particular, have become a key feature of corporate reporting, and this study will examine how they have been used by the Spanish fashion giant Inditex to communicate its vision of CSR over the years.

The remainder of the study is divided into seven sections, the first of which gives a brief outline of CSR-reporting and its origins. There follows a review of the literature on the use of photographs in corporate reports and in particular on their use to communicate CSR. The next three sections are devoted, respectively, to the study's objectives, methodology and findings. In the penultimate section, the findings are discussed. The study closes with some conclusions, in particular regarding its contribution to the literature on the use of photographs in corporate reporting and the construction of CSR through visuals, followed by a brief reflection on the study's limitations.

1. CSR reporting

CSR reporting consists of all those documents published annually by companies to give an account of their CSR-related activity and its impact. CSR being a social construct (Dahlsrud, 2008), it has evolved over the years (Carroll, 1999), and continues to do so as society gives corporations an ever-broader set of responsibilities (Latapí Agudelo et al., 2019). Moreover, the precise meaning of 'socially responsible' varies between companies depending on, for example, cultural factors or socio-economic conditions in the country, or countries, where they operate. It is therefore not surprising that the contents of CSR reporting are very heterogeneous. Nonetheless, there is an increasing tendency to standardisation prompted by the publication of numerous recommendations and guidelines, the most widely used being the Global Reporting Initiative, or GRI, (Nikolaeva & Bicho, 2011; Pérez Cañizares, 2021) and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The topics that, under the guidelines, companies may identify as material in relation to their responsible actions are of three main types: economic, social and environmental. Within them, the variety of subjects that may be addressed in CSR reports is wide-ranging. In practice, it is left to individual companies themselves to choose which topics they want to report about and which are left out. Moreover, guidelines concentrate on the reporting processes, the benefits of disclosure and the topics to be addressed, and provide no recommendations about more formal aspects, specifically the role of visuals (Breitbarth et al., 2010). Thus, here again, it is companies that ultimately decide whether to incorporate visual elements in the reports, and what purpose to attribute to them.

The roots of CSR reporting are to be found in the 1990s. It was then that a trend emerged for companies to publish reports (Ghio & Verona, 2020) about health, social or environmental topics, which are usually titled accordingly (Fifka, 2012; 2014; Pérez Cañizares, 2021). The main characteristic of this new form of non-financial disclosure was that, unlike publication of annual reports, it was voluntary. The move towards voluntarism was the result of various factors, one of which was increasing stakeholder pressure. Another was the reduction of the costs involved in producing reports during the 1990s (McKinstry, 1996; Ghio & Verona, 2020).

In the next decade, coinciding with the launch of the first GRI guidelines (Global Reporting Initiative, n.d.), these documents were superseded by more general ones, the first 'CSR Reports' as such (another common name used some years later was 'Sustainability Reports'). They enjoyed immediate popularity. Thus, in 2005, 41% of the hundred biggest companies in each of 16 countries issued a CSR-report (KPMG, 2005); by 2011, those figures had increased to 64% in 34 countries (KPMG, 2012). Thereafter, the rising trend continued and was reinforced in Europe by the publication of European Parliament Directive 2014/95/EU, which made non-financial disclosure a legal requirement (Council of the European Union, 2014).

Formally, CSR reports resemble annual reports insofar as these had come, in the final decades of the 20th century, to include a narrative part complementing the financial statements (McKinstry, 1996). Thus, CSR reports also start with a letter to their readers, although this addresses not only shareholders, as in an annual report, but a much broader range of stakeholders. Like annual reports, they comprise a mixed genre as they carry out at least two different communicative functions (Bhatia, 2005). On the one hand, they provide general information by offering external readers an overview of a company's performance in the CSR field. On the other, they are used to promote that company by presenting a positive image of it (Ditlevsen, 2012; Schnitzer, 2017).

