EMBELLISHMENT OR DECLARATION?

A SINGLE CASE STUDY ON CONSTRUCTING A RESPONSIBLE IMAGE TOWARDS STAKEHOLDERS THROUGH SUSTAINABILITY REPORTING

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Embellishment or declaration? A single case study on constructing a responsible image towards stakeholders through sustainability reporting

Abstract:

The thesis exams how an international company conveys its business operations through sustainability reporting. Drawing on Brennan & Merkl-Davies (2014)'s rhetorical strategies in social and environmental reporting as well as Cho et al. (2015)'s organizational façades in sustainability reporting, a single case study on H&M has been conducted by reviewing its sustainability reports from year 2011 to 2020. This study also aims to establish a clearer picture on how stakeholders' responsibility has been presented and interpreted, further shedding a light on Manetti (2011)'s findings. The empirical findings firstly suggested a clear preference on using different strategies to declare various sustainable actions and organizational façades in the reports. Secondly, with these methods, H&M mainly constructed three roles which indicate its attitude change towards different stakeholders. Lastly, these changes lead to a paradox on responsibility in the reports: Is it more responsible to shift more responsibility towards stakeholders? Through this single case study, we argue that language should be considered as a principle aspect that needs to be carefully observed in the sustainability reporting process, and related readers should also concentrate on the intentions behind the rhetoric.

Keywords:

> Sustainability reporting, Rhetorical strategies, Organisational façades, Fast-fashion industry, Stakeholder engagement, Responsibility

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1. Introduction

Sustainability reporting has gradually gained its significance within the corporate reporting process. According to KPMG's 2020 International Sustainability Reporting Survey, 80% of the companies worldwide now report on sustainability. Meanwhile, the related sustainability goals and standards are also developing. GRI remains the dominant sustainability reporting standard around the world, and UNs sustainable development goals (SDGs) are also gaining connections with business activities among the majority of companies. However, as the reporting becomes increasingly content-rich, greenwash has also become a phenomenon in sustainability reporting. Sustainability reporting is becoming a simulacra (Boiral, 2013) to the company and is being argued to be used to form a responsible, active, sustainable image.

For understanding the relationship between sustainability reporting and the company's intentions behind it, several theories are involved by various researchers so as to explain it theoretically. For example, symbolic convergence theory (Hossaln et al., 2018), organizational façades (Cho et al., 2015), dialogic accounting (Bellucci et al., 2019), and so on. And they all expressed their concern on forming too sustainable an image through sustainability reporting, which turned out to be a "marketing instrument" instead of substantive reporting. Rhetorical strategies in sustainability reporting are also not discussed for the first time. They are considered as a method used in two-way communication for achieving specific purposes or to persuade the opponent in Brennan & Merkl-Davies (2014)'s study. As a linguistic theory, it is originally used for speeches, which is a one-way communication. Therefore, we can also see the potential for using rhetoric to explain another one-way communication - reporting.

Traditionally, corporate reporting is "the link between a company and its investors" (Deloitte, 2016). However, as sustainability becomes more and more attached to society, it is also facing a group of complex target audiences. The communication is no longer between just the company and investors, but also involves related reputational gain through the publishing of sustainability reports. Due to this complexity, the companies are also focusing on stakeholder engagement to demonstrate the crucial role stakeholders play in the reporting process and strategic planning (Kaur and Lodhia, 2018; Ardiana, 2019). However, as there is no standardized framework that the company should follow or could align with (Bovea et al., 2021; Adam & Abhayawansa, 2021), and there are no controls on what should be disclosed in the "Stakeholder Engagement" section in the sustainability reports (Manetti, 2011), the company tries to take this advantage to form an sustainable image.

In order to investigate and to find out more insights on corporate social responsibility demonstration, we focus our study on the usage of rhetorical strategies in the sustainability

reporting combined with organizational façades to explore the responsible and sustainable image presented. Therefore, we seek to answer the following research question:

How does a company describe itself towards stakeholders for a sustainable image by using rhetorical methods and organizational façades?

The study was carried on by using qualitative content analysis based on a single case study. We analyzed the data by combining two method theories, the rhetorical strategies based on the Aristotelian rhetoric method and the organizational façades inspired by Brennan and Merkl-Davies (2014) and Cho et al. (2015). The rhetorical framework contains three elements, *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* concentrating on different aspects of languages used, and the three façades, rational, progressive, and reputation façades, are implemented in our analysis as well. To illustrate the use of these theoretical concepts, we present the study based on the case company H&M, a leading company in the fast-fashion industry and with an almost 20 year history in publishing sustainability reports by qualitatively analyzing its sustainability reports.

Our empirical findings suggest that among the three rhetorical strategies, *ethos* is the most frequently used strategy in the reports and *pathos* is the leased used one. The case company attempted to show its progressions and improvements mostly in the sustainability report, which is the progressive façade introduced above, and on the contrary, the reputation façade does not count for the majority of the efforts the company put in. Afterwards, our empirical analysis revealed the evidence that the case company skillfully used rhetorical strategies to show various façades to construct a sustainable and responsible image. However, we identified more inconsistencies and recognized the paradox between the responsibility that the company actually takes and it should take. The company formed various roles when communicating with different stakeholders and shifted the responsibility away at the same time. Through the study, regarding different stakeholders, we were able to define four roles: leader (towards stakeholders in general), monitor & helper (towards suppliers), and inspirer (towards customers). Despite different characteristics of the roles identified, all of them serve for creating a responsible, sustainable image.

The study aims to contribute to the domain of sustainability reporting, and more specifically in the sustainable image presented in the sustainability reporting. By conducting a time based stream research on the case company, H&M's sustainability reports from 2011 to 2020, we intend to draw out an industry norm through this "leading company". Additionally, we would like to contribute to Brennan and Merkl-Davies (2014)'s works and add on fresh and wider perspectives by combining rhetoric with sustainability reports. Therefore, our contribution will also land on applying the method theory on accounting research, which involves the

interpretation of reports through rhetoric and organisational façades aspects. Through these two linguistic theories, we believe they can serve the research question in an inspiring way.

The remainder of this paper is organized and constructed as follows: in chapter 2, prior literatures on related topics have been discussed and the method theories, rhetorical strategies and organizational façades, have been introduced. Chapter 3 explains the research design, selection of case company and text, and data analysis process. The empirical findings are presented in chapter 4 and discussions in chapter 5. This study is then summarized in chapter 6 by concluding the key findings, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

This chapter will outline the theories studied and used in our research. First section is about domain theory, in which previous research on sustainability reporting, rhetoric, and stakeholder communication will be reviewed. Then, this chapter will provide an overview of the method theories chosen to be used in this study and detailed explanations will be given respectively.

2.1. Domain Theory

2.1.1. Normalization of sustainability reporting and sustainable development

In the past decades, sustainability reporting and sustainable development have become an important theme in business operations and followed up with continuous development on "how" and "what" to report. A classic definition of sustainable development is that " ... *to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*" (World Commission on Environment and Development Report, 1987). The range covered by sustainability is also developing, and was defined by UNESCO with four dimensions - society, environment, culture, and economy. More dimensions such as time and human, time and space, are also considered as a complement (Seghezzo, 2009).

As society raises the importance of sustainable development and its relationship with corporate responsibility, more and more organizations started to conduct sustainability reporting under suggested structures, mainly the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (KPMG 2020). According to GRI, Sustainability reporting "...*is an organization's practice of reporting publicly on its economic, environmental, and/or social impacts, and hence its contributions – positive or negative – towards the goal of sustainable development.*" (GRI 101, 2016). To achieve this, GRI forwarded several principles for defining reporting content: Stakeholder inclusiveness, sustainability context, materiality, and completeness. Among them, materiality is based on the significance of economic, environmental, and social impacts, and the influence on stakeholders' decisions. Yet the objectivity of materiality assessment is doubted (Boiral, 2013) regarding the credibility of the information disclosed (Soumaya et al., 2018).

As organizations develop, they are expected to become more transparent and be responsible to society, as mentioned in GRI's mission, "... *GRI exists to help organizations be transparent and take responsibility for their impacts so that we can create a sustainable future,*" which is followed by a significant number of organizations and regions. Nowadays

over 95% of N100 (Top 100) companies report on sustainability, and a significant increase is also found in almost all sectors except the retail sector which is always lagging compared to others. Significant actions exist in the Fashion and Luxury sectors (KPMG, 2020) so as to go along with consumers' expectations which have been developed as a preference for sustainable products (Balconi et al., 2019).

2.1.2. Rhetoric in sustainability reporting

As a tool of communicating the social and environmental responsibility and effects that an organization's business activities are bearing and conducting, sustainability reporting is playing a crucial role in helping organizations gain "public approval" and "public support" (Bernays, 1947). Even though the main viewers of the sustainability reports are the related shareholders, organizations are now also awaring of the "complexity" of their target audiences. As a public document, government, media, social pressure groups, and various stakeholders all have access to it. Organizations have to be aware of the possibility of misunderstanding and reputational damage. Therefore, in sustainability reports, metaphors and images are frequently used for leading readers to interpret information in their preferred way, that is using rhetoric approaches (Brennan & Merkl-Davies, 2014).

In the 2000s, research revealed that companies report their core indicators which portray a responsible image of companies but they fail to reflect their performance in social and environmental activities and impacts from their business activities (Adams, 2004; Boiral, 2013). Questions and limitations are left in the report which shows a low quality as a presentation and as communication. Yet this was not obviously improved as 10 years later, a stream of research ((Boiral 2013); (Soumaya et al., 2018); (Diouf & Boiral, 2017)) also indicated that most of the companies still fail to report significant negative information. Furthermore, the images that were meant to simulacra the companies are actually disconnected from the actual business impact so that only a small amount of significant events concerning sustainable development are communicated clearly in the reports.

That is why rhetoric became popular in both sustainability reporting and the research field. Brennan & Merkl-Davies (2014) found extensive use of rhetoric for all parties in social and environmental communications and "*rhetorical approaches emphasize either the strategy or political nature of corporate narrative reporting and communication*". Evidence is given that rhetoric is "*the science and art of persuasive language use*" (Reisigl, 2008). The usage of these approaches is both persuading audiences under a current situation and structuring a framework for future rhetorical situations (Christensen et al., 2004). Persuasion is acting to

change people's attitudes about the organization's sustainability performance. For example, the pollution from factories or inhumanity in the labor market.

As mentioned above, rhetoric approaches are not only widely used in structuring companies' image and intention, they are also used for dealing with the social and environmental crisis that the company faces. Distinguished from the typical risks faced by the businesses, sustainability-related risks are related to consequences on the corporate reputation, financial exposure, and so on rather than the operational aspects (Giannakis & Papadopoulos, 2016). When sustainability-related risks exist, organizations are observed to use "... *the rhetorical strategies of logos, ethos, and pathos to convince audiences of the validity and legitimacy of their claims*" (Brennan & Merkl-Davies, 2014). Although lacking theory to underpin the analysis (Davison, 2014), visual rhetoric is also regarded as an important component in accounting statements and accounting numbers (Quattrone, 2009).

