Competitive aesthetics, semiotics, chaos and leadership

Corporate photography strategy for the CEO

Foo Check Teck

School of MPE, College of Engineering, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Abstract

Purpose – To highlight to CEOs/corporate community the emergence and rapidly rising phenomenon: e-photography as part of corporate communication. In the process, the paper provides concepts, models, tools and techniques in coping with this fast developing, global trend.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper reviews the literature of semiotics and emphasize a lack of focus amounting to neglect of research on photography. Citing Confucius, models are provided for conceptual testing in using e-photographs for communicating. That it is the role of the CEO to emphasize on the visual as part of their competitive strategy. The paper also argues why e-photography should become an integral part of corporate aesthetics and utilized for shaping corporate identity.

Findings – Finds that the dynamic role of technology is a business driver and should assist corporate communication practices in stimulating strategic thinking.

Originality/value – The paper is a very useful resource for CEOs and corporate communicators in utilizing the emerging tool of e-photography for shaping corporate aesthetics as part of identity building strategy.

Keywords Chief executives, Photography, Corporate communications, Corporate identity, Corporate strategy, Confucianism

Paper type Research paper

Photography and semiotics

One of the paradoxes of our modern living is in the new, often continuously developing technologies outpacing our human minds in appreciating them. The speed of technological transformation and change can be so rapid, that we lag behind in evolving a relevant philosophy. Even one with impacts on our daily lives. Despite world-wide, the many millions of cameras manufactured and billions of prints being developed, there still lacks in the twenty-first century, a theory on the finer aesthetics of photography (Yu, 2004). Photography too is neglected is in the mainstream semiotics literature.

Leeds-Hurwitz (1993) in Semiotics and Communication refers only sporadically to photography. In one instance, the photograph is described as iconic in the picture taken of the wedding as resembling the bride (p. 23, Chapter 2: Signs). And in another, using the widely advertised photograph of Lexus (p. 163, Chapter 7: Cultures) to highlight the rationale behind the subtle blending in of six bold words: “Only your milk should...”
be homogenized”. In other words, how words as part of the picture, seek to shape the intended message. Although Ruesch and Kees (1956) in Nonverbal Communications devoted an entire chapter, their purpose is still one of utility: photography as a tool to show objects reflecting the dichotomous divide: order versus disorder.

Yet Deely (1990) argues (his words, italicized): at the heart of semiotics is the entire human experience as an interpretive structure. If so, photography being so widely if not even uniformly experienced should be regarded much more widely to be an integrated part of semiotics. In Deely’s interpretive structure, the power of photography lies in communicating beyond words. The ancient Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu on heading west was requested by the gatekeeper to brush his understanding of the Tao. Thus, 2,500 years ago, he began his Tao Te Ching but by first reminding us of the very limitation of words in conveying deep, profound meanings:

Tao that may be spoken of is not the eternal Tao (Line 1, Chapter 1, Tao Te Ching: sixth Century before C.E.)

Then if the human world is one of signification (Greimas, 1983), e-photography in the internet age (see arguments later) should be seen as one of its major facets. And Eco (1976) argued that signification is a necessary condition for any communication between human beings. If so, here photography too has a role. For these reasons, Semioticians (Wray, 1981) ought to be more like Barthes (1981) and who embraces realist photography with studium. Framing the photograph in the language of founders of semiotics: in Saussurian (Saussure, 1969) terms a photograph is but a signifier. In Peircie (1958) usage, it is a representatum.

Beyond the singular, photographs in plurality when each and every piece adds on to a theme may be cited as an exemplar of Tobin’s (1990) system of codes. Contextually (Culler, 1981) meaningful (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981: Domestic Symbols and the Self) perspectives may emerge through a series or collection of photographs. That is when photographs yield intotally deeper meanings through their systemic inter-relationships. And through manipulating on colors in photographs electronically (Sahlins, 1976) symbolic meanings may be rendered. Indeed with the advent of e-photography, the photographer may click-verify iconic images instantaneously. These are acts consistent with what White (1962) term as symboling. In this paper we, therefore, set out to reinstate photography as integral to mainstream semiotics literature.