Recently, a further type of document known as an 'integrated report' has come to be used for CSR reporting. Published by companies especially concerned about such issues, this is a type of annual report in which disclosure of financial, social and environmental performance is intertwined. The underlying idea is that, responsibility being central to all business activities, the interdependencies between financial and non-financial

performance should be communicated and elucidated (IIRC, 2011). In other words, a company will present itself in an integrated report as an entity responsible for all its activities.

In fact, issuing integrated reports poses added difficulties for companies, as they are subject to the same legal requirements as annual reports. Specifically, there is a legal deadline for their publication, and they must be signed off by the company's board. Moreover, the costs involved in the reporting process are increased. That such efforts are devoted to CSR reporting is, in itself, often considered a sign of goodwill and transparency on the company's part, and ultimately of awareness of its responsibility to society.

2. Photographs in corporate reports

Together with the spread of multimodality, the inclusion of visuals in companies' reports, as well as the use of attractive design and layout, has been identified as a key recent development in corporate communication (Bhatia & Bremner, 2012). Some researchers have further argued that this process has gone hand-in-hand with another important change. That is the transformation of annual reports from financially driven documents into a corporate communications tool (McKinstry, 1996; Beattie et al., 2008; Karreman et al., 2014), a transformation that occurred in the UK in the mid 1980s and in the USA a decade earlier (McKinstry, 1996). Be that as it may, there is no doubt that visual artifacts are now a crucial element of the genre 'corporate report' (including annual, CSR and integrated reports) as we know it at present.

Not surprisingly, this development has attracted research interest. It is true that some of the research devoted to visuals has focused on the use of charts and diagrams (e.g., Beattie et al., 2008; Havemo, 2018). Nevertheless, it is photographs – or 'pictures', as they will also be termed here – that have received the greatest attention (Davison, 2015). A thorough review of recent literature on 'visual accounting' (Davison, 2015) identifies a total of 83 articles on the role of photos in corporate reports between 1987 and 2014, a fairly rich haul. But what truly impresses us is the range of disciplines contributing to it, which includes art history, visual semiotics, gender studies and visual psychology. This diversity, not just of disciplines, but also of approaches and methodologies applied to examine these artefacts indicates how appealing the topic is to researchers. But it also indicates how difficult they are to approach.

One of the most frequent subjects addressed by research on visual representations in corporate reports is diversity: primarily gender diversity, but more recently also, and to a lesser extent, ethnic diversity. Thus, some studies have contrasted depictions of men and women. In general, these studies show how, in photographs included in reports, women are under-represented and portrayed as less powerful than men (Benschop & Meihuizen, 2002; Bujaki & McConomy, 2009; Duff, 2011; Kuasirikun, 2011). Photographs repeatedly show gender stereotypes; that is, women tend to be clients rather than employees and are depicted at leisure (Benschop & Meihuizen, 2002; Duff, 2011) or in a less serious mood than men (Anderson & Imperia, 1992). However, Bernardi et al. (2002; 2005) have shown that companies with a higher percentage of women and ethnic minorities on their governing boards tend to use photographs to highlight this situation. Regardless of the methodology applied, research carried over decades presents similar findings (Panayiotou, 2021), with the situation in most recent years being understudied.

The second thematic field in the study of corporate reports that has been approached by focusing on photographs is, precisely, CSR (e.g., Breitbarth et al., 2010; Rämö, 2011; Höllerer et al., 2013; Catellani, 2015; Chong et al., 2019; Ali et al., 2021). In this case the aims have focused on establishing the importance of the CSR topics presented visually in reports, and whether these have changed over the years (Chong et al., 2019). Breitbarth et al. (2010, p. 248), for instance, observed that people feature in the majority of photographs in the CSR reports they analyse, and argue that this serves as a “humanification of the corporate” by adding a human dimension to the abstract concepts of ‘responsibility’ or ‘sustainability’. Other researchers have found that by depicting appropriate activities, companies attempt to portray themselves as responsible actors (Rämö, 2011; Chong et al., 2019), thus supplementing their discursive legitimation strategies (Höllerer et al., 2019; Ali et al., 2021).

