'A THORNY ISSUE' AND 'A FORCE FOR GOOD': EMPLOYEE ACTIVISM DISCOURSES IN HR ARTICLES

Sara Saariniemi

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Department of Language and Communication Studies

University of Jyväskylä

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Tiivistelmä

Työntekijäaktivismi on kasvava ilmiö, jonka keskiössä on työntekijöiden pyrkimys puuttua yhteiskunnallisiin ongelmiin haastamalla työnantajiaan tai organisaatioitaan vaikuttamaan niiden ratkaisemiseen. Työntekijäaktivismi käsitteenä kattaa myös itse organisaatioihin kohdistuvaa työntekijälähtöistä aktivismia, jossa työntekijät ottavat kantaa organisaationsa toimintaan. Aktivismin tarkoituksena on saada aikaan positiivista yhteiskunnallista muutosta vaikuttamalla itse organisaatioihin - erityisesti silloin kun organisaatiot toimivat epäeettisesti tai eivät osallistu yhteiskunnallisten ongelmien parantamiseen. Tuolloin työntekijät hyödyntävät sosiaalista mediaa, walk out -protesteja sekä lakkoja luodakseen tarpeeksi painetta, jotta organisaatiot muuttaisivat toimintaansa. Kyseinen ilmiö on herättänyt mediahuomion lisäksi myös kysymyksiä siitä, miten työnantajien tulisi käsitellä aktivismia.

Tässä tutkielmassa tarkastellaan kriittisen diskurssianalyysin avulla työntekijäaktivismidiskurssia henkilöstöalan ammattilaisten kirjoittamissa artikkeleissa. Tutkielman aineisto koostuu vuosina 2020–2021 julkaistuista englanninkielisistä artikkeleista. Kyseiset artikkelit on julkaistu henkilöstöalan sivustoilla, joiden tarkoituksena on esitellä alan uusia ajankohtaisia aiheita valistaen ja viihdyttäen lukijoita. Aineistossa nousi esiin seitsemän työntekijäaktivismidiskurssia, joissa aktivismi esitettiin muun muassa hyödyllisenä tai haitallisena sekä organisaatioiden ja työntekijöiden välisiä valtasuhteita muuttavana tekijänä. Nämä diskurssit rakentuivat metaforien, ironian sekä legitimiteetin rakentamisen keinoin, jotka osaltaan heijastivat sivustojen tavoitetta viihdyttää ja valistaa. Lisäksi osa diskursseista nojasi muun muassa voittamisen ja väkivallan kielikuviin, joilla rakennettiin mahdollisuuksien ja vallan diskursseja. Uhkaavia metaforia ja ironisia kielikuvia käytettiin erityisesti silloin, kun lukijaa kannustettiin toimimaan tietyllä tavalla. Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että vaikka ilmiön suhteellinen tuoreus heijastuu työntekijäaktivismidiskurssin moninaisuutena, niin siinä korostuvat erityisesti riskien, mahdollisuuksien ja vallan diskurssit.

Asiasanat
kriittinen diskurssianalyysi, diskurssianalyysi, työntekijäaktivismi, HR

Säilytyspaikka

Jyväskylän yliopiston julkaisuarkisto JYX

Muita tietoja

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1   INTRODUCTION

Employee activism is a relatively new phenomenon in the working life, and one to which organizations are looking for the right approaches to. It is activism by employees who want their employers to address societal or environmental issues that they potentially contribute to, or alternatively, to take a stance in support of social movements. In addition, employee activism challenges the conventional norms of employee engagement and employer control, causing managers and HR to look for appropriate responses to the phenomenon. As employee activism is expected to rise and employees increasingly leverage their voices and agency to advocate for change, it becomes important to understand the multifaceted dimensions of employee activism discourse.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the nature of employee activism discourse in articles written by HR professionals for managers and HR. Considering the articles' aim to be both educational and entertaining and the novelty of the phenomenon, the articles can be influential in shaping views on the introduced topic. Language is powerful, and from the perspective of discourse analysis, it is also a tool that we use to construct our realities as it gives us a lens through which we view the world. By inspecting and examining the language used, I aim to examine the linguistic choices and framing strategies employed in HR websites about employee activism, with a focus on how these choices contribute to the portrayal and perception of activism within organizations. My secondary aim is to bridge a gap in linguistic research, as currently there is a lack of critical discourse analytical studies on employee activism discourse.

This thesis is organized into distinct sections, each contributing to a holistic understanding of employee activism discourse. I begin by reviewing the existing literature on employee activism and corporate social responsibility, highlighting the gaps and areas of interest that this study seeks to address. Additionally, I discuss the key concepts of discourse analysis. Further, I introduce my data set (Table 1) and research questions as well as the method I have chosen for this study. Subsequently, I use critical discourse analysis and more precisely Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model to analyze the employee activism discourse in my selected data. Finally, I summarize the findings of the study and reflect on its limitations. Through this investigation, I aim to uncover the prominent emerging themes in employee activism discourse as well as the implications of those themes.

2   BACKGROUND

In this section, I present prior research on the topics relevant to my study. I first introduce the key concepts and then discuss research, particularly within the field of linguistics, done in relation to activism, corporate social responsibility and employee activism.

2.1   Corporate social responsibility (CSR)

Corporate social responsibility (from now on referred to as CSR) can be defined as "a commitment to improve community well-being through discretionary business practice and contributions of corporate resources" (Kotler and Lee, 2005, p.3). In other words, it is an organization's effort to do good for communities by the way that they do business and or engage in support for communities by their own volition. To further explain this, the way that organizations can support communities, as Kotler and Lee (2005, p. 3-4) suggest, is through initiatives that for example focus on education, health, hunger, homelessness or animal rights. According to Kotler and Lee (2005, p. 4), an organization may support communities for example by grants, donations, cash contributions and volunteering.

In turn, Carroll (1979, p. 499-500) has developed a four-part framework for CSR. The four parts are different categories of CSR - these include economic responsibilities, legal responsibilities, ethical responsibilities and finally discretionary responsibilities. The first two categories can be summed up as a business' responsibility to make profit through goods and services that are wanted, and its responsibility to follow laws and regulations. As Carroll (1979, p. 500)

reminds, the economic and legal responsibilities of an organization already "embody ethical norms". The ethical responsibilities in turn can be understood as societal expectations of a business being ethical, expectations which go beyond what is the minimum required by law. The last category of discretionary responsibilities - as the name suggests - are voluntary and up to "individual judgment". In other words, not engaging in discretionary responsibilities is not perceived as inherently unethical, although there may be an expectation that organizations for example engage in philanthropy or offer day-care for working parents.

In relation to activism and CSR, it can be argued that organizations and their CSR efforts are affected by activism, as activism may bring negative attention to organizations, particularly media attention, and thus damage their reputation and perceptions that stakeholders have of the organization (King, 2008, 2011; Bartley & Child, 2011, as cited in King & McDonnell, 2012). In other words, activism puts pressure on organizations to increase their CSR efforts both after receiving negative media attention and suffering reputation damage, but also preemptively in order to be protected from the aforementioned outcome (King and McDonnell, 2012). Similarly, activism and CSR are linked to each other, as poor CSR records may inspire activism.

2.1.1 Linguistic studies on CSR

In addition to management and marketing studies, linguistic and discourse analytical studies have been conducted on the topic of CSR, often inspecting CSR reports published by companies. These include studies by Rajandran and Taib (2014) and Nwagbara and Belal (2019), which analyzed CEO statements and CSR reports. The latter study was focused on how Nigerian oil companies use language to portray themselves as responsible organizations. The study used persuasion theory as well as critical discourse analysis (CDA) to inspect wording and clauses. The selected data consisted of CSR reports made between the years 2009-2012 by six different oil companies. The study by Nwagbara and Belal (2019) demonstrated that oil companies employ language to present an image of "responsible organization" to a broader audience and particularly the local communities. This image was presented in spite of substantial criticism received due to the "corporate (ir)responsibility".

The study by Rajandran and Taib (2014) used CDA and multimodal discourse analysis - more specifically, Fairclough's three-dimensional model and Systemic-Functional Multimodal Discourse Analysis (SF-MDA) were used to analyze the representations of CSR in Malaysian CEO statements. As for the data, Rajandran and Taib (2014) selected 27 CEO statements from the years 2009-2011, with the CEO statements coming from ten different corporations. Rajandran and Taib (2014) found that language and images were used to depict CSR as a corporate endeavor for the betterment of stakeholders, thus positioning the corporations as creators of positive change. Similar to findings of Nwagbara and Belal (2019), language in regards to CSR is used to create positive portrayals of organizations.