Having reviewed the literature, in internet age and CEOs, aesthetics is discussed. One of the key motivations for this work is our anticipation of a much wider use of photographs in day-to-day corporate communication. In the third section we emphasize the concept of competitive aesthetics, particularly for the CEO. This concept is illustrated through the use of e-logos. In the fourth, the art of e-photography, we enrich the discussion with what we term as the Confucius model. Fifthly, in words, pictures and technology, a conceptual framework for mapping out words or pictures as well as words and pictures in corporate communication. Since, technology is the driver, we provide insights on the dynamic role of technology behind corporate communication practices. Sixth, in CEO, chaos and aesthetics, we explain what the CEO may do. Our suggestion is for him to implement a chaos approach: let a corporate visual (photography) style emerge. In final, seventh section, we explore on further research and emphasizing the visual for CEOs in stimulating strategic thinking.
Internet age and CEO
Recently Hatch et al. (2004) in an interview-based study resulting in Three Faces of Leadership highlight the three facets of the CEOs as leaders: manager, artist and the priest. With schools of MBAs sprouting globally, the literature is now overwhelmed with works on managing but very little to guide the CEOs on their roles as the organizational aesthete. Exactly 60 years ago Cassirer (1944), a philosopher in his essay has argued on what makes man truly human is in his capability to create symbols and in using them.

The future CEO should be one who is able through his or her deep appreciation of the aesthetics, able to create if not structure or better still foster a distinctive, identifiable visually aesthetic environment. If that happens the corporate world of the future including manufacturing environments can become aesthetically more pleasing. This vision, a more beautiful working environment alone is worthy of our efforts. Moreover, CEOs as leaders ought through aesthetics better shape a corporate identity. This may be done through photography: the art, tools and techniques. For this to happen we need to re-ask the question: how should we educate CEOs for their roles? CEOs ought to go beyond the confines of the traditional MBA curriculum and realize a more complete education. So that they may be regarded as truly learned persons: appreciative of arts and their aesthetics.

Google is facilitating free of charge, e-library access (including the famed, Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford) to the vast collections of works intop libraries. The internet is fast transforming the world of learning that it is time for a truly holistic education. The goal must be to merge the classical divide in learning between sciences and arts. For in time too, all the major works of art collected in museums across the globe will be e-deposited on the internet. Maybe it is timely to be a re-asking the question:

- who is a learned person?

So that there is a reframing in the minds of people in what constitutes a learned person. Is he just a person who has plainly just read the books or is he a more subtle being? One whose sense of the eyes – the visual – is as developed as say his or her reading and numeric skills.

Most relevantly, should future educated Homo sapiens be aesthetically inclined as in being able to partake in joys of the aesthete. For now, there is some growing justification for this need. Aesthetics is becoming quickly a competitive tool, essential as part of the mix of the elements in corporate communications strategy. Even though aesthetics is not new, many pre-internet CEOs take a much less than hands-on approach towards the discipline. CEOs, those bred by the hard, accounting numbered, often science-driven, US-grounded MBA schools do not see arts as integral to their calling.

This should be changed.

So that in the future, a person educated to lead or manage enterprises – MBA-certified CEOs – are themselves too familiar with aesthetics. This is especially so for those who operate at the top. Imagine how more beautiful the world may become? That is if CEOs instead of being more accounting-minded are aesthetically minded or as inclined. The key question is: can top strategists relegate – as they have done in the past in the pre-internet era – competitive aesthetics – simply, to design houses? I shall be exploring these issues and argue for future CEOs to embrace aesthetics.
Why competitive aesthetics

One of the emerging competitive edges in contributing to future successes by internet-based enterprises is within the domain of competitive aesthetics. Not just simply in the applied fine arts aspects, as in the design of products but especially importantly in the age of inter-net, for corporate communications per se. For example, if a CEO plans on integrated, strategy-driven efforts to establish global presence, it must involve the building of a presence through a strong corporate identity (Foo et al. 2001) on the internet. In the identity building process, visual aesthetics are critical elements.