Still other studies underline a twofold use of photos in corporate reports: either to reinforce written information, or to create independent “symbolic visual declarations” (Rämö, 2011) which can even lead to “construct a reality” (Hines, 1988). Preston and Young (2000) stress the particular importance of the relationship between text and images, which prompts the reader automatically to translate images into words, although in some cases possible multiple readings of an image can convey a message different from that transmitted in the text (Breitbarth et al., 2010). Photographs are also

thought to be a more accessible means of transmitting a responsible corporate image to a wider audience, who otherwise would need to check other evidence and numerical data (Rämö, 2011). Moreover, photographs can also transmit a meaning instantaneously (Meyer et al., 2013; de Groot et al., 2016), by contrast to written texts, which must be decoded sequentially.

Even so, there continues to be a lack of studies on features of style, in particular the use and layout of photos in corporate reports (e.g. Tregidga et al., 2007; de Groot, 2014; Karreman et al., 2014), including those communicating about CSR. Specifically, there is a dearth of research focusing on how the use of pictures with this purpose has evolved over time. Moreover, no longitudinal study of a Spanish company has yet been reported. It is that research gap that this work aims to fill.

3. Objectives

This study intends to shed light on changes in CSR reporting practice in Spain over the last two decades. To do so, it will examine how the use of photographs in one major Spanish company's CSR reporting has evolved and how it helps to shape and communicate the meaning of CSR. In more concrete terms, the study seeks to answer the following research questions.

RQ1. To what extent are photographs used in Spanish CSR reporting, how prominent are they in relation to the accompanying text, and how does their prominence vary over time?

RQ2. Which topics are accorded greatest prominence in the photographs, and what variations, if any, are observable in this pattern over time?

RQ3. Which motifs are used in the photographs, and what variations, if any, are observable in this pattern over time?

4. Methods and data

In order to answer these questions, it was decided to conduct a case study. This was considered a suitable approach as it has previously proved effective in shedding light on the development of corporate reports as a business genre in a number of contexts. These include the UK fashion retailer *Burton*

(McKinstry, 1996), the Danish food producer *Danisco* (Ditlevsen, 2012), the Swedish communications technology company *Ericsson* (Havemo, 2018) and the dairy producer *Fonterra Co-operative Group*, New Zealand's largest company (Ali et al., 2021).

The method chosen for the case study was quantitative content analysis (QCA) (Rose, 2001), which can be used to establish the frequency of visual elements in a defined corpus. This choice was motivated by the longitudinal perspective of the work, as QCA is considered to provide information that is especially valuable for diachronic studies in general (Bell, 2001; Grittmann & Lobinger, 2011). Moreover, it can also reveal how reporting patterns have changed over time (Havemo, 2018). Finally, using QCA does not exclude a certain amount of qualitative interpretation (Rose, 2001, p. 55) since salient examples can be analysed to assess their meaning in social and historical context (Bell, 2001, p. 27).

The Spanish company Inditex was selected as the object of the case study, for three main reasons. Firstly, Inditex is a global player; in fact, it is the largest worldwide fashion retailer. Secondly, Inditex provides a wealth of relevant data. Specifically, the company began issuing separate CSR reports in 2002 and introduced a single integrated report to replace both these and its annual reports four years later. Finally, it has been a pioneer in non-financial disclosure in the Spanish context; in 2002, only 11% of the 100 largest Spanish companies issued an independent CSR report (KPMG, 2005). In this respect, Inditex has probably served as a reference for other Spanish companies that started to disclose non-financial information more recently.

To provide a corpus for analysis, the CSR reports issued by Inditex between 2002 and 2005 and the integrated reports issued from 2006 to 2019 were downloaded from the company's website. The number of pages and photographs included in each report appears in Table 1.