Likewise, a thesis by Itänen (2011) took a closer look at the prominent CSR discourses in reports in order to inspect how CSR is constructed socio-culturally. The selected data of Itänen's (2011) study consisted of reports of ten European multinational corporations, which then analyzed the reports through textual criticism and discourse analysis. Itänen (2011) found three notable CSR discourses: business discourse, caring discourse and sharing discourse. All of these discourses positioned either the organization itself or CSR in a certain way - for example, business discourse underlined the profitability of CSR to organizations, whereas caring discourse established organizations as concerned and CSR itself as beneficial to society, as it is an organization's way to contribute to society. In turn, sharing discourse presents CSR as something that requires engagement and participation from stakeholders as well in order to achieve common goals.

Another linguistic study on CSR was conducted by Lin (2021), who focused on legitimation strategies used by corporations - more specifically, discursive strategies used when disclosing any incidents or negative aspects. The aforementioned negative aspects were divided into five categories, which included for example problems with business ethics or compliance with laws and regulations. Lin's (2021) data consisted of 100 CSR reports, half of which were from Chinese companies and another half from UK companies. In Lin's (2021) study, legitimation strategies were used as the framework of the study. The study found a similarity in Chinese and UK companies reporting the same negative aspects, however, it also found that the companies used different strategies - for example, deflection was noticeably more often used by UK companies. Another key difference found by Lin (2021) was that UK companies used the legitimation strategy of mortification which was not used by Chinese companies - overall, UK reports

were found to use many legitimation strategies whereas the Chinese reports primarily used the strategies of corrective actions and deflection.

Finally, another linguistic study was conducted by Sun et al. (2018). Their study was focused on the use of metaphors in CSR reports. The data selected by Sun et al. (2018) consisted of 28 Chinese and 30 American reports, on which corpus analysis was then conducted. After that, found metaphors were tagged by categories and metaphors themselves were studied. Sun et al. (2018) found in their study several metaphors, such as "business competition is competitive games/sports", "business is a journey" and "skills for business success are military strategies" which were prominent in both Chinese and American CSR reports.

2.2 Activism

Activism can be understood as a form of social or political engagement, with the efforts to advocate for change and address various issues affecting society being central to it. To put it more succinctly, activism is "action on behalf of a cause", characterized by the activists' desire to "achieve a social goal" rather than "obtain power for themselves" (Anderson and Herr, 2007, pp. 19-20). Activism often involves various forms of action, ranging from signing petitions to campaigning and protesting. As Anderson and Herr (2007) describe, non-violent forms of activism include protests and persuasion, noncooperation and intervention.

With the advancement of technology, activism too has evolved into online activism, allowing activists to swiftly share information with others, raise awareness, mobilize masses and to engage with a broader audience. The online and social media activism has been studied in linguistics as well.

One of the previous studies includes a study by Shirazi (2013), who examined the role of social media in Arab Spring uprisings in Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Shirazi's (2013) data consisted of 3635 messages that were published in blogs and various social media platforms including YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. These messages and statements were made both by government or state officials as well as citizens themselves. Shirazi (2013) categorized the messages themselves, with one third of the messages being either new material on events

or responses to broadcasted rhetoric of authorities, and 21.6% of them about mobilizing. Other findings by Shirazi (2013) include the use of metaphors and rhetoric that authorities used to describe activists and protests. These include "dirt and dust", "conspirators", "enemies", "outlaws", "criminals", which, as Shirazi (2013) pointed out, is threatful and antagonistic rhetoric that had prompted more protests.

In turn, Clark (2016) explored the discourse and activism surrounding the #WhyIStayed campaign. The campaign was particularly prominent on Twitter, and had tens of thousands women share their experiences of domestic violence in response to victim-blaming narratives in mainstream news media. The data in Clark's (2016) study consisted of randomly selected tweets, which were coded and analyzed. Clark (2016) applied McFarland's theoretical framework to her study and focused on the framing strategies. Clark (2016) then found seven framing strategies in the data, including sharing of personal experiences and commentary on the cases of domestic violence that had received news media attention.

Another study by Wonneberger, Hellsten and Jacobs (2021) focused on hashtag activism, more precisely on animal welfare debates. Their data sample consisted of two Twitter debates, one on "kilo stunner" and the other on "over-fed chicken", on which content analysis was conducted in addition to the method of automated network analysis. The kilo stunner refers to cheap meat that lacks "animal welfare quality marks" (Wakker Dier, 2017, as cited in Wonneberger, Hellsten and Jacobs, 2021) explain, whereas the over-fed chicken debate refers to the chickens that are being overfed and intentionally bred to grow rapidly, causing them health problems. As Wonneberger, Hellsten and Jacobs (2021) noticed, the debates had received more attention and engagement at several points within a few months. One of the explanations proposed by Wonneberger, Hellsten and Jacobs (2021) is that the kilo stunner debate had become part of political discourse too, and thus caught attention. In addition to that, the study found two clusters of different participants around the animal welfare debates, one of which consisted of citizens, Twitter users and organizations, whereas those in media formed another one. As Wonneberger, Hellsten and Jacobs (2021) conclude, their study points to the significance of citizens in the online debates.

A critical discourse analytical study on social media activism was conducted by Wang and Ouyang (2023), who focused on counter-discourse on a social media post on sexism and

misogyny. The data sample was collected from a post on Weibo, as well as the comments on the original post and the reposts after the original one had been censored, resulting in a data sample of 500 posts, comments and reposts total. The data was then analyzed using critical discourse analysis (CDA). Wang and Ouyang (2023) found in their study that the social media posts and comments used satire with the purpose of resistance as well as a discursive practice, and that with the use of satire, social media users criticized patriarchal rhetoric.

In summary, the studies I have included all investigate various forms of activism and utilize different methods. With the studies by Wang and Ouyang (2023), Shirazi (2013) and Clark (2016), linguistic studies related to activism appear to analyze activism in social media and online spaces, with a particular interest in the content of activism and language. The causes for activism vary from animal welfare to domestic violence. Interestingly, Wonneberger, Hellsten and Jacobs (2021) in turn approach a study on online activism more so with a look towards the digital counterpublic - the participants who engaged in online activism.

2.3   Employee activism

Previous studies on employee activism have been done mainly in fields of management and leadership studies. For the most part, the focus on these studies has been to understand the cause of the phenomenon, as well as define it and offer examples of how to respond to it. Notably, the published articles on employee activism focus specific high-profile cases, such as the global walkout of Google employees in response to poor handling of sexual harassment by their company.

Employee activism can be understood as activism that centers on social and environmental concerns, to which organizations and employers may contribute to, and which aims to bring change in organizations which would then impact society itself in a positive way. For example, Reitz and Higgins (2022) define employee activism as "voices of difference, on issues of wider social and environmental concern, that seek to influence company action and that challenge existing patterns of power." However, employee activism may also target the organization itself, as evidenced by the Google walkout.

The phenomenon of employee activism is expected to remain a relevant topic, as according to a survey up to 80% of companies expect an increase in employee activism (Reitz and Higgins, 2022). In their article, Reitz and Higgins (2022) point out that according to the Edelman Trust Barometer (2021) results, up to 86% of CEOs expect that more employees will engage in employee activism and that CEOs also believe they will be expected to speak out on social issues.

A factor which speaks for the growth of employee activism is that now millennials make up the majority of the workforce. According to Reitz and Higgins (2022) millennial employees are more likely to believe that businesses can contribute to positive change (Weber Shandwick 2019, as cited in Reitz and Higgins) and that up to 70% of US millennials believe that positive societal change can be achieved with activism. The results of the Edelman Trust Barometer (2021) indicate that 68% of surveyed employees believe that CEOs should take action and help when the government fails to act.

An article by Reitz, Higgins and Day-Duro (2021) discusses several cases of insufficient responses to employee activism by companies and names the common mistakes made. These mistakes are dismissing or ignoring the activism, choosing to be apolitical and making statements without taking action to support movements such as Black Lives Matter. Similar advice is offered by Svystunova and Girschik (2020), who underline the importance of being receptive to listening to employee activists as well as addressing the social injustices that may occur within organizations.

