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This is the author's manuscript

Original Citation:

Availability:

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/128529> since 2018-04-04T10:29:41Z

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UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI TORINO

This is an author version of the contribution:

Questa è la versione dell'autore dell'opera:

**'New Targets' for 'More Sustainable' Companies: A
Corpus-driven Study of Adidas', Ikea's and
Vodafone's Sustainability Reports. In *Textus*, XXVI
(1), pp. 103-113.**

The definitive version is available at:

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&task=schedafascicolo&id_fascicolo=580&Itemid=257](http://www.carocci.it/index.php?option=com_carocci&task=schedafascicolo&id_fascicolo=580&Itemid=257)*

“New Targets” for “More Sustainable” Companies: A Corpus-driven Study of Adidas’, Ikea’s and Vodafone’s Sustainability Reports

by Alessandra Molino

Abstract

This paper investigates recurrent rhetorical strategies in the sustainability reports by three leading multinational companies, namely Adidas, Ikea and Vodafone, over the three-year period from 2008 to 2010. The companies are selected from distinct business sectors because the aim is to verify whether crosscutting phenomena can be identified, which would suggest the existence of genre-specific rhetorical patterns and, consequently, an increasing standardisation of this disclosure genre. The analysis is carried out using methodological tools from corpus linguistics (i.e. wordlists and concordances) and the study of phraseology, focussing on a selection of items, which are scrutinised for their most frequent collocates and co-occurring word.

1. Introduction

This paper investigates some recurrent rhetorical strategies in Sustainability Reports (SRs) by Adidas, Ikea and Vodafone. Sustainability reporting, i.e. the practice of disclosing social and environmental performance, has received considerable attention in recent years. Studies have focused on different types of publication format, such as online SRs (Isenmann *et al.* 2007; Morhardt 2010) and corporate websites (Coupland 2005; Pollach *et al.* 2009). Numerous investigations dealing with SRs, in particular, have focussed on the factors, or determinants, that induce companies to publish these documents, such as size (Morhardt 2010), business sector (Brammer and Pavelin 2008) and the socio-economic context (Fifka and Drabble 2012). As compared to the investigation of determinants, there has been less research on the discursive and rhetorical features of SRs. Exceptions are Bowers (2010) and Catenaccio (2011), who studied the evolution of the SR as a genre, and Malavasi (2011; 2012) who focussed on the strategies adopted by companies in presenting their core values.

The goal of this paper is to contribute to the study of the rhetorical patterning of SRs. As Catenaccio (2011) observes, existing reporting frameworks, such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) guidelines, promote a standardised approach to sustainability reporting in terms of content, but they do not offer explicit guidance as to how companies should actually articulate their commitment to sustainability. The present work, therefore, aims to verify whether, despite divergences in business sector, communal rhetorical strategies can be identified in the presentation of core sustainability values, which would indicate an increasing standardisation of not only sustainability topics (see Catenaccio 2011), but also their discursive construction.

2. Corpus for analysis and method

The analysis is based on a small specialised corpus consisting of nine SRs, three from each of the companies analysed: Adidas, Ikea and Vodafone. The texts cover a period of three years, i.e. 2008, 2009 and 2010, although for Vodafone the fiscal year ends in March 2011. The corpus collects approximately 240,000 words (Table 1).

TABLE 1
Corpora for analysis

Companies	Number of words
Adidas	98,590
Ikea	73,502
Vodafone	66,060
TOT	238,152

The approach is corpus-driven, as the aim is to highlight genre-specific traits. With the help of the WordList Tool of WordSmith Tools 6.0 (Scott 2011), a frequency list of the first 60 lexical items in each sub-corpus was created. Thanks to the stop list option, the 50 most recurrent function words extrapolated from the British National Corpus (BNC) were excluded from the count. The resulting wordlists contained the most frequent content words and unusually frequent function words. The lexical items being shared across SRs were concordanced and examined using methodological tools from the analysis of phraseology (Sinclair 1991).

