THE DISCURSIVE EFFECTS OF RHETORICAL DEVICES IN H&M'S 'THREE PILLARS OF SUSTAINABILITY'

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Yhä useampi kuluttaja on tietoinen yritysvastuun osa-alueista, mikä heijastuu ostokäyttäytymiseen. Tämän seurauksena pikamuotiyritykset joutuvat mukauttamaan viestintäänsä, jotta se vastaisi sidosryhmien entistä korkeampia vaatimuksia yritysvastuuta kohtaan.

Tässä tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan retoristen keinojen käyttöä pikamuotiyritys H&M:n verkkopohjaisessa kestävyysdiskurssissa. Tutkimuksen aineisto koostuu neljästä sivusta, jotka käsittelevät H&M:n sosiaalista, taloudellista ja ekologista kestävyyttä. Tutkimuksessa hyödynnetään teoriapohjaista sisällönanalyysiä sekä retorista diskurssianalyysiä, jotta voidaan selvittää aineistossa esiintyvien retoristen keinojen seurauksia. Analyysi osoittaa, että yleisimmät retoriset keinot H&M:n kestävyysdiskurssissa ovat konsensuksella tai asiantuntijalausunnolla vahvistaminen, leksikaalinen ja lauseopillinen toisto, toimijuuden hämärtäminen, tulevaisuuteen viittaaminen sekä kolmen lista.

Koska pikamuotiyritysten kestävyysdiskurssi on verrattain uusi ilmiö, on aihetta tarpeen tutkia lisää. Analyysiä voisi tarkentaa sisällyttämällä aineistoon kaikki H&M:n verkkotekstit, jotta voitaisiin luoda parempi käsitys siitä, miten yritys käyttää retorisia keinoja. Myös eri pikamuotiyritysten kestävyysdiskurssia voisi vertailla keskenään, mikä lisäisi ymmärrystämme kestävyyspuheen genrestä. Lisäksi olisi hyödyllistä selvittää, vaikuttaako verkkotekstien hierarkia retoristen keinojen käyttöön.

Asiasanat – Keywords fast fashion, CSR, corporate identity, rhetorical discourse analysis, rhetorical devices

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1 INTRODUCTION

Fast fashion empowers customers by offering trendy clothes and accessories at affordable prices. The term "fast fashion" refers to the rapid production of clothing and accessories which enables a constant turnover of items according to ongoing trends and seasons (Anisah et al., 2024, p. 2). It was popularized in the early 2000s by major fashion corporations such as Zara and H&M (Papasolomou et al., 2023, p. 194). This study focuses on H&M, a fast fashion brand belonging to H&M Group. H&M Group is a multinational retail group founded by Erling Persson in 1947 (H&M Group, n.d.) that manufactures clothing and interior design products. It has since become one of the biggest fast fashion brands in the world, generating a revenue of more than $22 billion in 2022 (Statista, n.d.).

Fast fashion is problematic in several ways. Arguably one the most troubling aspects of the fashion industry as a whole is its environmental impact: it ranks as the second most polluting industry after the oil industry (Papasolomou et al., 2023, p. 191). Moreover, fast fashion companies increasingly outsource their manufacturing to developing countries (Joy et al., 2012, p. 275) where not enough attention is paid to working conditions. It is also noteworthy that fast fashion offers more instant gratification which is why people often consume it based on impulsions (Wojdyla & Chi, 2024, p. 11). Consequently, one ends up buying items that one does not genuinely need, wasting natural resources in the process. The issues surrounding fast fashion have been widely debated in societal discourse, particularly over the past decade, as climate change and social injustice have received increased attention.

This heightened awareness of sustainable development poses a challenge for fast fashion brands built upon unsustainable operating models. Stakeholders increasingly expect companies to demonstrate social, economic, and environmental responsibility (Li, 2022, p. 2), and H&M is no exception in that regard. Generation Z and Millennials, significant consumer groups of fast fashion, believe they contribute to societal well-being by supporting companies they perceive as socially responsible (Digital Marketing Institute, 2021). Customers evaluate companies not only by analyzing numerical data but also by considering how companies present themselves in their written communication (Jaworska & Nanda, 2016, p. 373). As a result, corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication is on the rise (Li, 2022, p. 2; Lee et al., 2024, p. 314). CSR communication can be seen as a sub-category of corporate communication which Balmer and Gray (1999) define as "the process through which stakeholders perceive the company's identity and image and reputation are formed" (p. 171).

Historically, companies have relied on traditional forms of media—more specifically print, audio, telephones, film, images, radio, and television (Cameron and Panović, 2014, p. 7)—in their corporate communication. Today, digitalization has enabled new ways for companies to communicate about topics they deem significant for their business. As Da Giau et al. (2016, p. 77) point out, the web has become the primary mode for discussing sustainability-related topics. According to Díez-Arroyo (2021, p. 202), web advertising differs from other types of advertising in several ways. They note that it relies on technology-savvy customers who are actively seeking out such texts, and this affects the way advertising texts are constructed; web advertisements are longer and provide more in-depth information, which caters to the curiosity of tech-literate consumers.