In addition, some studies have focused on the potential consequences of employee or workplace activism for the employee themselves. One such study was made by Niven (2020), who took a look into whether NFL players experienced repercussions for taking part in the 2017 national anthem protests. Niven (2020) collected media data on which players protested and which didn't to be able to compare the two groups. Due to the top and bottom players being paid vastly differently, Niven's (2020) approach was to focus on the players with similar annual approximate value scores as they would have comparable performances. The study found that the protesting players were more likely to receive pay cuts (30% compared to 22% of non-protesters), having smaller raises which resulted in noticeably smaller guaranteed salaries than

non-protesting peers and less likely to stay in the old team, as 55% of protesting players and 30% of non-protesting peers were cut from their teams.

2.4   Discourse and CDA

Discourse, as Blommaert (2005, p.25) defines, is both socially conditioned and socially constituted. In other words, discourse and language create our reality - but it is also that reality that affects our discourses and language use (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen, 2019). To analyze discourse is to analyze language used in different contexts, situations, social practices, as well as the impact it has.

However, there is no one clear definition of discourse within linguistics. Bloor and Bloor (2007, pp. 6-7) for example provide multiple definitions of the term - some of the definitions rely on the medium of discourse (e.g., *spoken discourse, written discourse*), while some depend on the context of communication, e.g., medical discourse, legal discourse and so on. The latter definition of discourse as communication or interaction within an institution thus involves interactions that one does, such as consulting a patient or writing a medical report.

 In addition, there is a concept of "discourse" with a lowercase 'd' and "Discourse" with a capital 'D'. Gee (1999) introduced this concept to differentiate between two different levels of discourse and its meaning for us and our world. As a further explanation, "discourse" is communication or interaction that relates to language when language is used to convey some meaning - "discourse" thus is a key part of any social interaction. The "discourse" with lowercase 'd' also involves context, social dynamics and any cultural elements that take place and thus affect the communication and social interaction. Bloor and Bloor (2007, p.6) similarly offer an explanation of "discourse in the broadest sense" as "all the phenomena of symbolic interaction and communication between people, usually through spoken or written language or visual representation".

In turn, "Discourse" with capital 'D' is perhaps more specific - it relates to systems of knowledge, ideology, and power, all of which both reflect and are reflected in our language use. This "Discourse" does not focus on single instances of social interaction but instead takes

a look into social practices, power structures, institutions, and ways of thinking. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) relates more to the "Discourse" with a capital 'D' - in the following subsection, I introduce critical discourse analysis in more detail.

2.4.1 CDA

Critical discourse analysis - from now on referred to as CDA - is a qualitative method that takes a critical look into language and discourse – which, as critical discourse analysts view it, go beyond just words and sentences as they construct our realities and are a form of social practice. More importantly, language and our ways of speaking contain ideologies, through which language impacts our realities and through which power is constructed. A critical discourse analyst may study how a group of people are represented in mainstream news, thus relating to issues of representation, social justice and power. In other words, CDA is a method for delving into the ways in which language is used to shape and reflect social structures and power dynamics.

However, there is no one single approach or a model to CDA - there are several, and of the most well-known ones includes Norman Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of CDA. As previously mentioned, one of the key thoughts of CDA is that discourse both reflects and shapes our reality. This is mirrored in the three-dimensional model, which analyzes the relationships between language, discourse, and social practice. In the model, there is the dimension of text - meaning not only written text, but it can be also visual or spoken. The second dimension is that of a discursive practice, which focuses on the consumption and producing of the text, and finally the third dimension in turn takes a look at the sociocultural practices, connecting micro and macro levels of interpretation. To further elaborate on this, in the first dimension one analyzes the text and its features - for example metaphors, in the second dimension one analyzes the target audience or producers of the text, and then in the dimension, the analysis connects the aforementioned to socio-cultural conditions that are at play in the text and its production.

Another approach to CDA has been proposed by van Dijk (1993, 2005), who in turn emphasizes that CDA can be a tool for examining how power and inequality manifest in spoken or

written text, within the "social and political context". In van Dijk's (1993) view, CDA is inherently sociopolitical and driven by problems that exist in the society.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Aims and research questions

The aim of this study is to inspect employee activism discourse and how language use in the advice given to managers reflect attitudes towards this new phenomenon. The research questions are following:

1. How is employee activism portrayed in the articles? What discourses emerge?

2. How are these discourses constructed?

3. Is the employee activism discourse different when it focuses on the employee perspective? How are employer-employee relationships discussed?

3.2 Data

For my study, I have selected five online articles mainly from websites that are aimed for managers, senior executives and HR professionals. The articles explain what employee activism is, the cause for employee activism as well as include advice for managers. All of the articles have been published between the years 2020 and 2021, as I wanted to analyze articles that are relatively recent. I wanted to include in my study articles that bring attention to employee and

manager point of views as I am interested in the possible variety in the discourse when one point of view receives more attention.

The first article *Employee activism is on the rise – here's why* by Tilo (2021), published in hcamag.com, Human Resources Director's Canadian branch, discusses employee activism from the perspective of managers and senior executives. Though the article is shorter in comparison to others, it discusses the phenomenon from the point of view of management and senior executives and contains suggestions for companies, which is why I chose to include this article. Another article, written by Hirsch (2021) and published on shrm.org, *When and How Employers Should Respond to Employee Activism* describes activism both from employee and managers point of view and offers suggestions to companies and businesses on handling employee activism. The third article is *The rise of employee activism: a defining issue for HR in 2020* by Stuart (2020) focuses on why HR should be interested in employee activism and thus concentrates on the management's point of view. The fourth article, *The 2020s: Decade of Employee Activism* by Peachey (2020) discusses employee activism and offers a suggestion on how to handle it. The final article*, Business Disruption From the Inside Out* by Briscoe and Gupta (2021) describes employee activism at length and offers solutions to managers.

The websites share their goal of both entertaining and educating managers and HR, with the exception of Stanford Social Innovation Review, which aims to advance and educate as well as offer solutions to global problems. Considering that the writers themselves are professionals and offer advice to management on issues such as employee activism, analyzing discourse on those articles can provide insight into what ideologies are offered to the readers. Especially given that the websites are aimed at managers and HR, the very people who make decisions that affect employees, workplaces and work life cultures.

Table 1

Code by which referred to in analysis	Name of article	Source	Length	Date of publication
A1	*Employee activism is on the rise – here's why*	hca-mag.com	525 words	23rd of September 2021
A2	*When and How Employers Should Respond to Employee Activism*	shrm.org	1455 words	30th of April 2021
A3	*The rise of employee activism: a defining issue for HR in 2020*	hrzone.com	1029 words	10th of February 2020
A4	*The 2020s: Decade of Employee Activism*	thehrdirec-tor.com	614 words	17th of March 2020
A5	*Business Disruption From the Inside Out*	ssir.org	4666 words	Winter 2021

3.3   Method

As my method for this study, I use critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA can be described as a method for inspecting the relationships between language, ideologies, inequality and power. More specifically, it is a method for studying how language and discourses contain ideologies and values, which is why I have chosen CDA for analyzing my data.

In this thesis, I use the three-dimensional framework that was developed by Fairclough (1995). The three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis focuses on the different dimensions: text, discursive practice and social practice. In the dimension of text, one takes an in depth look into for example word choices, grammar and metaphors and the ideologies those contain and conducts a systematic analysis. The second dimension, discursive practice, refers to production or construction of the text. In the third and final dimension, the text is seen in the social context, as social practice. In my analysis, I focus on the first dimension as it is concerned with language use.

I conducted critical discourse analysis by first reading through the data and then marking words and sentences for analysis. While marking them, I made brief notes of my initial impressions on the effect of the language use. After that, I analyzed the highlighted parts and notes as well as the articles themselves in order to see which themes emerged in employee activism discourse. As I was interested in how the articles would address the organization and employee perspectives, I chose to also divide the different themes based on the chosen perspective. I began my writing process with starting the subsections of the most prominent emerging themes, consulting my notes and inspecting the direct quotations that I found particularly interesting for critical discourse analysis. Some of the quotations that I have chosen to include reflect more the entertaining and other the educational nature of the articles. At the end, I coded the quotations as A1, A2 and so on in order to provide a source to the article in which it appears.

I chose to focus on the most prominent themes in the data that related to how employee activism was discussed. Such include activism is a risk and activism is an opportunity which I have divided into their own subsections. In the analysis, I first discuss the results of the discourse that is focused on the organization's perspective as that was more prominent. Then, I continue

by presenting the discourse analysis from the employee perspective. At the end, I also discuss another theme that emerged in my data - activism and power.

4 ANALYSIS

In this section, I analyzed the notable discourses on employee activism in the data set. I divided the discourses first based on whether they focus on organization or employee point of view, and then thematically. First are the discourses that focused on organizations' perspective as those appeared prominent in the data, then noteworthy discourses from employees' perspective, and finally discourse on power.