3. The presentation of core sustainability values

Table 2 compares the wordlists obtained from the three companies’ SRs. The interest in the environment is a crosscutting theme, but the focus is on different aspects. In Adidas, the adjective “environmental” collocates with “impact(s)” (75 entries), “footprint” (40 entries) and “performance” (38 entries). Among the most frequent co-occurring items are “reduce/-ing” (34 entries) and “improve” (25 entries). Differently from Adidas, Ikea’s and Vodafone’s discourse strategy revolves around the more specific issue of “energy”. The analysis of collocations indicates that both Ikea and Vodafone talk about “renewable energy” (37 entries) and “energy efficiency” (42 entries). The difference in focus between Adidas, on the one hand, and Ikea and Vodafone, on the other, reflects a different overall rhetorical strategy. Adidas seems more inclined to analyse the causes of climate change (e.g. “95% of direct environmental impacts are caused during the production of our products”, Adidas 2008), while Ikea and Vodafone concentrate on the solutions (e.g. “By being innovative, energy efficient and using more renewable energy, we shall significantly reduce CO₂ emissions from our own operations”, Ikea 2010).

A second common interest is for particular groups of stakeholders, i.e. “employees”, “workers”, “suppliers” and “customers”. The only item occurring in the three sub-corpora is “suppliers”. The relationship with suppliers is different across companies. In Adidas’ SRs, “suppliers” co-occurs with verbs such as “help”, “develop” and “provide”, and nouns such as “relationships”, “training”, “guidance” and “standards”. Suppliers are portrayed as a key but problematic category of stakeholders, which the Group needs to control and train in order to make them respect the company’s sustainability standards (e.g. “our suppliers desperately need guidance if they have to navigate this new terrain successfully and humanely”, Adidas 2008). In Ikea’s SRs, too, the issue of compliance with standards emerges as crucial. In this case, however, the tone is more coercive, as signalled by the rather frequent collocation of “suppliers” with the modal “must” (39 entries) (e.g. “Suppliers must have procedures in place to secure this throughout their supply chain”, Ikea 2009). In addition, suppliers are explicitly held responsible for their sustainability performance (e.g. “Our focus is to motivate and support suppliers to take more responsibility and ownership themselves”, Ikea 2008).

TABLE 2
Adidas, Ikea and Vodafone: Wordlists

Adidas	Frequency	%	Ikea	Frequency	%	Vodafone	Frequency	%
16 adidas	725	0.72	4 IKEA	1,924	2.56	12 Vodafone	697	1.01
18 group	650	0.64	15 suppliers	527	0.70	18 markets	365	0.53
21 environmental	553	0.55	17 more	512	0.68	21 mobile	322	0.47
22 suppliers	460	0.46	23 products	390	0.52	24 group	274	0.40
23 more	353	0.35	30 energy	260	0.35	26 local	256	0.37
29 management	352	0.35	32 wood	249	0.33	28 march	227	0.33
30 business	325	0.32	33 workers	245	0.33	29 new	224	0.33
34 factories	295	0.29	34 sustainable	243	0.32	31 see	220	0.32
35 performance	291	0.29	36 cotton	230	0.31	32 network	218	0.32
36 compliance	278	0.28	37 use	227	0.30	33 services	215	0.31
38 supply	244	0.24	38 water	225	0.30	34 more	207	0.30
45 chain	234	0.23	39 work	222	0.30	35 health	201	0.29
47 products	227	0.22	40 food	216	0.29	36 customers	200	0.29
49 programme	222	0.22	43 environmental	205	0.27	37 suppliers	196	0.28
51 target	221	0.22	44 requirements	200	0.27	38 report	193	0.28
52 training	221	0.22	45 new	196	0.26	41 issues	190	0.28
53 employees	215	0.21	46 social	186	0.25	42 data	186	0.27
55 factory	206	0.20	47 IWAY	184	0.24	43 business	180	0.26
56 new	204	0.20	49 projects	181	0.24	46 sustainability	170	0.25
57 global	195	0.19	51 children	179	0.24	47 energy	168	0.24
59 materials	194	0.19	52 stores	179	0.24	49 use	165	0.24
60 data	191	0.19	53 working	176	0.23	51 safety	160	0.23
			54 customers	173	0.23	52 CR	159	0.23
			55 percent	173	0.23	53 performance	156	0.23
			57 global	152	0.20	54 management	153	0.22
			58 help	145	0.19	59 employees	141	0.20
			59 support	145				
			60 must	137				

Another remarkable strategy used by Ikea is to refer not only to standards, but also to “values”, thus defining the relationship with suppliers in terms of shared moral goals (e.g. “we strive to build long-term relationships with suppliers that share our values”, Ikea 2010). Finally, as regards Vodafone, this company stresses the importance of collaboration with “suppliers” through the co-occurrence of this item with “work/-ing”, especially in contexts dealing with company’s present activities (e.g. “we are working closely with suppliers to develop more efficient equipment”, Vodafone 2010/11).