However, we would like to focus our study mainly on the written rhetoric used in sustainability reporting. Firstly, previous research has shown the rhetoric in sustainability related press, but not in official reports. Secondly, as sustainability reporting becomes increasingly universal among corporations, it serves as a gradually important way for companies to express their thoughts on sustainability to their stakeholders. This will inevitably, consciously or not, involve the use of rhetoric. Lastly, even though the reporting process is conducted as a combination of written and visual rhetoric, we believe they are conducted under different theories and therefore we would like to stick to the literature (Brennan & Merkl-Davies, 2014) we would like to contribute to.

2.1.3. Consistency of sustainability communication and stakeholder engagement

GRI, as the only framework concerning accountability for an organization's impact on the environment, society and economy (Adam & Abhayawansa, 2021), sets the standards for sustainability reporting, aiming to enhance transparency and to meet different expectations of various stakeholders. However, Adam and Abhayawansa (2021) argue that the GRI standards so far do not go deep enough. Based on their analysis, the problems that different reporting standards currently have regarding the sustainability aspects have been demonstrated. The phenomenon of the proliferation of reporting frameworks implies the need for the standardization of sustainability reports. Together with the analysis of the icons and graphic designs demonstrated on the sustainability reports, there is no standardized system to guide the communication on this aspect (Bovea et al., 2021). Besides the overload of information, the inconsistency among the actions and information, or information claimed in various settings also draws attention to the need for standardization. In Cho et al. (2015)'s study, three

outputs, talk, action, and decision, have been specifically studied by supplementing the organizational façades framework. The outputs signaled through the reports and decisions made based on the reports might be inconsistent with the actions. The corporations not only used rhetorical strategies in the form of metaphors to reframe the sentences to respond to the demand of and criticism from legitimate stakeholders (Brennan & Merkl-Davies, 2014) but also attempted to concede the conflicting demands of various stakeholder groups by construct and maintain several discrepant façades (Cho et al., 2015).

Based on the GRI standards, which originally does not encourage the organizations to engage with their stakeholders but gradually increases the focus on specifying the importance and power of involving the stakeholders (Grushina, 2016), organizations generally would construct a section related to shareholders engagement in their sustainability reports. Most of them use various methods to show their willingness in communication with the stakeholders (Bellucci et al., 2019). The relationship between organizations and stakeholders becomes increasingly crucial and has been taken seriously, which has also been emphasized by Kaur and Lodhia (2018)'s research on Australian Councils that highlighted the critical role the stakeholder plays in sustainability accounting and reporting process such as strategic planning, measurement on sustainability performance and so on. Also, Ardiana (2019)'s study on large Australian companies underlined that the awareness of stakeholder engagement is not only important for business processes but also for more informative and meaningful sustainable disclosures.

However, even though there is the presence of the stakeholder engagement section in the reports, no qualitative controls have been implemented on what should be disclosed and how the information should be managed. Based on Manetti (2011)'s findings on the study of various company's reports in different countries and industries, stakeholder engagement would serve either to set the strategic objective or to set the content of the report whereas most of the companies did not refer to any of them. Most of the reports studied only concentrate on the stakeholder management instead of real engagement to establish mutual responsibility, and stakeholder engagement was to promote a positive corporate image. Previous studies pointed out a lack of the ideal of stakeholder engagement in sustainability reporting, however, what companies have done to make the stakeholder engagement appear impeccable in the reporting process, and how they distribute responsibilities among themselves and stakeholders could be further studied.

Sustainability communications in the fashion industry

Customers, as one of the major stakeholders in the fashion industry, with their increasing awareness of sustainability, how companies involve their stakeholders in the sustainability matters would be interesting to explore. Developing different marketing strategies

(Thorisdottir & Johannsdottir, 2020) and conveying sustainability information through corporate websites are all means that might help to enhance the sustainability communications. However, only a small number of companies did an effective alignment between their sustainability communications and sustainable actions (Da Giau & Macchion, 2016). Life-cycle assessment (LCA), a technique introduced to quantify the impacts and emissions the company generated, helps to support management by questioning all three sustainability strategies: efficiency, consistency and sufficiency (Malik et al., 2021). As companies in the fast-fashion industry consume tons of materials in their production process that creates huge impacts on the surroundings and the society such as Greenhouse gas emissions and extensive water usages (Caniato et al., 2012), the three aspects mentioned by Malik et al. are equally important in this context. The reporting in the fast-fashion industry lacks action orientations. The gap between sustainability reporting and the actions still exists (Garcia-Torres et al., 2017). Therefore, it is necessary to think about how to communicate with stakeholders more effectively but at the same with sufficient and consistent information disclosed.

2.1.4. Connecting the language with company image construction

Previous studies including the exploration on the incompatibility of organizational talks, actions, and decisions, and discrepant organizational façades (Cho et al., 2015) and the research on the extensive use of rhetorical strategies by all parties including both business organizations and stakeholders (Brennan & Merkl-Davies, 2014) concentrate on different aspects of the sustainability reporting process. These studies nonetheless build the concepts for our analysis. Another domain of the previous studies focuses on the stakeholder engagement of sustainability reporting. Besides the discussion about the important role the stakeholders play in the reporting process (Kaur & Lodhia, 2018; Ardiana, 2019), Manetti (2011) further pointed out the issue that there is a lack of the ideal of stakeholder engagement in the current sustainability reporting, which leads to the possibility of further research on this aspect.

First of all, this study shed a light on sustainability reporting in general. It uses different materials, sustainability reports, than previous studies focusing on rhetoric and adds another layer on sustainability reporting by implementing the organizational façades theory to enrich and advance a collective understanding. Organizational façades could generate positive outcomes beyond reality, in turn to give an appearance that stakeholders are well engaged in the process and sustainability efforts have been communicated effectively. Therefore, based on the understanding of various façades the company demonstrated, the study also aims to

contribute to a broader scope on the construction of a sustainable corporate image. Additionally, this study tries to explore how a company demonstrates the stakeholder engagement in the reports to find out responsibility distribution among stakeholders and the company. To sum up, we want our study to address the following research question:

How does a company describe itself towards stakeholders for a sustainable image by using rhetorical methods and organizational façades?

2.2. Method theory

2.2.1. Rhetorical strategies

We consider rhetoric here as a method for communication in order to achieve certain intentions. We are inspired by Brennan and Merkl-Davies (2014), in which Aristotle's triangle framework of rhetorical situations are adapted.

Brennan and Merkl-Davies (2014) was inspired by the "New Rhetoric" movement who "*regard rhetoric as an essential constituent part of social interaction and communication, rather than mere ornamentation of speech".* This is linked to the idea of Speech act theory (SAT). SAT, originally from the philosophy of language, refers to someone not only expressing the information but also taking actions through it (Austin, 1975). That is, once an individual said or communicated some information, this communication also includes a call to action of some kind. Using our definition of rhetoric, it is providing evidence or reliability to the claim as a means of scientific and artistic persuasive language (Reisigl, 2008). Therefore, as presented in Brennan and Merkl-Davies (2014), the rhetoric is used in sustainability communication as a way of influencing the audience to change their opinions of an issue.

Our rhetorical framework is also based on Aristotelian rhetoric which includes three types of rhetorical strategies: *logos* (appeal to logic), *ethos* (appeal to values or authorities), and *pathos* (appeal to emotion). *Logos*, derived from ancient Greek, was applied by Aristotle when to "reasoned discourse" or "the argument". It "relates to the speech itself", and can appear in forms of statistics, articles, studies, and so on. Therefore, it should be counted as *logos* "so far as it proves or seems to prove" (Aristotle). *Ethos* in rhetoric is linked to the speaker's credibility. This credibility can be formed before audiences start to listen, but can also be gained through "self-branding", citing reliable sources, or adding up personal confidence in order to influence audiences' attitude. *Pathos* is targeted at awakening audiences' emotions. By using vivid words or metaphor, the emotional change can induce audiences to make desired decisions. Examples on these strategies can be found below:

Logos	Our own result and audits done by an independent laboratory shows (sic) that the chemical has not been used, since the results are below the detection level the independent laboratory recommends (**in this case below 100 ppm**)
Ethos	The Adidas Group also commissioned a German-based independent testing institute specialised in water analysis to compare testing results as reported in the Greenpeace report with **German and European waste and drinking water regulations.**
Pathos	We always **strive to strengthen our methods and routines**, and as part of our work we wellcome (sic) the dialogue with all our stakeholders – of course including Greenpeace.

Table 1: Examples of rhetorical strategies (Note: examples come from Brennan and Merkl-Davies (2014)'s study, for explaining and guidance purpose only)

2.2.2. Organizational façades

Organizational façades are defined by Nystrom and Starbuck (1984) as "*a symbolic front erected by organizational participants designed to reassure their organization's stakeholders, of the organization and its management*" (cited from Abrahamson & Baumard, 2008). Three façades are discussed by Abrahamson and Baumard (2008): a rational façade ("a key to market legitimacy"), a progressive façade ("display talk and decisions about new approaches to solving problems raised by stakeholders"), and lastly a reputation façade ("displays accounting and rhetorical symbols desired by critical stakeholders").

The three façades included in the organizational façades, examples may be found below, would serve to demonstrate how an organization operates and how it communicates with the stakeholders from various aspects.

Rational façade	These systems are aimed at achieving top operating performance and ensuring that we direct our **$10 billion 2005 capital and exploratory budget toward the highest quality opportunities** with the greatest potential to create future growth and stockholder value.

Progressive façade	Recognizing there is always room for improvement, the company plans to continue to identify **additional opportunities for expanded implementation of the [Voluntary] Principles [of Security and Human Rights].**
Reputation façade	Protecting **people and the environment** is a **core value** for Chevron.

Table 2: Examples of organizational façades (Note: examples come from Cho et al. (2015)'s study, for explaining and guidance purpose only)

The rational façade expresses rationality by demonstrating behaviors that meet the norm. For example, demonstrating an organization's cost and benefit analysis, assessment details, and so on (Cho et al., 2015). However, as only showing that the company is behaving within the norm might not satisfy all stakeholders' expectations, the progressive façade helps to demonstrate that actions and decisions were designed and implemented to solve the problems and move the company forward, in other words, showing how the company improved compared to last year, or what kind of actions have been done regarding current issues. The reputation façade addresses corporate values and how the companies stand in their entire industry, it displays accounting and rhetorical symbols to meet stakholders's desires and reinforce a positive image (Abrahamson & Baumard, 2008).

Organizational façades are being used by companies to justify actions, acquire sources, and can be constructed to mislead external stakeholders (Nystrom & Starbuck, 1984). However, it is believed by Cho et al. (2015) that "*contradictory societal and institutional pressures, in essence, require organizations to engage in hypocrisy and develop façades*". This will largely limit the substantiveness of sustainability reporting. Organizations hide themselves or some of their behaviors behind these façades, and these façades may also hide the problems that may change stakeholders' opinions negatively in regards to the company. The companies display façades to make the case that they conform to the existing norms to be rational actors and constantly recraft their façades to maintain that image (Abrahamson & Baumard, 2008). Therefore, as this framework categorized the façades into three different facets, this would help us have a clear direction on analyzing the business operation on top of rhetorical strategies.