4.1 Discourses from organization perspective

4.1.1 Activism as a threat

In this discourse, employee activism is seen as potentially or even likely harmful to organizations, employees themselves and managers. The most commonly named risks to organizations include a negative impact on the organizational performance, loss of profit, damage to reputation and difficulty retaining or attracting talent. In other words, the main concern is how activism can negatively impact the organization financially. Few of the selected articles also showed a particular concern as to how social media and technology can aid employee activism through stories going viral:

    (1)   95% of companies also expected a rise in the number of employees using social media such as Twitter to raise complaints and concerns about their company over the next five years. (A4)

(2) The stories have attracted the attention of politicians and become globally negative issues damaging the reputation of these titans of industry. (A3)

(3) In recent years, prominent American businesses have landed in the headlines not because of their new products but because of their employees' activism. (A5)

These excerpts use language that emphasizes the damage that viral employee activism can cause to businesses. In (2) "the stories" refer to Google, Amazon and Wayfair, all of which have had widely reported cases of employee activism, when it is stated that the reputation "of these titans of industry" have taken damage. Describing these corporations with the noun "titans of industry" communicates that they have great power and importance especially in their respective industries - and therefore, employee activism that goes viral, has power too as it manages to damage these "titans". Similarly, in the third excerpt, describing the companies as "prominent American businesses" which have "landed in the headlines not because of their new products but because of their employees' activism" shares the same sentiment of activism causing trouble to the big companies. The use of the adjective *prominent* underlines that the businesses are notable, likely familiar to most Americans. Considering how well-known these businesses are, receiving negative publicity or "landing in the headlines" due to activism can damage their reputations widely across nation. Also notable is the use of passive voice in "have landed in the headlines", which suggests powerlessness as with the passive voice, the subject lacks agency.

(4) It is clear then, that organisations that fail to come up with an answer to employee activism will certainly find it harder to attract, hire and retain the people they need for the future. (A3)

However, as is seen above, *activism as a threat* discourse sees that part of the risk for organizations is not just the activism itself, but rather the difficulty of finding an appropriate response to it. As this fragment illustrates, it is precisely the failure "to come up with an answer to employee activism" that then leads to trouble attracting, hiring and retaining employees. Other articles in the data set also underline the importance of the right response mostly by describing how a poor response can backfire on the organization. On a similar note, another concern is being caught off guard by employee activism and thus having difficulty with responding adequately.

(5) Megan Reitz is a professor of leadership and dialogue at the Hult Ashridge Executive Education program outside London. In her research, she has found three common mistakes business leaders make when dealing with employee activism: denying there's a problem, believing that they can be apolitical and rushing to make quick fixes. (A2)

(6) "The term itself is loaded, and people come to it with assumptions and judgments which go on to affect their response," she said. "One of the most important changes is the realization that to stay quiet is to perpetuate the status quo. Leaders can no longer claim neutrality and objectivity, because even sitting on the fence is seen as a political act." (A2)

As both of the excerpts above point out, silence or a lack of response to societal issues has its consequences, as inaction is also action, and one which employee activists meet with criticism. In (5), first it is established that one is an expert in order to legitimize their advice and the message to readers themselves as worth listening to. The legitimation by using an expert opinion, or in other words authorization as Van Leeuwen (2007, p. 95) describes, is accomplished by informing of Reitz's expertise in leadership, education and research. The key findings in turn are delivered in colloquial language as well as are categorized as "common mistakes", with the noun mistake obviously carrying a negative meaning. Notable in (6) are both the use of the idiom sitting on the fence and drawing attention to fence-sitting being "seen as a political act". The idiom sitting on the fence, tends to be used in a derogatory tone (Dictionary.com, 2023), thus further criticizing the claiming of neutrality. Secondly, fence-sitting being seen as a political act draws attention to how it is perceived by employees and possibly other stakeholders, as well as underlines the political nature of the decision to be neutral.

Another finding is that in *activism as a threat* discourse, the emphasis is on the statistical number of employees who feel dissatisfied with their employers or organizations. As Van Leeuwen (2007) has stated, relying on expert authority is one way to have legitimacy. The authors of the selected articles refer to specific studies and surveys, which can be considered expert legitimation. By using these statistics from previous studies, the articles can support the claim that employee activism will grow as a phenomenon and that therefore, organizations should get ready to respond to it. In addition to (5) and (6), this is also illustrated in (7), where a survey is cited to demonstrate employees supporting activism:

(7) Many workers speak up and even put pressure on their employers to increase their CSR efforts. Tellingly, a 2019 Weber Shandwick survey found that 75 percent of employees in the United States agreed with the statement that "employees are right to speak up against their employers." Only 14 percent did not agree, and 11 percent said they were unsure. (A5)

In the excerpt above, several expressions are used to convey the popularity of activism among employees - *many workers, 75 percent agreed, only 14 percent did not agree.* In addition, the use of adverb *tellingly* is used to connect the cited survey to the previous sentence, thus supporting the argument made.

Furthermore, in *activism as a threat* discourse while the language in the selected articles is mainly neutral in tone, metaphors are used for describing the potential problems arising from employee activism.

(8) "--employers will have to wrestle with a number of thorny issues that may act as a lightning rod for employee activism," said Herbert Smith Freehills partner Natalie Gaspar. "Much of this is un-chartered territory for… businesses and employer-employee relationships will be tested." (A1)

First, *wrestling with a number of thorny issues* relays an idea of having difficulty with handling issues that may be directly related to workplace practices, social or environmental issues - this difficulty is communicated first through the verb *wrestling* and then with the adjective *thorny*. The Merriam-Webster (2023) dictionary defines wrestling as not just "combatting an opposing tendency or force", but also as "engaging in deep thought, consideration and debate". The latter definition of the term invokes the aforementioned difficulty with responding to employee activism. The adjective thorny describes these issues as difficult to approach and handle, thus further emphasizing the difficulty of the employers' task.

In addition to that, those issues *may act as a lighting rod for employee activism,* the lightning rod meaning "one that is a frequent target of criticism or focus of controversy" (Merriam-Webster, 2023) and "someone who attracts criticism or anger that could be directed at some-one else" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). In other words, it is implied that the issues could inspire employee activism, adding more trouble to employers. Stating that "much of this is un-charted territory" underlines the newness of employee activism and its impact on businesses,

but also the uncertainty of its consequences. The use of various metaphors is notable, as according to Musolff (2012, p. 302) they are important rhetorical devices with which social realities are created. The social reality which is created in the metaphors used in activism as a risk discourse is one in which employee activism is a new, difficult, risk-laden issue for organizations and their leaders to handle.

> (9)   "The potential for activism remains a constant threat and employers need to be focused on the future," added Gaspar. "The employers that succeed will ultimately view adapting to these organisational challenges as less a matter of compliance and more securing competitive advantage." said." (A1)

In (9), "the potential for activism" is described as "a constant threat". Notable is the use of "potential for activism", rather than simply *activism* - describing "the potential for activism" as something to be wary of illustrates that activism can be hazardous for organizations. Thus, the language used in (9) subtly advises employers to be alert and ready to adapt.

4.1.2   Activism as opportunity

Activism as an opportunity discourse sees employee activism as capable of creating positive change. This discourse also focuses on how it can be a beneficial opportunity and the good that it can create, and frames activism in a positive way by using discourses of success, winning, equality and justice. In the selected articles, those who benefit from employee activism include organizations, employees and society at large.

Articles generalize with the determiner "every" and use verbs such as "can" and use terms that have a positive tone to present employee activism and its opportunities for organizations more appealing and applicable to most. The repeated use of the verb "can" as seen in (13) and (14), highlights the potential and the possibility of a positive outcome, if organizations follow the suggestions or advice given in the articles, whilst also not guaranteeing that outcome. Nouns and expressions that have positive connotations and cultural meanings - such as "force for good", seen in (12), which relies on the idea of a moral fight between good and evil - are used to describe the phenomenon, thus creating a more positive view of it overall. Additionally, "force for good" portrays employee activism as an attempt to better the world and thus presents employee activists as more sympathetic. Given that the articles aim to

explain employee activism and explain why it is a trending phenomenon, these descriptions may be the first portrayal of activism that the readers may encounter. It is also notable how this discourse discusses *not* supporting employee activism - terms related to fighting and inequality are used particularly often in this category of *activism as opportunity* discourse.