Another recurrent theme is the attention to production, as signalled by markers such as “products” and “materials”, and to the provision of “services” in the case of Vodafone (see paragraph 4).

An interesting datum obtained from the comparison of wordlists is the high incidence of some items that are distinct from most of the other top ranking words in that they are not directly related to the themes identified above. These are “new” and “more”. Their high rate of occurrence deserves closer inspection as it may denote the existence of common persuasive strategies typical of SRs.

4. “New” (and related items)

“New” is a rather frequent adjective, which occurs 224 times in Vodafone (3.4 hits per 1,000 words), 196 times Ikea (2.7 hits per 1,000 words) and 204 times in Adidas (2.1 hits per 1,000 words). The value of innovation appears as crucial to the presentation of sustainable policies by the three companies. This trait was also noted in Malavasi (2012) for the automotive sector. Therefore, it seems reasonable to hypothesise that the rhetoric revolving around the concept of “novelty” is a distinguishing feature of SRs.

The collocations of “new” which cut across companies are “new suppliers” and “new products”. As noted above, “new suppliers” occurs in association with items indicating the need to control their environmental behaviour, such as “assessment” and “pre-screen”. The collocation “new products (and services)”, instead, shows that these companies view production as an opportunity to improve their sustainability performance. “New products” occurs with items such as “develop” and “creation”, and companies underline the importance of “materials” to reduce their “operational footprint”. These patterns occasionally co-occur with hedging devices, as in example 1:

(1) We hate waste in every form, and try to make good use of spill material from manufacturing for new products whenever possible. (Ikea 2009)

This example is interesting for the use of conflicting strategies, such as the categorical statement “We hate waste in every form” and the hedge “try”, which hints at difficulties in achieving the aim of waste reduction. There are various other passages in the SRs analysed where embracing sustainability is presented as a difficult endeavour. Despite not ranking in first 60 positions, the item “effort(s)” was found in all the three sub-corpora. Portraying the goal of sustainability a challenging one performs a self-protective function: companies present themselves as well-meaning organizations fully committed to sustainability, an attitude which may mitigate the negative reaction of stakeholder when such a policy is not put into practice, because being sustainable is a demanding and on-going process.

Other recurrent collocations of “new” are “new targets”, “new goals”, “new way(s)”, “new thinking”. Companies portray themselves as agents of change, who are able “to make a difference”. However, firms differ in their methods to bring about change. For example, Adidas concentrates on the supply chain and on collaboration with other stakeholders, while Ikea talks about climate projects dealing with resource efficiency. The recourse to these collocations, together with expressions referring to the future, such as “will” and “next”, and other expressions indicating a present need, such as “looking for” and “find”, suggests that companies often construct their present sustainable image in terms of future intentions. This rhetorical strategy is probably a response to initiatives such as the GRI guidelines, which expressly advise corporations to deal with “goals and performance”, along with other topics such as “management approach” and “risk and impact assessment”. There are, however, no indications as to the space that should be allotted to each of these topics, probably because discussions are highly variable depending on the company. However, this flexibility lends itself to be exploited by corporations to disclose information that most sheds positive light on them.

The adoption of a rhetorical strategy emphasising goals seems corroborated by the clusters related to the personal pronoun “we”. Although in the three corpora considered together the most frequent clusters are “we aim to” (51 occurrences) and “we said we” (51 occurrences), which would indicate a balance between future goals and present performance, these clusters are immediately followed by expressions indicating intentions and needs rather than accomplishments: “we want to” (37 occurrences) and “we need to” (33 occurrences). A focus on the exhibition of good intentions may be seen as an example of the strategic use of the SRs’ “socio-pragmatic

space” (Bhatia 2010: 40) in which the provision of information is increasingly interspersed with discourse practices typical of promotional genres.

5. “More”

Table 3 shows the three most frequent collocates of “more” in the three sub-corpora. “More” is often used with “than” followed by a numerical expression, as in example 2:

(2) In 2010, 193 training sessions were conducted by the SEA team. Included in this total number are 73 group training sessions where there is **more than** one supplier participating:

Americas - there were 80 training sessions provided to **more than** 170 adidas Group staff and suppliers’ compliance personnel. (Adidas 2010)

This example is symptomatic of the function performed by this construction. “More than” is an approximator of quantity: when used with an exact number the result is a vague reading of the figure. Arguably, the purpose of “more than” is to inflate data so as to impress the audience with the company’s progress against targets. At the same time, however, considering the heterogeneity of the readership of online SRs, this structure may also serve the function of providing more palatable information about business matters, as noted by Goossens and De Cock (2012) in their analysis of business newspapers.

