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## **READABILITY AND UNDERSTANDABILITY: A LOOK AT MISSION STATEMENTS OF SELECTED ASIAN COMPANIES**

### **Purpose**

*Mission statements are important corporate communication tool for organizations. In order to be purposeful it should be comprehensible and easy to understand. Considering the importance of mission statements readability, this research endeavor is aimed to judge the level of readability and understandability of mission statements of Asian companies listed in Fortune 500 for the year of 2015.*

### **Design/Methodology**

Asian companies listed in Global Fortune-500 for 2014-2015 were taken. There were 197 Asian companies present in that listing. In order to fetch mission statements of those companies their websites were visited from Feb, 2016-April 2016. Mission statements were analyzed for their readability and understandability by estimating total sentences, total words and number of words per sentence (simple counting technique) and following tests: automated readability index, Coleman Liau index, Flasch Reading Ease tests and Gunning fog index.

### **Findings**

It is evident from the study that mission statements of Asian companies are long and difficult to read and understand. Trading sector is found to have shortest mission statement, with ease of reading and understandability, when compared to other sectors.

### **Research Limitations/Future Directions**

Future researchers should use other sophisticated evaluation tools and the analysis should also include the influence of country culture on contents and traits of mission statements.

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## **Managerial Implications**

Findings leave a valuable message for management, as they have to have a good look at the mission statements, while looking at its readability and understandability. They should also consider the traits of their stakeholders while preparing mission statement and other statements.

## **Originality/Value**

This research is first study which had investigated mission statements of Asian companies listed in fortune 500, as there is no such study available upto the best of researchers' knowledge.

**Keywords:** Asia, mission statements, strategic management, readability, understandability.

## **Background of the Study**

Mission statement is an important typescript of an organization, showing its goals, motivations, attitudes and philosophies. It is considered to be an indispensable document as it has direct influence on all stages of strategic management process (Pearce & Robinson, 1991). It shows that direction to follow and path that may lead to that direction (Keller, 1983). It is useful for both internal and external stakeholders of an organization. For internal stakeholders it elucidates the philosophy of entity (Davies & Glaister, 1997); for external stakeholders, it explains the reasons of existence, areas of activities, product and services it offers, target customers and markets, and what all businesses it is operating in (Campbell and Yeung, 1991; Hartley, 2002). Thus it could be concluded that this statement is concerned with all stakeholders, to make them familiar with organization and its ambitions (Kover, 2002). Considering the usage of this statement, organizations use it as a communication tool. As it is a stakeholder centered statement, it should properly convey its message to all stakeholders (Fairhurst & Jordan, 1997).

When a stakeholder is able to grasp the message of mission statement, he/she is able to understand the ideology of organization. Ability of a reader to understand and grasp the message of a statement depends upon the quality of statement in terms of its readability and understandability (Godkin, *et al.*, 2000). Readability is defined as the extent to which reader and writer share the meaning of statement (Bart & Baits, 1998). Readability significance has been identified in many disciplines, e.g. marketing (Kover, 2002; Mackey & Metz, 2009; Milne *et al.*, 2006), accounting & finance (Blouin, 2010; Li, 2008), public relations (Geary, 2001), strategic management (Verma, 2009). All these disciplines signify the value of mission statements in developing corporate image corporate image (Cochran *et al.*, 1985; Sattari, Pitt, Caruana, 2011).