Perhaps the word, “building” is just too logical, strong, masculine and even unrefined when used in relation to visual aesthetics. For the art of designing an artifact – a logo, a matchbox, product, etc. – that is visually appealing often involve finely honed skills. The key is to draw attention yet it should appear as though it happens by chance, unintentionally. Ideally, the object, of itself and by itself, draws attention its beauty, attractiveness.

The attention the “designed object” gains must be achieved without, as one may put it, by “shouting out loud”. Since, many CEOs rise through the hierarchy from marketing positions, I shall use a metaphorical equivalence: designing a product that quietly sells by itself. In the future, this may require more of personal and direct interest by CEOs in competitive aesthetics. Perhaps it is timely to consider, the implementation of experimentally grounded methodologies in design choices.

That is to begin with in the assessments of publicity materials as conceptualized and designed (e.g. annual report, Stanton et al., 2004). Or say, instead of finalizing on a range of e-logo design options coming from a famed design house, the CEO may ask for tests of their validity. To obtain what is measurable through experimental test results: statistical equivalence of the “goodness of fit” of a regression line. In the case of the corporate e-logo as proposed, on how good does it fits vis-à-vis the entity being represented: the corporation or organization or her products.

CEOs should begin to be much more keenly interested in major aspects of corporate aesthetics. For example, on how his current customers and stakeholders perceive the corporate logo. Say, for example, as to the corporate logo’s creativity, complexity or attractiveness on the internet (Foo, 2001, 2003a, b, c). For such knowledge is discoverable through implementing a process of collecting these perceptions, statistically testing and then analyzing them. In the internet age, how any design – whether logo, annual report, or created products – are being responded to aesthetically should be part of the new, knowledge-based economy.

Until now, the corporate world has for too long being too pre-occupied with just the financials, especially on the accounting, number crunching side. This is seen in the large expenses allocated to publicity materials related to annual reports. In these annual reports CEOs utilize symbols to communicate his/their corporate prowess in productivity as well as in profit-generating power (Foo, 2003a, b, c). It is timely, however, for them to broaden their embrace to include competitive aesthetics.

Why?

Globally and in many unprecedented ways, technology has been the driver behind changes in corporate behavior. And in corporate communications, technology has transformative powers. Even now, technology is transforming how everyone communicates. Corporate communications practices cannot but be reflecting the state of art in communications technology.
Technology keeps on evolving, miniaturizing and at the same time, embedding more power into their products. With this trend we may begin to see in the field of corporate communications (web sites, portals, etc.), enhanced uses of more sophisticated technologies. For example, on the internet, the incorporation of embedded sounds, say the voice of CEO himself or herself greeting the site visitor. Also moving images may be integrated within the total corporate communications mix. Thus, the question arises: what kinds of movements – kinetics – are aesthetically, most intriguing? Or, is the most pleasing? Again, these are the kinds of questions ought to be answered through experimentations.

For the more intermediate future, the crux of the matter is in striking the balance between the use of words and pictures (in future, possibly moving). Yet whatever may be the transformative exponentials of new, ever newer technology, the basics of communications remain. For the sense of what is more or less aesthetically appealing – just “pictures” or a combined use of “pictures and words” – is much dependent upon our innate, human responses to our perceptions.

Let me provide an example of how our emotional responses may flow from what we perceive through our eyes. I shall illustrate with very popular imagery drawn from real world examples. Which of the three corporate logos is the most aesthetically designed logo?

IBM (International Business Machines) or Mer-ce-des or BMW:

All three are similar in being three syllables or simply, to pronounce the presence of the logo on the internet to the surfer, you have to use three sounds for each.

Product-wise, IBM is popularly associated with computers and does not compete, product-wise with either Mercedes or BMW. Here we are, however, interested in logos primarily more as a logo per se. IBM when read out is almost similar with BMW, just three easy alphabets.

Although different in approach to logo design, Mer-ce-des and BMW are, however, head-on competitors in the luxury car market. As shall be seen, each utilizes a similar yet at the same time different approach in the design of logos for marketing the same kind of cars.