TABLE 3
“More”: collocations in Adidas, Ikea and Vodafone. Raw and normalised frequencies (1,000 words)

Collocation	Adidas		Ikea		Vodafone		Tot	
	Raw	Norm.	Raw	Norm.	Raw	Norm.	Raw	Norm.
more than + numerical expression	71	0.7	72	1.0	35	0.5	178	0.7
more sustainable	23	0.2	128	1.7	14	0.2	165	0.7
more at			69	0.9			69	0.3
more about	40	0.4					40	0.2
more efficient					18	0.3	18	0.07

“More” is also used as a degree modifier of “sustainable”. This collocation is the most recurrent one in Ikea’s SRs and it is the third most frequent in both Adidas’ and Vodafone’s SRs. In Ikea, the three

most recurrent collocations of “more sustainable” are “cotton” (31 times), “life at home” (27 times) and “products” (9 times). In Adidas, the most frequent collocate is “materials” (9 times), while in Vodafone, it is “society(-ies)” (14 times). Regardless of the specific collocation, most of these patterns occur in contexts in which a comparison is made between the present and the future, and sustainability is located principally in the future, as in example 3:

(3) I firmly believe that Vodafone and the sector in which we operate have a key role to play in shaping **a more sustainable society**. (Vodafone 2009/10)

This example is also useful to illustrate another rather frequent rhetorical strategy, whereby companies present their core activities as inherently able to promote sustainability. In so doing, firms acknowledge the improvements that they still need to make, but at the same time, they rhetorically create the need for sustainability. This discourse practice is illustrated in examples (4) and (5). These two statements are remarkably similar: sustainability is presented as a matter of lifestyle and in the era of branding, promoting lifestyle is arguably a way to encourage product consumption, a view that is in line with the increasing tendency to combine sustainability and profitability, which was noted in Bowers (2010), Catenaccio (2012) and Malavasi (2012).

(4) Our products and services can enable our customers to have **more sustainable lifestyles** in a low-carbon society. (Vodafone 2009/10)

(5) We believe that Ikea products and services can help our customers live **a more sustainable life at home**, and thus slow down climate change. (Ikea 2010)

Finally, the third crosscutting pattern is the collocation of “more” with the prepositions “at” and “about”. These collocations function as endophoric or exophoric markers referring respectively to information in other parts of the text or in other documents (often the corporate website). The prominence of these collocations suggests that sustainability reporting increasingly relies on a “colony” (Bhatia 2004: 57) of disclosure genres. As a consequence, it seems reasonable to expect that companies diversify information and ways of presenting it depending on the genre. Equally, it may be hypothesised that genres

influence one another. This is an issue which goes beyond the scope of this paper, but which deserves further attention.

6. Conclusion

The corpus-driven study of the most frequent words in Adidas', Ikea's and Vodafone's SRs has shown that there are recurrent discourse strategies that cut across companies. Firms project a socially responsible image by devoting particular attention to environmental issues and to the relationship with strategic stakeholders, especially suppliers. Companies also establish a close connection between production and the goal of sustainability, underlining the positive impact of their products and services. Thanks to the use of highly recurrent items such as “new” and “more”, companies emphasise their engagement in sustainable development through the identification of innovative ways of thinking, the announcement of future targets and the monitoring of progress. These crosscutting patterns suggest that SRs are undergoing a process of standardization concerning not only the selection of focal topics to cover but also of key rhetorical devices to present corporate values. An analysis of larger and more varied samples is needed, however, to corroborate these results. Another possible line of investigation may be the study of the most recurrent rhetorical devices employed in existing guidelines, such as the GRI guidelines, because the impression is that the way they are written has influenced the discursive strategies of the SRs analysed here.

Differences have also been noted, particularly in terms of the perspective through which core sustainability values are approached. Although an admittedly restricted inventory of items was analysed in this study, the data suggest that while Adidas opts for an analytical approach to sustainability issues, focussing on the identification of problems and causes, Ikea and Vodafone appear as more proactive, concentrating on present and future solutions. Further research is needed to substantiate this finding and to identify other discourse strategies that may indicate different corporate attitudes to increasingly shared sustainability issues.

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