2.2.3. The synergy of method theories

Logos
Refer to studies, statistics, cases

Rhetorical strategies

(Way of presenting)

Ethos
Self-branding, citing
credible sources

Pathos
Stories, vivid language,
inspirational quotes

Rational façades
Key to legitimacy

Organizational façades

(Intention of presenting)

Progressive façades
Mirror the norms of the progress

Reputation façades
Accounting and rhetorical symbols

Figure 1: Synergy of method theories

As shown by the figure above, the two triangles have been designed to illustrate the two method theories we chose to base our analysis on, rhetorical strategies and organizational façades. With regard to the rhetorical strategies, *logos* refer to studies, statistics, and cases to show logicality, *ethos* refer to credible sources such as experts or legitimate organizations in the claims, and *pathos* uses stories, vivid languages, and inspirational quotes to generate emotional reaction. These three together serve as the foundation of our study and would be used to firstly identify and classify the language used in the reports which could be considered as the way of presenting and the first layer of the study results. The findings would be further narrowed down to demonstrate how these rhetorical strategies lead to the creation of organizational façades. Within this method, the rational façade shows rationality and alignment to the societal norms, the progressive façade expresses the progression and improvements, and the reputation façade uses accounting and rhetorical symbols to show and retain the company image. They combine together to show the intentions of the presentation and also the second layer of the empirical findings.

Although these two theories have separate meanings and explanations, they share a lot of common ground. For instance, *logos* and the rational façade both contribute to the logic, reason, and rationality of the argument. In the same vein the reputation façade illustrates the corporate image that could be better perceived emotionally by using *pathos*. We see the potential of combining the two frameworks together to get a more comprehensive image of sustainability reporting in linguistic and operational aspects. Thus, these two theories are not completely different ones but could be imagined as two triangles with overlapping areas instead. However, one could also use different rhetorical strategies to put up a certain organization façade, such as using *pathos* for the rational façade, or using both *logos* and *ethos* for progressive façade. As a result, different forms and possibilities of presenting make the combination of these two theories interesting.

3. Data collection

This section will display our data collection process by firstly explaining the research design. Followed by describing the selection of the case company and the empirical material selected to be used in this study. Afterwards, this section will address and walk through the process of how the researchers analyzed the data.

3.1. Research design

Interpretivist approach

Interpretivism, also referred to as the interpretivist approach, involves researchers seeking to combine qualitative data into a *"system of belief"*. It involves the form of work that "look for details about preferences, motivations, and actions that are not easily made numeric", and comment about general principles or relationships by showing how the general pattern looks in practice (Lin, 1998). The interpretivist view can be largely affected by the history, culture, power differences in society, and politics (Dharamsi & Scott, 2009), and therefore discovering and delineating the social mechanisms is work most suited to an interpretivist approach, but the result will also vary between researchers and studies due to its dependence on subjectivity and small adaptation of results. When having interpretative views on the findings, meaning emerges depending on the different angles from which the researcher approaches the subject.

Based on our method theory, it is inevitable for us to adopt an interpretivist approach into our data analysis. With awareness of the limitations of interpretivist methods, we believe it fits the best for our single case study, secondary sources collected, and domain and method theories. Furthermore, by using contrastive thinking as a useful tool to develop and construct the explanations more casual and theoretically contextualized (Lukka, 2014), the rhetoric could be better interpreted so as for us to find the meaning behind the report information, so as to draw an image out of the official words to gain in-depth understanding of why companies present in the way and method they do.

A single case study

In order to gain insights on how the rhetorical strategies have been used to show various façades and responsibilities, we chose to conduct a single case study. Based on our knowledge, previous research on rhetorical strategies or organizational façade focused mostly on multiple-case studies (Cho et al., 2015; Brennan & Merkl-Davies, 2014). However, as a

single case study would provide a deeper analysis, leading to explore new theoretical relationships and challenge the existing ones (Dyer et al., 1991), we believe that this method is well suited to our research to find out how the two method theories could be combined and how the company's responsibility has changed over time.

3.2. Selection of case company

To contribute to the previous research (Brennan & Merkl-Davies, 2014; Cho et al., 2015; Kaur & Lodhia, 2018), we chose to perform our study on one of the 'Detox'[1] claim companies, H&M. We believe H&M is a representative case company within the fast-fashion industry that has a negative unsustainable impact on the environment. Additionally, according to KPMG's sustainability report (2020), H&M is within the industry where the actor reacts to sustainability concerns the slowest. Within such industries, organizations are more likely to face bigger sustainability related problems when engaging with stakeholders and forming an organizational image. Therefore, it is urgent to define the relationship between the sustainability reporting and the indicated content behind the reporting.

H&M, a Swedish corporation founded in 1947, is one of the world's leading fast fashion companies . The group operates ten different brands and continually aims to increase the share of its recycled and sustainably sourced materials in its collections (H&M Group Annual Report 2020). H&M has published its sustainability report since 2002 and continues involving more indexes such as the GRI Content Index since 2011 and the UNGP Reporting Framework Index since 2016.

As sustainability becomes a more and more pressing issue within our society, the fast-fashion industry is criticized for its use of poisonous chemicals, human rights problems, raw material supply chain, transportation, etc. Additionally, based on fast-fashion's nature, cheaper, fashionable products, speedier production, and increased purchase power enable customers to enjoy the instant-ratification desire, but the industry also inevitably has to deal with its large amount of production, and huge amount of waste due to the unsold as well as sold products. As a leading company within this industry, H&M has been regarded as a company that is actively participating in the sustainability transformation, which is perfectly fitting for the industrial requirements we are searching for.

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[1] 'Detox My Fashion' is a campaign started by sustainability group Greenpeace, which claims to stop fast-fashion companies from dumping hazardous chemicals into rivers and oceans, and it started with a press accusing six fast-fashion companies of water pollution. (Referred source from Greenpeace Organization: https://www.greenpeace.org/international/act/detox/)

3.3. Selection of text

Sustainability reports are an appropriate source for our study since it focuses specifically on the social and environmental aspects as well as the communication between organizations and their stakeholders. Therefore, our qualitative data consists of H&M's sustainability reports published on its organizational website from 2011 to 2020. Ten reports have been collected in total and specific focus has been put on the years 2011, 2015, 2016, and 2020. We mainly considered events that greatly affected the fast-fashion industry as well as H&M itself, and based our selection of years on these events. Within the selected years of the study, a number of standards have been established and several significant events occured, such as Greenpeace's criticism of the fashion industry's high level of hazardous chemical use, the Higg Index established in 2012 assessing sustainability throughout the entirety of the supply chain, the UN Sustainable Development Goals were established and the UNGP Reporting Framework Index launched in 2015, and most recently, the Fashion Pact designed and signed by various companies in 2020. This change of the standards indicates the development and innovation of the entire industry as well as society at large and stakeholders that might be impacted by the changes. As the regulations and standards have no compulsory requirements on what should be disclosed or publicly distributed, a good way to show companies' sustainable image might be to try to align with these new regulations and to manage to implement and embed them in the sustainability reports, at the same time also showing them to the stakeholders explicitly.

3.4. Data analysis

The empirical data was analyzed by using qualitative content analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2003). With this approach, we were able to gather valuable publicly disclosed information regarding sustainability (mainly sustainability reports), which also matches with our method theory of rhetorical strategies that mainly relies on the language and words used. Previous studies (Cho et al., 2015; Brennan & Merkl-Davies, 2014; Boiral, 2013; Bovea et al., 2021) have also implemented this method of analysis, which increases the possibility for comparison with and further contribution to them.

The reports have been checked regularly to make sure the claims within the reports are well understood and no significant information has been missed. The first phase of our analysis focused on individual reports to identify explicit or underlying trends within the rhetorical strategies and to quantify the expressions (see Table 3 for example). Then, in the second phase, by comparing the reports from different years and looking for similarities and patterns

across the ten sustainability reports selected, we were able to comprehend the meaning and purpose behind the reports and to analyze the reports more comprehensively.

As expressed in the synergy of method theories, we conducted the selection of texts according to rhetorical strategies and organizational façades by firstly filtering with rhetorical strategies, and then allocating the selected information into three façades for further analysis. In order to systematically develop the meaning behind the information, coding is used in the data analysis process. Coding in this paper is referred to as a simple operation of identifying and labeling the data with a code. With the rhetorical strategies and organizational façades as our predetermined coding scheme, we were able to deal with the large amount of data more efficiently and to categorize our findings more effectively in order to establish what they indicate as part of the general company image. A guideline on coding is shown below:

[Example of *Logos* + Rational façade]: (...) our science-based targets **aligned with the Paris agreement** have been approved by the Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi). H&M group *commits to reduce absolute GHG emissions 40%* in our own operations (scope 1+2) by 2030. (2018, p54)

[Example of *Logos* + Progressive façade]: We will **continue to support increases in global production of organic cotton**, but we do expect growth rates to normalise (*our average growth from 2007–2010 amounted to 130%*). In 2011, we nevertheless further ***increased our use of organic cotton*** *by more than 20%.* It now represents 7.6% of all the cotton we use. (2011, p22)

[Example of *Logos* + Reputation façade]: According to *Textile Exchange's latest Global Market Report on Sustainable Textiles 2010* (launched in summer 2011), H&M is **the world's biggest user of certified organic cotton**. (2011, p22)

[Example of *Ethos* + Rational façade]: This new assessment method is based on the *Higg Index*, and some complementary questions and KPIs developed by H&M. **The Higg Index is a holistic measurement standard** with the aim of creating alignment, greater transparency and better sustainability performance across the apparel and footwear industry. (2015, p34)

[Example of *Ethos* + Progressive façade]: We are working with a range of stakeholders, including the *European Retail Round Table* (ERRT) and its members, the *World Resources Institute* (WRI) and the *Carbon Disclosure Project* (CDP), to **find a consensus on how to define, measure and report on renewable energy use**. (2011, p64)

[Example of *Ethos* + Reputation façade]: We lead the ranking for use of organic cotton, *MMC-fibres and RDS-certified down*, and continue to be **one of the world's biggest adopters** of recycled cotton, wool, nylon and lyocell. (2020, p39)

[Example of *Pathos* + Rational façade]: To us, 'quality' includes that our products should be produced, transported and sold with *care for people and the environment.* (2011, p20)

[Example of *Pathos* + Progressive façade]: At H&M, **we are further improving our purchasing practices** founded on our relationships with suppliers, *enabling and incentivising the business environment* in a way that facilitates suppliers taking ownership of future investments in the workforce, i.e. skills development, sustainability performance as well as direct wage improvement areas. (2015, p38)

Table 3: Examples of rhetorical strategies and organizational façades identified during coding

[Example of *Pathos* + Reputation façade]: We have now ***taken a big first step*** in **lifting the Fair Wage Method to scale**, building on the promising outcomes and what we have learned from the Fair Wage method in our three role model factories (2015, p48)

(Note: Key phases guiding the coding judgement of rhetorical strategies and organizational façades are italicised and bolded respectively in this study.)

Discussions have been conducted between both researchers regularly throughout the data reviewing process to reduce subjectivity and also to avoid the misunderstanding of the expressions. Thereafter, the analysis was conducted based and built on previous literature, findings were divided into various sections, and the method theories have been applied to each section.

4. Empirical Analysis

In this chapter, four main sessions will be presented. Based on H&M's sustainability reports from 2011 to 2020, language, stakeholders, customers, and suppliers will be discussed respectively. Firstly, we will talk about the general language features the company used and the changes it has undergone. Secondly, the stakeholders in general will be discussed with the main focus on structural changes. The third and fourth part of this chapter will be focused on the customer and supplier specific stakeholder groups respectively, showing the changes and possible reasons that lead to the changes.