We shall comment on each in turn:

- IBM as a logo may be perceived as a “picture”. One that is made up of specially designed alphabets. Yet a child who is learning his or her ABCs can easily read them.

- How does that compare to say a symbol: the three pointed, encircled star of Mercedes? Now, the figure of star is highly symbolic, possibly with more evocative powers. That too is as easily recognizable by a child.

- Or the IBM and Mercedes with BMW: for BMW there is a simultaneous use both of alphabets and imagery. One may argue that the BMW logo with two circles, one inner and one outer, conveys more immediately than Mercedes logo, the imagery of a wheel. Interestingly, the outer circle is black with BMW engraved upon it. The inner circle is cut into quadrants, two white and two blue, that faces off each other.

Fortunately for IBM and BMW, English is now a global language, thus easily recognizable. Imagine if it is in the Russian alphabet, it may be less recognizable and even less pronounceable. Any translation (Danet and Herring, 2003) possible with
evolving multilingual internet must mean a loss of the logo as a logo. Clearly the design of logo matters less now to IBM for it had long dominated the American computer markets.

Steve Jobs is, however, likely to agree, in upstaging IBM, his logo an imagery of an apple (also New York) must had helped. Or may even be said to have some talismanic effects. It is a bitten-off apple. That symbol many people are able to relate to: biting off juicy corner of an apple. Such an imagery enhances the potential of unlocking the brand across countries (van Gelder, 2003): the visual easily connects.

In contrast to just alphabetic IBM, the Mercedes “encircled star” is a symbol everybody is likely to recognize. If the logo is a symbol – not just alphabets – arguably, there is the chance of getting an emotive response. Personally, I respond to the triangle (some see as a star) within the circle: I sense stability. Besides imagery like star, triangle and circle, colors also carry deep cultural symbolism. Our goal is to illustrate that a “picture” (circle, star, triangle, quadrants, etc.) may communicate symbolically more than employing strictly alphabetic logos. Next we turn to discuss why corporate communications is likely to turn even more picturesque.

The art of e-photography
Of late there is one of the greatest revolutions in digital technology with possible impacts on the future of corporate communication: the advent of the art of e-photography. Just one or two years back it has not been as feasible as it is now to incorporate e-pictures in corporate communications. The technology for the average executive was then not quite there yet. But now, with rapid revolutionary changes, especially trends towards a multi-functional hand-phone, the scenario has been dramatically transformed.

For technology has reached a stage where with ease, every executive may factor in pictures in communicating. Communications programs may be inadequate if the art of photography is not part of the curriculum. It is not, however, just for the mastering of Tao on photography (Ang, 2000), its creative use (Curl, 1991), professionalism (Schwarz, 1984) or even cultural history (Marien, 2002) but its role in and for communications.

This may involve more thinking through photography (Maynard, 1997), utilizing the tool for more incisive communications. The executive need not even buy a camera. The technology for amassing the pixels for a picture is a standard feature of the executive's hand phone or mobile. And in today's environment, the hand phone is a common tool to stay communicated.

With continuing technological enhancements, leading to even more flexible use, the executive may e-photograph for his routine reports. Thus, as is argued, the corporate communications scene may become more picturesque than before. It is timely to witness how e-photography may evolve to become part of corporate communications: blossoming to be part and parcel of day-to-day corporate communications. This will happen when CEOs expect photographs be incorporated in routine corporate reporting.

But why should it happen?
With e-photography, there is not only the speed but also the most critical aspect in corporate communications: realizing true quality. Pictures not only reinforcing words but also yielding added insights, instantaneously and precisely. Insights of a deeply
 qualitative nature may be gained via pictures. Moreover, there is a whole visual anthropology associated with photography (Devereaux and Hillman, 1995).

