

Corporate responses to sustainability issues: are they rhetorical?

Eka Ardhani Sisdyani, I Putu Sudana and Putu Agus Ardiana
*Department of Accounting, Faculty of Economics and Business,
Udayana University, Denpasar, Indonesia*

I Gusti Agung Ayu Apsari Anandari
*Department of Economics, Faculty of Economics and Business,
Udayana University, Denpasar, Indonesia, and*

Kadek Dwi Linda Yanthi, Radheeya Aishvarya Uttari,
Komang Puja Astiti and Anak Agung Vidyaswari Kedisan
*Department of Accounting, Faculty of Economics and Business,
Udayana University, Denpasar, Indonesia*

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine the rhetorical strategies used by the top 50 large-cap companies on the Indonesia Stock Exchange in their voluntary sustainability reports (2006–2023), focusing on their alignment with institutional theory's concept of decoupling.

Design/methodology/approach – An index adapted from the frameworks of Benoit (1995), Bolino and Turnley (2003) and Shrivies and Brennan (2017) was used in a content analysis to evaluate corporate rhetorical strategies. The thematic analysis further explored the perspectives of sustainability reporting managers through semi-structured interviews.

Findings – Content analysis of 144 sustainability reports reveals that bolstering is the most prevalent rhetorical strategy, while simple denial is the least used. Thematic analysis of interviews with sustainability reporting managers confirms that these rhetorical responses are primarily symbolic, strategically used to protect and enhance corporate reputation.

Research limitations/implications – The study is limited to large-cap Indonesian companies and relies on publicly disclosed reports and interviews.

Practical implications – The findings provide insights for companies to enhance transparency in sustainability communication, assisting stakeholders in critically evaluating corporate sustainability claims to foster trust and accountability.

Social implications – This study helps stakeholders critically assess corporate sustainability commitments, highlighting the need for stronger oversight and genuine accountability.

Originality/value – The novelty lies in reclassifying rhetorical strategies from Benoit (1995), Bolino and Turnley (2003) and Shrivies and Brennan (2017) into a unified framework, offering fresh insights into symbolic sustainability communication.

Keywords Rhetorical response, Sustainability reporting, Institutional theory, Decoupling

Paper type Research paper



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1. Introduction

Sustainability reporting has become a key aspect of corporate communication, driven by rising expectations for environmental and social accountability. However, such disclosures are often used strategically to shape stakeholder perceptions rather than to convey substantive information. Growing global concern over greenwashing and corporate accountability highlights the need to critically assess these practices (Khan *et al.*, 2021). Research shows that companies frequently highlight achievements while downplaying or omitting negative information, particularly in voluntary disclosures intended to enhance reputation (Haffar and Searcy, 2020; Böhling *et al.*, 2019; Truong *et al.*, 2021). This raises questions about the authenticity of sustainability reports and whether they function more as symbolic tools to project responsibility (Leung and Snell, 2021). The issue is especially pressing amid increasing regulatory and investor scrutiny (Christensen *et al.*, 2021). While regions like the European Union and the USA are adopting stricter reporting mandates, Indonesia remains in a transitional phase with evolving sustainability disclosure policies.

The motivation for this study arises from growing concerns that sustainability reporting is often symbolic rather than substantive – used to project responsibility while masking misaligned practices (Shrives and Brennan, 2017; Bolino and Turnley, 2003; Benoit, 1995). Institutional theory, particularly the concept of decoupling, explains how organisations use symbolic communication to gain legitimacy while preserving operational flexibility (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Boxenbaum and Jonsson, 2008). Although previous studies have explored this dynamic, they have largely focused on Western contexts (e.g. Pizzi *et al.*, 2023; Posadas *et al.*, 2023). This study contributes to institutional theory by investigating sustainability rhetoric in Indonesia – an emerging market where regulatory and sociopolitical factors uniquely shape disclosure practices.

While prior research has examined rhetorical strategies, most focus on short-term or isolated cases. For example, Lodhia and Mitchell (2022) applied Benoit's (1995) image restoration framework; Momin *et al.* (2023) examined impression management using Bolino and Turnley (2003); and Ardiana (2019) explored non-compliance strategies through Shrives and Brennan (2017). However, these studies often overlook the long-term, strategic use of rhetoric in emerging economies like Indonesia, where regulatory structures remain nascent (Hossain *et al.*, 2022). This study addresses that gap by analysing the sustainability reports of the top 50 large-cap companies listed on the Indonesia Stock Exchange (IDX) from 2006 to 2023. Integrating the frameworks of Benoit (1995), Bolino and Turnley (2003) and Shrives and Brennan (2017), it categorises rhetorical responses into seven groups: evasion, excusing, positive image, downplaying, attack, rectification and relationship-building. This reclassification deepens our understanding of how rhetorical strategies function within institutional theory, especially in contexts marked by symbolic compliance. Grounded in the concept of decoupling, the study explores how companies use rhetoric to maintain legitimacy without enacting substantive change. It addresses two questions:

- Q1. What rhetorical strategies do Indonesian companies use to navigate external pressures?
- Q2. How do these strategies reflect decoupling in institutional theory?

Indonesia presents a compelling case for this study due to its rapid economic growth, environmental challenges and evolving regulatory framework. Although POJK 51/2017 mandates sustainability reporting for certain firms, it lacks specific standards or detailed content requirements, leaving report substance largely to managerial discretion (Adhariani and du Toit, 2020; Ardiana *et al.*, 2025a). Fragmented enforcement, limited standardisation, and political dynamics – including the influence of state-owned enterprises and weak civil society oversight – create conditions for symbolic compliance. Companies often meet surface-level expectations

through rhetoric rather than reform. Cultural factors, such as a collectivist orientation and a preference for corporate harmony – prioritising consensus and relationship preservation over confrontation – further shape these rhetorical strategies (Ardiana *et al.*, 2025b; Akhter *et al.*, 2023).