4.1. Overall language in sustainability reporting

Rhetorical strategies

In order to explore how each rhetorical strategy has been used in the report and how they help the company to communicate with the stakeholders and build a relationship with them, we believe the frequency of each strategy used to be a crucial clue. Following examples shows our standard for selecting the text:

> [Example of *logos*]: (Use of statistics) "*Factory-level wage management systems at our suppliers led to a **2 .8% average wage increase** and workplace dialogue programmes led to a **2% average wage increase**, compared to suppliers not enrolled in these programmes.*" (2020, p65)

> [Example of *ethos*]: (Use of reliable outsider comments) "***The SAC Higg Facility Environment Module** shows that our value chain is performing well in reducing water use and improving wastewater quality compared to our industry.*" (2020, p44)

> [Example of *pathos*]: (Use of vivid words) "*We'll **continue accelerating progress towards our goal** of 100% of tier 1 supplier units within SIPP assessment scope completing verified FEM and FSLM by 2022.*" (2020, p79)

To obtain further insight, we analyzed H&M's 2020 sustainability report as an example (Table 4). And we have found that *ethos* was the most frequently used strategy, and the second most used one is *logos*, and then *pathos*. *Ethos* gains a clear preference in H&M's 2020 sustainability report and is most often shown in referring to sustainability related awards and organizations' rankings, which is in line with their active actions.

Rhetorical strategies	Logos	Ethos	Pathos	Sum
Total	40	59	38	137

Table 4: Frequency of rhetorical strategies used in 2020 report

Based upon H&M's 2020 sustainability report, we observed that for different topics, the case company prefers to use different rhetorical strategies for presenting a "more reliable image". The section "Learnings" has been summarized by often using *ethos*, referring to the company's collaboration or comments from experts in outstanding universities. In section "Future focus", *pathos* were used to lead audiences' emotional reaction by using inspiring languages or presenting a well solved case. From here, we came to understand that the same rhetorical strategies have been implemented for the same broad context, and similarities could be found even though the specific content discussed might be different.

Organizational façades

To build on the findings of the rhetorical strategies, we further applied the organizational façades framework in our study that has been explained in detail by using the below examples.

> [Example of rational façade]: (Show alignment of the plan) *We are fully committed to ensuring **the timely implementation of all Corrective Action Plans** at all of our supplier factories moving forward and will continue to follow up on this closely, providing support wherever it is needed. (2015, p39)*

> [Example of progressive façade]: (Show the company's improvement on the use of organic cotton) *In 2011, we nevertheless further **increased our use of organic cotton by more than 20%**. It now represents 7.6% of all the cotton we use. (2011, p22)*

> [Example of reputation façade]: (Show the company's position in the industry) ***We lead the ranking for use of organic cotton**, MMC-fibres and RDS-certified down, and continue to be **one of the world's biggest adopters** of recycled cotton, wool, nylon and lyocell. (2020, p39)*

As what we did for rhetorical strategies above, we have also used the 2020 report as an example to illustrate the frequency of the organizational façades constructed. The company is mostly showing its progressive façades by using rhetorical strategies, and the reputation façades was the least demonstrated in the report (Table 5).

Organizational façades	Total
Rational façade	50
Progressive façade	56
Reputation façade	31

Table 5: Frequency of Organizational façades showed in 2020 report

Combination of rhetorical strategies and organizational façades

When combining rhetorical strategies and organizational façades together, by using the 2020 sustainability report as an example (Table 6), each façade has been illustrated in the form of a claim by implementing the rhetorical strategies.

Organizational façades/ Rhetorical strategies	Logos	Ethos	Pathos	Total
Rational	16	19	15	50
Progressive	23	25	6	56
Reputation	1	15	15	31
Total	40	59	38	

Table 6: Frequency of the combination of rhetorical strategies and organizational façades demonstrated in 2020 report

The rational façade is mostly shown by using *logos* and *ethos*. This is a rather non-surprising result, as one may expect to use *logos* and *ethos,* the two "more rational" or say "emotion-free" strategies to be linked tighter with each other, to present a rational image. However, the finding shows a surprising result that despite *logos* and *ethos* being used the most, the frequency of using *pathos* is very close to other two strategies. For this unexpected result, one would wonder "Why use *pathos* for a rational façade?" or further "Is *pathos* going to function well in a rational façade?" However, this is out of range for our research and we would like to just briefly take it as a way to strengthen the argument. *Pathos* invokes audiences' emotion and therefore gives a chance for accepting the speaker's thinking. For the rationale of its actions, one can expect H&M to apply more *pathos* to create a more emotionally well-intentioned attitude towards its audiences (stakeholders).

Based on the data collected above, *logos* and *ethos* have been mostly used to show the progressive façade. This was expected for the progressive façade since for a more concrete progressive image, one would expect H&M to present more concrete evidence, and therefore this is generally an unsurprising result. In addition to the use of *logos* to ensure that the information disclosed in the report is reliable and measurable, H&M also used *ethos* with various environmental and social organizations or government legislations on specific concerns such as the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), World Health Organization, etc. in its claims, combining with its new decision and acts such as adoption of new GRI sustainability reporting standards or the signatory of the Fashion Pact, to strengthen the credibility and to show its progressive façade.

The reputation façade is mainly presenting the company's future strategy, promises and how these aspects work in driving the company's operations or shaping its values and has most frequently been implied by *ethos* and *pathos*. In this context, it not only evokes the audiences' emotional response but also shows credibility. Here, *logos* have only been used once, much less when compared to *ethos* and *pathos*. As the message the reputation façade tries to convey is not related to a specific individual or measurement, it would be considered a reasonable result that using statistics would contribute the least to the construction of the corporation's sustainable image.

Tone of the language

Starting from a general overview of the reports from 2011 to 2020, we discovered that H&M has used inspiring words and tones to describe its actions towards sustainability and developments on future sustainability strategies. The use of phrases such as "*increase visibility*" and "*even more impactful*" expressed in the below examples lead to a positive feeling.

> *Now all our brands are exploring how to increase visibility of product sustainability information — testing new communication approaches and traceability pilots. (2020, p24)*

> *We're now updating our strategy to be even more impactful. (2020, p56)*

However, when looking into details and focusing on the meaning behind the sentences, the actual implementations and results from the claimed policies and behaviors are not clear. For instance, even though H&M informed the audience that new communication approaches have been developed to improve the information visibility in the above claim, it neither mentioned the progress nor the updated plans in detail in the reports. This method of disclosure allowed

H&M to show a superficially sustainable image but whether substantive action has been taken remains a question.

Followed by the close readings of the sustainability reports, issues and concerns raised by the society or other stakeholders have not been actively responded or at least not in a clear and explicit way. Even though concerns have been raised, H&M handled them skillfully by using excuses and avoiding mentioning the details, which could be considered as using the rhetoric of silence.

> [Example 1]*: We understand that many of our stakeholders have faced a challenging situation during 2020 and could not always prioritise filling in questionnaires and surveys. (2020, p15)*

> [Example 2]*: We investigated and closed 16 incidents of potential non-compliance with the Code of Ethics (2019: 28, 2018: 47). Of these, nine potential incidents involved our employees and eight involved our business partners. (2020, p79)*

Taking these two examples from the most recent report, the first statement pointed out the issue of not having sufficient number of stakeholders participating in its survey, leading to the potential concern on the credibility of the data used, whereas H&M responded by using the pandemic as an excuse to admit the problem but not taking any responsibility for not persuading or educating the stakeholders to participate in this activity. Additionally, in the second example, even though H&M mentioned that there were incidents that occurred, how it solved them and future improvements, however, the related issues have not been declared.

> [Example 3]: *During 2011, H&M engaged with Greenpeace regarding our shared ambition to eliminate the use of hazardous chemicals and achieve zero discharge of such substances in global textile production. Since 1995 H&M has been working to reduce the use and impact of hazardous chemicals using an approach based on the Precautionary Principle. (2011, p16)*

In the case of Greenpeace's criticism in 2011 (Example 3), H&M did not give any feedback to the accusation but presented it as a "partnership" instead to avoid confirming the issue at hand.

Words used in the reports

In order to further familiarize ourselves with the data and understand the information that H&M tried to convey in its reports, we have narrowed down the scope and focused closely on the words and phrases. In these disclosures, we note that vague phrases such as "*seem to be well*" or "*easily understandable*" in example 4 and 5 did not have an actual meaning but

would help the claim to be more persuasive, have been frequently used in the reports. These phrases seem to emphasize the progressive efforts the company put into sustainable development and the attempt to improve the understandability of the information disclosed. The real world implementations are still in doubt.

> [Example 4:] *I think that H&M takes a very serious view on business ethics and fighting corruption, that these issues are highly prioritised by top management, and that procedures in these respects seem to be well integrated into H&M's business strategies. (2014, p56)*

> [Example 5]: *The H&M brand OPT pilot showed that customers are interested in sustainability information, but it must be easily understandable to have an impact. (2020, p25)*

Although sustainability is a word that has often been mentioned in recent years, it is necessary to use scientific data and results to help provide proper information to the stakeholder and to show the efforts by deeds rather than by words. This vague and limited information mainly highlights the company's efforts on rephrasing its future goals instead of planning detailed actions on how to achieve them.

Besides the above findings, certain words have been used quite often when talking and describing different stakeholders (Table 7). These words set a dividing line that reveals the perceived relationship between the company and its stakeholders. H&M takes on a collaborative role when mentioning stakeholders in the reports by using words like *"collaborate", "work with"* etc.. However, when narrowing it down to specific stakeholders and only focusing on the two stakeholders our study is exploring, this ceases to be the case. Regarding customers, H&M more often used words such as *"influence", "inspire",* or *"help"*, which are not actually consistent with stakeholders in general. Therefore, a potential conflict has been raised. For suppliers, H&M also preferred to use *"help"* a lot, together with words such as *"committed"* and *"aim"* to demonstrate its commitment and efforts towards supply chain management and sustainable development. From the observations of the words H&M used in the reports, we discovered the various roles that H&M formed respectively regarding different groups of stakeholders that will be discussed further in the later chapters of this study.

Stakeholders	Customers	Suppliers
Collaborate	Influence	Help
Engage	Protect	Business partner
Work with	Inspire	Improve
	Help	To ensure
	Committed to	Aim to
		Committed to
		Actively

Table 7: Often used words for different stakeholders groups

Summarizing, we found strong evidence that the company used rhetorical strategies frequently in the sustainability reports and various organizational façades, in which the most prevalent ones are *ethos* and the progressive façade. Besides, H&M generally carried out a positive tone for issues raised by the society and the stakeholders, and sometimes used vague and intriguing words to generate a positive feeling that could lead to potential conflicts between the meanings.

4.2. Stakeholders

The stakeholder structure can be divided into two periods, before and after 2017. In 2017, H&M did a major restructuring of its stakeholder structure which drew our attention and led us thinking about the leader role it intends to achieve behind this major change.