Imagine reviewing facial reactions of potential customers upon being shown, say the newly proposed logo: the picture of a face adds insights often inexpressible by the use of words alone. Or say, responses of existing customers on being shown a new product, one replacing an existing line. Faces of customers may better reflect their truer feelings. Feelings they may be at a lost to put effectively into words, so photographs are utilized (Morris, 1982). This may lead to CEOs embracing a visual culture (Mirzoeff, 1999) through a wider adoption of use of photographs in communication.

Now, it is timely for us to introduce a Confucius grounded model. One may argue that all these new technological developments enabling better communications through more use of pictures had long been predicated by the greatest of all Chinese sages: Confucius.

Just like Sun Tzu (Foo and Grinyer, 1994; Foo and Foo, 2001) whose art of war remains relevant even after 2,500 years for modern CEOs, key Confucian ideas on education, remain equally valid: his philosophy of life-long learning is now advocated by western gurus. Here I am proposing a classical, already well-known Confucian saying especially relevant for corporate communications in the internet age:

A picture is worth a thousand words.

His saying so often quoted in the west by professional advertising agencies using photographic imagery that Confucius deserved a place as an icon of photography (Stepan, 1999). Yet his saying remains little investigated empirically or made a subject of research in corporate communications. Corporate communications experts, however, continue to turn to Confucius to justify the need to incorporate a greater use of visuals.

It is, therefore, interesting to be exploring to what extent may the use of visuals, say through e-photography, may enhance what is being communicated. This is especially timely as we are on the verge of a “picture revolution”: a consequence of camera technology being embedded into hand-phones, a tool for verbal, word-based communication.

As argued, by reasons of their communicative power, many more executives are likely to be incorporating pictures as part of communications. Also hand-phones are already tools for rapid communications among executives, on the move or not.

Thus, the “picture” is likely to be weaved along with words (either spoken or as SMSes) as part of corporate communications. One may hypothesize, in the future for more “pictures” (photographs) in corporate reporting. And this may or may not lead possibly to a lesser quantity of words as part of the communications process.

In short, the executive be writing less but be photographing more. If so, there has to be an entirely new arena of research. Say, one of how to effectively integrate pictures into words. This is besides the more technical aspects of shooting pictures: layout, composition, colors, angle, etc. More critically are matters such as the correspondence between the picture as shot and what the executive intends to communicate. These concepts, techniques and skills may be emphasized more as part of an added curriculum in corporate communication skills.

For this purpose a detailed, multi-stage Confucius grounded model (Figure 1) has been developed. The model is to guide the executive in conceptual testing when utilizing e-photography as part of his communication practice. It asks the executive what he intends to communicate, conceptually.
The next question is: how measurable is the concept. A customer's sense of awe for a newly designed logo may be captured on five-point, Likert scale using a survey form. Or it may be conveyed additionally through the eye of the camera using e-photography: shots of their expressions as written on faces.

Once it is decided to incorporate photographs, then a series of other questions that may arise: for example, will pictures only do? Then there are the side questions related with the use of photographs. The other major issue in communication arises: a role for words? If so, how are these words to be incorporated?

Here I utilize an example to illustrate.

Assuming that an executive is to communicate a concept or attribute. For example, it may be the real purchasing power of consumers from a city in a country. The marketing executive may, if inclined towards economics, be looking up to national statistical databases. Yet statistics may lie – for example, the luxury goods market in Beijing is not as foreseeable in the tomes of published statistics about China. Here, a photographer in Beijing capturing the equivalent of the “Oxford Street” in London may do a much better, incisive job than an economist with his statistical bases. The power of photography lies in enabling new visions (Traub, 1982).

On the other hand it may be some highly qualitative attributes, for example, the executive wishes to communicate to his CEO on the hospitality of a people from a country.

Or it may be on how inwardly happy are a people.
For as the author has discovered (Foo, Laos), economics development seems to be little related to happiness of a people. In which case, the question turns to will pictures of smiling faces only do? Or, if it must be supplemented by words: how and how many?

And having gathered a portfolio of e-photographs, which one is the defining shot. That best picture which is most effective in communicating the qualitative attribute to be investigated. Or if I may say, that very picture which according to Confucius is embedded with a thousand words. And there are other questions relating to a picture and those pertaining to photography skills per se are outside the scope of this paper.