This study offers several contributions. Firstly, it extends institutional theory by empirically linking rhetorical strategies in sustainability reporting to the concept of decoupling, illustrating symbolic compliance. Secondly, it integrates impression management, rhetorical analysis and institutional theory into a unified framework for examining corporate sustainability communication. Thirdly, it adds to the literature by analysing 17 years of reporting in an emerging market context. Finally, it provides practical insights to help stakeholders critically assess the authenticity of disclosures and promote alignment between rhetoric and substantive sustainability actions.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows: Section 2 reviews the extant literature; Section 3 outlines the research methods; Sections 4 and 5 present and discuss the findings, respectively; and Section 6 provides the conclusion.

2. Literature review

2.1 Symbolism in sustainability reporting

Traditional financial reporting prioritises profits and expenses, often neglecting social and environmental impacts (Böhling *et al.*, 2019). In response, many companies have adopted standalone sustainability reports, guided by voluntary frameworks such as the Global reporting initiative (GRI) standards, to present a broader view of their operations (Jadhav *et al.*, 2022). While intended to improve accountability (Hassan *et al.*, 2022), these reports frequently serve marketing purposes, raising questions about their authenticity (GRI, 2021; Truong *et al.*, 2021). The voluntary nature of sustainability reporting enables selective disclosure, allowing companies to highlight achievements and omit challenges. Unlike mandatory financial reports, frameworks like the GRI permit discretion, often prioritising image over substantive change (Jadhav *et al.*, 2022; Truong *et al.*, 2021). This issue is especially pertinent in emerging markets such as Indonesia, where evolving regulatory oversight allows firms to use reporting as a legitimacy tool rather than a transparent account of environmental and social performance (Adhariani and du Toit, 2020).

Prior studies show that sustainability reports often serve as tools for impression management rather than objective disclosure. Khan *et al.* (2021) found that banks in developing economies use symbolic reporting to enhance reputation without substantive change, while MacPhail *et al.* (2023) observed mining companies crafting a green image through selective transparency. Although the GRI encourages authentic, balanced reporting, many companies rely on symbolic actions. Ardiana (2023) and Parfitt (2024) noted that firms often claim stakeholder engagement without explaining the process, casting doubt on their sincerity. These strategies focus on commitments and achievements, diverting attention from unresolved issues (Ardiana, 2019), often using vague language or offsetting negatives with positives (Morrison and Lowe, 2021). As Hossain *et al.* (2022) argue, such rhetoric undermines authenticity and turns sustainability reports into tools for masking actual practices.

Selective disclosure dominates voluntary reporting, with companies highlighting positives while omitting negatives, using reports for impression management rather than transparency (Schaltegger *et al.*, 2015). This strategic use of sustainability reporting aligns with legitimacy theory, as companies attempt to manage public perception to secure social approval (Deegan, 2019). Furthermore, Christensen *et al.* (2021) highlight that firms facing increased regulatory pressure tend to enhance the symbolic aspects of their sustainability reports to maintain legitimacy without necessarily implementing substantive operational changes.

By integrating the frameworks of [Benoit \(1995\)](#), [Bolino and Turnley \(2003\)](#), and [Shrives and Brennan \(2017\)](#), this study categorises rhetorical responses into seven groups: evasion, excusing, positive image, downplaying, attack, rectification and relationship-building. These categories provide a structured lens through which to examine how companies use language to symbolically address sustainability pressures.

Evasion of responsibility strategies, such as simple denial and blame-shifting, help organisations deflect accountability for negative sustainability outcomes. Simple denial involves rejecting or omitting critical information to maintain a positive image ([Lodhia and Mitchell, 2022](#)), while blame-shifting assigns fault to external factors or uncontrollable events ([Sandberg and Holmlund, 2015](#)). Both are key rhetorical tools for managing reputational risk.

Excusing strategies allow companies to justify shortcomings by framing them as responses to external pressures. These include provocation, defeasibility and accident. Provocation attributes actions to external forces ([Mapa et al., 2019](#)), while defeasibility claims events were unforeseeable or uncontrollable ([Almeida and Fett, 2016](#)). Accident portrays incidents as unintended ([Beelitz and Merkl-Davies, 2012](#)). Collectively, these tactics position the company as a victim rather than a perpetrator, mitigating perceived responsibility.

Unlike defensive tactics, positive image strategies aim to build favourable stakeholder perceptions. These include good intentions, bolstering and ingratiation. Good intentions express ethical aspirations to foster trust ([Bellringer et al., 2011](#)), bolstering highlights achievements to reinforce responsibility ([Bice and Coates, 2016](#)) and ingratiation aligns messaging with stakeholder values ([Caliskan et al., 2021](#)). These strategies shift the narrative from justifying failures to promoting positive engagement.

When addressing negative issues, companies may use downplaying strategies to soften their impact. These include minimising, differentiation and transcendence. Minimising reduces perceived severity ([Talbot and Boiral, 2018](#)), differentiation distances the firm from broader industry problems ([Nishant et al., 2016](#)) and transcendence reframes issues within a larger, value-driven context ([Schneider, 2015](#)). These tactics enable acknowledgement without fully accepting reputational consequences.

In high-stakes situations, companies may use attack strategies to defend their legitimacy. These include attacking the accuser and intimidation. The former discredits critics by questioning their motives or credibility ([Corazza et al., 2020](#)), while the latter seeks to suppress dissent through fear ([Higgins et al., 2014](#)). Such tactics are typically used when reputational risks are particularly acute.

Companies may use rectification strategies to demonstrate accountability by addressing issues directly. These include compensation – offering reparations for harm ([Kolk, 2004](#)) – and corrective action, which outlines steps to resolve problems and prevent recurrence ([Hogan and Lodhia, 2011](#)). Such strategies signal a commitment to improvement, especially under regulatory or stakeholder scrutiny.

Relationship-building strategies help companies restore trust and strengthen stakeholder ties. These include mortification – admitting fault to rebuild relationships ([Bellringer et al., 2011](#)), attribution – crediting others to foster goodwill ([Hahn and Lülfs, 2014](#)), self-promotion – highlighting achievements to boost image ([Fialho et al., 2021](#)) and supplication – seeking empathy and support ([Wang and Highhouse, 2016](#)). These tactics are key to managing long-term perceptions and sustaining engagement.