Rhetorical strategies, organizational façades, and their collaboration

H&M has always been showing its active action on communicating with its stakeholders and fulfilling the stakeholders' expectations on the reliable and transparent sustainability reporting. As the quotes shown below:

> *We are committed to open and honest disclosure and our reporting is part of that process. We believe that our involvement in multi-stakeholder initiatives, as well as our own effort to elicit feedback from our stakeholders, adds value and credibility to our reporting and we have taken into account comments received through this dialogue in selecting our material issues and choosing which Conscious Actions to take. (2011, p11)*

> *We hope that by consistently sharing information about our impacts, challenges, progress, business partners, and products, we can continue to build and maintain relationships with our many stakeholders based on open dialogue and mutual respect.(2019, p20)*

As it is presenting its goal of "communication", active words like "*support*", "*help*", "*lead*", and "*contribute*" are frequently used which we can conclude as a usage of *ethos* and *pathos* for its self-branding as a responsible and contributable company towards society, as shown in the following examples (Figure 2).
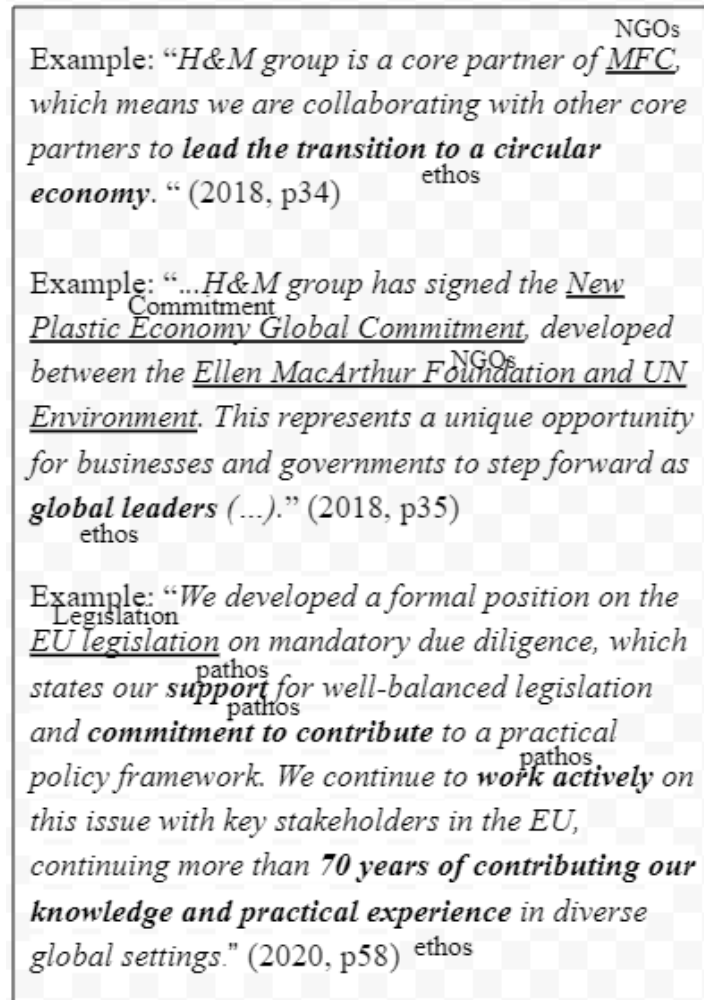
Figure 2: A glimpse of how H&M use different rhetorical strategies

H&M restructured and redefined the categories of its stakeholders in 2017. One of the major changes is that it created a new genre - Experts. This involves a clear preference of using façades. Experts for H&M are "*partnerships tend to be focused on raising standards, developing ideas, and tackling regional or global challenges*". This is an important part in every one of the H&M sustainability reports especially collaboration with policy-makers and NGOs. This becomes an important part for H&M's reputation and rational façades. For example:

We adopted ZDHC MRSL 2.0 and participated in setting the update process for this list to increase its robustness — it now includes input from academia, NGOs, and chemical industry representatives, all with an equal say. (...) We received an award at

the annual ZDHC event for being an active and leading organisation within ZDHC. (2019, p45)

As the rational façade used for companies is "key to market legitimacy", these statements are used as a main strategy for creating the image that H&M is supported by reliable organizations and have a well-known good reputation among them. Noticeably this also involves a combination with *ethos* to form a "self-branding," showing by the example above with the expression on "*equal say*". Considering that this is one of the examples given by H&M for the "Human rights" section, such highlights can accordingly be considered as an *ethos* strategy and shows that it highly values such problems. This is also the case for industry peers, who are only shown as objects that need help and guidance from H&M.

Leader -- A role towards stakeholders as a whole

According to H&M's sustainability reports, as we mentioned above, the structure of H&M's stakeholders underwent an enormous change in 2017 (Figure 3), and from how it describes and structures it, we can conclude a role that H&M intends to achieve towards stakeholders - Leader.

H&M is trying to form an image as an "industry leader" in the reputation façade. This is reasonable since it is because H&M operates within the fashion industry, which has been accused a lot because of the nature of fast-fashion (high consumption, low price), criticism falls on the encouragement of "one-time consumption", and H&M is also indeed a leading company within the fast-fashion industry, it is urgent to form a good social image. And adding a "leader" tag is beneficial for it as the standard setting can then be settled according to its standard, which not only reduces the cost of adapting to other standards but also forms a strong "sustainable" character.

Before 2017, the stakeholders it had defined included customers, community, employees, suppliers, industry peers, policy-makers, investors, and NGOs. While in 2017, this structure is categorized into experts,business partners, customers, and colleagues. With the customers and colleagues not changing their range of targets, the experts include four of the former stakeholder categories and business partners are an expanded concept based on the former suppliers.
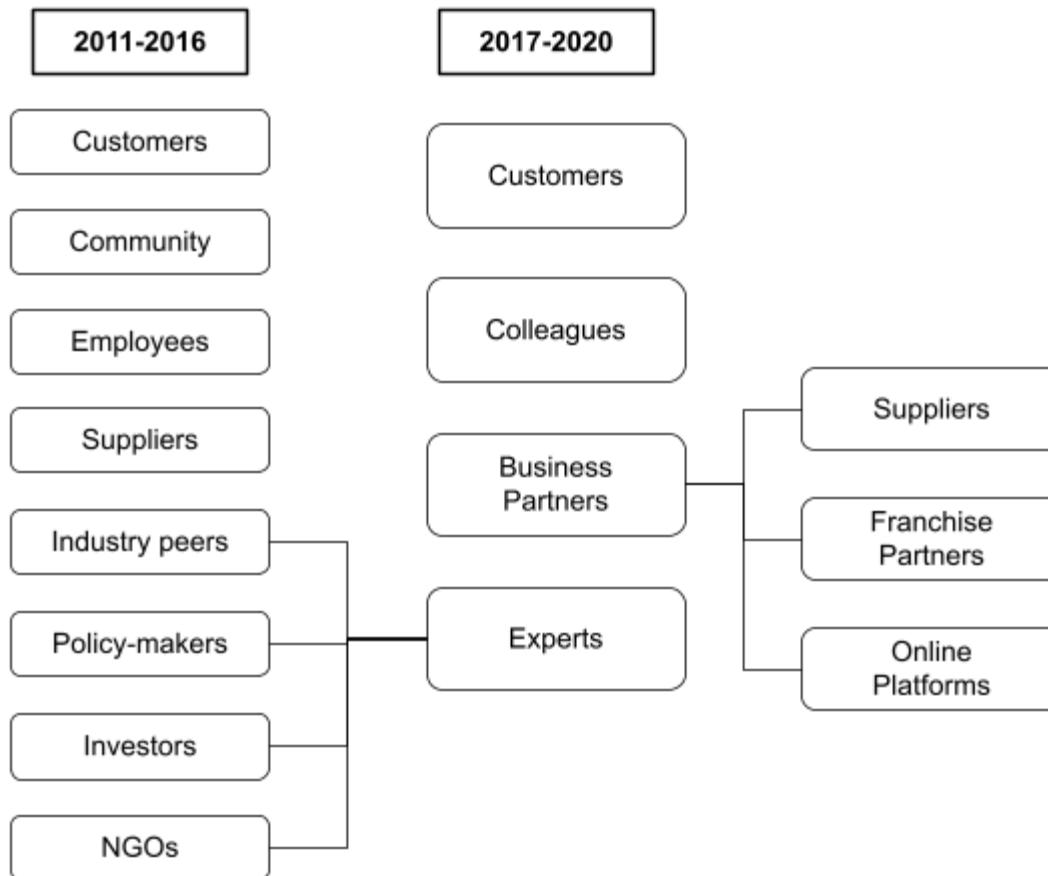
Figure 3: Change on H&M stakeholder structure

The change in its definition of business partners can both be treated as a change in its business structure as H&M is expanding its online shopping after noticing the increasing demand for it, and the change in its attitude towards suppliers, as it has been changing its roles within the supplying chain. During the pandemic, this transformation on demand from the customer side drove it to develop more within the online sector together with its online delivery system. As online shopping delivery can conflict with its "climate-smart delivery", it is acting to satisfy the market need first and now developing the delivery system. However, even though H&M changed its stakeholder structure, the core concern is its business model as a fast-fashion company that will not change anytime soon.

In addition to the significant restructure of the stakeholders, the way how H&M addresses itself in the reports also changed. Compared to years before 2017, there are not only the descriptions about each stakeholder but also the sections called "How we engage" and "Key issues", which illustrate the key efforts it puts in the engagements with the respective stakeholders and the issues that need to be solved or improved in the future. Whereas in 2020's report for example, only short descriptions on four stakeholders have been included,

no more detailed information has been disclosed accordingly or issues have been identified for future sustainable developments.

As we mentioned above, by using *pathos* and *ethos*, H&M is trying to enrich its leader role in progressive and reputation façades. This can also be explained by the change of stakeholder structure, especially the new category of experts. By using the word "experts", it already increases credibility and reliability even before H&M presents its collaborations with the experts. Furthermore, for an active player like H&M, the amount of collaborations, rewards, and discussions are outstanding, which also enhances its position as the leader who unites and pushes forward the development of a sustainable industry.

4.3. Customers

In a fast-fashion industry setting, customers are presented as the indispensable player. It exerted an imperceptible influence on the trend that their slower or conscious consumption behavior would all contribute to a more sustainable industry and help to establish a more environmentally friendly fashion business model. Based on selected years in this study, customers continuously remained as a crucial stakeholder regardless of the shareholder restructure in 2017.

Rhetorical strategies, organizational façades, and their collaboration

The methodology applied here relied on the use of rhetoric and how *logos, ethos,* and *pathos* help the company to present its relations and communications with the customers. Based on our period of interest and several readings of the reports, customers have often been addressed in the report by using *pathos*, in which the use of vivid languages and words appeal to the audience's emotions, getting the users of the reports on the company side and also helping the company appear trustworthy in its pursuit of sustainable developments (Higgins and Walker, 2012).

> *We also want to use our position as a major retailer to help our customers and business partners to reduce the waste that they generate. (2011, p68)*

Beyond the rhetorical strategies we classified in H&M's reports, different façades have been further categorized and identified. We sought to draw some insights for a broader understanding of the rhetorics used. H&M not only uses *pathos* to establish a trustworthy image but also by showing its corporate values and the attainment of industry leading positions, in order to show its reputation façade. In the following examples, both "*the second largest player*" and "*we can lead the way...*" indicate H&M's achievement in the industry and its leadership role.