Next, we consider words along with pictures.

**Words, pictures and technology**

Since, this paper is focused on corporate communications, it is necessary to consider the role of words for, whether used as part of (within) or alongside a picture. Here, almost a myriad of issues may arise instantly. Sporadically, these may be listed as:

- Whether words are an appropriate fit?

That is with the concept to be conveyed by a picture.

- Do words add to the picture?

This raises a fundamental question:

- Is there a role?

Assuming there is a role:

- Then how are words to be crafted?

The goal here is to ensure that these words become an integral part of the picture. This is particularly the case in applying conceptual photography within say, the Chinese context.

Let me explain.

For unlike alphabetic English language, Chinese characters originated as pictures. Indeed it is possible to deconstruct a Chinese character or word for its pictorial symbolism. As such, it may therefore, appear more aesthetically meaningful to have Chinese characters (calligraphically rendered) as part of a picture. This of course is assuming that some rightly chosen words are required. And beyond that when used (often sparsely, see earlier figure on the Yin-Yang balance) adds to the whole picture. So the picture becomes even more powerful in communicating a particular concept. Then there is the consideration of how these words sounded: are the sounds appropriate?

Here it is also appropriate to suggest a numerically-based, conceptual framework (Figure 2) that may be utilized to frame any discussion on mixing words with pictures in corporate communications. Thus, the box (0, 0) begins with verbal communication, as in everyday face-to-face meetings. Thereafter are the minutes having been drafted, amended, corrected, proof read and then printed (2, 0) to be circulated. This is a typical, type I situation in traditional, pre-internet age office settings.

In some cases, all that is required is the picture (0, 2), a type II situation. For example, during the verbal discussion (0, 0), the talk turns to a newly re-designed, yet
to be seen logo of a competitor. A follow-up action may well be the delivery by SMS of the e-logo by a member of staff.

Now type III situation (2, 2) is the most common in corporate communication among the listed corporations: the annual report. Here is where the art of traditional photography is encountered as part of the annual ritual in corporate communication.

Technology makes possible and thus plausible that a greater use of pictures in corporate communications. Thus, using a similar type of matrix, we intend to explain to the reader just how technology may shape communication. Again the focus is on three key dimensions: printed words, use of pictures and the flow of time. So our portrayal may uniquely take an evolutionary perspective: the past, present and future.

Beginning with the pre-print age, where communication tended to be mainly verbal. With the advent of the mechanization of print through intensive use of machinery (not just after the manual process), ideas began to be communication more widely through the printed books. In this age too, there may well be printed “pictures” on paper but due to the high cost of illustrated books, these are far and few in between.

Then the scene changed as technical advances made photography an accessible tool for the average person. So instead of using words to describe a scene in the art of communications, there is now the alternative of utilizing a photograph. In that sense there is likely to be a reduced use of printed words only and here, Confucius is likely to agree.

For him a picture (and a photograph even more) is worth more than a thousand words. With the rise of internet and the wide and cheap availability of e-mail facility, words-in-print (i.e. e-print, on the screen, rather than handwritten) tend to proliferate.

That is before technology begins to literally put the facility of photography into hands of the executives. If this becomes widespread, then a new dynamic will lead to the greater inclusion of e-photos.
That position is as shown in Figure 3: segment of intersection of medium-high within the technology-communications grid. This is but one possible portrayal of the complex processes of change in communications mix of words and pictures.

**CEO, chaos and aesthetics**

Having provided the background we now discuss specifically how the CEO may proceed with e-photography. Our argument is that with the easy availability of camera-hand-phone as a tool and with related editing software, more executives and staff will begin to use “pictures” as substitutes or in addition to “words” when communicating via e-mail. A trend towards photography may set in when almost everyone in organization is so enabled: in Singapore, hand-phones are necessity for daily living. If so, there is then a need for a finer appreciation by staff in organizations on how to more effectively render pictures via the art of e-photography.