Despite the growing importance of CSR communication, literature on web-based CSR communication in the fashion industry is still scarce (Feng & Ngai, 2020, p. 1; Da Giau et al., 2016, p. 73). Web-based CSR communication is a fairly new phenomenon that is constantly evolving. Consequently, the number of studies that have approached the issue from a discourse analytical perspective is limited. Most studies about annual reports, a related genre to sustainability web pages, have employed quantitative methodologies (Tregidga et al., 2007, p. 2), seeing language as a unit that can be quantified (Jaworska & Nanda, 2016, p. 374) rather than analyzed qualitatively. Further research is needed to deepen our understanding of the specific characteristics of web advertising and how organizations use discourse to foster positive corporate identities and persuade stakeholders in their CSR communication. According to Jokinen (2016, p. 296), rhetorical analysis can provide insight into how identities are discursively constructed and reinforced through rhetoric. Therefore, by examining how H&M employs rhetorical devices in the company's CSR communication, this study aims to illuminate the ways in which rhetorical devices are used to persuade stakeholders of H&M's sustainable identity.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 Corporate social responsibility discourse

Researchers have used different terms to describe organizations' communicational efforts aimed at creating images of responsible business. However, the most commonly used term for these activities is *corporate social responsibility* (CSR). From the 1980s onwards, corporate activities against environmental degradation, discriminatory hiring practices, and unethical standards began to be commonly referred to as *CSR* (Jaworska & Nanda, 2016, p. 376). Researchers do not yet agree on the exact definition of CSR (Mayes, 2010, p. 602) as it is a complex phenomenon that covers a wide range of corporate activities. In the research literature, the term CSR is used to refer to sustainable operation models as well as companies' communication about them. For clarity, I will use the term *CSR discourse* in this thesis since it focuses on the discursive construction of corporate social responsibility.

Past research has found that companies often divide their CSR into three main topics: social, economic, and environmental (Pälli & Turunen, 2013, p. 286). *Social responsibility* encompasses fair treatment of workers, respect for human rights and support for communities. *Economic sustainability* focuses on decoupling business growth from resource consumption. *Environmental responsibility* involves actions aimed at preserving biodiversity. In the research literature, this categorization is commonly referred to as the *three pillars of sustainability*, though its naming varies across different sources. For instance, Elkington (1997) uses the term *triple bottom line* to refer to the three areas of CSR.

Numerous studies emphasize the benefits that CSR discourse provides to organizations. According to Roberts (2003), CSR discourse can be used to promote positive evaluations of the company. Similarly, Fuoli (2018, p. 2) explains that these positive images can result in a good reputation, which can in turn help to improve competitiveness, increase business, and attract investors and skilled employees. CSR discourse can also be a way for companies to protect themselves from NGO (non-governmental organization) attacks. However, companies have to constantly evaluate how much information is worthwhile for them to share with their stakeholders. As Da Giau et al. (2016, p. 73) have expressed, the perceived threat of NGO attacks can also be a reason for some companies to withhold information from their stakeholders.

CSR discourse can also serve internal purposes for organizations. Through persuasion, an interrelated term to CSR, companies can foster cooperation between organizational members in various aspects, such as bargaining, troubleshooting, and reconciliation (Neher, 1997, cited in Shanahan et al., 2018, p. 334). Nielsen (2017, p. 54) adopts a similar perspective that emphasizes the impact of CSR on group dynamics by stating that it strengthens corporate identity and fosters a sense of belonging among organizational members. Furthermore, Shanahan et al. (2018, p. 334) point out that persuasive messages can aid in keeping talented workers in the company and channeling organizational energy toward output.

2.2 Communicating corporate identities

Schnurr (2013, pp. 120–121) discusses identity theory in relation to professional communication. According to them, identity theories can generally be divided into two schools of thought: essentialist and constructionist. The former views identity as a "fixed set of categories" (p. 121) assigned to entities whereas the latter sees identity as something that "people conjointly (although not always necessarily in harmony) construct, negotiate and enact when engaging with each other" (p. 121). This is in accordance with Li's (2022) remarks about the social constructionist and discourse perspective; in this sense, identity is seen as fluid and something that is "socially constructed, maintained, and negotiated, through discourse and communication" (p. 2). Poststructuralism, a theoretical movement that rejects the pursuit of universal truths and acknowledges the multiplicity of assigned meanings (Niska et al., 2024, p. 19), has led to the rejection of essentialist notions of identity (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 28).

From a constructionist perspective, companies actively engage in building and maintaining their own identities by communicating with their stakeholders. Accordingly, Westcott Alessandri (2001) defines corporate identity as "a firm's strategically planned and purposeful presentation of itself in order to gain a positive corporate image in the minds of the public" (p. 177), emphasizing a company's agency in forming and negotiating one's identity. Corporate identity consists of different factors which are communicated and negotiated between interlocutors. According to Melewar (2003), these include "'what the organisation is', 'what it stands for', 'what it does', 'how it does it' and 'where it is going'" (p. 197).

Schnurr (2012, p. 104) explores how companies communicate their identities in practice. They state that companies often share information about who they are in their external communication and that it can take on different forms. They point out 'who we are' statements as a common example of such communication. According to them, the prevalence of these statements illustrates the magnitude of identities in organizational contexts. Indeed, identities hold discursive power (Pietikäinen and Mäntynen, 2019, p. 52), which is why companies approach identity construction from a strategic perspective. As a result, companies often use nearly identical language to describe themselves. For this reason, Schnurr (2013, p. 105) argues that the primary functions served by corpotate identities are promotional. However, as Pälli and Turunen (2013, pp. 284–285) have argued, these messages can be seen bearing deeper messages as discourse constructs and legitimizes particular ways of perceiving and representing social reality.