> (10) Everyone should be able to bring their whole self to work and to speak their truth," Rubel said. "I have learned more and grown more as a leader by not stifling employee opinions and by providing opportunities for conversations." (A2)

As previously mentioned, what is notable in (10) is "by not stifling employee opinions*".* The use of the preposition *by* points that exactly the *not stifling employee opinions* was one of the two factors that lead to growth and learning as a leader. The verb *stifle* means "to withhold from expression" and "to deter, discourage" (Merriam-Webster, 2023) - the suggestion is that not withholding from expression or discouraging employees to voice their opinions can be an opportunity to learn and grow as a leader.

The articles name several opportunities and benefits to organizations that support or engage in employee activism - these opportunities and benefits are mainly related to organizational performance and thus its profits. However, another key opportunity that is brought up in the data set is gaining resources such as improved leadership skills and innovation, as well as maintaining competitive advantage. By naming the exact benefits, this discourse persuades managers and HR to see activism as a way of getting those desired benefits, whilst also presenting fighting against employee activism negatively.

> (11) "The employers that succeed will ultimately view adapting to these organisational challenges as less a matter of compliance and more securing competitive advantage." said. (A1)

Although this excerpt is apprehensive of employee activism, referring to it as an "organizational challenge", it does suggest that adapting to it can help to maintain competitive advantage over other organizations, thus eventually bringing success. The use of the verb *to adapt* suggests that employee activism should not be seen as a power struggle between the employers and employees or the former submitting to the wishes of the latter as the noun *compliance* would suggest, thus maintaining that employer-employee relationships are hierarchical. To hold a view of responding to activism as a matter of compliance, as is implied, is to risk losing competitive advantage.

As I have previously discussed, this discourse focuses on what organizations can gain from activism - including immaterial, abstract resources such as innovation. Particularly one of the selected articles discusses the potential benefits of activism when organizations choose to approach it with support to employees.

The following three excerpts illustrate the positive tone of *activism as opportunity* discourse, particularly in regard to the potential outcomes and benefits to organizations. This can be seen especially with the idiomatic expressions and the word choices that are related to games, competition and winning.

> (12) When you think about how much energy and courage it takes for employees to speak out and act, there is a force for good that can benefit every business. (A3)

In (12), employee activism is described as "a force for good that can benefit every business". The idiomatic expression *a force for good* paints employee activism in a highly positive light and, as mentioned before, frames it as an issue of good versus bad, while the conjunction *that* is used to connect the positively viewed employee activism to its potential to "benefit every business". The use of the determiner *every* generalizes and thus encourages more businesses to see employee activism more positively.

> (13) The prize for HR is to channel that energy, courage and conviction so that it improves performance, engagement and retention. This can only happen if employees are confident that their values are respected and they feel part of the change they want to see. (A3)

In turn, (13) describes "energy, courage and conviction" of activist employees as something that HR ought to "channel" in order to "improve performance, engagement and retention". Energy, courage and conviction are more abstract qualities which, when channeled, this excerpt sees as benefiting the organization. The expression "the prize for HR" further emphasizes the benefits which HR should see in employee activism, as *prize* means "something important and valuable that is difficult to achieve or get". (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). The benefits are mainly related to organizational performance and thus implicitly to organization's financial success - this frames employee activism as a financial

opportunity. HR's role is specifically named, and with the second mention in the third ex-
cerpt, further underlined as important.

(14) As regulators, investors and customers are demanding better social and environmental outcomes,
HR can become the champions in galvanising employees to come up with new ideas and help de-
liver these ambitious targets. (A3)

Additionally, employee activism presents in itself an opportunity to get valuable resources
and achieve the organization's goals. Particularly HR's role in this is highlighted, as it is HR
who "can become champions in galvanizing employees". With the verb *can,* it is highlighted
that there is potential for HR to "become champions" if they respond to activism as sug-
gested, whilst the noun "champions" is used to describe HR who follow the suggestion in a
highly positive tone. The noun *champion,* as Merriam-Webster (2023) defines, is "a winner
of first prize or first place in competition" and "one who shows marked superiority" - once
again using language related to winning when discussing the opportunities to organizations,
thus making it more appealing.

4.2   Discourses from employee perspective

In this section, I will present the prominent employee activism discourses that are focused on
the perspective of employees. These prominent discourses include activism as a risk, activism
as an opportunity and activism as a fair response. I will provide more detailed descriptions of
each discourse type under each of their respective subheadings.

4.2.1   Activism as a risk

Activism as a risk to employees discourse focuses on the risks which activism presents to em-
ployees who are or consider engaging in it - the perspective changes, focusing on the activ-
ists themselves as they become targets of retaliation in this discourse. However, it should be
noted that the data set showed that there is also variety in perspectives within this discourse,
as focus is on employees but also organizations. Mainly, this discourse discusses the poten-
tial repercussions but also uses real life examples to illustrate the point. In this discourse,

employee activists are mostly in a passive role, which presents them in a vulnerable position particularly when discussing the negative consequences they may face. One of the findings was also that *activism as a risk* discourse links itself to power struggle discourse in somewhat subtle ways.

> (15) The risk of retaliation is real and, at worst, can mean losing a job and damaging one's career by being labeled a "troublemaker" or "disruptive." Career damage can occur more subtly, too—for example, when someone is passed over for opportunities or is ostracized by company and industry peers. (A5)

The excerpt above specifically names "the risk of retaliation", continuing to describe the risk as "real". The adjective *real,* as defined by Cambridge Dictionary (2023), means "existing in fact, not imaginary" - thus it is suggested that the risk of retaliation should be carefully considered. "Risk of retaliation" in itself is a broad category of the possible repercussions one may face - those include rather straightforward forms of retaliation such as losing one's job and career damage from being labeled as "troublemaker" or "disruptive". Both of the negative labels, considering the negative existing notions of activists, could flag the person as an activist employee not only within the organization but also outside of it, in the industry at large, especially as there is also damage which "can occur more subtly" through ostracism.

> (16) Google, however, was less receptive to its employee walkout: It altered its employee handbook to discourage future activism. In addition, many of the walkout's organizers have since been pushed out; 45 employees have documented their experiences of retaliation by the company, including demotion." (A5)

As briefly mentioned before, *activism as a threat* discourse is linked to power struggle discourse. In (16), Google is presented as one entity with the use of it as the subject of the sentence as well as the use of the possessive pronoun "its". With this, the size and power of the company and thus the severity of its response underline the risk for employees who engage in activism. The personified company can "push out" those who participate and otherwise retaliate. By presenting the organization as powerful and retaliating with the use of personification, activism is portrayed as risky to engage in as it may well be a struggle that ends in employee's failure.

(17) Amid rising anticipation for employee activism, nearly all of the respondents (94%) said they already have measures in place to control or restrict their workers' actions. This includes movements such as public comments, attending marches, signing petitions, picketing, and strike action. Among the executives, 43% tagged their curbs as "high," while 55% described them as "moderate." (A1)

Interestingly, (17) illustrates the aforementioned different perspective in the *activism as a risk to employees* discourse. The excerpt above states that up to 94% of the executives surveyed have "measures in place to control or restrict their workers' actions" as they expect employee activism as a phenomenon to grow. The *nearly all,* while already conveying that almost every respondent has measures already, is further emphasized by the high percentage of 94. Most of the actions which the respondents aim "to control or restrict" are somewhat visible or public, such as joining on marches and writing public comments. As employee activism is seen as a risk to organizations financially, the approach suggested in this excerpt is to control or prevent activism, or at least the forms which would be visible or those which would affect the organizational performance and thus the profits earned. Additionally, the verbs *control* and *restrict* illustrate the power relations between executives and employees - as the Cambridge Dictionary (2023) defines it, *to control* is not just "the act of controlling" but also "the power to do this". This excerpt illustrates that although employees could theoretically engage in activism, the power which executives, organizations and managers have over employees can prevent them from doing so.

4.2.2 Opportunity for change

This category of employee activism discourse focuses on the opportunities for employee activists. These opportunities include having organizations increase their corporate social responsibility efforts and thus enabling their employees to work in an organization which matches one's own personal values, which in turn can contribute towards their greater job satisfaction. Employee activism, in this discourse, is established as a matter of values, of standing up for what one believes is right. Notably, one of the key findings in this subcategory of *activism as an opportunity* discourse is that opportunities and benefits for employees are also often connected to those of society at large.

This subcategory of employee activism discourse frames activism in a positive light. One of the ways the discourse accomplishes this is through utilizing fairness and equality discourses, as seen in the (18) and (19).