A digital photograph as shot by say, a sales staff, most likely using his or her hand-phone, of a customer pleased on winning a prize ought to be kept as part of the corporate database. So too are the other e-photographs captured by those in the organization in the visual documentation of events. For example, during an internal workshop session on sales, presentations by staff may be documented. These e-photographs ought to be filed in a corporate photography database.

In semiotic language, each one of these e-photographs is but a sign that is capable of signifying something more. For example, photograph of a smiling customer may signify the concept of “customer satisfaction”. If so, some e-photographs may have an appropriate caption added (word-picture model, see earlier discussion). Accordingly to semiotic literature, these photographs are integrally part of the overall corporate signification system (Eco, 1976), so necessary if there is to be effective communications. Photographs may communicate better than words in depicting how satisfied a customer is. Otherwise, there will not be a specialist field as photojournalism.

![Figure 3. Technology and communications](image-url)
Thus, organizational staff may after they have begun with in utilizing photography for communications seek to embrace aesthetics of well-known photographers. For example, some staff reflecting in their shots, the documentary aesthetics of Walker Evans. Or for the staff to begin adopting the straight photography aesthetics of Edward Weston.

Others, those who are perfectionist in terms of timing – getting that right shot – may try for the “decisive moment” style or rather the aesthetics of Cartier-Bresson. Still there are others may try to capture in their shots featuring Ansel Adam’s musicality as part of their aesthetics. This is more likely to happen if the CEO is aware of the concepts of aesthetics and encourages aesthetics as part of photography in corporate communication. The easy availability of the tool for photography through the hand-phone presents many opportunities.

So for the aesthetically minded CEOs, it is a chance to influence the emergence of a style of aesthetics through participative, organizational photography. That is a departure from the past in relying on the professional photographer in rendering imagery.

How?

By selecting from thousands of images shot by staff in corporate communication, those that convey a sense of corporate culture. Imagery that conveys the sense of corporate being: values, beliefs even ethos and more. For if the cloth that the CEO wears may convey symbolic meanings (Sterba, 1987), much more may be reflected in the choices of photographic imagery. Here too the now widely popularly known chaos theory may be applied as an alternative to the process. The fundamental idea is in the Taoist sense, allow a visual corporate culture to emerge out of the chaos: order coming out of disorder. For initially, with the CEO emphasizing photographs as part of the corporate communication process, there may proliferate many “signs”. If so, there is resulting as naturally part of the process, a disorderly array of photographs within the corporate photography database.

Yet over time, out from this disorderly mass, the possibility remains for some order to emerge. This will begin to happen as signs are being considered in relation to one another (Culler, 1981). For then, using a typical semiotic term, “codes” arise through a process of clustering of some of these signs (Figure 4) by their themes.

![Figure 4: Photographic Semiotics](image-url)
And over time, we may begin to see from the seemingly, initial chaotic mass of signs, the possibility of an emerging corporate visual culture. This may well be preferable to the CEO appointing a professional photographer with his own signature aesthetics for conveying corporate aesthetics. In allowing order arises out of disorder, there is a powerful sense of both ownership and authenticity.

Imagine hearing an employee says:

These photographs – our creativity ... Our hearts, souls and spirits are embedded ... It is our style ...

For the arising blend of corporate aesthetics is homegrown. And that is true corporate culture: it is in the way we do our thing. You go to France and bread takes on a different order of significance. Why? The French are known to be proud of their homemade bread and I am certain, the result of many hours of experimentations with flour.

It is the same for photography: the secret is to encourage photographic experimentations. Over time, instead of just the e-logo that identifies the organization, there may emerge a visual style or even an expressive culture. Through web-based e-gallery, people in the organization may share their sense of aesthetics, one arising out of day-to-day communication with customers, stakeholders and public. These e-photographs taken as part of corporate communication process may be interpreted and chosen to shape if not define the organizational sense of the aesthetics. Leeds-Hurwitz (1989) argued it is from little, seemingly insignificant, day-to-day behaviors (as captured through e-photography) that people truly communicate with each other.