Year of issue	Number of pages	Number of photographs
2002	185	112
2003	170	45
2004	107	91
2005	82	41
2006	453	203
2007	413	65
2008	379	74
2009	313	69
2010	291	63
2011	296	48
2012	323	50
2013	294	72
2014	315	130
2015	309	84
2016	350	119
2017	388	160
2018	431	144
2019	472	155

Table 1. Number of pages and photographs in Inditex reports (2002-2019).

In total, the reports contained 1,725 photographs, all of which were analysed, thus precluding any problems of sample representativity. Specifically, the images were classified by the following factors:

- (i) their size;
- (ii) the topic about which they provide visual information;
- (iii) the various visual motifs used to communicate these concepts through images.

A full list of coding categories is provided in Table 2. These categories were developed inductively (Breitbarth et al., 2010, p. 242) and revised after a trial coding run of images taken from three randomly selected reports (those for 2002, 2006 and 2011). The purpose of this pre-coding stage was to ensure that there were no overlaps between categories, and that all topics depicted in the photographs were covered by the coding tool (Rose, 2001, pp. 61-62). In order to establish the prominence of images relative to written text, pictures were assigned values based on their size, as shown in Table 2. Photos less than a whole page in size were categorised as 'large' if they covered a half-page or more, as 'medium' if covering between a quarter and half of a-page, and as 'small' otherwise. Regarding the different topics included in the coding tool, probably the only one that needs some clarification is 'responsibility'. This refers to photographs where activities related to CSR are depicted, but the actors involved cannot be clearly identified (for instance, a fire drill). The content of these images is often

clear only through the inclusion of captions. Of the categories of motif, ‘spaces’ is self-explanatory, ‘detail’ normally refers to a camera close-up focusing on a part of an object, ‘persons’ denotes portrait-like photos of people looking at the camera, while photos including people but with the photographer as a remote observer were categorised as ‘actions’.

Size	Topic	Motif
Double-page (32)	Company	Spaces
Single-page (16)	Back office	People
Large (8)	Front office	Actions
Medium (4)	Product	Details
Small (1)	Shops	
	Factory	
	Philanthropy	
	Environment	
	Shareholders	
	Suppliers	
	Responsibility	
	Other	

Table 2. Categories and variables used in coding.

All pictures were initially coded by the author. A quarter of them, drawn from all the reports, were then coded independently by a second person, a PhD student who was trained for the purpose. A comparison of the results of the two coding runs showed intercoder reliability of over 90%. Coding inconsistencies were discussed by the two coders and a final agreement reached on the appropriate coding.

5. Findings

This section presents the study findings with regard to each of the three research questions in turn.

5.1. RQ1: Extent of photograph use, absolute and relative to text

The extent of photograph use in Inditex’s reports was assessed using two metrics: the number of photographs per report page and the proportion of reports devoted to photos (for details of how this indicator was calculated, see the Methods section). Figure 1 sets out the study findings with regard to the first of these and shows a clear division of the study period into three distinct phases: 2002-2006, 2007-2012 and 2013-2019. During the first of these, reports include an average of one photograph every two pages. This

frequency decreases during Phase 2, when a picture appears approximately every five pages. However, it increases again in the third phase, when the average frequency rises again to one photo every third page. It is also worthy of note that the indicator's volatility, which in Phase 1 is high, falls to a very low level in Phase 2 and remains moderate in Phase 3.

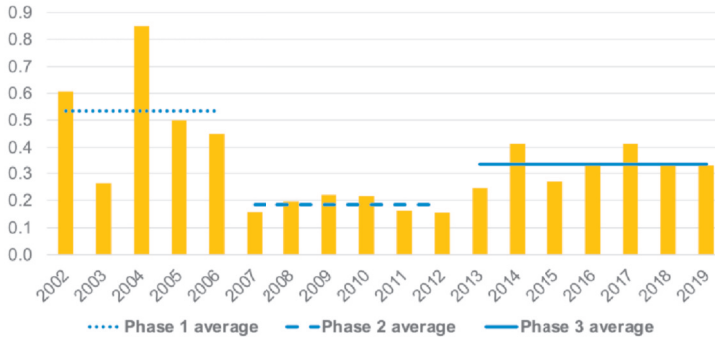


Figure 1. Inditex reports: Number of photographs per page.

