The reality is real, but the photo isn't

Furniture Bank is leveraging AI technology and changing the industry standard of using "poverty porn"

Toronto-based charity, Furniture Bank has embarked on a ground-breaking annual campaign by leveraging innovative technology to create its required visuals. It is disrupting the charity sector's reliance on "poverty porn" by engaging with Artificial Intelligence (AI) to create its images. Though AI-generated art is spawning fierce debate in art circles, it allows Furniture Bank to communicate the dire situations its clients are living in with its donors ethically, and responsibly.

What is "poverty porn"?

Poverty porn is the exploitation of people's experience of poverty to generate the necessary sympathy for increasing charitable donations, and/or support for a charity for the sake of a privileged audience.

There are many debates around "poverty porn": there is no denying it works—for more than 40 years, charities of all types have relied on these types of photos to increase awareness, advocacy and fundraising efforts. But these images require significant overheads of time, planning, and expense, and exploit, objectify and dehumanize people who are at their most vulnerable, all to generate a compelling photo for a fundraising campaign.

What is Furniture Bank doing to avoid engaging in "poverty porn"?

In this increasingly visual world, Furniture Bank must leverage photography to raise awareness of and donations for its charitable work eradicating furniture poverty. But how can it ask those coming out of crisis pose for photos of their children sleeping on piles of clothes on the floor, or families eating dinner on a bare floor, or mothers on mildewed mattresses comforting their children?

Furniture Bank is disrupting the fundraising campaign model by engaging with Artificial Intelligence (AI) to create these images.
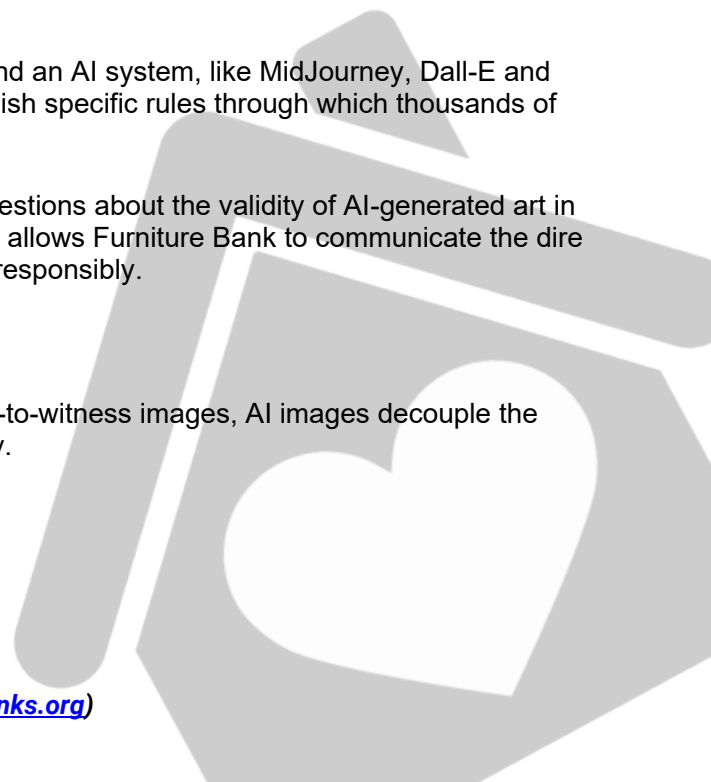
What is AI-generated art?

AI-generated art is the result of a collaboration between an artist and an AI system, like MidJourney, Dall-E and Stable Diffusion. Artists/AI architects work with algorithms to establish specific rules through which thousands of images are analyzed and processed in a specific style/aesthetic.

Though AI art is generating controversy in art circles, leading to questions about the validity of AI-generated art in artistic competitions and gallery spaces, for the charitable sector, it allows Furniture Bank to communicate the dire situations its clients are living in with its donors both ethically, and responsibly.

AI-art is anti-poverty porn

Though AI-generated images can still be upsetting and are difficult-to-witness images, AI images decouple the element of harm and exploitation from the visuals used by a charity.

Digital transformation in charities

AI-generated art is still very new and the designers are still in an experimental phase, discovering together how far it can go. Though it doesn't entirely replace the work of a traditional designer, it is another graphic design tool that helps to put ideas into visual statements quickly and economically and is helping Furniture Bank disrupt the charity sector's reliance on "poverty porn."

How did Furniture Bank create its AI-generated campaign?

Furniture Bank hired an "AI architect" Pablo Pietropinto, and together developed a working methodology. (More details on this methodology can be found here)

The charity translated the written impact stories from its clients into the words and phrases that described the realities of what furniture poverty looks like behind closed doors. These key phrases then generated the images used in Furniture Bank's 2022 campaign.

What is the ROI for AI-generated art?

Using AI to generate annual campaign assets saved Furniture Bank over $30,000 in production costs and has already proven to have a much higher ROI than hiring a professional photographer.

In addition to generating images that capture the desolation and isolation without compromising clients' dignity, using AI to create images is a financially sound investment for charities. Leveraging AI allows more money to be redirected to charitable services, while still being able to bring awareness to the charity's key issues.

How will this change the charitable sector?

Using AI generated art will allow charities to increase awareness of their work, and generate donations responsibly, both ethically and financially, without re-traumatizing their clients.

In using key words drawn from client experiences, including "bare walls, no furniture, children doing homework on the floor, empty living room", Furniture Bank and its AI architect were able to generate this image that encapsulates the reality of living in furniture poverty.

What is Furniture Bank?

Founded in 1998, Furniture Bank is a Toronto-based charity and social enterprise with a mission to break the cycle of furniture poverty. Furniture Bank works in partnership with over 200 community agencies to provide people who are economically vulnerable with furniture and home furnishings, a service that enhances both psychological and financial stability. Furniture Bank collects 70,000 furniture items and serves over 3,600 families annually. For further details visit furniturebank.org.

Furniture Bank's 2022 AI-generated campaign can be found here.

Proud member of the Furniture Bank Network (FBN) (www.furniturebanks.org)