Companies are faced with stakeholders' often differing and contradicting expectations (Cornelissen, 2017, p. 66). This applies to fast fashion brands as well: investors aim to maximize profit, while employees search for information about work culture, and customers demand transparency in sustainability-related themes. Thus, they must communicate a different identity to each target audience. Accordingly, in their corpus-based analysis of annual and CSR reports, Fuoli (2018) found that companies communicated distinct identities in different genres and that they were deliberately designed to meet the needs of the main target audience: in annual reports, companies depicted themselves as objective, sensible and proficient decision makers, whereas in CSR reports they constructed more caring and sympathetic identities. Similarly, in their study about Starbucks' CSR discourse, Mayes (2010) found that the company was presented as either "an active doer of socially responsible actions" (p. 623) or "a compassionate collective, made up of caring, individual human beings" (p. 623) by manipulating agency through lexical choices. Based on the points made by the aforementioned scholars, this study views H&M's sustainable identity as a social construct designed for specific purposes that is realized through discourse.

2.3 Discourse studies and discourse analysis

In short, discourse studies can be defined as the exploration of how language (use) is interconnected with social reality (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen, 2019, p. 8). Researchers in this field study language use in social contexts, drawing on theory from various disciplines (Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 2) such as communications, linguistics, and the social sciences. A discourse analyst studies language use as it appears in real life, paying close attention to the context of use as well as the underlying influence of society, and considers its possible effects (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen, 2019, p. 8). The point of discourse analysis is not to study linguistic features, such as syntax and grammar, in isolation but rather to gain insight into the phenomena being constructed through discourse (Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 9). In a discourse analytical study, virtually any form of language use can serve as data. The data may include speech, text, sign language, and images (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen, 2019, p. 134), for instance.

Pietikäinen and Mäntynen (2019, pp. 13, 17) outline the concept of *discourse*—a central tenet in discourse studies—in their introductory book on discourse. They point out that discourse is a multidimensional term that can refer to language use as a social activity or an established way of meaning-making and language use. In English, the former definition is used when the term discourse is treated as an uncountable noun (discourse). When the term discourse is written with an article and is treated as a plural noun (a discourse), the latter definition is used. Furthermore, they shed light on the basic assumption, which discourse studies adheres to, about language and the social world being intertwined; the world is built using language, but the world also influences language use.

In the same book, Pietikäinen and Mäntynen (2019, p. 10) address the theoretical foundations of discourse studies. According to them, discourse analysts approach language from a functional perspective rooted in Halliday's (1925–2018) systemic-functional theory. They write that Halliday viewed language as a set of resources from which people actively choose different means to communicate meanings. In this sense, language choice is never random; it is always tied to the social context and the goals of language users. Moreover, they note that discourse studies—similar to other fields that examine the construction of meaning and social reality—is grounded in social constructionism. Social constructionism is based on the idea that reality as it appears is not fixed; rather, people actively shape and define it through interactions with others (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008, p. 3). The premise of the grounding frameworks of discourse studies is that language along other semiotic systems plays a key role in the construction of reality and must therefore be researched (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen, 2019, p. 10).

Discourse analysis (DA) can be considered the cornerstone of discourse studies. Gee (2010, pp. 8–10) introduces two approaches within DA: descriptive and critical. The former focuses on analyzing linguistic content. The latter investigates how language plays a part in maintaining oppressive power structures within society. However, they claim that all DA can be viewed as 'critical' since language is inherently political and shapes our social reality. They go on to argue that the researcher actively adopts a critical stance just by revealing how language plays a part in the construction of social reality. Gee's (2010) remarks reflect the ongoing debates concerning DA and its multidisciplinary nature; researchers hold different views on its definition and scope. Van Dijk (2017, p. 28) states that (C)DA is considered a broad area of study rather than a well-defined method of analysis, pointing to the imprecise nature of the method. Pietikäinen and Mäntynen (2019, p. 139) express a similar view, noting that while all discourse analytical studies share the same theoretical premises, they employ different methods depending on the research question(s).

According to Pälli and Turunen (2013, p. 286) texts strongly influence the world by reinforcing certain fundamental beliefs and narrative patterns. They point out the previously mentioned concept of *the triple bottom line* as an example of how discourses can shape the way people use language and perceive the world; the prevalence of the triple bottom line in corporate communication both produces and solidifies perceptions that sustainability can be broken down into social, economic, and environmental sustainability. Their ideas reflect the work of the influential theorist Foucault (1926–1984) in discourse studies. Foucault conceptualized discourses as established, taken-for-granted ways of speaking and thinking that intertwine with power: they shape our understanding and knowledge of social reality (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen, 2019, p. 17).

Companies are valuable subjects of study for discourse analysts. In essence, companies are social constructs produced and maintained through discourse (Gunnarson, 2009, p. 3), meaning they cannot exist without it. DA offers an opportunity to examine this discursive nature of companies. When examining companies through the lens of discourse studies, the researcher has a vast range of options regarding what one can study. Examples of possible research questions are how corporate identity and activities are sustained through language use, and how different roles are enacted through linguistic practices.