2.2 Institutional theory and rhetorical strategies for sustainability issues

Institutional theory explains why companies often adopt symbolic rather than substantive sustainability practices to gain legitimacy ([Deegan, 2019](#)). Reporting is used to shape

public perception under pressure to conform to societal norms, resulting in institutional isomorphism – where firms mimic peers to meet expectations (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). In Indonesia, institutional pressures from regulators, investors and civil society have influenced sustainability practices, yet firms frequently engage in decoupling – publicly committing to sustainability without enacting meaningful change (Putri *et al.*, 2025; Widhiyani *et al.*, 2025).

Decoupling, a core concept in institutional theory, refers to the gap between symbolic compliance and actual practices (Bromley and Powell, 2012). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue that organisations adopt formal structures to meet societal expectations, even if internal practices remain unchanged. Oliver (1991) expanded this view, suggesting firms respond to institutional pressures along a spectrum from full compliance to strategic resistance. Rhetorical tools like sustainability reporting often occupy the middle ground – signalling alignment while avoiding substantive change.

Recent studies further support this view. Posadas *et al.* (2023) found that while regulations in Europe increased the volume of non-financial disclosures, the depth and authenticity of reported efforts remained limited. Similarly, Pizzi *et al.* (2023) observed that companies use sustainability rhetoric to align with institutional pressures while preserving operational flexibility. These findings reinforce the notion that sustainability reporting often prioritises perception management over genuine accountability.

Benoit's (1995) image restoration framework shows how firms use rhetorical strategies to manage public perception, such as bolstering positive actions or minimising negative impacts – thereby deflecting attention from substantive issues. Similarly, Bolino and Turnley (2003) describe impression management as a way for companies to craft narratives that highlight achievements and moral positioning without enacting real change. These tactics support decoupling by allowing firms to appear transparent while preserving operational flexibility. Shrivies and Brennan (2017) add that companies often justify non-compliance – citing financial or market constraints – to rationalise performance gaps. Such strategies are common in Indonesia's energy and extractive sectors, where firms promote voluntary initiatives while resisting mandatory environmental measures (Hahn and Lülfs, 2014; Akhter *et al.*, 2023).

In Indonesia, decoupling in sustainability reporting is shaped by cultural and political dynamics. The country's collectivist culture emphasises harmony and consensus, encouraging firms to use rhetoric that aligns with societal expectations while avoiding contentious disclosures (Ardiana *et al.*, 2025b). Regulatory enforcement is inconsistent across sectors, contributing to a fragmented landscape (Adhariani and du Toit, 2020). As a result, Indonesian sustainability reports often reflect a strategic balance between institutional pressures, corporate interests and sociopolitical norms.

Rhetorical strategies enable companies to symbolically address institutional pressures, preserving legitimacy without substantive change. This raises concerns about the effectiveness of sustainability reporting in promoting accountability. As stakeholders become more aware of the gap between rhetoric and practice, trust and corporate reputation may suffer (Boxenbaum and Jonsson, 2008; Zhong *et al.*, 2022). Understanding these rhetorical practices in the Indonesian context is crucial to evaluating whether sustainability reports function as genuine accountability tools or as mechanisms for managing reputation.

3. Research methods

This study used both content and thematic analyses to understand how companies respond to sustainability issues through their reporting practices. The research is designed to address two main questions:

RQ1. What rhetorical strategies do Indonesian companies use in their sustainability reports to navigate external pressures?

RQ2. How do these strategies align with the concept of decoupling within institutional theory?

Content analysis of sustainability reports identifies the rhetorical strategies companies use to manage external pressures, answering the first research question. Thematic analysis of interviews with sustainability managers explores the motivations behind these strategies, addressing the second question on how they align with institutional decoupling.

The integration of content and thematic analysis enhances the robustness of the findings by offering both breadth and depth in understanding corporate rhetorical strategies. Content analysis provides a systematic, replicable approach to categorising rhetorical responses in sustainability reports, allowing for the identification of patterns across a broad data set (Krippendorff, 2013). However, content analysis alone cannot capture the motivations and strategic considerations behind these rhetorical choices. Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews (Clarke and Braun, 2016; Xu and Zammit, 2020) complements this by uncovering the underlying reasoning behind corporate sustainability narratives, adding depth to the study. Together, these methods ensure that the research not only identifies rhetorical strategies but also contextualises them within the broader institutional environment, addressing both micro-level corporate rhetoric and macro-level institutional pressures. The study integrates micro-level rhetorical strategies with macro-level institutional theory to examine the phenomenon of decoupling. Institutional theory suggests that organisations adopt symbolic practices to gain legitimacy without necessarily implementing substantive change (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Bromley and Powell, 2012). By applying both content and thematic analysis, this study links rhetorical strategies used in sustainability reports to broader institutional pressures, revealing how companies maintain legitimacy while selectively engaging with sustainability initiatives.

The content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013) was conducted on sustainability reports issued by the top 50 large-cap companies listed on the IDX. The reports analysed spanned the period from 2006 to 2023, selected based on the criterion that each company had published at least one report during this timeframe. This approach focused on voluntary disclosures, allowing flexibility in reporting practices. Preliminary research showed that many of these companies began issuing sustainability reports voluntarily starting in 2006, with 2023 marking the endpoint of this study to use the most recent reports available online. Publicly traded companies, particularly those with significant market capitalisations, were chosen due to their higher visibility and greater scrutiny from stakeholders, motivating them to engage in sustainability reporting to enhance their legitimacy (Gerged *et al.*, 2023).