Considering the significance of readability of mission statement from stakeholders' perspective, there are many guidelines agreed to make a good mission statement. For instance, Ehrenberg (1982) recommended following guidelines to make a good mission statement (i) make it brief (ii) consider the reader and his/her skills (iii) wording should be short (iv) always be ready to revise it when necessary, and (v) always "start at the end". While looking at the contents and development of the statement Cochran *et al.*, (1985) stated that

statement should be brief, concise and should be rewritten at any time. They also recommend that statement should be evaluated at each step of its formation, and the best way of its evaluation is “Fog Index”. But awkwardly, very few studies are evident of testing readability of the mission statements (Sattari, Pitt, and Caruana, 2011). Out of those studies mostly are conducted in universities, for example, Stober (1997); Morphew and Hartley (2006) conducted research in universities of United States (US) and concluded that conciseness and stakeholder consideration are the main problems with those statements. Expending the same work by adding colleges and universities of U.S. Creamer and Ghoston (2012) again found the same problem. Kemp and Dwyer (2003) studied the mission statements of 50 airlines on the bases of components and found technology and employees concern least present. Similarly, studies in business entities were also very scarce and rare. Out of few studies, Cochran and David (1986) comparative study conducted in 74 universities and 61 organizations operating in US, concluded that business entities had more readable statements than universities. The method of investigation applied in this research was Fog Index. Another study conducted in recent past was of Sattari and fellows (2011). They conducted readability analysis of 100 U.S based organization randomly selected from fortune 500 and found their mission statements very difficult to read. This unique finding, stimulate researchers to examine the same by considering mission statements of all the Asian companies listed in fortune 500. The main reason to choose Asian companies is their different culture as compared to U.S based organizations. To test the same, Biloslavo (2004) and Arifin, Casimir, Kasia, Charles, and Inge (2010) make a comparison between America, European and Chinese organization’s mission statement and found hell difference while reporting culture and historical aspects as the main reason of difference. Nevertheless, whether the mission statements of Asian companies are readable, is still a question to answer. Authors of this study made an attempt to find literature on Asian business entities and their mission statements readability, but unfortunately no evidence was found. Considering the gap present in Asian region, this study is conducted on mission statements of 164 Asian business organizations listed in fortune 500. This is the study which is conducted first time on Asian business entities and will contribute a lot in existing body of knowledge.

### **Worth of a Mission Statement**

A Mission statement is formal statement containing the goals, aims, directions, and guidelines to achieve those goals (Sattari, Pitt and Caruana, 2011). Hill and Jones (2006) also mentioned it a direction and way to achieve that direction. Mission statement has been considered to be the statement with prime significance as it facilitates all the stage of strategic management (Hill & Jones, 2008); it effects decision making process (Jones, 1960); it is a center point which enables diverse people to work at a shared objective (Ireland & Hitt, 1992; Verma, 2009); and a prime force that leads to peak performance (Baetz& Bart, 1998). But whether mission statement really brings these results is a question (Bartkus et al., 2000; Sattari Pitt, & Caruana, 2011), as many studies have found not relationship between mission statement and organizational performance e.g. Barber, (2005); Davies & Glaister, (1997); and Meyer, (2005).

Mission statement declares the values of an organization, which enables leadership to find the direction, on the other hand, missions statement is also the outcome leadership and organizational values (Klemm et al., 1991). But, Bartkus and Glassman (2008) noticed that, in actual, missions statements are found to be inconsistent for conveying their message to stakeholders, thus creating skepticism about these statements. Therefore, Morphew and Hartley termed them as “collection of stock phrases”, and unreadable statements.

Irrespective of the skepticism about mission statements, they are taken as a valuable tool for strategic planning; as mission statement offers three distinctive gains, i.e. creation of corporate image, clarifying direction to follow, and marketing tool for both internal and external customers (Drucker, 1973). Mission statements can create a distinctive image of an organization, as it displays the direction and means of reaching that direction (Whelan and Hunger, 1989). Strategic value of a statement has also been highlighted by many researchers e.g. Pearce and Robinson (1991) signified missions statements as an important tool for direction setting. It also helps management setting ultimate choice of a business entity along with visions statement (Nanus, 1992). Similarly, a statement is believed to be a marketing tool (e.g. Hackley, 1998; Keller, 1983); for both internal and external customers (Hartley, 2002; Sattari, Pitt, and Caruana, 2011). Thus mission statements are having great significance for an entity, as it sets direction, strategies to follow those directions, creates good image, conveys message to both internal and external customers and offers many more benefits.

In order to convey all these messages a statement should be readable and understandable to all of its stakeholders (Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Stober, 1997; Sattari, Pitt, Caruana, 2011). Thus readability and understandability should be an important consideration for a mission statement.

### **Importance of Understandability and Readability**

Readability and understandability are the prime consideration for a good statement; and it should be audience centered, in order to achieve this purpose (Sattari, Pitt, and Caruana, 2011). If a statement and its message are well understood by a reader, a statement would be considered a worthy statement (Klarke, 1963). A readable and understandable statement should be well structured in form of its layout, legibility, structure (words and sentences) (Klarke, 1963; Sattari, Pitt, and Caruana, 2011). In order to make a statement readable, it should be “reader centered” (Klarke, 1980), and it should be good at comprehension, reading speed, retention, and easy to read (Sattari, Pitt, and Caruana, 2011). Zakaluk and Samuels (1988) commented that mission statement like other communication tools, should be good at its writing style, and structure. Readability and understandability of a statement is also dependent upon the skills and traits (e.g. motivation, knowledge, interest) of a reader, and a statement should follow these traits with good style, structure, contents, and design (Sattari, et al., 2011). Readability of a statement is judged by using various methods; these methods use both document and reader traits to judge quality of it (Keller, 1983). Following section covers details of various methods applied in mission statements’ readability and understandability.

### **Techniques For Estimating Text Readability And Understandability**

Initial studies on readability of the documents were conducted on the texts of school children (Sattari, Pitt, and Caruana, 2011, Zakaluk and Samuels, 1988). With the passage of time new techniques were introduced considering the challenges and drawbacks of previous techniques (Zakaluk and Samuels, 1988). Out of the various techniques, Fog index (FI) is the mostly widely used technique developed by Gunning (1952). It was developed to evaluate the quality of report writing through fog factor, calculated by dividing number of sentences of a document by number of long words in document (Ehrenberg, 1982). The Lower the score the readable the statement is believed to be, but academic writing is marked good even at fog score of 6-8 or even at 10 (Ehrenberg, 1982). Another widely used measure of text readability is Flesch measure developed in 1948. It is used to judge the readability of a document, which overweighs fog index which judges only a part of document for readability (Sattari, et al., 2011). Flesch measure includes two types of tests (i) “flesch reading ease score” (FRES) (ii) “flesch-kincaid grade level score” (FKGLS). The former one uses average sentence length (ASL) and average number of syllables per word (ANS), as baseline of text readability. The scores are calculated on point scale of 100 where higher the scores better is the text readability of document. Later one also uses both ASL and ANS to calculate but uses different score level to judge text understandability. Here outcome values determine the results. A higher outcome value indicates higher level of qualification degree needed to understand the statements or documents.

Other readability tools include Smith and Senters’ “Automated Readability Index” (ARI) (1968). It uses characters, sentences and words to determine the level of schooling needed to comprehend a text. SMOG index of McLaughlin (1969) is also another tool that uses poly-syllables (words made of 3 or more syllables) to determine the education level needed to understand a document. Yet another tool is Coleman-Liau Index (CLI) (1975) which uses 100 words to find average number of sentences and letters to determine the years of education needed to comprehend a text document.

Which method is the most suitable and desirable is a question which requires clarification (Sattari, Pitt and Caruana, 2011). But literature proves that various researchers have preferred one method over others, e.g. Cochran and David (1986) analyzed mission statements of universities and business entities using fog index, Stober (1997) conducted study in US universities by using fog index. Sattari, et al., (2011) analyzed mission statement of 100 companies using FRES and FKGL score. In order to judge the preferable method of evaluation, Thomas, Hartley and Kincaid (1975) compared ARI, Flesch scores and Fog index and noticed that each method offers unique benefits over other, thus none of them overweighs others and all should be applied for a document evaluation. As no choice has been made about the best method, this study applied all the methods of reevaluation except SMOG index, which was primarily focuses on testing readability of medical sciences. Using all the methods is also a new dimension to work on as no one in past has used all of the evaluation tools to judge the readability and understandability of documents.

## **Data Sources**

A list of Asian companies listed in Fortune global 500 was taken. There were 197 Asian companies listed there. Mission statements of these selected companies were taken from their websites from Feb 2016 to Apr 2016. Only 164 mission statements were accessed, as other firms either had their mission statements in native language or had problems in translating them back to English. Out of these companies, 92 belong to manufacturing sector, 39 from services sector, 04 from services sector and 29 were having diversified operations. Selected missions statements were assessed for their contents: number of words, number of sentences, readability and understandability using MS word. Analysis also includes sectorial comparison of the companies. Following section covers the results of these measures.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Table-1 contains the results of analysis of size of mission statement in terms of sentences, words and number of words per sentence. Findings reveal that services sector has longest mission statement ( $x=43.28$ ,  $SD= 31.99$ ) in terms of number of words and in terms of sentences ( $x=1.67$ ,  $SD=1.06$ ) while trading/distribution sector has shortest mission statement both in terms of words ( $x=8.75$ ,  $SD=4.5$ ) and number of sentences ( $x=1$ ,  $SD=0$ ). Why looking at the reason that why service sector has longest mission statement: firstly, it may possible be influenced by the vast area of activities to cover in terms of service delivery; and secondly, mission statement needs more explanation to make reader understand the message as the array of services may be vast (Sattari, et al., 2011). A look at number of words per sentence also reveals that manufacturing sector has longest mission statement ( $x=32.65$ ,  $SD=24.86$ ) while again trading and distribution firms have shortest mission statements ( $x=8.75$ ,  $SD=4.5$ ).

**Table-1 Mission statements (No. of words, sentences and words per sentences)**

<b>Measures</b>	<b>Manufacturing</b>	<b>Services</b>	<b>Trading</b>	<b>Diversified</b>	<b>Overall</b>
Longest mission statement (words)	149	127	15	122	149
Shortest mission statement (words)	4	3	5	8	3
Mean (length of mission statement in words)	36.55	43.7	8.75	36.33	37.94
Standard deviation (words)	32.12	31.3	4.5	31.58	31.85
Most (No. of sentences)	6	5	1	6	6
Lowest (No. of sentences)	1	1	1	1	1
Mean (No. of sentences)	1.58	1.68	1	1.6	1.61
Standard deviation (sentences)	1.06	1.07	0	1.17	1.07
Highest (words/sentence)	149	95	15	83	149
Fewest (words/sentence)	3	3	5	6	3
Mean (No. of words/sentence)	32.65	24.5	8.75	22.29	25.87
Standard deviation (words/sentence)	24.86	21.42	4.5	16.62	22.47

Table-2 contains the results of readability tests applied in this study. The first test applied was FRES, which shows the level of readability of a document on scale of 100. Higher the score greater would be the readability of the document, but a document should score at least 60 to be a readable document (Sattari, et al., 2011). It is evident that Asian companies have poor statements at readability as they score very low at FRES ( $x=27.31$ ,  $SD=34.75$ ). When we had a look at the sectorial division it is again noticed that none of the sectors is having good mission statement (manufacturing sector,  $x=21.62$ ,  $SD=42.02$ ; service sector,  $x=31.77$ ,  $SD=26.08$ ; trading sector,  $x=36.15$ ,  $SD=61.56$ ; and diversified organizations,  $x=32.10$ ,  $SD=23.73$ ) which could meet the criteria of readable mission statement as per the standards of FRES. Thus it could be inferred that Asian companies are not having good statements while looking at their readability traits.

Other tests applied in this study include: FKGLS, ARI, CLI and GFI. All these tests are used to judge the level of schooling to understand a document (Sattari, Pitt and Caruana, 2011). A look at the score of Asian organization, for FKGLS, shows that a reader should have at least 14 years of education to understand these mission statements ( $x=14.38$ ,  $SD=7.31$ ). Score of other tests also shows that a reader should have at least 15-19 years of education to understand mission statements of companies under observation (ARI,  $x=15.98$ ,  $SD=9.13$ ; CLI,  $x=15.18$ ,  $SD=5.67$ ; GFI,  $x=19.01$ ,  $SD=7.97$ ). When we put an eye on sectorial division results are not different. A look at the scores of manufacturing firms shows that a reader should have about 14-19 years of schooling to understand these mission statements (FKGLS,  $x=14.75$ ,  $SD=9.14$ ; ARI,  $x=16.23$ ,  $SD=11.40$ ; CLI,  $x=16.18$ ,  $SD=6.51$ ; GFI,  $x=19.65$ ,  $SD=9.82$ ). Similarly, service sector also requires 15-20 years of schooling to understand their mission statements (FKGLS,  $x=15.15$ ,  $SD=6.68$ ; ARI,  $x=17.54$ ,  $SD=8.58$ ; CLI,  $x=15.32$ ,  $SD=4.54$ ; GFI,  $x=20.46$ ,  $SD=6.83$ ); whereas trading sector requires 9-15 years of schooling (with average= $11.50$ ) to understand the mission statements (FKGLS,  $x=10.53$ ,  $SD=6.80$ ; ARI,  $x=10.58$ ,  $SD=7.32$ ; CLI,  $x=9.15$ ,  $SD=5.91$ ; GFI,  $x=15.68$ ,  $SD=10.33$ ). It further strengthens the findings of previous section, where it is noticed that trading sector is having shortest mission statements in terms of words, sentences and words per sentence. Further inquiry of diversified business also proves that reader should have at least university degree (graduation, 13-16 years of education) (FKGLS,  $x=13.05$ ,  $SD=4.35$ ; ARI,  $x=14.23$ ,  $SD=5.14$ ; CLI,  $x=14.78$ ,  $SD=4.68$ ; GFI,  $x=16.26$ ,  $SD=4.96$ ) to understand the mission statements of companies with diversified operations.

These findings help us conclude that mission statements of Asian companies are need easy to read, understand and comprehend. It is evident that mission statements of all the sectors don't meet the minimum criteria of mission statement readability given by FRES (i.e. 60 on 100 point scale). Thus all the mission statements are difficult to read. Further inquiry proves that these statements are not only difficult to read but also to understand. All the score of understandability tests are quite high and show that a reader should have at least a university degree (graduation) to understand the mission statements. While comparison a made among the sectors, it is found that trading sector is having most readable statement, as the education level required to understand a statement is lower than the other sectors (almost 11 years). These findings are in-line with the findings of

Sattari, et al., (2011), who noticed that trading firms have clear objectives and mission statements than other sectors, because of their nature and scope of operation.

**Table-2 Readability Analysis**

<b>Readability Test</b>	<b>Lowest</b>	<b>Highest</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Dev.</b>
<b><i>Overall</i></b>				
Flesch Reading Ease Score	-99.3	98.4	27.31	34.75
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Score	-0.2	56.2	14.38	7.31
Automated Readability Index	-0.6	36.2	15.98	9.13
Coleman-Liau Index	1.2	31.2	15.18	5.67
Gunning Fog Index	2	63.4	19.01	7.97
<b><i>Manufacturing</i></b>				
Flesch Reading Ease Score	-99.3	74.8	21.62	42.02
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Score	2.3	56.2	14.75	9.14
Automated Readability Index	0.9	35.6	16.23	11.40
Coleman-Liau Index	3.5	31.2	16.18	6.51
Gunning Fog Index	2.7	63.4	19.65	9.82
<b><i>Services</i></b>				
Flesch Reading Ease Score	-19.8	71.8	31.77	26.08
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Score	-0.2	28.8	15.15	6.68
Automated Readability Index	-0.6	36.2	17.54	8.58
Coleman-Liau Index	1.2	27.4	15.32	4.54
Gunning Fog Index	3.6	31.9	20.46	6.83
<b><i>Trading</i></b>				
Flesch Reading Ease Score	-47.9	98.4	36.15	61.56
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Score	2.5	20.2	10.53	6.80
Automated Readability Index	3.7	18.3	10.58	7.32
Coleman-Liau Index	3.3	17.1	9.15	5.91
Gunning Fog Index	2	27.1	15.68	10.33
<b><i>Diversified</i></b>				
Flesch Reading Ease Score	-7.9	95.4	32.10	23.73
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Score	3.9	20.6	13.05	4.35
Automated Readability Index	1.0	21.7	14.23	5.14
Coleman-Liau Index	3.0	23.6	14.78	4.68
Gunning Fog Index	8.0	26.5	16.26	4.96