2.4 Rhetorical analysis: a focus area of discourse studies

From a sociolinguistic perspective, rhetorical analysis is an analytical focus area within discourse studies that explores how language users present certain interpretations of reality as credible and worthwhile with a persuasive intent (Jokinen, 2016, p. 273). Rhetoric formed in ancient Greece (Hogan, 2012, p. 2) and has since gone through significant transformations, which has led scholars to commonly distinguish between 'classical' and 'new' rhetoric (e.g. Thomas, 2007). While classical rhetoricians focused on the delivery of effective speeches in civic settings (Charteris-Black, 2018, p. 3), new rhetoric has extended its scope to encompass written language as well as media, visual, and digital communication (Casado Velarde et al., 2014, p. 26; Eisenhart & Johnstone, 2008, pp. 5–6).

The premise of rhetorical analysis is that "people are able to persuade others to believe things through communication" (Zachry, 2009, p. 71). At the heart of rhetoric is, then, the act of persuasion. Shanahan et al. (2018) define persuasion as "the purposeful act of influencing and even changing another person's attitudes, beliefs, and/or behaviors through the use of language and/or symbols" (p. 329). They consider the interrelatedness of rhetoric and persuasion but draw a clear distinction between the two: "Whereas rhetoric is a broad concept used to describe a wide array of linguistic and symbolic practices, persuasion refers more specifically to the process of change resulting from rhetorical activities." (p. 329).

According to Díez-Arroyo (2021, p. 203), the pioneers of rhetoric had the same objective as contemporary advertisers: to trigger the desired response in the recipient. In the context of CSR discourse, companies try to make internal and external stakeholders commit to their claims about sustainability to increase business. This can be achieved through advertising rhetoric which "establishes credibility, and logically argues, informs, or emotionally connects with consumers to persuade them to adopt promoted attitudes or behaviors" (Huhmann, 2018, p. 229). Díez-Arroyo (2021, p. 203) concludes that rhetorical analysis can reveal how rhetorical elements contribute to the effectiveness of web advertising.

2.5 Rhetorical devices

Central to the rhetorical tradition through the ages has been listing rhetorical devices (Martin, 2014, p. 75). Potter (1996, cited in Nivanaho et al., 2023, p. 5) defines rhetorical devices as a means to construct and strengthen one's argumentation. Martin (2014) sees them as "distinct ways of shaping language to enhance its connotative and denotative effects" (p. 75) that stand out and therefore catch people's interest. Rhetorical devices can be divided into schemes and tropes. According to Martin (2014), schemes "arrange words in ways that heighten their effect – that is, they draw our attention to the way we read or hear them" (p. 75), whereas tropes "involve the use of particular words to connote certain meanings" (p. 77). Given the extensive history and interdisciplinary nature of rhetorical studies, various lists of rhetorical devices exist. Moreover, new devices continue to be discovered even today (Martin, 2014, p. 75).

When discussing rhetorical devices, it is relevant to consider the two dimensions of rhetorical argumentation: offensive and defensive rhetoric. According to Potter (1996b, cited in Jokinen, 2016, p. 276), the purpose of offensive rhetoric is to destabilize the opponent, whereas defensive rhetoric is a means to defend one's own argument.

This study focuses on the use of rhetorical devices in defensive rhetoric as it can be argued that it is not favorable for companies to base their argumentation on offensive rhetoric given the possibility of reputational damage.

Jokinen (2016) has categorized fourteen rhetorical devices aimed at strengthening one's argumentation and convincing the audience of the veracity of a stated claim or version of reality: (1) distancing from one's own interests, (2) justifying with speaker categories, (3) regulating the degree of alignment (4) reinforcing with consensus or an expert's statement, (5) "the facts speak for themselves", (6) using categories as a means of persuasion, (7) persuading with details and narratives, (8) numerical and non-numerical quantification, (9) the use of metaphors, (10) the use of extreme expressions, (11) the three-part list, (l2) contrast, (13) repetition, and (14) shielding against a potential counterargument. Next, those rhetorical devices from Jokinen's list that are of high importance for the present study will be briefly explained.

According to Jokinen (2016, p. 282), *reinforcing with consensus or an expert's statement* can be implemented in various ways. One way is to use direct quotes that bring another person's voice to the fore, which supports argumentation. Another way is to employ the pronoun 'we' when presenting an argument; the impression of a shared view is more persuasive than a personal claim. This rhetorical device can also manifest in the utilization of expert knowledge, such as research results and expert statements.

Jokinen (2016, p. 295) describes *repetition* as a common persuasive strategy in advertising language. It involves repeating specific patterns in one's language use. Intertextuality—recontextualizing previous language use—can be seen as one example of repetition. While analyzing intertextual repetition, it is fruitful to examine what functions the recontextualized elements serve in the new context.

According to Jokinen (2016, pp. 282–283), rhetors can waive their responsibility for the course of events by employing the rhetorical device "*the facts speak for themselves*". The operating principle of this rhetorical device is agency reduction which can be achieved through factual speech, the passive voice, and nominalization, for instance. In factual speech, situations are presented as immutable facts, suppressing alternative views. Employing the passive voice in a clause creates the impression that things just happen without the involvement of active agents. Nominalization involves deriving nouns from verbs which obscures agency.

Jokinen (2016, p. 293) also presents *the three-part list* as a way to strengthen one's argumentation. The effectiveness of this rhetorical device lies in the fact that it provides the audience with sufficient evidence about the regularity of operation. The persuasive effect can be further increased by using the preceding phrase "for example" or succeeding phrase "and so on". This creates the impression that there is more supporting evidence which cannot be explored simply due to the limitations of the communicative event, but it exists.

A rhetorical device that is not included in Jokinen’s list but is frequently discussed in the research literature on the topic of CSR is *future-oriented language*, which can be implemented by discussing future prospects. By referring to the future, companies communicate meanings of expertise and devotion to ethical conduct which helps them to construct a favorable corporate identity (Fuoli, 2018, p. 8).

3 RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTIONS

People are increasingly becoming more aware of sustainability-related themes, which creates the pressure for companies to adjust their discourse so that it meets this expectation. Sustainability is signaled through persuasive language to elicit the desired reaction in the audience, which underscores the necessity of studying the use of rhetorical devices in corporate contexts. By taking a closer look at H&M's advertising language, this study seeks to find out what rhetorical devices H&M employs in the company's CSR discourse, and what effects these devices can have in H&M's stakeholders. I aim to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the most prominent rhetorical devices in H&M's CSR discourse?
2. What are the discursive effects of these rhetorical devices?

4 DATA AND METHODS

4.1 Overview of the data

The data of this study consist of four web pages from H&M Group's website, focusing on the company's sustainability practices and objectives. The web pages that I have collected and analyzed are *Sustainability*, *Leading the change*, *Circularity & Climate*, and *Fair & equal.* The first is a higher-level category page, one of the links on the footer menu on H&M's online store. On this page, H&M's sustainability is divided into three 'focus areas'. The last three are sub-pages within the first page that discuss these focus areas in more detail. *Leading the change* demonstrates how H&M aims to balance profitability with circularity, innovation and collaboration, conveying the message that H&M is aiming to grow as a business while avoiding a parallel increase in resource use. *Circularity & climate* deals with H&M's environmental goals. *Fair & equal* discusses H&M's commitment to human rights and social justice across their value chain. Although H&M has more web pages that can be considered to address CSR matters, it was impossible to include all of the company's web content in this study. Therefore, I limited my analysis to these four pages as they are a continuum of texts that discusses the three pillars of sustainability already established in this study: social, economic, and environmental sustainability.

Before analyzing the data, I had to process it to fit my research purposes. I transcribed the content of the selected web pages into plain text which contained only the language that was meaningful to analyze from a rhetorical standpoint. Therefore, the navigation bar and the footer menu were excluded from the study. These elements on H&M's website consist of basic language, absent any rhetorical devices, and thus were irrelevant to my research aims. Since this study focuses on the use of rhetorical devices, it was also not necessary to include multimodal elements, such as pictures or text formatting, in my analysis.

4.2 Methods of analysis

The first step of rhetorical analysis is to identify the elements under scrutiny from the data (Zachry, 2009, p. 69). Accordingly, I employed theory-based quantitative content analysis to map the rhetorical devices in the data. I went through the data in a systematic manner and counted the occurrences of each rhetorical device. Using this method, I was able to identify the most prominent rhetorical devices in H&M's CSR discourse.

I based the coding of the rhetorical devices mainly on the taxonomy of rhetorical devices proposed by Jokinen (2016) to which I made slight modifications according to my research aims. Two rhetorical devices—*justifying with speaker categories* and *using categories as a means of persuasion*—were excluded from the analysis. Language users inherently position themselves within certain speaker categories, and it is challenging to pinpoint exactly when this positioning occurs. In other words, it arises from broader linguistic structures rather than individual words or phrases. Consequently, *justifying with speaker categories* was excluded from the analysis as it could not be quantified with the same precision as the other devices. Furthermore, as language users constantly produce categories while referring to matters (Jokinen, 2016, p. 283), using categories is an inseparable part of language use. Including it in the analysis would therefore have been unproductive, as it would likely have been overrepresented in the results. While reviewing the research literature, it became apparent that CSR discourse often involves using two rhetorical devices that are not included in Jokinen's (2016) list: *future-oriented language* and *using real-life examples*. For this reason, I decided to include them in the analysis.

I also modified the names of certain rhetorical devices to clarify the analysis process and presentation of results. In Jokinen's (2016) framework, some rhetorical devices contain subcategories, and there are instances where Jokinen presents two opposing devices under the same category. In these cases, I split the opposing devices into two separate categories and renamed the rhetorical strategies consisting of multiple subcategories based on what my analysis found or focused on. For instance, in the case of *repetition*, I focused on repeated structures and content words, which is reflected in the name *lexical and syntactical repetition*. Furthermore, I changed the name *"the facts speak for themselves"* to *agency reduction* since it better describes the operating principle of the device.

Having identified the most prominent rhetorical devices, I then conducted a rhetorical analysis on their use. According to Zachry (2009, p. 69), a rhetorical analyst must evaluate the meaning and effect of the identified elements—both separately and together—from the audience's perspective. While analyzing the rhetorical devices, I benefitted from Jokinen's (2016) ideas on their use. I complemented this knowledge with past research on advertising rhetoric. Furthermore, central to rhetorical analysis is to "consider both the overall communicative purpose of a text and how its constituent parts contribute to (or sometimes detract from) the realisation of that purpose" (Zachry, 2009, p. 69). Consistently, I identified what function a given text served and examined how the rhetorical devices contributed to fulfilling that function.

5 ANALYSIS

5.1 General observations

Table 1 illustrates the total range and number of different rhetorical devices appearing in the data and answers the first research question. As can be seen from Table 1, H&M uses a variety of rhetorical devices in the company's CSR discourse of which (1) confirming with consensus or an expert's statement, (2) lexical and syntactical repetition, (3) agency reduction, (4) future-oriented language, and (5) the three-part list are the most prominent. On the contrary, *contrast*, *shielding against a potential counterargument*, and *regulating the degree of alignment* were used minimally. It is noteworthy *that distancing one's own interests from the argument* and *persuading with details and narratives* were entirely absent from the data.

TABLE 1 What rhetorical devices are used on H&M's sustainability-related webpages?

Rhetorical device	**Frequency**
Reinforcing with consensus or an expert's statement	76
Lexical and syntactical repetition	70
Agency reduction	49
Future-oriented language	24
The three-part list	24
The use of metaphors	15
Persuading with real-life examples	14
Numerical and non-numerical quantification	8
The use of extreme expressions	7
Acknowledging one's own interests	6
Contrast	2
Shielding against a potential counterargument	2
Regulating the degree of alignment	1

Distancing one's interest from the argument	0
Persuading with details and narratives	0

The context of the language use under scrutiny and the use of certain rhetorical devices may help explain why some rhetorical devices are used less frequently than others. The data suggest that H&M aims to stand behind its claims by using the pronoun 'we' in most of the clauses. When regulating the degree of alignment with a stated claim, the rhetor avoids presenting the claim as one's own by using reported speech (Jokinen, 2016, p. 280). With this in mind, regulating the degree of alignment would have contradicted H&M's approach. Furthermore, by minimizing the use of details and narratives, H&M can keep the conversation around sustainability on a general level to avoid being held accountable; as has been noted earlier in this study, the perceived threat of NGO attacks can make companies avoid disclosing information.

The discursive effects of the most prominent rhetorical devices in the data will be weighed in the succeeding subsections. Line breaks and paragraph breaks in the data excerpts are marked as [line break] and [paragraph break], respectively. Instances where text has been omitted from the data excerpts are indicated with an ellipsis in square brackets […].

5.2 Reinforcing with consensus or an expert's statement

The data shows that H&M employs the first-person plural 'we' in the majority of the sentences. According to Charteris-Black (2018, p. 65), the first-person plural 'we' is commonly used in persuasion due to its ambiguity and ability to win interlocutors over. It creates the impression of a unified group, while "maintaining a level of generality that hampers criticism and falsification" (Lischinsky, 2011, p. 272, cited in Jaworska & Nanda, 2016, p. 380). The pronoun 'we' in corporate discourse is ambiguous in the sense that it creates the impression of a unified force without giving away who constitutes 'we'. Excerpt 1 is a text passage from the *Circularity & climate* page where H&M discusses how the company plans to transform into a circular business. Here, the first-person plural is employed in all of the clauses. This way, H&M can keep the discussion about circularity vague and avoid revealing the actors involved in the company's operations.

Excerpt 1

> From the way we design our products to the services we offer our customers, we are committed to moving away from a take-make-waste approach to fashion. Instead we are building systems to make sure products and materials are used again and again.

One of the core principles of circularity is extending the lifecycle of products (Maity et al., 2020, p. 241), which requires actions across the whole supply chain. Through the use of 'we', H&M can convey that everyone involved in the supply chain is committed to circularity and shares the same positive attitude towards the company (Romanova & Smirnova, 2019, p. 61). This can influence the behavior of both internal and external stakeholders. For employees, the idea of unity can serve as a motivating force to commit to H&M's sustainability goals and align their performance in accordance to the company's sustainability policies (Breeze, 2013, p. 16). For external stakeholders, it legitimizes H&M's sustainable identity by implying that the company is unanimous in its commitment to sustainability.

The high frequency of the first-person plural in the data confirms prior observations by Tenca (2018) who examined the "About us" or "Company" sections of 30 European companies and found that the companies usually employed the pronoun 'we' to refer to themselves. Tenca proposes that it humanizes the company and makes its discourse more alluring and emotional (p. 96). With this in mind, it can be argued that H&M's frequent use of the pronoun 'we' humanizes the company since it refers to a group of people. Claims about circularity are more convincing this way, given the shared concers of people regarding the future of our planet.

Excerpt 2

> […] watch a short video with Leyla Ertur, our Director of Sustainability, where she talks about our approach to sustainability, our biggest challenges and our focus areas.

Expert discourse is afforded greater weight and credibility compared to statements made from a less authoritative position. Excerpt 2 is a text passage from the *Sustainability* page where H&M invites the viewer to hear from the company's Director of Sustainability. Here, H&M is highlighting the person's expertise by specifying that the person works in a lead position. This legitimizes the sustainable identity constructed by H&M by implying that a high-status person stands behind H&M's claims about sustainability.

5.3 Lexical and syntactical repetition

Repetition is widely used in advertising as it can help get a message across more effectively by facilitating recall (Den Hartog & Verburg, 1997, p. 364). The data shows a high frequency of repeated content words and structures. Excerpt 3 is a text passage from the *Sustainability* page where H&M points out three concrete ways in which the company has contributed to sustainability. Here, the heading of each paragraph begins with the phrase 'new case study'. In addition, the latter parts of the headings ('rooftop solar', 'transitional solution', and 'decarbonising our supply chain') are repeated in the corresponding paragraphs. The two latter sentences also repeat the expression 'find out how we'. These examples represent lexical repetition in H&M's discourse. By repeating the terms 'rooftop solar', 'transitional solution', and 'decarbonise'—key phrases in the green transition—H&M stresses the importance of renewable energy. This corresponds to society's increasing demands for companies to transition away from fossil fuels.