Such an approach is, however, a slow, emergent process. Even for a renowned artist like Picasso, it takes years for a particular style to evolve. So far no organization has attempted to shape their own living aesthetics for the means to do have yet to exist. With photography in-built as part of everybody’s hand-phone, there is this opportunity. But for an in-house style of competitive aesthetics to arise, the CEO has to foster that emergence. If he does so successfully, then clearly his leadership accords more with the Tao.

In the final section we conclude on the need for research on competitive aesthetics in corporate communications incorporating roles for e-photography as part of the process.

**Research on competitive aesthetics**

With ever developing technologies facilitating the use of pictures, there ought to be greater roles for pictures (those equivalent to 1,000 words, Confucius) in corporate communications via the internet. Correspondingly, there has to be greater awareness and willingness among scholarly community to embark on meaningful, related research.

Here, the term research is utilized in the broad, beyond the narrow, hypothesis-testing sense. For example, on case studies illustrating the application of e-photography in better communicating concepts. One possibility is on exploring visually, the concept of “entrepreneurial spirit” (work-in-progress). Another is on the concept of “customer satisfaction” – there are many possibilities. Or in using the art of photography to explore interesting themes particularly relevant to management; e.g. “art of the leader” within corporate settings.
Then there is the need for research to produce works that deepen our understanding. On aspects such as how words may interact, intersect, interconnect or interrelate with pictures. For background knowledge, an understanding in how, over the immensely vast expanses of human time and space, pictures – or symbols – had evolved in becoming words. These pictures, likely of symbolic importance to pre-historic society, say an animal or a fish (Plate 1) may be reconstituted once back again to our global, human consciousness[1]. For example, utilized by corporate logo designers as logo-in-a-picture.

The overall path of pictures to words may be charted (Figure 5). And on how words being are stringed together to be languages – and there are so many languages in the world. These should be included besides the more empirically-based studies and experimental works as related directly to the emerging field of competitive aesthetics (Vatter, 2003).

It is timely now in strategic practices to be integrating the deep, often metaphorically grounded thinking of Sun Tzu with the Confucian emphasis on the highly communicative power of pictures. Read *Art of War* and you find metaphors, the most popular being water. There are ample, simple yet powerful imagery: eagle, egg hitting a rock, log still on the ground and logs rolling down the slope and more.

For it is popularly believed that the unconscious communicates through imagery (pictures) but not words. In fostering a photography rich environment, CEOs may

---

Plate 1.
Symbolic pictures
(pre-historic)
benefit indirectly through getting added insights about managing and leading. That is if he or she reflects or better still meditates upon the visual imagery. As an analogy, why do very many CEOs put down as essential, the dates of industry-related trade-shows on their diaries?

For among other reasons, the trade-show with many exhibits provides a visually rich environment for the CEOs in stimulating their deeper, unconscious strategic thinking processes. In the same vein, a visually rich working environment through photography enables, facilitates, triggers off deeper thinking processes. There is even scope for integrating even artwork, for example, surreal imagery (Foo, 1997) into texts on and about CEO strategic thinking. Why? For in invoking the mysterious unconscious – a winning corporate strategy may just emerge.

Note
1. These photographs were taken by the author near the town of Ipoh, in the state of Perak, Malaysia. He was invited there to speak to the Perak Academy on “Strategy from the Unconscious”.

References
Cassirer, E. (1944), An Essay on Man, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.


Further reading


Rule, A., Solomon, N. and Zimlich, L. (2002), *Original Sources: Art and Archives at the Center for Creative Photography*, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

About the author

Foo Check Teck is an Honorary Professor, School of Management with the University of St Andrews, Scotland, UK. In 2004, he held his first solo photography exhibition funded by National Arts Council, Singapore and organized by the Photographic Society of Singapore. He was exploring the concept of “Entrepreneurial Spirit” through photography. For his accomplishments, he is named by *Straits Times* as Singapore’s Man of Renaissance. Foo Check Teck can be contacted at: mctfoo@ntu.edu.sg

To purchase reprints of this article please e-mail: reprints@emeraldinsight.com
Or visit our web site for further details: www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints