

Future X: An experiential future to trigger people's criticism (or not?)

ABSTRACT

With the increase in corporate greenwashing globally, more companies are being exposed for greenwashing as a tactic to cover up their hidden agendas. Within this paper, we jump to 02038 where FUTURE X, a fictional greenwashing company that is posing as a sustainable energy firm, travels back to 02023 to recruit talent that aligns with the company's vision. This experiential future scenario gives people the opportunity to consider working for this company, and examines how easily their decisions are influenced by the benefits on offer. By conducting a survey to gather their opinions on the vacancies, and observing their reactions at an exhibition, the research questions are answered. While approximately half the people were influenced by the company's presentation, nobody wanted to work for a greenwashing company, regardless of salary and benefits. This research makes people aware of the importance of having a critical attitude and how their choices have consequences that can affect their future. It also explores the (ethical) opportunities in design research when working with a fictional futuristic scenario and roleplay.

Authors Keywords

Experiential future; Greenwashing; Consequences of Choices; Time-travel; Speculative Design.

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INTRODUCTION

With the global movement towards sustainability, major companies worldwide have begun publicly displaying their initiatives towards greener operations. From energy and logistics to fashion, art, and food, companies all seem to have taken steps towards a more sustainable future. While many people have bought into these initiatives, it has recently been found that a lot of these companies use these initiatives to mask their unsustainable practices, in other words greenwashing [13]. These companies are now under the spotlight, being questioned about their unsustainable practices, yet face no consequences globally. While the EU and International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB) [9] aims to introduce legislation against greenwashing, as has been seen in the past, most major companies pay a small settlement and continue operations as normal. This was seen with Shell's oil pipeline spills in the Niger Delta that affected communities in Nigeria, with Shell paying 15.9 million euros [2], less than 0.05% of their profit in 2022 [10].

From this, the following questions emerged: How can we make people aware of the consequences of their choices? To what extent can we influence people and how far they go in giving up on the possibility to live

in a sustainable future? What is the price for people to sell their souls to capitalism? Within the research, the effects of greenwashing and corporate propaganda are studied, also looking at how people identify information that would affect them personally in the future, and if it changes their decision-making after they find out the true intentions of the experience.

The study uses a speculative approach with the showroom methodology by creating an experience of a company from the future with a hidden agenda that tries to hire people visiting the exhibition.

RELATED WORK

In the paper 'Letters from the Future: Exploring Ethical Dilemmas in the Design of Social Agents' by Michal Luria and Stuart Candy [12], the hybrid design/futures method Ethnographic Experiential Futures (EXF) is used to materialise and prompt discussion of currently under-examined ethical dilemmas like human technology interaction and its effect on politics, art, and consumerism [5]. This paper gives insight into speculative design approaches and decision-making within the design process to create an effective experiential scenario, which was inspiring for our process.

The paper “On the necessity of prefigurative politics” by Lara Monticelli [11], describes how capitalism manages to reproduce itself over time very successfully because it shares the same traits every time it occurs through the undervalued economy of care, exploration of nature, and the primacy of business over politics. A contemporary example of capitalism in this article is shown by a scene where not even extreme weather conditions can stop humanity’s insatiable hunger for conspicuous consumption, making us wonder what it says about us and the future we will end up in? As seen in Figure 1, the scene explicitly displays how consumerism is ingrained in society, raising concern over the continued growth of capitalism worldwide. This topic exemplifies how people act without thinking of the consequences of their choices.



Figure 1. Two women crossing the flooded Piazza San Marco, Venice.

Figure 1: How consumerism is ingrained in society. Picture from Monticelli [11].

Ansoms and Sarah Geenen, in their paper ‘Development monopoly: A simulation game on poverty and inequality’, look at the societal dynamics based on inequality and this gives insight into how capitalism and opportunity affects socio-economic decisions. This ties in with Rawls’ veil of ignorance theory which explains how human decisions are biased by their situations, not looking beyond their own benefit. This bias also causes tunnel vision, often causing people to lose sight of the bigger picture.

This tunnel vision is often exploited by major companies and marketing campaigns, greenwashing being the most notable recent example of this. Large technology companies such as Apple [3] and Samsung have taken to the media in recent years to promote their green initiatives, excluding charges and earbuds in order to reduce mining, reduce plastic waste from packaging, and CO₂ emissions, and while these companies are getting praise for their initiatives, the e-waste dumps generated by these companies in west-Africa are completely overlooked [14]. Aside from these dumps, the additional packaging required to sell these items separately, as well as the masked capitalism where these companies make more money off of products is often overlooked.

This masked dystopia and manipulated truth has also been portrayed in several books such as The Circle [6], Brave New World [8], and 1984 [7]. The manipulation of perspectives and truths is made very clear and shows how companies and media can alter people’s opinions using targeted propaganda. This became a strategy that we would use in our design.

PROCESS

The theme of the project is time travelling from 02038 to 02023, with the purpose of making people aware of something from 02038 that they could either change, stop or start thinking about from now. The researchers of this project were the actors that impersonated people from 02038 and crafted the speculation to find interesting discussions.

Speculative Design

Speculative design is a method used to look at the future and address complex societal problems. It uses the element of fiction allowing designers to let their imagination flow freely to create new perspectives and spaces for debates. A successful speculative design project creates a bridge between the audience’s perception of their world and the fictional element of the concept [1]. Possible imaginary futures are used as tools to better understand the present and discuss the future we want to live in. This project situates itself in the plausible future, but depending on our actions, it can drift toward a possible or probable future. Backed up by current knowledge and trends, it is a future we should start discussing.

Inspiration

The project took inspiration from different perspectives. We started looking at the contrast between priorities in different parts of the world, the missed sense of unity in today’s world, social human standards and many more. From this, the topics that emerged were related to games like monopoly, also mentioned in the related works, the positioning in life people get or are born into, and the consequences in choices which derived from the veil of ignorance metaphor. Looking at how these practices

will evolve in the future, examples of exclusivity and extreme division between the poor and the rich was the common outcome. An example of such a scenario is depicted in the show *Snowpiercer* [4], which depicts a dystopian future that questions class warfare, social injustice and the politics of survival.

These initial explorations lead to more discussion regarding the media's standpoint and its power, how responsibility is in reality a one-way street, and how important your position in the world is. The overarching theme kept coming back to the consequences of our choices that further developed into our final concept.

The final concept started looking at how we can make people more aware of the choices they are making, and how they can be more critical of their influences. Inspired by the works and approaches described in the related works from books like "The Circle" [6], "Brave new world" [8], and "1984" [7] we approached the project from a deceiving point of view. Posing like the good guys, in reality having a hidden agenda, we aimed to test how much people would sell their souls to capitalism, or even notice that they are doing it.

We achieved this by creating a company called FUTURE X that aimed to recruit people in 02023 for 02038, with the promise of a secure job, great benefits, and not-too-bad responsibilities.

DESIGN

In order to interact with people and let them experience FUTURE X, we designed a website, a flyer with six attractive job positions, and a survey that would gather people's interest so the company could better tailor the jobs depending on what people from this time need. The researchers acted as employees working in the department of past human resources as indicated on our nametags (Figure 2).

In the projects' exhibition, we had a setup with approximately 30 flyers and a big screen showing our website, to support our pitch (Figure 3). The pitch explained to visitors who we were (employees of FUTURE X), and that FUTURE X, the biggest energy company since 2030 that would be founded in two years' time, was hiring to ensure vision alignment within the company. Visitors were shown the website and the vacancies and they were told that working for FUTURE X is very secure, as we knew what was going to happen in the upcoming fifteen years. We also emphasised the good salaries and the job's benefits. Then we asked people to review our company and show their interest in the jobs, by scanning the QR code on the flyer

that linked to the survey. We told people that we would contact them and that the survey contained more information about the company.



Figure 2:
The design
of the
nametags
that were
worn in the
exhibition.



Figure 3: The setup
of FUTURE X in the
exhibition with flyers
and the website.

Website

The website included all the information provided in the flyer as well as a company description and vision (Figure 4). The role of the website was to strengthen the credibility of the company as well as visual support for when the experience of the recruitment took place. Its aesthetics were very corporate and the first image looks very industrially futuristic, but also a little dark (Figure 5).

<https://wtxx52.wixsite.com/future-x>

Flyer

The flyers were a support element created for the recruitment experience that relates very much to how things are done today. They included information about the vacancies and a QR code to the survey. The vacancies were tailored in a way that they are more and more obvious with their malicious intentions as you go from the first to the last (Appendix A). They were designed in this way to evaluate whether people would actually look well enough before applying to any positions or not.

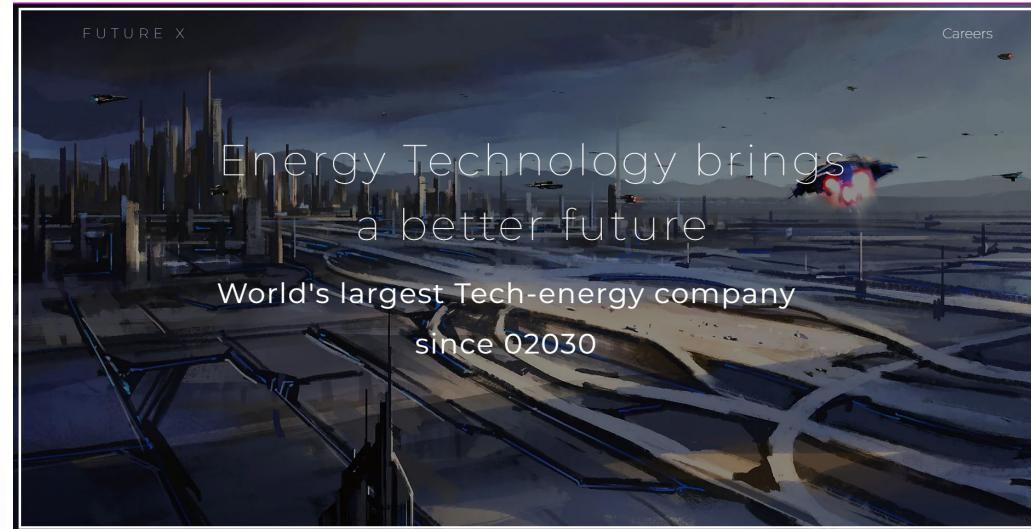


Figure 5: The website's first page is futuristic, but dark.

WHO WE ARE

We reimagine the World's future prosperity with our energy technology

We believe energy powers the future. FUTURE X ensures a reliable and affordable energy supply while embracing sustainable practices. We strive to innovate and leverage cutting-edge technologies to minimize our environmental impact, foster economic growth, and meet the evolving energy needs of our customers and communities.



Figure 4: One of the pages on the website describing FUTURE X.

Survey

In order to understand how critical people were to what they were presented, we created a survey. This survey initially pretended to collect data about people's interest in the vacancies and what they thought of the company, so that it concealed the actual purpose and that it fit in the roleplay. This was explained in the first of its three sections, next to the fact that participants shouldn't discuss their ideas about the survey within 3 hours to "not disrupt the space-time continuum". The survey would take approximately 8 minutes. The participants for the survey were all recruited during the exhibition.

The next section was about the participant. It collects some demographic data (pronouns, age and profession), but slightly differently to convey the futuristic vibes of the company. Instead of asking someone's age, it asked for their age in 02038 (15 years later). To get a glimpse of people's motivation, we asked them about their biggest hope for the future.

The following section was about the company. This concerned people's impression of the company as well as their interest in the jobs and their motivations. For more insight into the reasons for their interest, we ask what would be needed to make the other jobs more interesting. This information is interesting, as it can tell how well people are aware of the company's intentions and to what extent they would possibly do anything for money.

To ensure that everyone eventually is aware of the company's intentions, we created the reality check part. The participants need to watch a 100 seconds long video that said they were hacked, followed by a black screen where a text was being typed (Figures 6, 7). This text said that the company was corrupt and that they are attempting to actually make the future less sustainable by practices like greenwashing. It urges the participant to cut all bonds with the company. After watching the video, participants are asked if they would change their previous answers based on the knowledge they have now and why. This helps to understand the impact of the message, as well as their morale. There is also a question for feedback.

<https://forms.gle/1DRkieCULELazyrA6>



Figure 6: Still of the start of the reality check video in the survey.

STOP! This is not what you think it is. Future X is a company that tries to become more influential by avoiding green policies and negative media attention through greenwashing its polluting activities. This company should not be called Future X but Past X. Your future, people from 02023, is one of major change and full of transition towards sustainable lifestyles. Only a few selfish people try to maintain a monopoly and choose their own luxury at the cost of someone else's suffering. Don't become that person yourself! Cut your connections to Future X today, for there will not be a tomorrow ...|

Figure 7: Still of the end of the reality check video in the survey.

RESULTS

Survey

There were 18 participants for the survey, of which 50% used the pronouns she/her, while the other 50% used he/him. The participants' ages, in 15 years from now, ranged between 34 and 65. Their average age was 39. 44% of the participants were students and the participants were mostly involved in education and/or design. Furthermore, most hopes for the future concern an improved situation for the climate and society; "That the world is a better place for us and nature". There are also some more personal wishes concerning happiness and family. Some participants hope that the earth is still livable, which shows scepticism about being able to solve current challenges; "That we still have a world where we can live in." These are not egoistic hopes, which indicates that the participants care about more than their personal future well-being.

In the next section of the survey, participants wrote their impression of FUTURE X. Some people were immediately suspicious of the company's intentions, saying that they would never want to work there, while others slowly became aware of this. "The company first seemed very normal but looking at the higher paying jobs, their greenwashing efforts made them look very egoistic." There were also people saying that they think the company looks shiny and corporate, sometimes a bit capitalistic. There were even people that

believe the company is working towards developing technologies for a sustainable way to use energy in the future. "It seems like an interesting and sustainable company."

The question about the participants' interest in the vacancies suggests a relation between some of their motivations and the obviousness of the company's bad intentions (Figure 8). The participants showed the least interest in the job of the chief officer, which literally contains "greenwashing" in the description. It is also noticeable that the salary becomes a larger motivator to choose a certain job as the bad intentions and salary increase in the vacancies. The opposite effect is seen for the responsibilities as a motivator. The exception to this is job 4, the company influencer. This could be due to the population being mainly design related and this might be a job they therefore somewhat relate to. The benefits and growth opportunities as motivators do not seem to be impacted significantly by the intentions of the company becoming more obvious.

As can be seen in Figure 9, it is clear that 14/18 participants want a change in the tasks. They said that the salary will not convince them. Also in the "other" section, people explain that they do not appreciate the "greenwashing". These results show that people are already not very happy with the current vacancies and that they are suspicious of the company's intentions.

Which vacancies have your interest and why are you interested in this/these vacancy/vacancies?

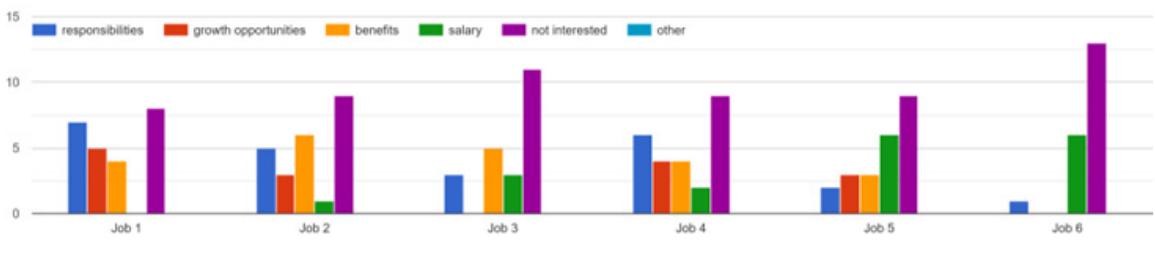


Figure 8: Results of the participants' interest in vacancies and their motivations.

What would be needed to make the vacancies you were not interested in, interesting to you?

18 antwoorden

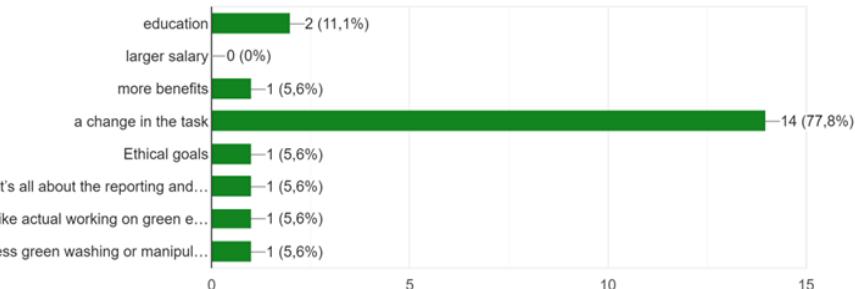


Figure 9: Result that shows what participants need to make the vacancies more interesting to them.

All participants watched the video in the reality check section of the survey. 10/18 would change their answers after watching the video. This does not necessarily mean that only 10 participants considered FUTURE X's practices to be harmful. When looking at their explanations about how they would change their answers, it becomes clear that no one wants to work for FUTURE X. Some people felt tricked and someone even wanted to join the rebellion against the company; "I think I would answer to all of them as not interested because why would I knowingly want to pollute a world where I want people to thrive in?". This means that 8 participants already knew of the company's bad intentions before the video. This was either due to the presentation or them reading the job descriptions very carefully. A full overview of the survey results can be found in Appendix B.

Exhibition

During the exhibition, some reactions were captured in notes. These concern the vacancies, the website, the topic, the roleplay, and the overall method. People said that they enjoyed the descriptions of the vacancies, but just in an artistic sense, not because they actually would want the job. "I like how you wrote everything to be not sketchy." However, they also thought that the greenwashing terms already gave away the company's bad intentions. They would have been more convincing if they also contained a section on the required skills. Also, the website could have been more convincing by replacing the very standard pictures with more futuristic pictures, as that would maybe appeal more to people who aspired to work for a company in the future.

By experiencing FUTURE X, people were reminded of the power of marketing. "This already happens now", they said about companies greenwashing and people easily believing what they are told. However, it also showed that not everyone was fooled by the pitch we gave as employees of FUTURE X: "So the green part, I'm actually supposed to believe that it is green?"

People reacted differently to the roleplay. Most people just listened to the pitch and filled in the survey as they were told, while some actually were playing along. One participant thought that he had to act like he was actually in the future and imagined what age he would be and consulted us about what job would fit best. Another participant was intrigued by the time-travelling aspect and thought it would be easy to make money through that. He suggested that we should make people pay us to work for us. Overall, people seemed to enjoy this way of experiencing the future. The participants were smiling often when filling in the survey. The reaction of a participant was: "It works very well, the vacancies and everything is very convincing. I had this gut feeling and the video confirmed it."

DISCUSSION

The survey shows that most people want the future to be more sustainable and socially just than the present. This also explains why everyone eventually does not want to work for FUTURE X. Some people noticed this already during the presentation or when reading the job descriptions, while others needed the video message in the reality check to understand FUTURE X's true intentions. The survey has shown that approximately half of the participants were already critical of the

company before seeing the video. This also means that the presentation of the company was rather convincing for the other half and that they were again influenced by what they were told in the video. Nevertheless, it is hopeful that everyone considered greenwashing not worth the money and benefits that were offered for it.

This study only had 18 participants, which is a relatively small sample size. The population was mostly of a high education level, which leaves it unknown how the reactions of other audiences would be. The politically correct answers to the survey regarding not wanting to work for a greenwashing company can be limited in validity due to people being aware of the fact that they were being studied. Some people already knew about the project, which also makes their answers less sincere. Everyone knew that the whole story of time travel was made up for the course, which may have impacted how they played along in the story. This was also visible in some interactions with the participants during the exhibition.

By making the future experiential for people, we were able to get an understanding of how they currently think they would act in that situation. The details in the design of the website, flyer, vacancies, and survey contributed to the credibility of this story, together with the roleplay. This enabled us to evaluate how easily people are influenced by what they are told and to what extent they stick to their morals when they could be offered large sums of money. This helped answer the research questions posed: How can we make people aware of their choices? To what extent can we influence people and how far they go in giving up on the possibility

to live in a sustainable future? What is the price for people to sell their souls to capitalism? We were also able to experiment with the use of roleplay and a fictive scenario in design research. The fact that FUTURE X was presented as part of a futuristic exhibition and had some fictional elements, such as time travel, made our method of telling "lies" to people more ethical, as they were aware it is all fiction. They were therefore not connecting actual hopes of getting a job to the experience, which perhaps makes their answers less representative of how they would act in a real scenario. It distances the practices of greenwashing and choosing for your own wealth from our current lives. Nevertheless, this whole setup was not about creating the most realistic and convincing experience in itself, but rather about letting people experience being tricked and prickling their critical attitude. We consider this important, as we believe that this critical attitude influences how people make their choices and that it stimulates thinking about the consequences of these choices. Our choices today shape tomorrow. We hope that the experience we provided to people will make them aware of that power and stimulate them to consider the future in their current decisions.

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Appendix A: The Flyer, including vacancies

JOB 5: MANAGER
STARTING SALARY: 110 K/Y

RESPONSIBILITIES:
Manage the company's adherence to various sustainability standards and certifications.

Oversee audits and inspections to meet basic criteria for eco-labeling.

Prioritize meeting the minimum requirements rather than driving substantial sustainability improvements.

BENEFITS:
Access to sustainability standardization organizations.

Opportunity to attend industry conferences on eco-labeling.

Performance-based bonuses for obtaining and maintaining certifications.

JOB 6: CHIEF OFFICER
STARTING SALARY: 150 K/Y

RESPONSIBILITIES:
Lead and coordinate all greenwashing efforts within the company.

Design and implement comprehensive strategies to deceive stakeholders and the public.

Create a pervasive culture of deceptive environmental practices throughout the organization.

BENEFITS:
Access to industry-leading greenwashing consultants.

Opportunity to attend exclusive greenwashing masterclasses.

Generous bonuses for successfully maintaining the company's greenwashing initiatives.



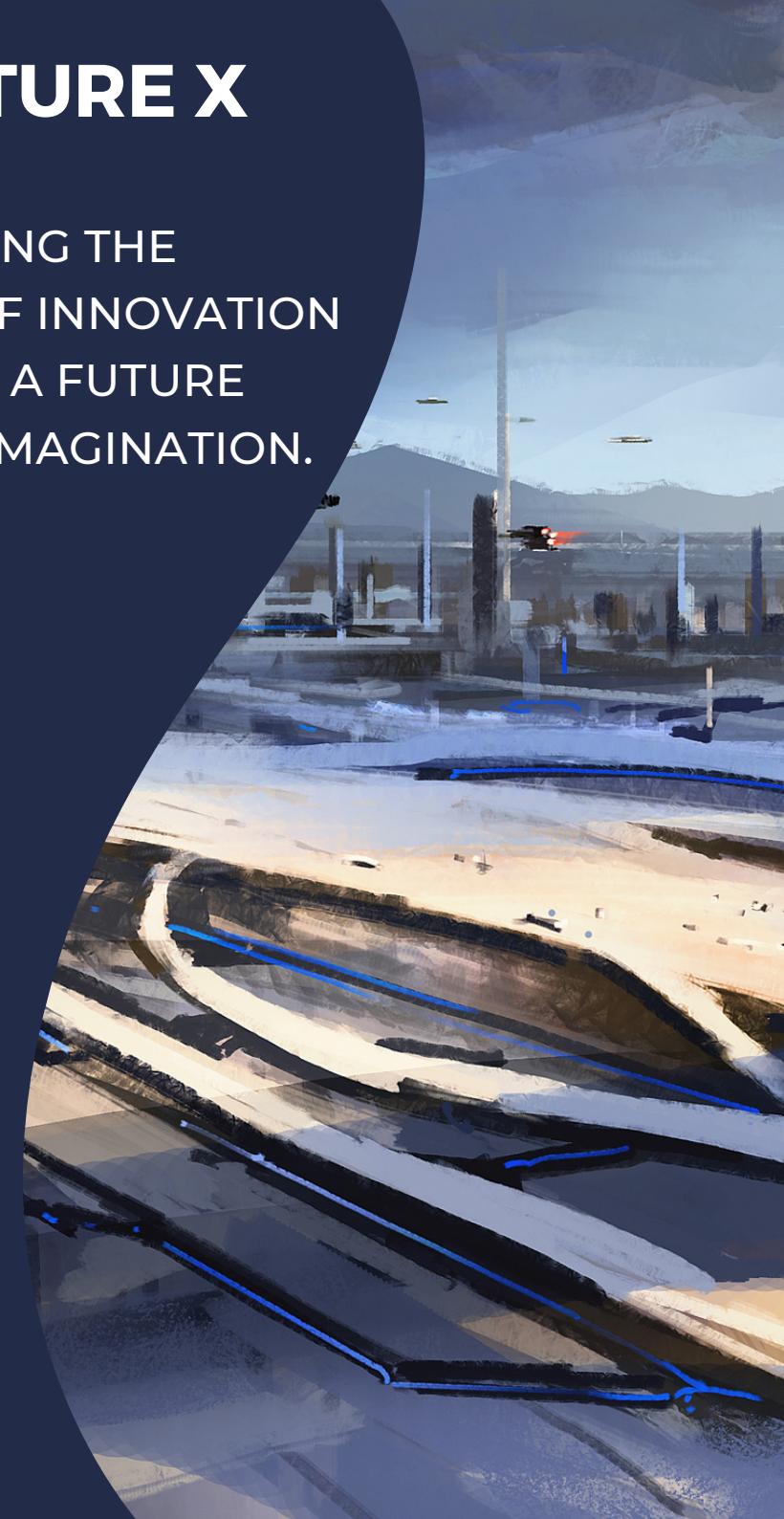
FUTURE X

HARNESSING THE
POWER OF INNOVATION
TO SHAPE A FUTURE
BEYOND IMAGINATION.

SURVEY QR CODE



FUTURE X



JOB VACANCIES

JOB 1: IMAGE CONSULTANT STARTING SALARY: 80 K/Y

RESPONSIBILITIES:

Develop and implement strategies to enhance the company's sustainable image.

Craft messaging and branding materials that highlight selected green initiatives and projects.

Leverage ambiguous language and selective data to create an impression of the company's environmental responsibility.

BENEFITS:

Access to sustainability-themed networking events.

Opportunity to attend sustainability conferences and workshops.

Performance-based bonuses for successfully enhancing the company's green image.

JOB 2: GREEN PROCUREMENT SPECIALIST STARTING SALARY: 85 K/Y

RESPONSIBILITIES:

Identify and source suppliers who claim to adhere to sustainable practices.

Ensure the inclusion of eco-friendly language and certifications in procurement contracts.

Overlook deeper supply chain sustainability issues to maintain business relationships.

BENEFITS:

Access to sustainable supplier directories.

Opportunity to attend green procurement trade shows and exhibitions.

Generous expense accounts for sustainable product research.

JOB 3: ENVIRONMENTAL REPORTING COORDINATOR STARTING SALARY: 90 K/Y

RESPONSIBILITIES:

Compile and prepare sustainability reports for internal and external stakeholders.

Emphasize positive environmental metrics while downplaying negative impacts.

Present data in a way that obfuscates true sustainability performance.

BENEFITS:

Opportunity for professional development in sustainability reporting.

Access to industry-standard reporting tools and software.

Paid attendance at sustainability reporting seminars and webinars

JOB 4: COMPANY INFLUENCER STARTING SALARY: 95 K/Y

RESPONSIBILITIES:

Analyze consumer trends and market demand for eco-friendly products.

Develop marketing campaigns that emphasize green features and benefits.

Leverage selective data and consumer psychology to manipulate perceptions of sustainability.

BENEFITS:

Access to market research reports on green consumer behavior.

Opportunity to attend marketing conferences and workshops.

Performance-based bonuses for successful green marketing campaigns.



FUTURE X

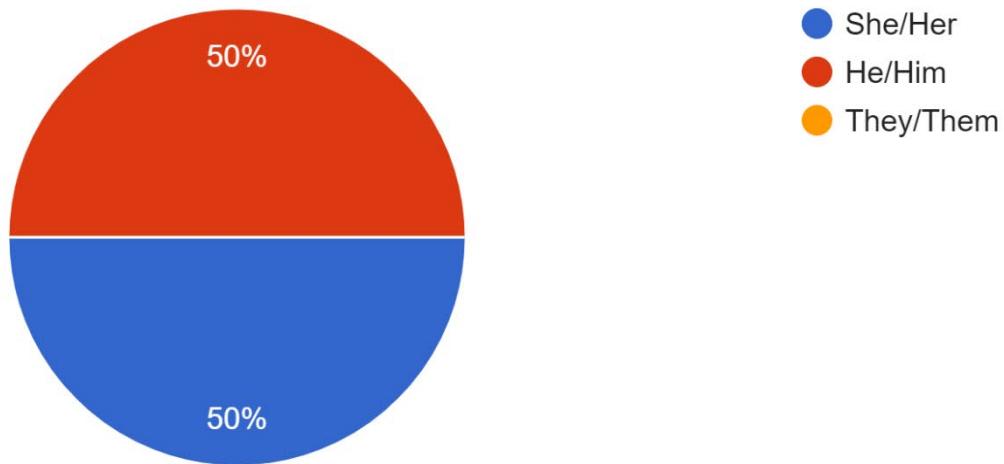


FUTURE X

Appendix B: The survey results

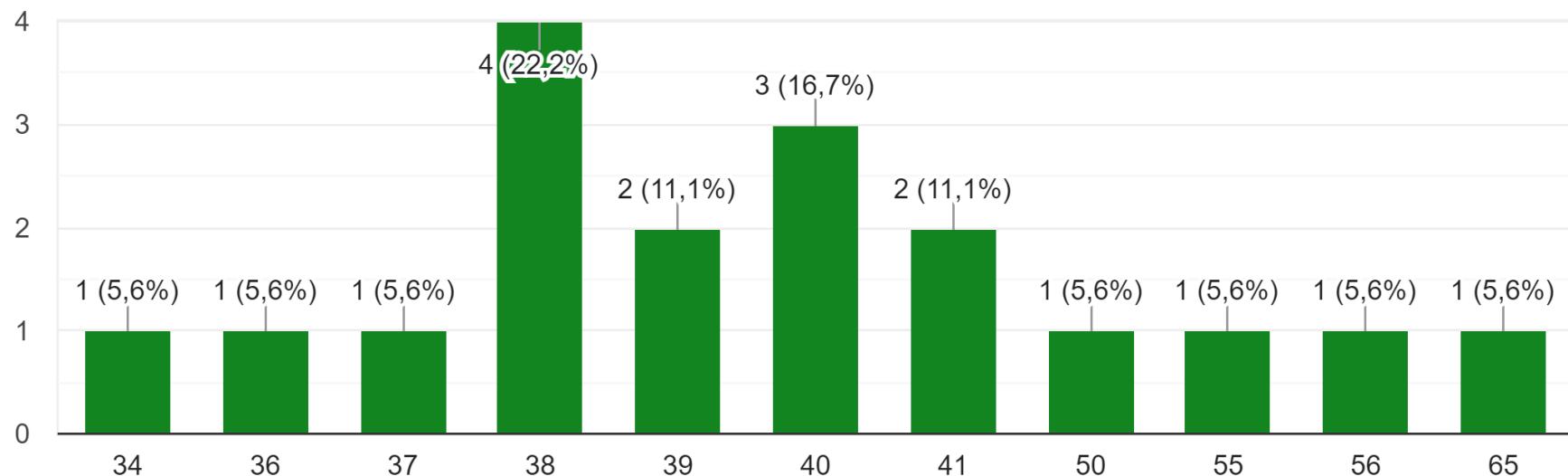
What are your preferred pronouns?

18 antwoorden



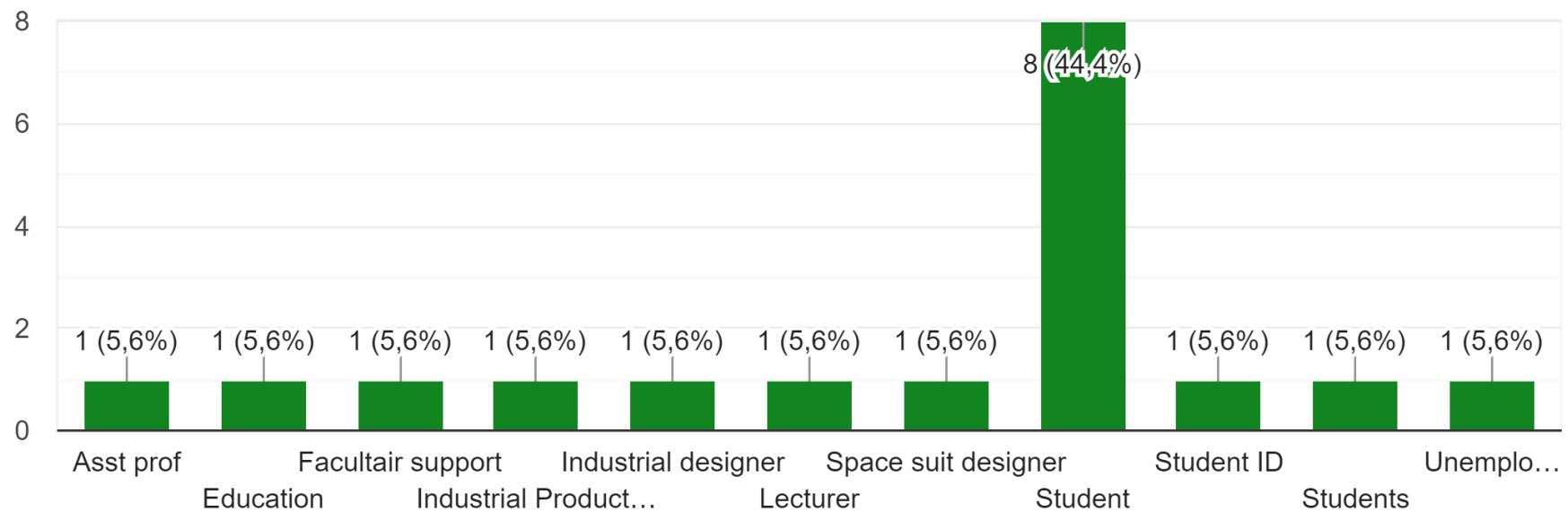
What is your age in 02038? (add 15 years)

18 antwoorden



What is your current occupation?

18 antwoorden



What is your biggest hope for 02038 in one sentence?

Being content and living without many worries

A wholesome relation with the planet and people

More collaboration and time for each other. Happiness and smaller gap between poor and rich

That the climate is recovering

Live happily in a non waste community

People and the planet finding a better way to live together

That there is still a liveable world, that is more accepting of all people.

A social and sustainable world where inequality vanished.

That we establish a more just and sustainable society

Happy life :)

A healthy earth

That the world is a better place for us and nature.

Improvement on climate situation

My biggest hope is to have a stable Familie and to be in an overall happy and stable Situation in life

Unity, peace

A fairer world free from capitalism

That we still have a world where we can live in

A more bleak power hierarchy amongst humans

What did you think of the company?

Im not sure yet

Scarily big

Shiny

I would never want to work there

Looks like a solid company

Very shiny, professional, corporate

Sounds very vague, only big words but no proof of anything.

Quite disruptive but also smart to acquire employees from the 'past' and to prepare already for the 'future' (which is Future X's present)

It seems like an interesting and sustainable company

Nice! But vague I think

The header picture looks a bit daunting. There is hardly any green. To me, this is not how I imagine the future to be.

A bit too focused on capitalism

Seems like a good company that would exist, also very helpful for a difficult job market

I am not the Biggest Fan of having one company in charge of everything so it is hard for me to like that

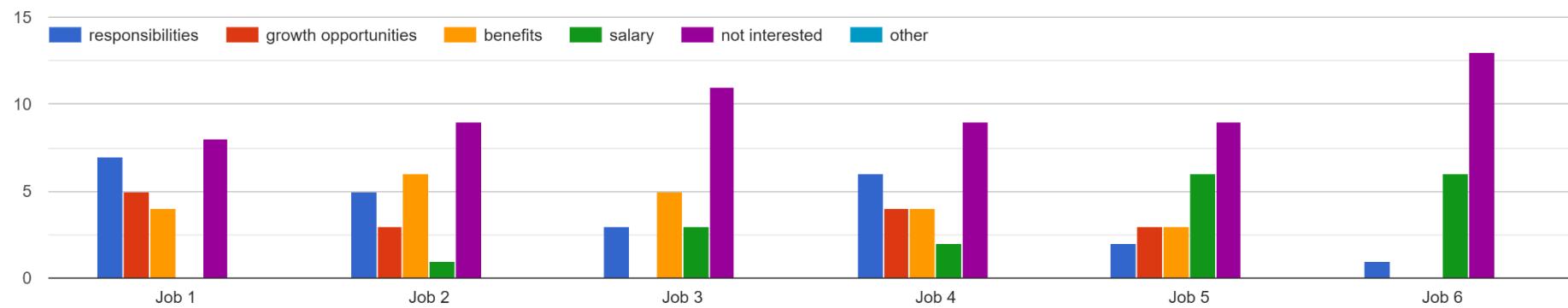
looking for sustainable solutions

The company first seemed very normal but looking at the higher paying jobs, their greenwashing efforts made them look very egoistic

It looks professional, and mainly focused on results, a bit like an engineering company, it lacks a little bit of soul in my opinion