> (18) "Employee activism is often related to topics that are considered part of the sustainability umbrella—environmental, social and economic—ensuring that things can continue so that people can sustain a decent quality of life," Stuart said. (A2)

This description of employee activism in (18) highlights its relations to values as well as the aim to maintain common good. The use of the verb *ensure* in this instance places activists into a role of safeguards of "decent quality of life". In addition, the use of the noun *people* is used to portray activism as activity that protects other stakeholders and thus employee activism becomes a matter of not just employees and organizations, but also the society as a whole.

> (19) Employee activists are also concerned about business dealings with certain suppliers and customers—such as those that themselves have poor CSR records, or that are using the organization's products and services to violate citizens' rights. (A5)

This excerpt in turn illustrates employee activism as concerned with business dealings that in the end may help other businesses to "violate citizen's rights", therefore portraying activist employees as concerned with ethical issues. The verb to violate has a negative meaning of "to break, to disregard, to do harm" (Merriam-Webster, 2023), which emphasizes the blatant harm done. By naming citizens' rights as the object being violated, these business dealings between organizations that may have "poor CSR records" becomes an issue larger than the organization itself, affecting people outside of either organization.

4.2.3 Activism as a fair response

In this discourse category, activism is presented as a fair response by offering explanations for why employees become activists. For example, activism is portrayed as stemming from frustration for the lack of follow-through from organizations, as seen in the excerpts below:

> (20) In a survey conducted by United Minds, a change management consulting division of Weber Shandwick, nearly half of employees surveyed said they believe that although their employers "say the right things," they don't actually "walk the talk."(A2)

(21) "Employees are not content with employers that merely give lip service to support but do not follow up those assertions with meaningful action," said United Minds President Kate Bullinger. (A2)

By stating that the issue is with the lack of action, activism becomes a response to organizations. The excerpts above focus on inaction of organizations that "say the right things" but "don't actually 'walk the talk'" or "merely give lip service to support" and "do not follow up those assertions with meaningful actions". Both excerpts use idioms that essentially have the same meaning: to walk the talk means "putting your words into action—showing that you mean what you say by actively doing it yourself" (Oxford Reference, 2023), or "to do the things that one says one will do" (Merriam-Webster, 2023). Interestingly, the use of the idioms and the quotation marks appears to give a personal voice to the surveyed employees and offers a simply expressed message to managers. Lip service is defined as "an avowal of advocacy, adherence, or allegiance expressed in words but not backed by deeds" by Merriam-Webster (2023), which already in the definition brings up the lack of action despite one's stated support. The implication is that organizations themselves have caused activism by their lack of action. In other words, this discourse places the blame on organizations. As the second excerpt states, employees want "meaningful action" to follow the "assertions" made by their organizations. By emphasizing that it is meaningful action that is wanted, focus is put on the quality of action taken by employers and the desire for something that genuinely contributes to easing problems. Additionally, as organizations have made "assertions", they are presented as responsible for proving they stand behind the statements that they have made. These word choices reflect skepticism and frustration towards employers and their social responsibility efforts, creating support or sympathy for employees - who, in contrast to their employers in (21), are framed as concerned with social problems and wanting to hold their employers accountable.

Although (22) also presents other factors that activism is a result of, such as access to large audiences and attitudes of millennials, in (22) it is also suggested that changes in working life have played a role.

(22) Activism is the result of a combination of factors: the ability to reach large audiences instantly via social media; the way in which organisations have become increasingly more slick and efficient over the past 30 years, but, at the same time, more impersonal; and the attitudes of millennials, alert to

environmental and social issues, who don't see workplaces as solid, dependable anymore – they've seen their parents struggle with insecurity, made redundant or move from post to post. (A4)

As seen in (22), organizations are stated to have become "increasingly more slick and efficient" while also simultaneously "more impersonal", in other words distant, without warmth or a personal connection.. It is suggested, that while change in the past decades have brought organizations more efficiency and slickness, it has also distanced them from stakeholders and made them "impersonal", in other words "without human warmth" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023) or lacking "personal connection" (Merriam-Webster, 2023). Another suggested factor is disillusionment with workplaces, as the generation of activist employees has "seen their parents struggle with insecurity, made redundant or move from post to post" - here it is the personal aspect of witnessing one's own family experience job insecurity and other working life difficulties. The description of this factor, in turn, can elicit sympathy for activist employees and thus make one become more inclined to hear them out.

(23) So we have a new situation where employees are willing to speak up, to resort to whistleblowing, when they don't feel listened to by managers or HR. (A4)

Similarly, it is suggested that employee activism is the last resort - employees "are willing to speak up", but "don't feel listened to by managers or HR" and therefore "resort to whistleblowing". By describing employees as "willing to speak up", the employees themselves are presented as wanting to express their concerns or opinion, and furthermore, by suggesting that it is a matter of not "feeling listened to by managers or HR", the blame is put on the latter. In addition, the use of the verb *to resort* implies there were no other alternatives, thus further underlining the role of organizations in sparking employee activism.

4.3 Activism and power

Similar to previous discourse of activism as an opportunity for change discourse, this discourse subcategory also views activism as capable of changing or affecting the power relations between employers and employees. Whether that is seen in a positive or negative light varies in

the selected articles, based mostly on whether the articles consider activism as more beneficial than it is risky or harmful and on whose point of view is focused on.

Notably, there are also two types of power struggles that emerged from the data: one focuses on organizations as entities that are challenged and other concentrates on the employer-employee relationship. First, I will discuss the formerly mentioned type and after that I will present the findings of the study on the aforementioned second power struggle type.

Notably, this category of discourse focuses on the implications of activism to the power structures between employers and employees. As I have found, this category either focuses on the power structures between organizations and employees or focuses on the implications for the relationship between employers and employees.

4.3.1 Power struggle for organizations

In this category, organizations are framed as lacking power in the face of employee activism. In addition, it can be argued that the action taken by employee activists challenges the power which organizations hold to a certain extent. As presented in activism as a risk category, activism can take organizations by surprise, damaging their reputations widely as the virality of online activism is outside of the organizations' control. This is apparent in the use of passive verbs such as "to land" or "feel pressured" in describing organizations' actions, juxtaposed with the active verbs such as raise complaints, walk out, protest used to describe employee activists' actions. In addition, by taking the activism online, activist employees have the potential to engage stakeholders outside the organization. This way, activist employees hold a certain power to affect how their organization is perceived by others and possibly even influence others to boycott the organization, causing loss of profit and reputation. In turn in activism as a fair response category, employee activists respond to their organizations actions and with activism, they can pressure the organizations to increase their corporate social responsibility efforts. In other words, when employee activists are successful, they can make their organizations change in a way that can benefit the society at large.

Important to note is that in this category, the organizations' lack of power comes from the ability of employees to leverage their activism, engagement with stakeholders and potential

to damage the organization's reputation - all of which mainly affects the organization's ability to make profit.

The powerlessness of organizations and the power held by activist employees are conveyed by language use, such as the use of the idiomatic expression to be under pressure to describe organizations, whereas employee pressure to yield to demands, as is seen in (26). The pressure in these examples is presented both as "pressure to 'do the right thing'", or, alternatively, "to yield to activists' demands".

(24) Businesses are under a lot of pressure to 'do the right thing.' (A2)

(25) Businesses are under more pressure than ever to 'do the right thing' and be more socially responsible. (A3)

The idiomatic expression *to do the right thing* in (24) and (25) suggests that organizations are under pressure to do what is just or morally right - while the freedom of choosing what action to take exists, "not doing the right thing" may be met with backlash. Given the implied consequence, organizations are portrayed as having somewhat less power. In (25), however, social responsibility is brought up, which perhaps suggests that there is an expectation that businesses raise their levels of social responsibility and contribute more to communities around them.

(26) More disruptive tactics are often intended to unsettle both an organization's internal routines and its public reputation, thereby pressuring corporate executives to yield to activists' demands. (A5)

Notably, the example (26) utilizes language use which evokes terrorism imagery, particularly with the use of the idiomatic expression to yield to demands which creates a strong image of powerlessness of one party and a ruthless power of another. To yield to something carries the meaning of "agreeing to do something that you do not want to do or should not do" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). Activists are presented as using "disruptive tactics" with which they can "pressure the corporate executives to yield to demands" - the use of "tactics", pressuring and having demands portray activists as formidable, strategic and uncompromising, all of which frame employee activists as strong opponents who can force corporate executives to do something against their wishes.