As the second largest player in its sector, H&M has strong connections with its supply chain and its customers. The transformational role of H&M is massive and could drive the whole sector (2015, p78)

At H&M group, we are positive that by working to achieve a 100% circular and renewable value chain, that treats people in a fair and equal way and makes it possible for our customers to make more sustainable choices, we can lead the way to this systemic change and provide truly sustainable fashion to all our customers around the world. (2017, p15)

From another point of view, a mask of performance could also be reflected in the reputation façade to hide the truth that might not be easily accepted by the stakeholders (Cho et al., 2015), which could potentially lead to the concerns on the trustworthiness of the information disclosed in the sustainability reports. Just claiming that the company is using more sustainable materials or the position, but not how these factors would contribute or benefit to sustainability or environment would not be considered as convincing information to base future choices upon.

Inspirer -- A role towards customers

In 2011, customers were still the "main focus". For example, "*customers are at the core of everything we do*", "*Offering our customers fashion and quality at the best price means that we need to keep unnecessary costs down*" are used frequently in its report to illustrate the position of customers in its business. Additionally, the purpose of providing sustainable products are described as for the "conscious customers". This is forming a totally customer-driven image of the company rather than the responsible social image. Compared to clearly showing the importance of customers to H&M at the very first paragraph in the "Letter from the CEO", it did not mention responsibility to the society as an international fashion brand until the second to last paragraph. This shows that the focus in 2011 as a fast-fashion company was still to capture and expand its customer base and, at the same time, to reason the imperfection of its sustainability efforts. Its actions on sustainability, no matter fast or slow, absolutely or comparably, can all be explained as serving the customers.

Previously that year, it had been criticized by Greenpeace and denied all of the claims on "Detoxing". Greenpeace organization is considered as one of the most shown NGOs in front of the public. Denying its claims can cause a huge reputational impact on the company itself. Thus, the customer group is regarded for both the fundamentals for the business and the excuse for the company's legitimacy. The claim "*...our success depends on our ability to deliver what they (customers) want.*"(2011, p20) clearly illustrated its attitude towards sustainability and customers. Noticeably, H&M also replied to the Perfluorinated Compound

(PFC) report from Greenpeace in 2014 and gave a totally different result (it has forbidden the use of PFC from 2013, January 1).

> *H&M was the first fashion company to phase out PFCs and we had the most aggressive plan for PFC phase out in the industry. Instead of PFCs H&M uses an alternative that fulfils our demands regarding health and environmental requirements.(H&M News article, About report from Greenpeace and PFCs in H&M's products, 2014. 01. 14)*

However, as the consciousness becomes more to the social responsibility of companies, this way does not work anymore. Starting from 2015, the way it mentioned customers in the reports has evolved. Rather than keeping the focus on customers as the company did in previous years, H&M focuses much less on mentioning how it will contribute to its customers' decision making process and how future developments would benefit the customers. Talks related to customers are combined and mixed together with employees or suppliers, for instance the section "Inspire our customers and colleagues" in the 2015 report, of which no separate section is designed for customers only.

> *Grievance mechanisms (s. 3.5) and assessment systems (s 2.4) are in place to ensure the effectiveness of our policy implementation. We conduct regular surveys amongst our colleagues (s. 3.4), suppliers and their workers (s. 2.2) and our customers, which include their perception of H&M's sustainability programs. (2015, p67)*

As above, when H&M talked about customers, it was hard to distinguish or separate them from other stakeholders such as suppliers or colleagues. This shift of focus points out the question on H&M's motivation behind it and also leaves a query on the industry status. Besides the observations of the method about how H&M involves its customers in the sustainability reports, the way used to describe customers has changed as well. In 2015's sustainability report, even though the attention on customers has been gradually less emphasized in the report, H&M still considered the customer as one of the 'partners' that could help to commit to the company's overall sustainability goals and strategies.

> *Teaming up with our customers helps us make an even bigger impact. (2015, p24)*

However, from 2017, as the structure of stakeholder changed, the customers are more described as a group that need to be "guided and inspired" than someone that drives the action of the company or that could be worked together with the company towards the sustainability goals.

> *We are working to inspire our customers to make more sustainable choices and to join our sustainability mission. (2017, p13)*

> *We aim to inspire our many customers all over the world to make sustainable choices that benefit them, the environment, people and communities, as well as contributing to our long- term business success. (2019, p13)*

Shown in the above quotes from 2017 and 2019 reports, when H&M describes its customers as a stakeholder, "*inspiring*" appears to be a frequently used word. This implies that the relationship between H&M and the customers has changed and potentially underlined that the attitudes and focus have been shifted to other stakeholders.

> *Simple indicators of business and product sustainability can give customers the detail they need to make informed choices. It sounds straightforward, but it's challenging to identify meaningful customer-facing metrics, access relevant data and establish consistency across the industry. (2020, p24)*

In the 2020 report, the company continues to address that it acts to meet customer demands and commits to provide more transparent information to the customer while no real action has been disclosed or mentioned regarding the claimed sustainable progress, which seems that customers, as one of the crucial stakeholders, have been sidelined.

In conclusion, H&M used *pathos* frequently in the reports to demonstrate the reputation façade. Based on the rhetorical strategies used, instead of working together with the customers in the beginning of our study period, we have discovered that H&M has gradually shifted its role towards an inspirer in its relationships with customers, guiding them becomes the main focus .

4.4. Suppliers

H&M divides its suppliers into two tiers which include all the independent companies that have direct or indirect business relationship with H&M. Tier 1 suppliers connect directly to H&M and are defined as "*manufacturing suppliers and subcontracted factories, who make our products by cutting, sewing and processing*". Tier 2 suppliers or factories are the suppliers of Tier 1 suppliers, such as fabric or yarn manufacturers. In general, H&M has no direct business relationship with actors at tier 2 of the value chain and does not take tier 2 suppliers into sustainability evaluations.

Rhetorical strategies, organizationalfaçade, and their collaboration

With the tiers on suppliers and the change of stakeholder structure, H&M took a lot of pages stressing on its progress on making suppliers more efficient and more sustainable from

different angles. *Logos* have been most frequently used to address the developments and changes related to suppliers to show a progressive façades

> *By the end of 2020, 757 tier 1 and 2 supplier factories were enrolled in energy efficiency programmes. (...) we expect emission reductions from 2020 efficiency improvement projects to reach 30,725 tonnes CO2e. (2020, p33)*

On the other hand, *logos* have also been used in the reports to show the progressive façades.

> *30% GHG reduction per product by 2025 compared to 2017 baseline. 30% of factories will be enrolled in energy efficiency programmes by the end of 2019. For 2018, the goal was to enroll 20% of factories in energy efficiency programme. (2018, p56)*

> *By 2015, 97% of our supplier factories were assessed and verified before an order was placed (2014: 96%). (2015, p37)*

H&M tried to use lots of statistics, such as "30% GHG reduction" or "97% of our suppliers" to demonstrate its accomplishments related to suppliers. However, this rhetorical strategy does not show how H&M deals with various cases. Take another claim in 2020's report as an example, "*H&M is scoring 73% in the Fashion Transparency Index in 2020*". Regardless of the published detailed information about abundant policies, assessment tools as well as other related strategies, H&M does not show how to deal with the issue with its suppliers. Although the policies that H&M currently has have some influences, the company has been scored high only because of these policies, not its engagements with the suppliers.

Despite the clear dividing on operational and ownership aspects, the improvements that suppliers in general make are counted as progress of H&M.

> *We are reducing greenhouse gas emissions at a factory level through supplier factories energy efficiency programmes in Bangladesh, China, India and Turkey. The energy savings from our 2018 efficiency improvement programs in Europe, China, Indonesia, Vietnam and Pakistan are 633,587,214 kWh, which equals a reduction of 183,296 tonnes of GHG emissions. (2018, p56)*

One could argue that this is untruthful, or contradictory information regarding its claims on not owning any suppliers but only using its influences to push the change. The "choose and reward" system works well if the difference between influence and forcing keeps as stated. As the above statement, for example, the emission improvement is respectful. However, as the controlling does not belong to H&M, the related changes, here is the emission, should also not to be taken credit.

Monitor or Helper -- A role towards suppliers

Compared to the obvious shift of focus on customers, the relationship with the suppliers also has a shift between two roles, as we may conclude, "monitor" and "helper". Additionally, we could say H&M has a preference and is trying to title itself as a "helper" while acting like a "monitor"

From a claim in the 2011 sustainability report, H&M clearly indicates a combination of monitor and helper role with an emphasis on the helper role it takes. As shown below, although it focused on both monitoring and helping, and actually stressed on monitoring, it also showed an intention of "monitoring alone is not enough", and it needed to focus on helping the suppliers. This is the initial time that shows its intention of stressing on helping based on its monitoring function.

> *We work to constantly improve our audit methods in order to ensure that we are getting an accurate picture of supplier performance. This also helps H&M and our suppliers to understand and address the root causes of any non-compliance (...)But monitoring alone is not enough. That's why we go beyond monitoring and focus on helping our suppliers to strengthen their ownership over their sustainability issues, (...). (2011, p32)*

However, when reading the reports of the later years, it could be observed that a shift from the monitor role towards purely a helper role has been revealed. As shown by the example below from the 2020 report, H&M clearly states its support role to its suppliers, and the monitor role no longer exists in its relationship with suppliers.

> *We stand by our responsible purchasing practices and agreements with suppliers, and are in close dialogue with them in order to support their businesses during these uncertain times. (2020, p4)*

Considering the supply chain management as a whole, starting from 2012 when Higg Index was established, H&M started to point out that it is aligning with the Higg Index but detailed alignment has not been disclosed in its reports. In 2015, when the UN Guiding Principles Report Framework regarding human rights management was launched, H&M expanded the length of the content related to this aspect in its sustainability reports with one extra page on the interview with former UN Special Representative for Business and Human Rights and one extra page with ten salient human right issues identified. In other words, neither additional valuable information nor solutions of the issues identified by H&M has been further disclosed. The content has mainly remained the same as before but from the languages it used, we could observe a shift of roles, from the monitor to helper.

The shift of the roles can indicate a shift of responsibility where the producing, online selling and transporting part of the business is not under "direct control" of H&M while it still can "require" and "reward" the suppliers for them to adapt to H&M's standards on chemical, human rights, climate, and raw material problems. This supplier related responsibility did not change in this ten year period but the way of expressing it is more specifically referred to as "responsible purchasing practice".

> *H&M does not own any of the factories that manufacture our products. Instead, production takes place at around 1,650 factories that are owned or subcontracted by almost 750 suppliers. (...) We use our influence to promote better working conditions and environmental consciousness throughout our value chain. (...) Our commitment is to choose and reward responsible partners who share our values and are willing to work with us to improve their social and environmental practices. (2011, p27)*

One of the key claims on suppliers that H&M has been holding for these ten years is that it does not own any factories, which is an important setting on other information it reports. As it stated in its sustainability report, "*H&M does not own any of the factories that manufacture our products.*", or later on it changed into using "*our own operations*" to divide from the supply chain. "Tier 1 suppliers" has also become a filter for reporting the important progress or goals. By using the difference of "our own operations" and the "tiers" of suppliers, a dividing line is drawn between H&M and the suppliers.