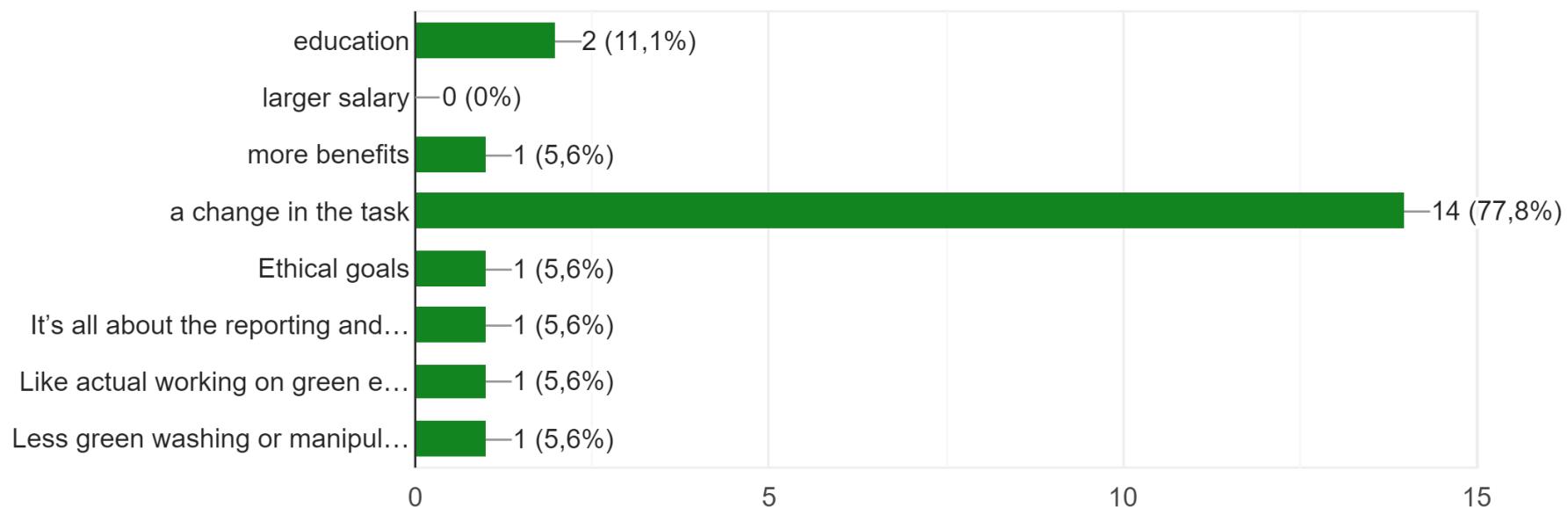
Very interesting where you address and are transparent about the manipulative actions taken within the company. And yet the website and the way it is worded is framed in such a happy way almost nudges you to go for it

Which vacancies have your and interest and why are you interested in this/these vacancy/vacancies?



What would is needed to make the vacancies you were not interested in, interesting to you?

18 antwoorden



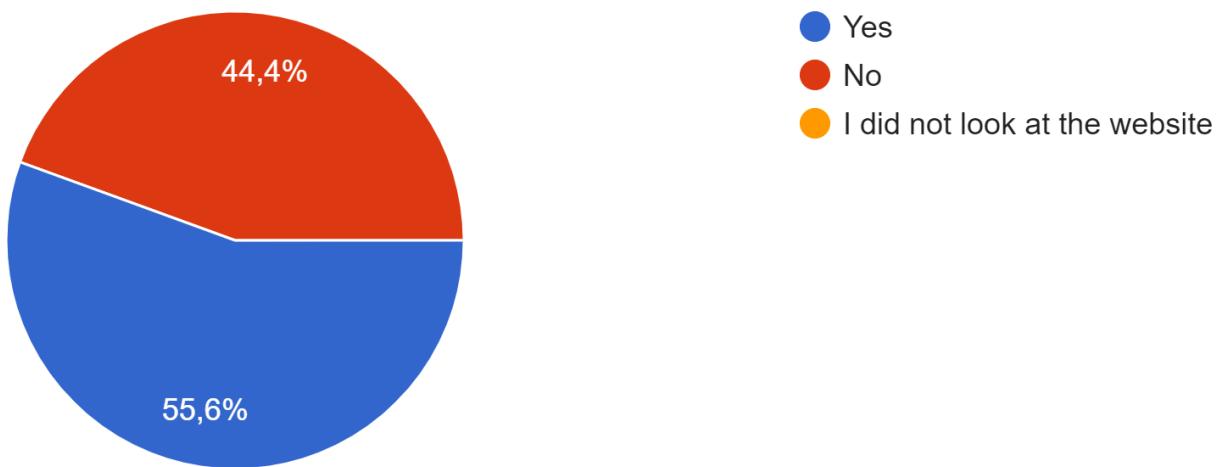
It's all about the reporting and branding outside, not acting and focus on 'doing good'

Like actual working on green energy and not fake.

Less green washing or manipulating of people

Did this experience make you want to answer the previous questions differently?

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If you would change them, how would you change your answers with the knowledge you have now?

Just don't want to work there at all

Join the rebellion against the company

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Na

Change it in a way that could lead to a more sustainable future

I would say not interested to all of them!

Just not fill them in.

I would not want to work for this company, I actually thought that it might not be ethical to get employees from the past already.

I would not want to work for this company

I wouldn't, the ads made me feel quite uncomfortable and the video stimulated that feeling

I wouldn't apply anymore

I would not be interested in jobs that are all about money and status

The opinion about the company has changed, I suspected something was wrong when looking at the job opportunities but the idea of the company still seemed logical. Now I wouldn't want to be a part of it

I do not wanna work for the company in the first place

Oh no i trusted you guys :(i wouldnt join and dont let others join

I would also remove the votes for the forst jobs

Maybe the one i was interested in the job description, so I would look more in depth what the vacancy actually says

I think I would answer to all of them as not interested because why would I knowingly want to pollute a world where I want people to thrive in

Do you have any feedback/questions for us?

Because of our nice conversation I was already a bit biased in the greenwashing aspect. But you did good! Nice storytelling.

Nope, good luck

Really liked the idea!!!

No

Maybe it was on purpose, but on the benefits list of the last vacancy does say greenwashing already, but I would not say that's a benefit, but could also be my opinion

Maybe it's nice to think about the word usage on the pamphlet such as deceptive, obfuscates etc because it might give it away that this could be a scam.. if you really wanted to recruit people ahahahaha