However, despite this framing of organizations as somewhat powerless in face of employee activism, it is only one aspect of this discourse. In addition to this framing, this discourse also sees organizations as holding power over their employees. As mentioned under activism as a threat to employees, organizations may choose to respond to activism with retaliation, with possible consequences of industry blacklisting affecting the activist employees' career outside of the organization. Furthermore, organizations may take measures to restrict what actions their employees can take.

4.3.2 Power and employer-employee relationships

In this category of *activism as a power struggle* discourse, the power struggle takes a more interpersonal tone as it is framed as a matter between employees and employers - however, as I have found, employers are discouraged from viewing activism as a power struggle. Another finding is the use of violence-related language, as verbs and nouns such as fighting disruption, quashing resistance are used as seen in (28). These evoke ideas of a fight for power between two groups: one currently remaining in power and the "resistance" or "disruption" aiming to unsettle it. Additionally, such language use could be considered satirical in the context, thus further criticizing any potential vitriol towards employee activists.

> (27) The purpose of this package of expertise for HR and their organisations is not to 'fight' disruption and quash resistance from activism, but making a bridge to achieving a new kind of equilibrium of mutual understanding and appreciation between employer and employees. (A4)

In (27), noteworthy is the use of peace-making discourse, apparent in linguistic choices such as the use of expressions such as "making a bridge" and "achieving a new kind of equilibrium of mutual understanding and appreciation". To build a bridge is an idiom, defined by Merriam-Webster (2023) as "to establish a relationship (as to foster understanding and appreciation of cultural differences)" - focus of which is on the interpersonal relationships and on improving them. In this context, this particular idiom calls employers to not view activism as an attempt to challenge the power structures - apparent in word choices such as "'fight' disruption" and "quash resistance from activism" - but rather focus on building a bridge between themselves and employees and an equilibrium of mutual understanding and appreciation. The noun equilibrium in turn means a balance, typically one between two different forces. As the noun is tied to the noun phrase "mutual understanding and appreciation" through the preposition of, it is underlined that a harmonious employee-employer relationship where both parties

maintain a positive professional relationship requires understanding and appreciation from both. HR and organizations are advised to begin the process of building harmonious relationships, and to not view employer-employee relationships through the lens of power structures.

The negation in "not to 'fight' disruption and quash resistance" discourages from approaching employee activism as a challenge to power structures between employers and employees. By using the negation *not* along with the descriptive verbs such as *fight* and *quash,* verbs which are highly related to violence and suppression, disapproval of such an approach becomes apparent - furthermore, the negation extends to reject the views of employee activism being "disruption" or employees being "resistance". The rejection of these views in turn strengthens the aforementioned intent and value for peace-making. Moreover, in the context the use of these verbs and nouns may appear dramatic, which would further demonstrate criticism towards hostility towards activism and employee activists.

Also noteworthy is the directly stated aim of the article by the author - the aim is to promote mutual understanding and appreciation, which arguably could make it easier to navigate for HR and organizations, and given the article's educational nature, also help gain an understanding of employee activism and especially the point of view of employees. However, as shown in the example (28) above, peace-making language is also used to promote a harmonious coexistence between employers and employees, thus setting the power struggle between employers and employees aside. Markedly, the peace-making language did not appear in the discourse on power struggle between organisations and activist employees.

> (28) The age of deference to authority is over. What was once a natural, common instinct is in short supply. No longer is there an assumption that employers are laudable institutions with worthy intentions – or a sense of the need to bow down to managers and bosses. Employees want reassurance and proof of an employer's commitment to a social and environmental 'good'. (A4)

As illustrated in (28), employee activism marks that "the age of deference to authority is over", noting that the power relations between employers who are the "authority" referred to and employees have changed. With the use of the adjective over, the finality of the end of "the age of deference to authority" is underlined. Deferring to authority is described as "once a natural, common instinct" which is now "in short supply" - the adverb once again highlights the final change in power relations between employers and employees, while "in short supply" suggests that there's a demand for it but not enough supply. Consequently, this 'instinct' can be understood to be presented as desirable and rare. In addition, the description of

deferring to authority as "a common, natural instinct" utilizes human nature discourse - if deferring is a natural instinct, then not deferring can be understood as unnatural, and engaging in employee activism as "going against nature". The noun instinct is defined by Cambridge Dictionary (2023) as "the way people or animals naturally react or behave, without having to think or learn about it". The noun and the adjective thus highlight even more so the role of nature and biology in deference and thus in power relations, questioning whether a change in power relations between employers and employees is a change that should have occurred and whether it can be good. However, considering that the aforementioned language choices are dramatic, the sentiment in (29) appears to criticize views which see employer-employee relationships as strictly hierarchical and which require one party to defer or to submit to the authority of the other. In other words, the satirical tone suggests that this view is outdated as old power structures are challenged.

> (29) No longer is there an assumption that employers are laudable institutions with worthy intentions – or a sense of the need to bow down to managers and bosses. (A4)

Important to note with (29) is that the language use appears rather satirical. The aforementioned noun phrases "laudable institutions" and "worthy intentions" both of which underline the worthiness of admiration and praise, while the use of the phrasal verb to bow down is another exaggeration. These exaggerations fall within metonymic strategies for satire, as the target of satire - in this case, employers - are inflated by the use of hyperbolic language (Simpson, 2003). With this satirical tone, the view of employer-employee relationship as comically hierarchical is criticized, further demonstrating the outdatedness of such a view and thus encouraging employers to see the relationship differently. A part of the change in the power relations is also the change in regard to the other party, in (29) the party in question being "managers and bosses" who are no longer assumed to be "laudable institutions with worthy intentions". *Laudable,* as defined by Merriam-Webster (2023), means "worthy of praise" while *institution* could be understood as "a significant practice, relationship, or organization in a society or culture" (Merriam-Webster, 2023), thus emphasizing the previously positive regard to employers. Then, "worthy intentions" points to the employers having good intentions, and thus hints at moral goodness.

A part of the change in the power relations is also the change in regard to the other party, in (30) the party in question being "managers and bosses" who are no longer assumed to be "laudable institutions with worthy intentions". Laudable, as defined by Merriam-Webster

(2023), means "worthy of praise" while institution could be understood as "a significant practice, relationship, or organization in a society or culture" (Merriam-Webster, 2023), thus emphasizing the previously positive regard to employers. Then, "worthy intentions" points to the employers having good intentions, and thus hints at moral goodness.

With satirical tone in mind, particularly notable are the word choices in the aforementioned noun phrases "laudable institutions" and "worthy intentions". As discussed above, both of the noun phrases contain adjectives that connect to worthiness of praise, with the adjective laudable carrying that meaning and as it is attached to the noun institution, which highlights the significance to society, employers are framed as important members of society that deserve praise and admiration. In addition, "worthy intentions" hint at moral goodness that they possess, thus further explaining the praiseworthiness. However, as is pointed out with the beginning of the sentence, those good characteristics are not assumed anymore, which points to a change towards a more cynical and distrusting attitude towards employers.

"Bowing down to managers and bosses" invokes a hierarchy between the employees and 'managers and bosses'. Bowing down is a physical act of submission and deference - by bowing down to someone a person lowers themselves both physically and symbolically before someone who is recognized to have more power or authority. This idiom and phrasal verb is defined by Cambridge Dictionary (2023) as "to show respect to someone and agree that they are more powerful than you" and by Merriam-Webster (2023) as "to show weakness by agreeing to the demands or following the orders of (someone or something)". Both definitions point to a power relation, and in this example, pointing to a power relation between employers and employees. The need to bow down suggests that it is a duty or an obligation to "bow down", an act of which also indicates a hierarchical power structure. "A sense of the need to bow down to managers and bosses" no longer existing again points to change in power relations.

 As the subordinate clause begins, it is remarked that there is no longer "a sense of the need to bow down." - which frames subordination or bowing down as natural or as common sense, further adding to the satirical tone. The use of the phrasal verb to bow down evokes an image of submission and reverence, underlining a sense of one party having power over another as well as the existence of a hierarchical power structure - in this context, it highlights the position of employers as powerful and on top of a hierarchy. As the language use thus appears sarcastic and hyperbolic, a satirical tone is created - ultimately mocking such sentiments. This

in turn may challenge readers to question their views on employer-employee relationships and a reader's potentially negative views on employee activism.

(30) "Much of this is unchartered territory for… businesses and employer-employee relationships will be tested." (A1)

Interestingly, in (30), one of the aforementioned risks of employee activism is that "employer-employee relationships will be tested". The expression *to be tested* is rather neutral in its tone: despite suggesting that professional relationships will undergo challenges, activism is not portrayed as a power struggle but simply a new challenge. The possible suggestion here is that there simply is no power struggle.