Figure 2 sets out the findings with regard to the second indicator of photograph use (space occupied relative to written text). It displays a very similar pattern to that of Figure 1, with the same three phases in the development of photograph use again clearly visible. To be specific, the proportion of reports devoted to photographs falls from 14% in Phase 1 to 7.5% in Phase 2, before rising again from 2013 on. In this case, however, the recovery is more marked than that in the number of photos, with the level in Phase 3 (13%) virtually equal to that recorded in Phase 1.

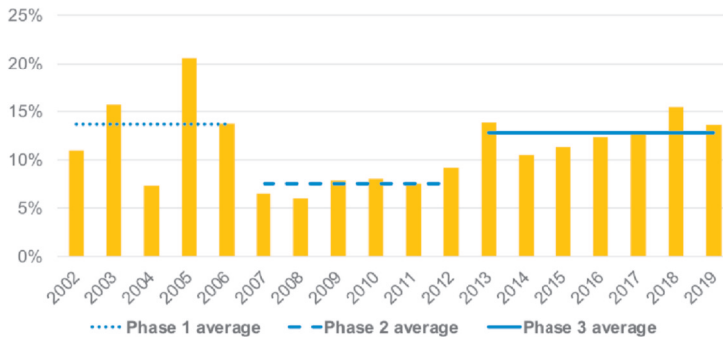


Figure 2. Inditex reports: Proportion devoted to photographs.

This difference in the patterns revealed by Figures 1 and 2 suggests another change in photograph use over the study period. For, if the proportion of reports devoted to photographs remains essentially unchanged while the total number of photos falls significantly, then the average photo size must presumably increase. Confirmation of this trend can be found in Table 3, which indicates the distribution of photos by size over the three phases identified in Figures 1 and 2. For the purposes of Table 3, the five categories described in the Methods sections have been reduced to three by amalgamating those of ‘large’ and ‘medium’ and of ‘single-page’ and ‘double-page’. It shows that, whereas in Phase 1 the smallest size category accounts for more than half of all photographs, by Phase 3 this proportion has shrunk to less than a quarter. After rising to a peak of 18% in Phase 2, the share devoted to single- or double-page spreads is also lowest from 2013 on, when it falls below one in ten. The consequent shortfall is made up by medium to large photos (taking up a quarter page or more), which more than doubles over the period to account for a good two-thirds of all the photographs used in Phase 3.

Photo size	Phase 1 (n=492)	Phase 2 (n=369)	Phase 3 (n=864)
Small	53%	38%	23%
Medium & Large	33%	44%	68%
Single- or double-page	14%	18%	9%

Table 3. Evolution of the use of photographs of different sizes.

5.2. RQ2: Topic prominence

Rather than the number of photographs devoted to a topic, the metric chosen to assess its visual prominence is the space occupied by these as a proportion of the total space devoted to photos. The bigger a photograph is, the more salient the message it conveys. These shares are set out in Table 4, in order of topic prominence during Phase 1. As can be seen, certain topics, especially ‘suppliers’ and ‘shareholders’, display very low prominence (under 1%) throughout the period studied. Interestingly, visual references to environmental issues or goals are consistently rare (maximum 6% share in Phase 1) and are under 1% during Phase 2, even though concern for the environment is generally seen as one of the most important components of CSR (see section on CSR Reporting).