Excerpt 3

> New case study: Rooftop solar [line break] […] We're […] supporting them to install rooftop solar panels. [paragraph break] New case study: transitional solutions [line break] […] Find out how we are using biomass as a transitional solution […] [paragraph break] New case study: decarbonising our supply chain [line break] […] we need to decarbonise our supply chain. Find out how we […]

Excerpt 4 is a text passage from the *Leading the change* page where H&M discusses the company's vision. Here, the subject in each of the four sentences is followed by the verb 'means', which is an example of syntactical repetition. This pattern is memorable due to its simplicity and can therefore subconsciously influence stakeholders' perceptions about H&M.

Excerpt 4

> Our vision to lead the change means [...] It means trying to do things differently […] It means sharing more data […] And finally, it means collaborating with others

Moreover, the repeated structure in Excerpt 4 enables H&M to provide multiple different answers to what "leading the change" means for the company. This creates the impression that H&M has thought deeply about the topic and thus cares about creating a more sustainable future. This contributes to the realization of the company's sustainable corporate identity.

5.4 Agency reduction

Consistent with earlier findings, the analysis shows that H&M frequently downplays the company's agency to achieve desired communicational goals. Excerpt 5 is a text passage from the *Leading the change* page. Here, H&M uses the nominalizations 'transparency', 'sustainability', and 'performance' which erases H&M's agency in sustainable development.

Excerpt 5

> Transparency alone will not improve sustainability performance, but […]

It is also noteworthy that the term 'sustainability' is followed by the nominalization 'performance' in Excerpt 5. This observation has also been made by Alexander (1999, 2009, cited in Jaworska & Nanda, 2016, p. 379) who discovered that the terms 'sustainable' and 'sustainability' were succeeded by nominalizations which erase the agency and thus the responsibility of companies. Jaworska and Nanda (2016, p. 379) argue that this makes the concept of sustainability unattainable and enables companies to discuss it in a non-committal way. By referring to sustainable conduct as "sustainability performance", H&M obscures the company's agency in the active pursuit of sustainable business. The alternative expression "Being transparent alone will not help us perform more sustainably" would have stressed the company's commitment and agency by treating H&M as an active agent executing sustainable practices.

Excerpt 6

> We believe that workers in our supply chain should be paid fairly.

H&M also uses the passive form to obscure the company's agency. The passive form treats the subject as the recipient of action. Language users employ this structure when they want to place emphasis on the process rather than the actor. Excerpt 6 is a text passage from the *Fair & equal* page where H&M expresses that workers deserve fair salaries. The subordinate clause contains the passive strucure "workers in our supply chain should be paid fairly". Although it is obvious from the context that the statement in Excerpt 6 implies that H&M should pay fair wages, the company is not explicitly mentioned as the agent. This way, H&M can focus on the action of paying fair wages without addressing the company's role in this action. This can help H&M avoid being held accountable for unfair treatment of workers. My findings are consistent with the work of Mayes (2010), who analyzed Starbucks' advertising language and found that Starbucks used agentless passives to obscure the company's agency.

Excerpt 7

> We want to be part of a fashion industry that provides fair jobs and equal treatment for everyone.

The analysis shows that the use of implicit actors also contributes to the obscuring of H&M's agency. Excerpt 7 is a text passage from the *Fair & equal* page where H&M suggests that the company is actively working toward being associated with a fair and equal fashion industry. The relative clause in Excerpt 7 attributes the action of providing fair jobs and equal treatment to "a fashion industry" without giving away which actors constitute the fashion industry. By doing so, H&M avoids directly naming the company as responsible for ensuring fair and equal treatment for workers, downplaying the company's agency. The broader expression "a fashion industry" shifts responsibility away from individual companies.

5.5 Future-oriented language

The analysis shows that H&M refers to future plans on several occasions and adopts a proactive stance in the company's CSR discourse. As found by Skulstad (2008), my results support the idea that expressions of commitments and goals are a common rhetorical device in CSR discourse. Excerpt 7 is a text passage from the *Leading the change* page where H&M describes the company's vision.

Excerpt 7

> Our vision to lead the change means […] And finally, it means collaborating with others to change the way the industry works and create the legislative environment and infrastructure required for the fashion sector of the future.

Here, H&M appeals to the vision of "leading the change" and "creating the fashion sector of the future" and explains that these goals are achievable through collaboration. This creates the impression that H&M does not merely aim to make profit but also cares about its long-term impact on the world.

Excerpt 8

> Our ambition is to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2040, reduce our […]

Excerpt 8 is a text passage from the *Circularity & climate* page where H&M sets the goal of becoming carbon-neutral by 2040. Setting a target year for achieving this milestone conveys that H&M is serious about transitioning away from the use of fossil fuels. Communicating future prospects is essential for constructing a sustainable corporate identity since sustainability requires a futurist outlook; one must be able to anticipate and plan for the long-term impacts of current actions to ensure the well-being of people and the planet in the future.

Furthermore, the data suggests that a significant number of H&M's future-oriented messages is conveyed using 'we-rhetoric', which is evident in Excerpts 7 and

8 as well. This strengthens the persuasiveness of the stated goals by implying that they are shared by the whole organization without resistance from any actors.

5.6 The three-part list

Another reoccurring rhetorical device in the data was the three-part list. H&M utilizes this rhetorical device in different ways. Excerpt 9 is a text passage from the *Leading the change* page where H&M discusses how it aims to be an innovative force in the fashion industry by directing organizational energy into three different aspects: "Scaling innovation", "Promoting transparency", and "Engaging partners for industrywide progress". Each example of innovative activity is presented with bullet points, bolding, and underscoring, and further elaborated in paragraphs. In this manner, the three-part list is not embedded in the flow of sentences but instead has a more structured use.

Excerpt 9

> We focus on three areas that maximise our impact [paragraph break] Scaling innovation […] Promoting transparency […] Engaging partners for industrywide progress […]

As has been noted earlier in this study, the effectiveness of the three-part list lies in the fact that it can be perceived as providing enough evidence of a stated claim. With this in mind, the three-part list in Excerpt 9 can be perceived as providing enough evidence that H&M is committed to being an innovative force in the fashion industry. Furthermore, as previously mentioned in this study, the persuasiveness of this rhetorical device can be further increased by pairing it with the preceding phrase "for example" or succeeding phrase "and so on". The data indicates that H&M also uses this technique—although in slightly different words. This can be seen in Excerpt 10, a text passage from the *Circularity & climate* page, where H&M uses the imperative "read more" after the three-part list that provides evidence about sustainable packaging.

Excerpt 10

> We're getting rid of unnecessary packaging, switching to recycled materials and investigating reusable solutions. Read more about packaging

With Jokinen's (2016) remarks in mind, it can be argued that H&M does this to create the impression of even more evidence supporting the legitimacy of its claims, and that the proof is available to the reader if one wishes to see it. In this context, the viewers can, in fact, read more about the matter since "Read more about packaging" is a hyperlink that takes the viewer to a separate page. However, it is noteworthy that this technique can make viewers abstain from further reading because the three-part list has, in their view, provided enough evidence to make them commit to H&M's version of reality. In such a case, they can miss relevant information that could affect their conclusions about H&M's sustainability; the *Circularity & climate* page contains general claims about sustainability and does not provide any details about H&M's operation models.

6 CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to explore how H&M employs rhetorical devices to persuade stakeholders of the company's sustainable identity. The analysis shows that H&M's CSR discourse relies heavily on consensus building which is most evident in the use of 'we-rhetoric'. By pairing this rhetorical device with future-oriented language, H&M is therefore represented as a unified, goal-driven force, which plays a key role in constructing a sustainable corporate identity; to be regarded as sustainable, a company must possess the readiness to cooperate and plan ahead. Consistent with the findings of past research, the analysis also indicates that the pronoun 'we' enables H&M to discuss sustainability in a non-committal, general manner by disguising the actors in key positions. Moreover, the analysis shows that repeated content-words and structures add rhythm and memorability to H&M's discourse and help the company stress key points. Furthermore, the findings reveal that H&M's agency is downplayed through various means: nominalizations obscure H&M's agency in the active pursuit of sustainability, the passive voice hampers criticism by placing emphasis on the action rather than the agent, and the implicit actors in the clauses shift the responsibility away from individual companies, including H&M. Lastly, the analysis shows that the three-part list and the impression of more existing evidence convey the meaning that H&M is actively contributing to sustainability although the conversation is mainly kept on a general level, as can be seen from the data excerpts. The use of the three-part list on a higher-level page can serve as a way to minimize the risk of scrutiny from stakeholders as they might abstain from further reading and thus miss relevant information.

This study has several implications from scholarly, societal, and professional standpoints. The primary contribution of this study is that it offers insight into how persuasion occurs in web-based content, a phenomenon that will grow in importance. The information provided by this study can make customers more aware of the rhetorical nature of corporate identities and the ways in which they are being persuaded, which enables them to make more conscious purchasing decisions. In addition, this study contributes to the academic exploration of the rhetorical nature of web-based CSR discourse in the fashion industry, a topic that has not yet been thoroughly researched. Furthermore, by utilizing the findings of this study, companies and public relations professionals can gain knowledge about the effects of rhetorical devices and how they can be implemented in discourse.

However, this study has some limitations that should be noted when interpreting the results. The data of this study included only a fraction of H&M's website which is why the results cannot be seen as an exhaustive answer to how H&M uses rhetorical devices in the company's CSR discourse. Furthermore, Jokinen (2016, p. 276) has drawn attention to the fact that their categorization of rhetorical devices should not be viewed as an exhaustive account of all rhetorical devices and situations in which persuasion may occur. Moreover, they highlight the interactive nature of argumentation as a reason why one cannot assume that rhetorical devices will have the same effects across all contexts. For this reason, the results of this study should not be interpreted as applicable in all situations where persuasion occurs.

Several possibilities for further research on the topic of this study exist. One research design that could lead to a more profound understanding of H&M's use of rhetorical devices would be to include all of H&M's web-based content in the database. This way, the page level of the webpages included in the analysis would not be a determining factor in the range and number of rhetorical devices. Another fruitful research avenue would be to investigate whether the page level affects the use of rhetorical devices. This could be done by comparing different parts of H&M's website and examining if there is a difference in terms of the rhetorical devices employed. Another approach could involve comparing how different companies use rhetorical devices, providing further insight into CSR as a genre.

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