(31) The employers that succeed will ultimately view adapting to these organisational challenges as less a matter of compliance and more securing competitive advantage. (A1)

In (31), employers are advised to see activism - referred to as an organizational challenge - as "less a matter of compliance". This acknowledges the view in which employee activists are disobeying or not complying with their employers who wield power or authority. *To comply* can be understood as to mean "to act according to an order, set of rules, or request" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023) or "to conform, submit, or adapt (as to a regulation or to another's wishes) as required or requested" (Merriam-Webster, 2023). The meaning of *complying* is important as in this context, it points to a power relation and, given that what is discussed is *not complying,* to a power struggle.

In (31), employers are advised to abandon views of activism as disobedience or noncompliance, and view employee activism instead as an "organizational challenge". The noun phrase "organizational challenge" frames activism as an issue that can be overcome. Interestingly, employers are also advised to consider activism "as less a matter of compliance and more securing competitive advantage" - with this, a shift of perspective is introduced. Instead of focusing on the effects activism has on the hierarchical relationship between employers and employees, employers are encouraged to proactively adapt in order to receive the benefit of a competitive advantage, thus ensuring that they will be among "the employers that succeed". In addition, the noun phrase "a matter of compliance" centers the employees' refusal to comply, which, as Merriam-Webster (2023) defines, is "to conform, submit, or adapt (as to a regulation or to another's wishes) as required or requested". The noun phrase thus points to the

existence of a power structure between employers and employees, although the overall message in (31) is to not focus on the challenge to the power structure.

(32) "Employee activism is fundamentally about voices of difference challenging the status quo and power structures," Reitz said. It seeks to change the nature of the employer-employee contract. (A2)

As demonstrated in (33), employee activism is described as "challenging the status quo and power structures". The use of the adverb "fundamentally" emphasizes that the core purpose of activism is change power structures. In addition, employee activism "seeks to change the nature of the employer employee contract", which echoes the previous sentiment of the aim to change. In the second sentence, however, a more specific context of an employer-employee relationship is added, which in turn links the relationship to power structures at large. The citation from an expert lends credibility to the claim that it is central to employee activism to challenge current power structures and later specifies that the power structures mentioned relate to those between employers and employees. The tone is more neutral in comparison to prior examples, evident in word choices such as "seeking to change" and "voices of difference challenging the status quo" - the aforementioned is a neutral expression in itself while the latter evokes themes of equality with the noun phrases "voices of difference" and "challenging the status quo." The change in power structures thus appears more peaceful and centered on equality and justice.

It can be argued that *activism as a power struggle* discourse provides various views on the relationship between employee activism power structures and power struggles, most of which assume a change in power structures between employers and employees. In descriptions and discussions on the employer-employee relationship, language related to violence was occasionally used - however, it was done in a context of discouraging negative attitudes towards employee activists.

5 CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings of this study show that employee activism discourse is varied, however with particularly the themes of risks, opportunities and power emerging consistently, in discussion of both the employer and employee point of view. I believe the emergence of the aforementioned themes in employee activism discourse reflects the recentness of the phenomenon, as well as cautious and hopeful views on it. Upon closer examination, I also found that there are also specific subcategories of aforementioned themes. One such example is *activism as a fair response*, in which employee activism was presented as a justified response to either poor CSR efforts or larger societal issues related to the organization itself, and activism itself as a way to improve society.

As mentioned previously, employee activism discourse was dominated by themes of risks or threats, opportunities to seize and power struggles. Discourses such as *activism as a threat* portrayed employee activism as potentially harmful to reputations and profits of an organization, whereas *activism as an opportunity* portrayed it as a chance to innovate, attract talent and profit. Related discourses *activism as an opportunity for change* and *activism as a fair response* in turn framed activism as a righteous cause that aims to improve life for all by pressuring organizations to be more socially responsible and ethical. *Activism as a power struggle* constructed a view of activism as a challenge to power structures, although in some instances with irony.

Employee activism discourse was constructed with metaphors, irony and legitimacy. *Activism as a threat* relied on both various surveys and metaphors such as "thorny issues" and "constant

threat" that conjured images of pain and looming danger. Legitimacy was also constructed by using expert citations and further pointing out that the person cited is a specialist in the field, which was apparent in *activism as a threat*. However, *activism as a fair response* also utilized legitimacy by citing surveys and specialists. In other words, same tool was used to construct employee discourse as either a controversial, inflammatory issue or as an understandable action. Employee activism discourse, when discussing power structures and employer-employee relationships, also utilized metaphors that promoted a positive view of employee activism - for example by using various peace metaphors and ironically using violence metaphors that ridicule hostile approaches particularly from organizations. In turn, *activism as an opportunity* used game and winning metaphors to evoke positive imagery and persuade employers to be open to activism.

The themes of threats, opportunities and power emerged in the discourse from both employer and employee perspectives. Given the likely audience of managers and HR personnel, the data primarily reflected the former perspective, focusing on the threats and opportunities to organizations themselves. Both *activism as an opportunity* and *activism as a threat* discourses used language related to either games and winnings or looming danger to construct a particular view of employee activism, thus offering rather varied viewpoints on the topic. Discourses that emerged from discussions of employee perspectives in turn highlighted the personal risks such as career damage, but also framed activism as justified and activists as either selfless protectors of the common good (as apparent in *activism as an opportunity for change)* or strategists looking to take down their organizations with stealth. Notably, *activism as a fair response* appeared almost solely in the discussion of employee perspective. Employee activism itself was framed as a mainly positive phenomenon, stemming from a desire to stand up for social justice and actively participate in solving societal problems.

As for the discussion on the power structures in employer-employee relationships, my findings showed some variety, however, mostly the power structures were noted as experiencing a change or having already been changed by employee activism. Interestingly, I found that language related to battle and peacemaking was often used in describing the approaches to employer-employee relationship, and particularly with activist employees. As Sun et al. (2018) point out, war metaphors in business discourse - under which employee activism discourse may also fall - are not unusual, and equally popular source domains for metaphors include games

and competition, which was apparent in *activism as an opportunity,* as previously discussed. This kind of language was evoked with word choices such as disruptive tactics", "unsettle routines" and "yield to demands" created a view of employee activists as powerful, strategic opponents and verged on evoking terrorism imagery. However, notable is also the juxtaposition of ironic violence metaphors (such as "quashing the resistance" and "fighting disruption") and peacemaking metaphors (such as "making a bridge"), as it discourages managers from suppressing employee activism and instead advises to nurture the employer-employee relationship with openness and mutual understanding. In addition, it can be argued that the use of dramatic language in a non-dramatic context creates a comedic effect, thus indeed ridiculing suppressive approaches to employee activism.

The language use was for the most part neutral in tone which appears to be conventional for texts with an educational aim. The educational aspect of the articles was illustrated in the citing of surveys, research and experts to legitimize claims made, whilst the entertaining aspect appeared mostly in linguistic choices such as use of colorful metaphors, idioms, emotionally charged word choices that may not have appeared if the aim was to educate only - as Bloor and Bloor (2007, p. 69) describe, metaphors can be used to "add interest, wit or complexity to a text". To introduce the topic of employee activism or to present a certain perspective on it, in addition to the aforementioned linguistic choices, authors linked for example social justice discourse to employee activism discourse.

Although the language appeared mostly neutral, the aforementioned idioms, metaphors and at times colorful word choices revealed different views on employee activism. The wary view became very apparent especially through the use of metaphors, which were used to describe either employee activism itself or the potential negative effects and outcomes of it. In turn, a more positive view on employee activism relied on the use of positively associated words, such as "champion", and on descriptions of the employee activists' concerns for society at large. Interestingly, the more neutral and positive views underlined the importance of genuine dialogue between employees and their employers, which was communicated especially via idiomatic expressions such as "speaking your truth" and "making a bridge".

As for the limitations of this study, the data set is limited both in terms of the size of it and the time frame of when the articles were published. Another limitation is in the method itself, as

CDA is subjective and different interpretations may arise. With this study, I have contributed to linguistic research on employee activism, a phenomenon that is estimated to grow and to remain relevant in the working life. Taking a closer look at the discourse around employee activism reveals some of the attitudes and views on it, ones that are promoted to HR and managers - the very people who can be influenced to view the issue as an opportunity to improve and to become more socially responsible, and who can be influenced to approach activist employees with openness to dialogue. In other words, these discourses shape and affect our working life, both on the level of ideas, views and values as well as practices and actions

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