Topic	Phase 1 (n=492)	Phase 2 (n=369)	Phase 3 (n=864)
Shops	28%	28%	15%
Product	15%	39%	14%
Philanthropy	15%	5%	2%
Back office	10%	11%	43%
Front office	9%	5%	13%
Company	8%	6%	5%
Environment	6%	1%	3%
Factory	5%	0%	1%
Responsibility	2%	2%	3%
Other	2%	<1%	<1%
Shareholders	<1%	2%	<1%
Suppliers	<1%	<1%	0%

Table 4. Topic prominence: Proportion of total photographic material devoted to topic.

A consistently medium to high level of prominence is displayed by two topics: 'shops' and 'product'. Indeed, from over 40% during Phase 1, their joint share rises to no less than two-thirds in 2007-2012, when pictures relating to 'product' alone account for almost two-fifths of the entire space devoted to photographs. From 2013 on, both categories show a sharp drop off, the prominence of 'shops' being reduced to just over half of its Phase 2 value and that of 'product' to little more than one third. Yet, even so, the two categories together continue to make up almost 30% of total photographic content.

A more dramatic, and highly significant fall is registered by the topic of 'philanthropy'. During the first phase, it places second-equal in prominence with 'product' on 15%, a figure exceeded only by that of 'shops'. Yet in Phase 2 its share falls to a paltry 5% and from 2013 on it accounts for only an insignificant proportion of all photo material. It is interesting to note that 'philanthropy' is presented almost exclusively by means of black-and-white rather than colour photographs and it is the only topic for which this is the case.

Inevitably, the decline in the relative importance of these three topics – 'shops', 'product' and 'philanthropy' – leaves a large gap to be filled. As Table 4 indicates, this is done partially by a small rise in the prominence of 'front office'. By far the biggest gainer, however, is 'back office'. Indeed, having initially made up only a tenth of the space allocated to photos, from 2013 on this topic alone accounts for a massive 43% of the total – which, as we saw earlier, is virtually the same in Phase 3 as Phase 1.

5.3. RQ3: Motif use

Use of the four motif types (spaces, people, actions and details) identified

during coding is summarised in Table 5. As it shows, they occur in broadly similar proportions during Phase 1. After 2006, however, the motif ‘people’ gains dramatically in importance, and from 2013 on it makes up over 50% of all occurrences. This rise is above all at the expense of the motif ‘spaces’, which by Phase 3 has lost more than half its importance in Phase 1.

Motif type	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Spaces	28%	23%	13%
People	23%	41%	50%
Actions	21%	13%	15%
Details	28%	23%	22%

Table 5. Motif usage: Proportion of photographs used by motif type.

While photographs depicting people are almost equally pervasive in Phases 2 and 3, there is a marked difference in the nature of the people portrayed. In Phase 2 these are most commonly models presenting the company’s fashion collections, and their portraits appear in photos coded to the topic ‘product’. A considerably smaller group consists of Inditex employees, who occur under the topic codes ‘front office’ and ‘back office’. In Phase 3, however, this latter group becomes clearly dominant, while pictures of models become much less frequent. These changes are summarised in Table 6.

Person type	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Fashion models	2%	23%	15%
Inditex employees	5%	3%	26%

Table 6. Principal types of people portrayed in photographs.

6. Discussion

The following discussion of the findings presented in the previous section is informed by the idea that the use of photographs in corporate communication helps to “construct a reality that becomes reality” (Hines, 1988). In the case of a contested concept with divergent and changing definitions such as CSR, photos play a fundamental role in communicating what a company understands by that concept – and ultimately how it sees its mission and its relationship with society – at the time of publication. In

doing this, pictures may present topics and serve aims which do not coincide with those of the written text.

A further background consideration is the fact that the changes observed in Inditex's use of photographs, and specifically those relating to the number and size of pictures included in CSR reporting, inevitably reflect the evolution of corporate reports in general. Originally printed on paper, these have come to be conceived as documents to be read in a digital version, on screen. Moreover, the genre has also seen a number of changes in its design and layout. Specifically, visualisation, in particular through the use of photographs has become an increasingly important element (Rämö, 2011).