KPI
Supply chain: % tier 1 supplier factories with trade union representation [1,2]
Supply chain: % tier 1 supplier factories with collective bargaining agreements [1,2]
Supply chain: % tier 1 supplier factories with digital payment solutions (bank account and/or mobile money) [1]
Supply chain: % of workers, supervisors, and worker representatives in our tier|1 production supply chain that are female [3]

Figure 4: An example of only tier 1 suppliers are considered into the supply chain (2020, p57, Fair & Equality KPI)

The category of suppliers have also changed. As stated above, the suppliers are included into business partners from 2017. It is not only an expansion of definition of the supply chain, but also a way of mixing the targets. Business partners include not only suppliers but also online platforms and franchise partners. Considering the business process it involved, the online platforms contain both transportation and the selling process, and franchise partners are more

performing like suppliers to H&M but also contain the selling process. Suppliers as the associated stakeholders that have the biggest, most obvious, and most accused problems, are covered by using other general words and reclassification in the reports.

To summarize, H&M mostly used *logos* when making claims and descriptions related to its suppliers, demonstrating the progressive façade with its improvements and developments. However, indexes and standards established during these ten years did not change the content of the disclosure but rather the way that H&M chose to present itself in the reports. The shift of roles polished the responsibility that H&M actually took and also led it to stand apart from the issues.

5. Disucssion

Based on the rhetorical strategies firstly proposed by Aristotle, the rhetorics used in H&M's sustainability reports have been carefully categorized and identified accordingly. Afterwards, we combined these findings with the framework of organizational façades to restructure and narrow the data down. In this chapter, we would like to have a deeper understanding of the trends found from the analysis, to discuss the meanings and reasons behind various roles that H&M takes, and to explore the potential conflict of responsibility raised.

5.1. Trends on the use of rhetorical strategy

The rational, progressive, and reputation façade, together are considered as the demonstration of the company's overall operations from various point views. In practical terms, these three façades illustrate different aspects and create organizational legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders (Cho et al., 2015). As environmental concerns have gained prominence among the stakeholders in recent years, even though sustainability reports are not direct verbal communications, stakeholders could still gain the sense on how the company deals with the related issues. Therefore, it becomes increasingly crucial that the information disclosed in the reports be not only truthful but also satisfy the stakeholders' demands.

Combinations of various rhetorical strategies and organizational façades

In reports, the company has a huge range of topics to be covered but only a certain amount of pages to present them. With the use of *ethos* by citing credible sources or self-branding, even though which might not be 100% trustworthy, it still adds to the legitimacy and makes the operations normal, or even respectful. Together with the progressive façade, they are a reasonable pair as they would add credibility to show that the company is making progress, or even better, making a huge influence to the industry or society (as an example from the 2020 report: "*Founded to accelerate progress towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals, H&M Foundation uses collaboration and innovation to co-create, fund and share solutions for the world's most urgent challenges. Since 2013, the family has donated 1.5 billion SEK (200 USD million) to the Foundation.*").

However, the concern of how the company performs in reality draws attention. *Logos*, by showing statistics and various cases related to H&M's efforts on sustainability in recent years to enhance the logical reasoning of the facts or actions claimed, is a way of increasing the trustworthiness of the data. Similarly, *ethos* as reliable sources are used for a self-branding and credibility enhancement purpose in the reports. Therefore, we could easily see the

reasons behind why both *logos* and *ethos* show a clear preference to illustrate the progressive façades (Table 6) that this combination (*Logos + Ethos*) would enhance the credibility of the claim.

Pathos, as one would expect not to be used so often in an official report, the frequency has been counted very similar to the *logos* (Table 6). Additionally, it shows an obvious connection with rational and reputation façades. "*Pathos* + Rational" is literally showing the legitimacy by creating resonance with the audiences. According to Fernández-López, & Perea, M. (2020), "language does not modulate the credibility of fake news, but emotion does". That is, the emotional part can serve as a way of increasing the rationale of the information. The pair of "*Pathos* + Reputation" is not a surprising combination as theoretically it covers a similar area where stories and inspiring languages are used to enhance the reputation of the corporation.

To a broader scope, there are also no standardized or legally provided frameworks to manage the format, the usage of language, and the information that is required to be addressed in the reports. Using rhetorical strategies could be a method to not reveal the true problems that the company currently faces. When narrowing down the concentration, there are also no strict or defined features of various façades, in other words, they are closely related to each other, which is also claimed by Cho et al. (2015) that the boundaries of these three façades are not to be so clear-cut. Rational and progressive façades share a common ground that they are both related to the norm of rationality. Also, the progressive façade and reputation façade both reflect and display the talks and decisions that are related to the company's operations. Therefore, without a clear dividing line between these three façades, they are together working as a progress to lead a good image step by step and all the façades shown to the stakeholders could be positive and bright.

In summary, H&M uses these rhetorical strategies and organizational façades in combinations to establish a preferable and tailored role towards the report's audiences that might not be the true situation that the company is currently facing, which we are going to discuss in more detail in the next section.

5.2. Rhetorics to Role switching: Leader, Monitor, and Inspirer

As shown in section 4, H&M is trying to form and act as different roles in front of different stakeholders. And these roles can be concluded as leader (towards stakeholders in general), monitor & helper (towards suppliers), and inspirer (towards customers). These different roles are formed by H&M in its sustainability reports and show a trend of role switching as time

and social background changes. Under the usage of the rhetorical strategies as well as presentations of different façades in various operation aspects, H&M adds a rich content in its roles. Eventually, throughout these roles, it is forming a responsible and sustainable business image.

Leaders - Stakeholders

Leaders are the direction for the group and for the industry. The standard can hardly be above the leader's capability and one would not expect the leader role to be taken by someone below the average. Researches reveal that the sustainability leadership and performance has become indices among analysts and investors, and "*the positive impact of sustainability leadership on firm value is primarily driven by German and Swedish listed firms*"(Quiros et. al, 2017). So the phenomenon distinguished in empirics shows that H&M is creating this leader role so that it is able to be within a safeline and also gain benefits from this leader role among investors and the society from both reputational and operational aspects. Based on the actions, supporting evidence, and the emotional expression addressed in the reports we discussed above, H&M revealed a very dominative and leading role. Industry leader, which is considered to be the company that has the most efficient production, the high quality goods, as well as the sustainable production, is included by H&M in its reports by combining all these characteristics together into the sustainable category. Also, as it presents itself as the leader in the industry as well as among various projects and actions, it also shows its complex audiences and stakeholders a positive signal that it is not worse or even better than other players in the industry.

One thing to notice is that the leader role that H&M presents is not only an industry leader, but also a social leader. When considering the role of industry leader, former researchers have noticed that it can "*enact mutual forbearance by establishing spheres of influence*" (Jaime et. al, 2020). This thought is in line with our analysis above. While stressing on the collaborations with stakeholders other than industry peers, this role also helps to back up H&M's sustainability development ethically. Like the "rapid change" mentioned by H&M in their sustainability report, as the society becomes stricter and stricter towards companies taking up social responsibilities, this safeline drawn by H&M is at the same time backing up for it from being criticized by the society or the legal or governmental organizations.

Monitor and Helper - Suppliers

Towards the suppliers, we have identified two roles for acting and presenting, monitor and helper. As we observed in our analysis, H&M is trying to present itself as the helper even though, if we neglect the way it presents itself, its actions shouts out as a monitor. We can see the power of using linguistic strategies, but at the same time, we see that the intention is

changing. The differences between monitor and helper can be further located into two different questions: "How does H&M position itself with the suppliers and how does responsibility change due to the change?", and considering the supply chain, "What is driving this change?"

The different positions the monitor and helper placed suggest different status of both H&M and its suppliers in the entire business process. Monitor and helper, these are more of a top-down relationship. Literally, a monitor is involved in "observing, checking, or keeping a continuous record of something." The series of actions is in line with what H&M presented itself (close collaboration with suppliers, auditing program for suppliers, and timely updated supplier lists). However, this involves a change of responsibility. As a monitor, H&M would be considered and expected to take on more responsibility as a return to the "premium position" it gets. The more responsibility in compensation to more "control". Once the monitored object does not perform as expected or well enough, the monitor will be questioned on if the report is complete, truthful, or timeliness, which might be the reason that H&M chose to present itself in a more "equal stage" way - the helper. By showing "we help suppliers", an underlying helper role is formed and determined automatically and indirectly. Helper would then be considered as a purely equal relationship between two parties and therefore will not take a direct responsibility if anything on the helped object goes wrong. A helper role also indicates that the entire process is based on a voluntary motivation and ethically sets H&M a higher position. Therefore this might be why it would use "help" as a key word relating to suppliers instead of "monitor".

Next for answering the question "what is driving the change?", limited by our research range and secondary sources obtained, it can only be analysed from the "outsider view". However, clues can be found from the reports.

> *With our ability to influence change, combined with our deep sustainability knowledge gained in the past years, we have the opportunity and responsibility to empower people across our value chain and lead our industry towards a sustainable future. And that's what we intend to do.* (*2020, p12*)

H&M has always been proud of its sustainability development as it stated in the report. It does not hesitate to share this out and claim the help of other organisations (including suppliers). This is a potential reason from the corporate culture aspect on the role it intended to present to the society. Through this adjustment, consistency can be achieved as well.

Another reason comes from the following quote, which recalls the responsibility issue.

And now we're seeing *a rapid shift in awareness and interest in sustainability: companies and customers alike are seeing their impacts on the world more clearly and learning how to behave more sustainably. (2020, p12)*

The social environment changed the way people view the supply chain. Under this "rapid shift", it is drawing another safeline for H&M to separate suppliers with the operations, and just stand by to help.

Inspirer - Customers

H&M presented its role as an inspirer when talking about customers in its reports. The inspiring role has already shown itself in early reports, yet as a supplement to "satisfying the customers". From "*customers are everything we do*" to "*we inspire customers to be more sustainable*", we can view this change from two aspects.

On the one hand, this is about the attitude change of how H&M treats its customers and how H&M thinks about the role its customers play in the entire business. Disclosing sustainability information can help in strengthening loyalty and customer retention. Since the sustainability actions were originally more "customer-driven", the attitude towards sustainability responsibilities is more passive, which was also in accordance with H&M's business feature - a fast-fashion industry company needs a huge amount of customers to compensate for the price and quality it offers. As mentioned in Henriksson & Weidman Grunewald (2020), "*If sustainability isn't integral to sales and reflected in the numbers, it will be hard to bring the organization along on the sustainability journey*". So we can also refer to this change from another perspective, inspiring customers can also be considered as a way of "customer-driven". While customers gain more consciousness on sustainability, they would be more willing to pay extra (within their acceptable range) for more sustainable products. Therefore being a company that is sustainable activist is an important marketing instrument that ensures the customer base. To conclude, even though the company now is more acting as an inspirer, the change in its attitude is not clear or at least no explicit evidence could be found in the reports.

On the other hand, more responsibilities are expected to be taken by customers through "inspiration". Companies should be able to share the risks of sustainability with customers as they are one of the major stakeholders and serve as the foundations of the company. And companies can, in turn, tailor the customer to fit their operations. Therefore we should consider, on the one hand, is the company trying to change the customer-driven to drive customers, or, on the other hand, is the company trying to change toward its customers' needs, ie. customers require to see more engagements within the sustainability actions and are willing to take on more responsibility. Another crucial aspect of the inspiration is about

after-sale and the sourcing process. The sourcing process is mostly about suppliers and keeping its own transparency and reputation, which is not closely related to customers' responsibility. Whereas, the after-sale is directly connected to how long the product is going to be used and how are the customers going to be able to sustainably deal with old products. More highlights on this "inspiration" role that H&M created and phrased mean more responsibilities H&M is expecting to switch and transfer to the customer side.