## **Conclusion**

This research endeavor is an attempt to cover and unexplored area about Asian companies listed in fortune (global) 500 companies. It is evident from literature that mission statements are an important communication tool, which cascades the objective, directions, motives and directions to all the stakeholders (Campbell and Yeung, 1991; Davies & Glaister, 1997; Fairhurst & Jordan, 1997; Hartley, 2002). Thus a mission statement should be a stakeholder centered statement (Verma, 2009), where a stakeholder should be able to understand and comprehend the message of the statement (Sattari, Pitt and Caruana, 2011). Whether a statement is really able enough to convey its message is judged through the usage of readability and understandability tests (Stober, 1997; Thomas, Hartley and Kincaid, 1975). Considering this notion, this study was an attempt to see the readability and understandability of mission statement of Asian organizations listed in fortune 500.

There were 197 companies listed in 2015 in fortune 500 ranking. The study analyzed both the contents (No. of words, sentences, words/sentences) and characteristics of mission statements (readability and understandability). Findings reveal that mission statements of the Asian companies are large in length; further inquiry proves that trading sector is having shortest mission statements than all other sectors. Readability and understandability analysis also proves that trading sector requires least years of schooling to understand the mission statements (11 years), when compared with other sectors (manufacturing=16.70 years; services=17.12 years; diversified=14.58 years). Conclusively, it could be inferred that mission statements of Asian companies are lengthy, difficult to read and hard to comprehend. Thus these mission statements might not be able to convey their message properly to their stakeholders.

## **Limitation & Future Direction**

This study focuses on the role of mission statements in corporate communication, whereas other communication tools may also be useful in conveying this message. Thus, findings of this study could be useful but are not the last voice. Most of the organization where Chinese, Japanese, or Koreans, thus their websites were also originally meant in their native language, so it was really difficult to fetch data from their sites. Any change in the website or its contents; or mission statements or its contents after fetching data couldn't be attributed to this study. An attempt was made to apply the best possible tools for statements evaluation, but still much could be done by using modernized tools (Sattari, et al., 2011; Morris, 1994). Computer based techniques (e.g. Leximancer) could also be used asses the statements for quality of communication and comprehendability (Sattari, Pitt, and Caruana, 2011).

Some realistic future directions could be taken from this study; for instance, future researchers can take all the Asian companies listed in NESDEQ, or New York stock exchange, or Asian stock markets. Future researchers should also consider the directions of Hofstede (1985) who noticed that country culture has great influence on organizational values and believes which become basis for such statements. Thus future research should also consider cultural differences and their influence in the contents of mission statement.

### **Managerial Implications**

Results of the study had great message for management. The length of mission statements, their readability and understandability traits highlight the need of top management in transforming their mission statement. As their mission statements are too difficult and hard to read and understand, they have to do a lot to overcome this deficiency. As the stakeholders are always diversified with different background and different education level, the mission statement should address all of them. Making a statement readable will not only make the message clear but it will also be eye-catching and attractive for the reader (Sattari, Pitt, and Caruana, 2011).

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