In the case of Inditex, the findings reported in the previous section with regard to the number, size and prominence of photographs in the company's CSR reporting strongly suggest an evolution through three distinct periods. The first of these (2002-2006) is characterised by the use of small photographs; more than half of all pictures used in this phase cover less than a quarter of a page. This may be linked to the fact that the motif 'detail', to which smaller photos are better suited than to, say, that of 'spaces', is slightly more common in this phase than in two subsequent periods (see Table 5).

In general, though, this period displays great heterogeneity regarding both motifs and topics. Of the latter, 'philanthropy' deserves particular attention since, as already noted, it is of major visual importance during this phase but barely features in the other two. Since the only topics that equal or exceed it in this respect are 'product' and 'shops', 'philanthropy' is the most visually prominent of those topics that can be directly linked to CSR during Phase 1. Moreover, it is very frequently presented in black and white photographs, with the suppression of colour in these cases prompting viewers to shift their attention to the stories behind the images. Two examples of this type of picture can be seen in Figures 3 and 4.



Figure 3. Inditex (2004, p. 54; photo size: small). In the public domain.



Figure 4. Inditex (2003, p. 107; photo size: single page). In the public domain.

The second phase in the evolution of Inditex's photograph use covers the period 2007-2012. It is characterised by the large number of pictures showing fashion collections, either with the motif 'people' (the models concerned) or, to a lesser extent, with that of 'detail', when a particular product is displayed. Interestingly, such photos often occur in sections of reports whose topic – as indicated by the written text and/ or heading – is unrelated to the company's commercial activities. The prevalence of photographs of this type (they account for 39% of the total), together with that of the topic 'shops' (a further 38%) shows that in this period the focus of Inditex's visual communication is clearly on its commercial activities. In fact, some of the reports it published during this period resemble, at least visually, a hybrid between a corporate report and a fashion catalogue. Figures 5 and 6 are examples of the 23% of photographs portraying fashion models; neither is directly related to the accompanying texts, which refer to CSR and volunteering, respectively.



Figure 5. Inditex (2010, pp. 58-59, extract: photo size: single page). In the public domain.



Figure 6. Inditex (2011, p. 80, extract: photo size: large). In the public domain.

As already noted, the final phase of evolution (2013-2019) is characterised by a marked decrease in the use of fashion photographs. Moreover, their appearance is now restricted to those sections of reports where commercial activities are presented in the accompanying text. Although half of all pictures in this period have the motif ‘people’, they no longer feature fashion models to any great extent. Instead, they are dominated by Inditex’s own employees. These are in most cases portrayed transmitting optimism and happiness, and the overall effect is to visualise the company as greatly concerned for its employees’ well-being and as a paragon of diversity. In fact, in the most recent report analysed, the company addresses diversity and inclusion as fundamental principles and stresses that women make up 76% of its workforce and hold 79% of the management positions; also that 172 different nationalities are represented on the staff (Inditex, 2019, p. 71). This suggests that they might be consciously transmitting the importance of these principles through the use of visuals. Typical examples of employee photographs used in this period are shown in Figures 7, 8 and 9.



Empleados de Massimo Dutti en la sede de la marca en Tordera (Barcelona).

Figure 7. Caption: "Massimo Dutti employees at the brand's head office in Tordera (Barcelona)". Inditex (2015, p. V; photo size: single-page). In the public domain.



Figure 8. Caption: "Inditex employee at the New York office (USA)". Inditex (2016, p. 37; photo size: single-page). In the public domain.



Figure 9. Inditex (2018, p. 24; photo size: large). In the public domain.