5.3. Responsibility Inconsistency

From the three roles H&M possesses, we can see a common ground of why H&M sets up these roles - the responsibility. The leader role is to lower the potential responsibility that H&M may take when there is an industry-wide criticism. The helper and monitor roles are for decreasing its responsibility on the supplier side while increasingly the influence on suppliers towards its goal of sustainability. The inspirer role is aiming for switching more responsibility to customers so as to release the burden of the responsibility on the after-sale process. Therefore, the question on why H&M cares so much about its responsibility, and how it tries to reasonably turn the responsibility down have been raised.

Forming a trustworthy, responsible image

Being a responsible business is important for the long-run, especially in the sustainability topic. While we cannot discuss if the actions are 100% conducted in real life, we can still see that from the sustainability reports and from how it presents itself, it is trying to sustain a responsible sustainable company image with the three roles being aggregational level supporting materials.

To have a trustworthy image, firstly we should consider what initiates and develops the trust. To form an image for an international retailing company like H&M, considering the complex audiences, it cannot be just focusing on one aspect. Therefore, with regard to different stakeholder groups, H&M is reasonably using different roles to cater its actions. From different aspects, these roles cooperate together to support a grand image of the company, but is it developing trust among the stakeholders or is it covering up for some aspects that the company does not want to show would be a question. Over-focusing on one spot can lead to ignoring other aspects. As we mentioned before, H&M have a quite defensive attitude towards criticisms. No matter in denying 2011's Greenpeace "DeTox" claims, ignoring in the 2017 report when questioning it burning down new clothes instead of recycling them as it promised, or advocating for gender equality but avoiding to reply the reported case of abusing a female worker in 2018, H&M has always been consistent in defending itself strongly. From which we can see the importance of reputation to the company, and how it

tries to retain its responsible industry leading company image. The fact that H&M tries to pretend to have a good image without actively replying to its issues and queries leads to an "over-bright image" that calls the curiosity to find what is the truth behind its stories instead. Comprehensive information, including unpleasant information, would be the key to create a mutual trust relationship between the company and the stakeholders.

The responsibility paradox on suppliers and customers

From the analysis we conducted in section 5.2, the paradox of the responsibilities could be concluded as how H&M describes its responsibility in the reports and how it performs. Taking suppliers' case to demonstrate it, H&M performs in monitoring the activities that the suppliers conducted whereas when describing the responsibilities, helping the supplier is the main focus in the reports. In fact, the responsibility that has been put on suppliers and customers is way heavier than what has been shown in the reports.

To have a deeper insight on this finding, what drives the change would be the core. Being a socially and environmentally responsible company could improve the company's image (Lee and Lee, 2018), aligning with H&M's value and claim shown in its 2020 sustainability report.

> *With our ability to influence change, combined with our deep sustainability knowledge gained in the past years, we have the opportunity and responsibility to empower people across our value chain and lead our industry towards a sustainable future. And that's what we intend to do. (2020, p12)*

Showing what responsibility has been taken would potentially be essential to the company's future success and attracting a larger customer base, and also contribute to long-term value creation. The stakeholders, especially the customers, expect the companies and the business to be active and to react quickly on sustainable matters and concerns such as climate changes, human rights problems or other issues whereas the actions performed by the company are quite slow or lagged behind. As a result, the company would like to throw some of the responsibilities to the stakeholders to bear less or to find ways to bloom the actual responsibility it actually takes in order to manage these gaps or inconsistencies and to show that it is actively responding to these challenges and expectations. Even though H&M addressed that "*It's important we work in partnership with them [stakeholders] all on our journey towards sustainable fashion.*" (2020, p15), in fact, what H&M is claiming is conflicted with the underlying shift of the roles and the responsibilities to the stakeholders instead of working together with them.

The company may use an unimportant or a relatively small conscious range to suggest that its entire business is sustainable, such as claiming that it is placing recycled bins at each store but did not claim how many recycled clothes have been collected or how many have been

reused. The question of sustainable practices that the company is currently doing to offset the negative impacts generated by productions and consumptions would always remain to be thought about. The responsibility the company shows by the sustainability reports hides some of the responsibilities that should be borne by the company. Even though the policies are constructed and actions are performed and well talked about in the reports, the nature of the business still does not change and the company is still actually profiting from mainly its unsustainable goods.

Less responsibility, more engagement with the stakeholders?

Changes on the roles indicate changes on the communications. H&M skillfully used different rhetorics in the reports to show its responsibility when communicating with its suppliers and customers depending on which role it takes in reality. By using rhetorical strategies to demonstrate various organizational façades, H&M could be able to gradually resolve the inconsistency between what it actually did and what the stakeholders expected. It has positioned itself in a different level and also played as an outsider instead of an insider that indeed has connections with the stakeholders. Therefore, with Manetti (2011)'s finding of the lack of stakeholder engagement in the sustainability reporting, one could realize how the company tries to cover up this phenomenon and at the same time retain a positive image.

However, based on the claim Bellucci et al. (2019) proposed, there is no firm link between the stakeholder engagement and corporate responsibility. Therefore, H&M shifting the responsibility to its stakeholders could not be explained by the willingness to improve the stakeholder engagement in the business, or we could not see that there is evidence to lead us to conclude it this way. Even though H&M has the section in the reports called "Engaging with stakeholders" or "Stakeholder Engagement", according to different years' reports, with the shift of the roles we discovered and analyzed in above sections, when the responsibility the stakeholders take has been indirectly changed, no additional information has been disclosed in these stakeholder engagement related sections.

6. Conclusions

Previous research has analyzed sustainability reporting from different perspectives, viewing it as a simulacra, a platform for Dialogue Accounting for effective stakeholder engagement, and the constructing of intended corporate image with the usage of rhetorical strategies in this one-way communication ((Boiral, 2013); (Bellucci et al., 2019); (Brennan & Merkl-Davies, 2014)). On top of Brennan and Merkl-Davies' (2014) work on combining rhetorical strategies research with sustainability reporting, this study starts from adapting organizational façades, a framework inspire by Cho et al's (2015) research on sustainability disclosures, together with rhetorical strategies so as to have a clearer insight on the rhetorics used in the sustainability reports and to better adapt it as the starting point of our research towards the corporate sustainability reporting. We investigate how the case company constructs its trustworthy image in sustainability development. Contributing to Manetti (2011)'s finding that the lack of ideal of stakeholder engagement in current sustainability reporting, we further explored how the case company indicates its relationship with the stakeholders through the roles identified, and how the responsibilities it presents itself to take related to various stakeholders differentiate from the responsibilities perceived from the interpretations of findings of rhetorical strategies and organizational façades.

As one of the main contributions of this paper, we illustrate the use of rhetorical strategies, *logos, ethos*, and *pathos*, in the sustainability reports and their combinations with different organizational façades. We identified the trends of how various rhetorical strategies have been used to show the organizational façades. Whereas, as there is no clear cut and defined meaning on each organizational façade, the use of persuasive languages may lead to a reasonable and trustworthy image but the reality might be easily ignored (Higgins and Walker, 2012).

Secondly, we were able to conclude four main roles the case company forms in the reports. The leader role towards the stakeholders in general shows its ambition of performing outstanding sustainable reputation and drawing the safeline for the company's future development. Previous research shows that being the leader does not only benefit reputationally, but also economically, as it is more likely to support competitiveness with other industrial peers. Towards the suppliers, the role setting is more complex as the helper role gives the case company an ethically beneficial image when relating to responsibility while the monitor role gets weakened shows the related responsibility shift. Same intention can also be found in the inspirer role towards customers. A clear shift of responsibility can be observed that from customer-driven to customer inspirer, more responsibility gets shifted to customers.

Lastly, we found that H&M tries to construct a sustainable standing through its own descriptions in the reports. On the one hand, the company demonstrated the responsibilities it bears through various rhetorical strategies and combinations with the organizational façades to form a trustworthy and responsible image. On the other hand, by continuously claiming the industry leader role it possesses, the company takes the advantages to position itself in a safe area. However, when it comes to the stakeholders, specifically customers and suppliers, it tries to shift the responsibility but not act responsible in fact. Therefore, this constitutes an inconsistency between how it is expressed and how it is performed. Yet, even though the stakeholders take more responsibility, there is no obvious change of the stakeholder engagement that could be observed explicitly.

Above all previous mentioned findings, we argue that language would be considered as a principle aspect that should be carefully observed in the sustainability reporting process. As there is no standardized and legally binding framework that requires all companies to comply with when disclosing the information and govern how sustainability is defined, companies play with this loophole to try to construct a good image by using vague words, avoiding to demonstrate their ethical practices in details by using policies to hide the true problems, etc. Although the GRI index sets the standards, it did go deep and strict enough as argued by Adam and Abhayawansa (2021). As a result, many companies used the vague word "sustainable" as a popular word in the reports but without providing proper and transparent information, hence greenwashing emerged.

We recognize that this single case qualitative study is subject to several limitations. Firstly, in terms of reliability, we acknowledge that our background, information complementation, and motives may have an influence on the interpretation of the texts to some extent. This is a common question for interpretivism research. Based on different social environments such as history, culture, power differences in society, and politics (Dharamsi & Scott, 2009) that the researchers position in, the texts will be interpreted under different systems of belief. However, while having a larger possibility of losing reliability due to subjective interpretation and selection of texts, through the data analysis process designed based on previous research and methodology, we intend to minimize these biases so as to give a more adaptive, reliable analysis and conclusion. Secondly, in terms of time expansion with adaptability to current issues, we are well aware that our selection of years from 2011 to 2020 is comparably a short period to H&M's reporting history as well as the industry's reporting time. However, in order to be able to pick out the "recent changes", we choose this 10-year period which includes several major changes of the industrial level sustainability reporting that we would like to take hand on deeply and acquire comparably "new" information. Lastly, in terms of single case study itself, the barely report based one-way written communication between the only

one company studied in this paper and its stakeholders can be very limited on figuring out the complete image of the company. The question of if this is the industry norm can also arise.

We would like to suggest that potential future research can be conducted based on a broader range of sustainability reports in terms of both case company selection and empirical material selection. This includes applying the rhetoric research on multiple companies based on a wider study period, focusing not only on sustainability reporting but based on other materials such as corporate press, financial reports, visual communications, and other relevant communication forms. Additionally, another possible research area could be seeking the consistency between the "unofficial" visual rhetorics and "official" written rhetorics to have a deeper understanding on the responsibility image that H&M forms. Interviews could be conducted to further investigate the expectations and demands that stakeholders/potential audiences have and to explore the stakeholder responsibilities and engagement from a different point of view.

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Appendix

A summary of H&M's publicly available Sustainability Reports and press

Year	H&M Sutainability report
2011	Conscious Actions Sustainability Report 2011
2012	Conscious Actions Sustainability Report 2012
2013	Conscious Actions Sustainability Report 2013
2014	Conscious Actions Sustainability Report 2014
2014	About report from Greenpeace and PFCs in H&M's products
2015	Conscious Actions Sustainability Report 2015
2016	The H&M Group Sustainability Report 2016
2017	The H&M Group Sustainability Report 2017
2018	The H&M Group Sustainability Report 2018
2019	Sustainability Performance Report 2019
2020	Sustainability Performance Report 2020
2020	H&M Group Annual Report 2020