A number of these results are in line with those of other studies. For instance, the earlier finding that companies attempt to portray themselves as responsible actors (Rämö, 2011; Chong et al., 2019) is echoed in the case of Inditex by the focus on philanthropy during the first phase of its evolution. Similarly, the high frequency of photographs featuring people in the second and third periods coincides with the findings of Breitbarth et al. (2010, p. 248). The same authors also show that certain types of CSR report feature the presence of smiling people who transmit a feeling of happiness and optimism, a characterisation which very well describes Inditex' third phase. They argue that: "The conceptualization of CSR is that of making life easier and people's life happier" (Breitbarth et al., 2010, p. 249).

Finally, a trend tentatively identified by Chong et al. (2019) may at least partially account for the virtually complete absence of photographs dealing with the topic 'environment' in Inditex's CSR reporting. What these authors suggest is that CSR reporting increasingly serves a promotional purpose; rather than a particular understanding of CSR, it reveals the concept's essential emptiness. Inditex's extensive use of fashion photographs in the years 2006 to 2012 would seem to support this line of argument. The existence of a conflict between the different communicative purposes of reporting (to inform, but also to give a positive image, to legitimate, etc.) has been frequently stressed (e.g., by Ditlevsen, 2012). However, the use of reports to transmit direct product publicity through the use of photographs has not yet been addressed and could prove a fruitful avenue for further research, even if the phenomenon may be restricted to retailing companies.

7. Conclusion and limitations

In conclusion, it would appear that the three distinct phases in the evolution of Inditex's use of photographs in its CSR reporting from 2002 to 2019 reflect changes in the company's understanding both of CSR and of its relationship with society as a whole. Thus, the visual prominence accorded to the philanthropic projects (see Figures 3 and 4) financed by the company during the first phase suggests that Inditex then identified CSR with philanthropy. At that time, CSR reporting was non-mandatory and could be seen as a voluntary contribution to society, which might or might not be linked to companies' core activities (as previously mentioned, CSR reporting was done separately from and independent of the production of statutory

annual reports). Philanthropic activities fitted perfectly with this conception of CSR; they were another 'optional extra' and an additional sign of goodwill towards society.

This situation changed radically with the move to integrated reports combining information relating to CSR with that required by law. In Inditex's case this switch occurred in 2006, and it seems no coincidence that that year marked the start of a second phase in the company's use of pictures to visualise CSR. In fact, the extensive use of fashion catalogue photographs during the second phase of evolution suggests that the great cost linked to the production of the new integrated reports prompted Inditex to use them as a marketing tool with the main goal of promoting its products. During these years the visual message transmitted by Inditex's reports relates above all to selling clothing, with CSR-relevant topics present only marginally.

Finally, in the period from 2013 on, the emphasis of visualisation shifts again, with the prominence of fashion photography being greatly reduced. Instead, pictures are used primarily to present Inditex as a company whose success is based on a competent, diverse and, above all, happy workforce. Employees, the photos overwhelmingly suggest, are the company's most fundamental asset and what makes it special. In this way, Inditex implies, consciously or not, that people come first for it, thus projecting a more humanised image of the company. Its role in society, it seems to be suggesting, is not to satisfy a demand for products but rather to improve the quality of people's lives.

These conclusions are inevitably accompanied by caveats. The first relates to the study's use of QCA to describe salient aspects of how photographs in Inditex's corporate reports represent the company's relationship to society. Like other methodologies employed to assess visualisation, QCA requires the salience of particular topics or patterns to be assessed on the basis of particular interpretations of CSR, which may not coincide with what the users of CSR reporting understand by a 'responsible' company. Another limitation of the study is that it has focused on the photographs included in the reports of a single company. While this allowed use of a fully representative sample of pictures, the results can inevitably only hint at general trends in the use of photographs in CSR reporting. Further research will be needed to establish whether any of the results can be generalised to cover Spanish companies as a whole or the fashion-retailing sector. Moving beyond the Spanish context, researchers could investigate the relationship

between visual and written text in CSR – and other – reports, considering the company as a collective author with various individuals or departments contributing to the final document.

Article history:

Received 3 February 2022

Received in revised form 31 March 2022

Accepted 1 April 2022

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