The content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013) used a framework adapted from the works of Benoit (1995), Bolino and Turnley (2003) and Shrives and Brennan (2017), classifying rhetorical strategies into seven groups: evasion of responsibility, excusing, positive image, downplaying, attack, rectification and relationship-building. This reclassification, rooted in institutional theory and the concept of decoupling, aimed to reveal how companies use symbolic communication to align with external expectations while potentially avoiding substantive changes. Table 1 provides an overview of the 144 sustainability reports analysed, categorised by year, language, length and reporting frameworks used. The reports, averaging 113 pages in length, were primarily bilingual (97 reports), with the GRI guidelines being the predominant framework used in 120 reports. Additionally, 22 reports referenced multiple frameworks, such as the AccountAbility 1000 Stakeholder Engagement Standards (AA1000SES), the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB) and the Regulation

Table 1. Characteristics of sustainability reports being studied

Characteristics	Total
<i>1. Year of publication</i>	
-2006	5
-2007	5
-2008	7
-2009	9
-2010	9
-2011	9
-2012	9
-2013	9
-2014	8
-2015	9
-2016	9
-2017	8
-2018	9
-2019	9
-2020	8
-2021	9
-2022	9
-2023	9
Total	144
<i>2. Language</i>	
-Indonesian	21
-English	26
-Bilingual	97
Total	144
<i>3. Length (number of pages)</i>	
- Average	113
- Minimum	57
- Maximum	378
<i>4. Reporting framework(s) used</i>	
*Global reporting initiative (GRI)	
-GRI G3	18
-GRI G3.1	20
-GRI G4	48
-GRI standards	34
Subtotal	120
*Multiple reporting frameworks	
-GRI G3.1 and AA1000SES	4
-GRI G4 and AA1000SES	10
-GRI G4 and SASB	1
-GRI Standards and AA1000SES	2
-GRI standards and POJK	3
-GRI standards, SASB and POJK	2
Subtotal	22
*No reference	
Subtotal	2
Total	144

Note(s): GRI G3; GRI G3.1; GRI G4 = Global Reporting Initiative Guidelines versions 3; 3.1; or 4 AA1000SES = AccountAbility 1000 Stakeholder Engagement Standards; SASB = Sustainability Accounting Standards Board; POJK = *Peraturan Otoritas Jasa Keuangan* (Regulation of the Financial Service Authority)

Source(s): Authors' own work

of the Financial Service Authority (POJK), while 2 reports did not reference any specific frameworks.

An index derived from the frameworks of [Benoit \(1995\)](#), [Bolino and Turnley \(2003\)](#) and [Shrives and Brennan \(2017\)](#) was used to code the reports. As shown in [Table 2](#), the integration identified 19 types of rhetorical responses, which were grouped into the 7 categories mentioned earlier. The coding process involved assigning a score of “1” for the presence of a specific strategy and “0” for its absence. This systematic approach provided insights into how companies symbolically use sustainability reporting to project compliance while potentially engaging in decoupling.

To complement the content analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into the motivations behind the rhetorical strategies identified. Eighteen sustainability reporting managers from the companies analysed were interviewed between January and May 2024. These interviews allowed for a richer understanding of how companies strategically manage their sustainability disclosures in response to institutional pressures. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure their roles were directly related to sustainability reporting.

Ethical considerations were a priority throughout the research process. Initial contact with potential interviewees was made via email, where the study’s purpose and objectives were clearly explained. An ethics approval letter, confirming the study’s compliance with ethical standards, was attached to these emails. Prior to the interviews, participants were provided with a consent form outlining their rights, including confidentiality, voluntary participation and the option to withdraw at any time. Interviewees were given sufficient time to review and sign the consent form. All interviews were audio-recorded with explicit consent, and identifying information was anonymised using codes like “COMP1” to “COMP18” to protect participant confidentiality.

The semi-structured interviews, conducted both online and face-to-face depending on the participants’ preferences, were designed to probe the managers’ perspectives on their companies’ sustainability reporting strategies. The following list outlines the interview guidelines used to explore these perspectives, focusing on how companies navigate sustainability challenges while managing stakeholder perceptions. Each interview lasted between 61 and 116 min, providing in-depth responses that were essential for the thematic analysis:

- (1) Introduction
 - Can you briefly describe your role in sustainability reporting within your company?
 - Can you describe the process your company follows when preparing sustainability reports?
 - How does your company prioritise different sustainability issues for reporting?
 - What factors influence the decision to include or exclude certain information in the report?
- (2) Stakeholder engagement and reporting
 - How do stakeholders influence the content of your company’s sustainability reports?
 - Can you elaborate on any specific feedback or input from stakeholders that impacted the report?
 - How do you balance transparency with maintaining the company’s image?
- (3) Corporate responses to sustainability challenges
 - How does your company typically respond to sustainability challenges in public communication, such as reports?
 - What are the primary goals when addressing these challenges in sustainability reports (e.g. protecting reputation and ensuring compliance)?

Table 2. Index of disclosure of rhetorical responses to sustainability issues

No	Rhetorical responses	Explanation	Measurement
<i>A. Evasion of responsibility strategies</i>			
1	Simple denial	Refusing to acknowledge or accept responsibility for an issue	Score 1 if disclosed; Score 0 if not disclosed
2	Shifting the blame	Assigning fault or responsibility to others to avoid accountability	Score 1 if disclosed; Score 0 if not disclosed
<i>B. Excusing strategies</i>			
3	Provocation	Suggesting that the action was provoked by external factors or entities	Score 1 if disclosed; Score 0 if not disclosed
4	Defeasibility	Claiming that the situation was unforeseen or beyond control, thus absolving responsibility	Score 1 if disclosed; Score 0 if not disclosed
5	Accident	Portraying the situation as an unintended mishap beyond control	Score 1 if disclosed; Score 0 if not disclosed
<i>C. Positive image strategies</i>			
6	Good intentions	Emphasising positive motivations to frame negative impacts as unintended consequences	Score 1 if disclosed; Score 0 if not disclosed
7	Bolstering	Emphasising positive aspects to downplay negative impacts or improve the image	Score 1 if disclosed; Score 0 if not disclosed
8	Ingratiation	Seeking favour or goodwill through actions or words	Score 1 if disclosed; Score 0 if not disclosed
<i>D. Downplaying strategies</i>			
9	Minimisation	Reducing the significance or seriousness of an issue	Score 1 if disclosed; Score 0 if not disclosed
10	Differentiation	Comparing the situation to something worse to make it seem less severe	Score 1 if disclosed; Score 0 if not disclosed
11	Transcendence	Redirecting attention away from the issue by focusing on broader, more positive aspects	Score 1 if disclosed; Score 0 if not disclosed
<i>E. Attack strategies</i>			
12	Attacking accuser	Challenging or undermining the credibility of those making accusations	Score 1 if disclosed; Score 0 if not disclosed
13	Intimidation	Using threats or coercion to influence perceptions or responses	Score 1 if disclosed; Score 0 if not disclosed
<i>F. Rectification strategies</i>			
14	Compensation	Offering reparations or compensation for the negative impacts	Score 1 if disclosed; Score 0 if not disclosed
15	Corrective action	Taking steps to rectify or address the issue	Score 1 if disclosed; Score 0 if not disclosed
<i>G. Relationship-building strategies</i>			
16	Mortification	Publicly admitting fault or expressing regret	Score 1 if disclosed; Score 0 if not disclosed
17	Attribution	Attributing actions or situations to specific causes or factors	Score 1 if disclosed; Score 0 if not disclosed
18	Self-promotion	Promoting one's positive attributes or actions	Score 1 if disclosed; Score 0 if not disclosed
19	Supplication	Appealing for help, often by portraying oneself as weak or needy	Score 1 if disclosed; Score 0 if not disclosed

Source(s): Authors' own work, adapted from [Benoit \(1995\)](#), [Bolino and Turnley \(2003\)](#) and [Shrives and Brennan \(2017\)](#)

- Can you give examples of how your company highlights positive initiatives or manages negative issues?
- (4) Use of rhetorical strategies
- Let's consider a situation where your company is facing criticism from environmental groups and media for failing to meet a significant sustainability target, such as reducing carbon emissions. This has caused some negative media coverage, and stakeholders are questioning the company's commitment to sustainability.
 - * In this situation, how would your company respond in its sustainability report?
 - * How do you think these responses would affect the company's reputation, both in the short term and long term?
 - Imagine a scenario where a major supplier in your company's supply chain is exposed for environmental violations, such as improper waste disposal or deforestation, which contradicts your company's sustainability commitments. The media and other stakeholders have linked your company to this incident due to the supplier relationship.
 - * How would your company address this issue in its sustainability report?
 - * How would you balance transparency with the need to protect the company's reputation?
 - Let's consider a situation where your company experiences a significant employee safety incident, leading to injuries or fatalities, despite previous reports emphasising a strong safety record. This incident has sparked criticism from both the public and regulatory bodies.
 - * How would your company address this in the sustainability report?
 - * How would you ensure that the response is seen as sincere rather than a reputation management tactic?
 - Let's assume that your company has been accused of greenwashing after launching a new product line marketed as eco-friendly, but environmental groups have criticised its actual environmental impact. This has led to growing scepticism among consumers and stakeholders.
 - * How would your company address these allegations in its sustainability report?
 - * How would you ensure stakeholders view the company's response as credible and not just damage control?
 - Let's assume that your company is fined by a regulatory body for non-compliance with environmental regulations, such as exceeding emission limits. The fine and non-compliance are public, and stakeholders are questioning the company's commitment to sustainability.
 - * How would your company address this issue in its sustainability report?
 - * How would you use the report to reassure stakeholders while maintaining transparency?
- (5) Clarification on specific disclosures (different companies and different questions)
- In your 2011 sustainability report, it was stated that the company faced significant challenges related to land clearing, resulting in a red PROPER rating from the Ministry of Environment. The report also mentioned that the company responded by allocating funds for environmental projects, ultimately improving to a blue rating (COMP1, 2011 Sustainability Report, p. 53).

- * Could you provide more details on the specific challenges the company faced regarding the land-clearing charges and how these were managed?
- * What specific environmental projects were funded in response to the PROPER assessment, and how did these projects contribute to the improved rating?
- * How did the company ensure that similar issues would not occur in the future, and what lessons were learned from this experience?

(6) Symbolic vs substantive actions

- In your opinion, how closely do the actions described in the sustainability report reflect actual practices within the company?
- Are there instances where the company's public commitments to sustainability do not fully align with internal practices?
- Do you think the sustainability report is used more for external image-building than for driving internal change? Why or why not?

(7) Challenges and improvements

- What challenges does your company face in preparing sustainability reports?
- In your view, how could sustainability reporting practices be improved to increase transparency and authenticity?
- How do you foresee the future of sustainability reporting evolving in your company?

(8) Closing

- Is there anything else you would like to add regarding the company's approach to sustainability reporting or the use of rhetorical strategies?

Source(s): Authors' own work

As detailed in aforementioned interview guidelines, the interview questions were designed to align with the study's research objectives by exploring how sustainability reporting managers justify and implement rhetorical strategies in corporate disclosures. These questions addressed key themes such as stakeholder influence, transparency versus reputation management and strategic responses to sustainability challenges. Scenario-based questions probed managers on real-world dilemmas, such as accusations of greenwashing or regulatory fines, allowing the study to examine the practical application of rhetorical strategies in shaping sustainability narratives. By linking these discussions to institutional theory, the interviews provided deeper insights into how companies navigate external pressures while maintaining legitimacy through sustainability reporting. Scenario-based questions were also used to understand corporate responses to sustainability challenges. For instance, managers were asked how they would address accusations of greenwashing, negative environmental incidents or regulatory fines in their reports. These questions provided insights into how companies strategically frame sustainability narratives under institutional pressures.

Table 3 presents an overview of the interviewees' profiles, including their positions, ages, educational backgrounds and interview durations. The interviewees included sustainability reporting managers, corporate social responsibility (CSR) managers and corporate executives. The majority held bachelor's degrees (15 out of 18), with a few possessing master's degrees. This diversity of backgrounds ensured a comprehensive understanding of the strategic use of rhetorical responses in sustainability reporting.

The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, following the methodology outlined by Clarke and Braun (2016) and Xu and Zammit (2020). The analysis involved familiarising with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes and refining these

Table 3. Characteristics of interviewees and interviews

Code of interviewees	Interviewee's position	Interviewee's sex	Interviewee's age (years old)	Interviewee's education	Interview duration (minutes)
COMP1	Sustainability reporting manager	Female	43	Master's degree	61
COMP2	Sustainability reporting manager	Male	39	Bachelor's degree	65
COMP3	Sustainability reporting manager	Male	33	Bachelor's degree	116
COMP4	Sustainability reporting manager	Male	39	Bachelor's degree	61
COMP5	Vice president of corporate social responsibility	Male	39	Bachelor's degree	105
COMP6	Sustainability reporting manager	Female	33	Bachelor's degree	71
COMP7	Head of investor relations	Male	39	Bachelor's degree	68
COMP8	Vice president of corporate secretary	Male	48	Master's degree	97
COMP9	Corporate social responsibility manager	Male	43	Bachelor's degree	69
COMP10	Sustainability reporting manager	Male	44	Bachelor's degree	75
COMP11	Sustainability reporting manager	Male	45	Bachelor's degree	64
COMP12	Sustainability reporting manager	Male	42	Bachelor's degree	98
COMP13	Corporate social responsibility manager	Female	43	Master's degree	68
COMP14	Corporate external reporting manager	Male	39	Bachelor's degree	97
COMP15	Sustainability reporting manager	Male	33	Bachelor's degree	69
COMP16	Vice president of corporate social responsibility	Male	39	Bachelor's degree	75
COMP17	Sustainability reporting manager	Male	48	Bachelor's degree	64
COMP18	Sustainability reporting manager	Male	43	Bachelor's degree	68

Source(s): Authors' own work

themes to produce a final report. This approach allowed for the identification of recurring patterns related to symbolic compliance and decoupling, providing deeper insights into the strategic motivations behind corporate sustainability disclosures. The thematic analysis also revealed how companies selectively emphasise certain narratives to align with external expectations without necessarily implementing substantive changes.

Triangulation was used to enhance the reliability of findings by cross-referencing content analysis results with interview insights. Additionally, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with selected interviewees to confirm the accuracy of interpretations. The combined methodological approach strengthens the study's contribution to understanding sustainability reporting as both a strategic and institutionalised practice.

4. Results

4.1 Results from content analysis

Table 4 presents the content analysis results, revealing six out of seven rhetorical response groups. Notably, downplaying strategies were absent. Of the 144 reports analysed, bolstering was the most common response (92 reports or 64%), emphasising positive achievements to

Table 4. Results of content analysis

No.	Rhetorical responses	No. of reports
<i>A. Evasion of responsibility strategies</i>		
1	Simple denial	14
2	Shifting the blame	19
<i>B. Excusing strategies</i>		
3	Provocation	28
4	Defeasibility	21
5	Accident	0
<i>C. Positive image strategies</i>		
6	Good intentions	0
7	Bolstering	92
8	Ingratiation	48
<i>D. Downplaying strategies</i>		
9	Minimisation	0
10	Differentiation	0
11	Transcendence	0
<i>E. Attack strategies</i>		
12	Attacking accuser	28
13	Intimidation	0
<i>F. Rectification strategies</i>		
14	Compensation	0
15	Corrective action	34
<i>G. Relationship-Building strategies</i>		
16	Mortification	0
17	Attribution	21
18	Self-promotion	40
19	Supplication	0

Source(s): Authors' own work

counter negative perceptions, while simple denial was the least frequent (14 reports), used to obscure or omit issues.

4.1.1 Evasion of responsibility strategies. Evasion of responsibility strategies, including simple denial and blame-shifting, were used in 23% of the reports. The content analysis identified 14 reports using simple denial. For example, COMP3's 2021 report states, "Throughout the implementation, several Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) were achieved[...]" (COMP3, 2021 Sustainability Report, p. 74). This vague phrasing suggests that not all KPIs were met, with the company likely withholding details about unachieved targets to protect its reputation. Additionally, 19 reports exhibited blame-shifting. COMP11's 2013 report states, "[...]the use of used lubricant for blasting[...]was down because our contractor[...]used more emulsion as a blasting agent" (COMP11, 2013 Sustainability Report, p. 47). This statement shifts responsibility for reduced lubricant use to the contractor, deflecting accountability and emphasising external factors rather than the company's direct actions.

4.1.2 Excusing strategies. Excusing strategies – such as provocation, defeasibility and accident – are used to deflect responsibility for negative sustainability outcomes by attributing them to external circumstances. In this study, 34% of the reports used such strategies, with provocation appearing in 28 reports and defeasibility in 21. The accident strategy, however, was not observed in any of the analysed reports. An example of provocation is in COMP18's 2015 report: "Severe challenges in the growth of the property market nationwide are affecting the total sales of cement[...] due to the influx of new players[...]who were not ASI members yet" (COMP18, 2015 Sustainability Report, p. 10). This statement attributes declining sales to external market conditions, positioning the company as a victim of circumstances beyond its control. Meanwhile, defeasibility is seen in COMP6's 2021 report: "The price of coal sold by [the company's] subsidiaries is determined by factors beyond the company's control, such as world coal price fluctuations[...]" (COMP6, 2021 Sustainability Report, p. 111). This explanation shifts responsibility to global market forces, portraying coal pricing as outside the company's influence.

4.1.3 Positive image strategies. Positive image strategies were used in 97% of the reports. The analysis identified 92 reports with bolstering (64%) and 48 with ingratiation (33%), but none using good intentions. Bolstering and ingratiation often overlap, as seen in COMP1's 2011 report:

Since the beginning, COMP1 has understood that environmental implementation policy is not easy[...] The company remains confident that the land-clearing permit has been obtained legally [...] These challenges caused a red PROPER rating, which has been addressed by allocating funds for environmental projects[...] COMP1 has successfully received a blue rating. (COMP1, 2011 Sustainability Report, p. 53)

This statement combines ingratiation, acknowledging challenges to build empathy and bolstering, highlighting actions that improved the company's PROPER rating.

Another bolstering example is in COMP9's 2014 report:

We have always taken sustainable approaches[...] Unfortunately, only 28% of our primary packaging is being recycled[...] We are working on two technologies to solve this issue[...] Best practices of similar waste-to-energy technologies[...] have shown the possibility of processing hundreds of tons of waste per day. (COMP9, 2014 Sustainability Report, p. 62)

Here, the company acknowledges a problem but focuses on proactive solutions, emphasising its commitment to sustainability and innovation, making this a clear example of bolstering.

4.1.4 Downplaying strategies. Downplaying strategies, including minimising, differentiation and transcendence, are rhetorical tools used to mitigate or reframe issues. However, the content analysis found no instances of these downplaying strategies in the sustainability reports analysed.

This absence may indicate that companies prefer more explicit legitimisation strategies, rather than rhetorical downplaying when addressing sustainability issues. Moreover, managers may perceive downplaying as a risk to corporate credibility, fearing that minimising issues could be interpreted as insincerity, ultimately undermining stakeholder trust.

4.1.5 Attack strategies. Attacking the accuser and intimidation are rhetorical tactics aimed at discrediting opponents or instilling fear to silence dissent. Attack strategies were observed in 19% of reports. The content analysis found 28 instances of attacking the accuser, but no cases of intimidation. An example of attacking the accuser is in COMP4's 2021 report:

There is an 'Open Letter' published by a coalition of Non-Government Organisation (NGOs) [non-government organisations][...] The open letter accuses [the company] of various allegations with no merit. These claims are not new and have[...]been asked and answered in the past. In response[...]we presented data and analysis and published this on our website. (COMP4, 2021 Sustainability Report, p. 35)

Here, the company undermines the NGOs' credibility, dismissing their allegations as unfounded and previously addressed, thus discrediting the accusers.

4.1.6 Rectification strategies. Compensation and corrective actions are rectification strategies aimed at addressing and resolving issues. The content analysis found 34 reports (24%) demonstrating corrective actions but none involving compensation. An example of corrective action is found in COMP14's 2017 report: "In 2017, there were complaints [...] alleging spills from our operational areas[...] Investigations concluded the allegations were not correct [...] Nevertheless, corrective, preventive, and assistance actions were provided for the impacted communities" (COMP14, 2017 Sustainability Report, pp. 151–152). Despite denying responsibility, COMP14 took corrective actions to help affected communities, demonstrating a commitment to resolving the issue and preventing future incidents.

4.1.7 Relationship building strategies. These rhetorical strategies help mend relationships, acknowledge contributions, showcase strengths or seek assistance. Relationship building strategies were observed in 42% of reports. The content analysis found 21 reports using attribution and 40 using self-promotion, with no instances of mortification or supplication. An example of attribution is found in COMP2's 2013 report: "The usage of diesel fuel has increased by 6% due to new operational areas and increasing production in the company's subsidiaries[...]" (COMP2, 2013 Sustainability Report, pp. 108–109). Here, the company attributes the rise in fuel usage to external factors like expansion, deflecting responsibility from internal decisions.

An example of self-promotion is in COMP5's 2018 report: "During the reporting period, [the company] received 72 complaints[...] handled properly by meeting customer service standards[...] no record of product recall[...]" (COMP5, 2018 Sustainability Report, p. 47). This statement highlights effective complaint handling and the absence of product recalls, positioning the company as proactive and competent in maintaining product quality and customer satisfaction.

4.2 Results of thematic analysis

The thematic analysis of interviews with sustainability reporting managers revealed several reasons behind the use of rhetorical strategies in the companies' disclosures. Managers provided insights into their decision-making processes, highlighting the motivations and considerations that shape their sustainability communication practices. Table 5 shows the results of thematic analysis.

4.2.1 Strategic image management to protect reputation. A dominant theme emerging from the interviews was the strategic use of sustainability reporting as a tool to manage corporate image. Managers described how reputational concerns shape the content and tone

Table 5. Results of thematic analysis

Themes	Descriptions of the themes	Samples of interviewee’s quotes
Reputation management	Managers use rhetorical strategies like bolstering and self-promotion to protect and enhance the company’s reputation	“In an environment where every mistake is magnified, it’s crucial to highlight our achievements to balance public perception” (COMP3)
Justifying challenges	Managers provide context, using strategies like provocation and defeasibility to frame external challenges as causes of negative outcomes	“When market dynamics affect our performance, we need to communicate that clearly so stakeholders understand the broader situation” (COMP18)
Selective transparency	Stakeholder expectations drive reports, leading managers to focus on positive initiatives and sometimes defend against misinformation	“Stakeholders expect us to show that we are taking action, so we often focus on initiatives and improvements in our reports” (COMP1)
Avoiding downplaying	Managers avoid minimising issues to prevent loss of trust and maintain long-term stakeholder confidence	“If we minimise or dismiss issues, we risk being seen as insincere, which can damage our reputation in the long run” (COMP5)
Proactive rectification	Corrective actions show proactivity in addressing sustainability problems, reassuring stakeholders of the company’s commitment	“We take corrective actions to show that we are not just acknowledging problems but also working towards solutions” (COMP14)
Relationship building	Managers emphasise relationship-building by acknowledging partners’ contributions and highlighting successes to foster trust	“We aim to acknowledge the role of partners and stakeholders in our achievements to foster goodwill and collaboration” (COMP2)

Source(s): Authors’ own work

of these reports, driving a focus on positive achievements while carefully navigating or deflecting negative issues. As one manager explained:

In an environment where every mistake is magnified, it’s crucial to highlight our achievements to balance public perception. (Sustainability Reporting Manager, COMP3)

This view was widely shared. Managers consistently positioned sustainability reports not merely as compliance documents but as instruments of image construction. For example, a reporting officer emphasised the value of showcasing initiatives during reputationally sensitive periods:

We highlight our community programs and green initiatives to show that we’re taking action, especially after any negative media attention. (Corporate External Reporting Manager, COMP14)

Another interviewee expressed a similar sentiment:

The report is not just about compliance—it’s also about shaping how the public and investors see us. (Corporate Social Responsibility Manager, COMP9)

Several managers also discussed the use of evasion strategies, particularly in handling reputationally sensitive topics. Rather than accepting full accountability, companies sometimes attribute shortcomings to external forces, such as contractors, regulators or market dynamics:

We sometimes need to point out factors beyond our control to show that not every issue is solely due to our operations. (Sustainability Reporting Manager, COMP11)

This sentiment is echoed in COMP11’s 2013 sustainability report, which states, “[...] the use of used lubricant for blasting[...]was down because our contractor[...]used more emulsion

as a blasting agent” (COMP11, 2013 Sustainability Report, p. 47). Such statements represent a clear blame-shifting tactic, used to reframe responsibility while preserving the organisation’s reputation. As one manager further elaborated:

It’s not about hiding things—it’s about explaining the context. If external suppliers or market conditions are responsible, we make sure to say that. (Sustainability Reporting Manager, COMP6)

These accounts collectively demonstrate that rhetorical strategies like bolstering and blame-shifting are not isolated or defensive reactions. Rather, they form part of a deliberate and calculated effort to maintain organisational legitimacy and stakeholder trust. In this way, sustainability reports operate not only as tools for disclosure but as curated narratives that defend and enhance corporate reputation.

4.2.2 Framing challenges as contextual justification. Closely linked to reputational management is the strategic use of context to justify sustainability challenges. Another prominent theme in the interviews was the deliberate framing of operational setbacks as the result of external forces beyond the company’s control. This approach allows organisations to reframe perceived weaknesses as reasonable outcomes of complex market or regulatory environments. As one reporting manager explained:

When market dynamics affect our performance, we need to communicate that clearly so stakeholders understand the broader situation. It’s not about hiding problems; it’s about presenting the full picture. (Sustainability Reporting Manager, COMP18)

Similarly, the sustainability officer from COMP6 noted:

Not all aspects of our operations are within our direct control, such as fluctuating commodity prices. It’s important for us to explain this so that stakeholders can set realistic expectations. (Sustainability Reporting Manager, COMP6)

Several interviewees reinforced that such framing is not intended to deflect blame, but to educate stakeholders on the broader business environment:

Stakeholders don’t always understand how external shocks work, so we have to explain it in the report. It’s about managing expectations without sounding defensive. (Sustainability Reporting Manager, COMP12)

When new regulations come in, or there are sudden cost spikes, we clarify that we’re adjusting, not failing. It helps us avoid being seen as incompetent or unprepared. (Vice President of Corporate Secretary, COMP8)

This theme reflects the tactical use of provocation (blaming external conditions) and defeasibility (highlighting limited control) as rhetorical strategies. These devices allow firms to construct a narrative of reasoned response rather than responsibility evasion. In doing so, companies maintain reputational capital without appearing defensive or opaque. Thus, contextual framing emerges as a critical component of corporate sustainability discourse – one that transforms potential reputational liabilities into plausible outcomes of external volatility. As such, it functions as a calculated response to institutional pressures and audience expectations, rather than a neutral recounting of events.

4.2.3 Responding to stakeholder pressures through selective transparency. Building on the previous themes, a third prominent insight revealed how companies strategically calibrate disclosures in response to stakeholder expectations. Interviewees acknowledged that sustainability reporting often involves a selective emphasis – highlighting actions that meet stakeholder demands while controlling the narrative around contentious issues:

Stakeholders expect us to show that we are taking action, so we often focus on initiatives and improvements in our reports. (Sustainability Reporting Manager, COMP1)

It's important to frame our actions in a way that builds trust. If we don't highlight what we're doing, people assume we're doing nothing. (Sustainability Reporting Manager, COMP10)

However, when companies face external scrutiny or criticism, the strategy may shift towards defending credibility. Some interviewees described using attack tactics to respond to what they perceived as misinformation:

When accusations are based on misinformation, we need to correct them to maintain our credibility. It's not about denying problems but about ensuring the narrative is fair. (Sustainability Reporting Manager, COMP4)

This approach was echoed in COMP4's 2021 report:

There is an 'Open Letter' published by a coalition of NGOs[...] The open letter accuses [the company] of various allegations with no merit. These claims are not new and have[...] been asked and answered in the past. (COMP4, 2021 Sustainability Report, p. 35)

A similar perspective was shared by another manager:

We try to stay factual, but when misinformation spreads, we have to defend ourselves. Otherwise, our silence is interpreted as guilt. (Head of Investor Relations, COMP7)

These findings reveal that sustainability reports are not merely descriptive tools but active instruments of impression management. Companies use selective transparency to reassure stakeholders, mitigate reputational risks and counteract criticism – balancing disclosure with control to maintain legitimacy in the public eye.

4.2.4 Avoidance of downplaying to maintain trust. In contrast to the use of rhetorical strategies aimed at protecting image or deflecting blame, a notable theme that emerged was the conscious avoidance of downplaying tactics. Several managers highlighted the risks associated with minimising or dismissing negative information, suggesting that such strategies could backfire and undermine stakeholder trust:

If we minimise or dismiss issues, we risk being seen as insincere, which can damage our reputation in the long run. (Vice President of Corporate Social Responsibility, COMP5)

Stakeholders are becoming more informed. If we downplay something serious, they'll notice, and then we lose credibility. (Corporate Social Responsibility Manager, COMP9)

We are honest when things don't go perfectly. But we also show how we respond. That builds credibility. (Sustainability Reporting Manager, COMP2)

This strategy aligns with a broader understanding that perceived transparency and accountability are more valuable than polished perfection. One interviewee explained:

Today's stakeholders—especially institutional investors—don't expect flawless performance. They expect openness and responsibility. (Sustainability Reporting Manager, COMP12)

Thus, rather than downplaying negative events, companies are opting to contextualise them or focus on corrective action, which serves to maintain credibility. These findings suggest that non-use of downplaying strategies is itself a rhetorical choice, one that signals authenticity and supports long-term legitimacy.

4.2.5 Demonstrating proactivity through rectification strategies. Another recurring pattern in the interviews was the emphasis on portraying the company as proactive and solution-oriented. Managers indicated that disclosing corrective actions – rather than

concealing or excusing issues – was an intentional strategy to demonstrate accountability and build trust:

We take corrective actions to show that we are not just acknowledging problems but also working towards solutions. It's a way of demonstrating our commitment to continual improvement. (Corporate External Reporting Manager, COMP14)

Other interviewees reinforced this framing of rectification as a forward-looking communication tool:

It's not enough to say sorry. We need to show what we're doing next—how we're preventing the issue from recurring. (Sustainability Reporting Manager, COMP2)

Corrective measures are about transparency. They prove that we're learning from mistakes and adjusting our practices accordingly. (Head of Investor Relations, COMP7)

Rather than risking damage from inaction or silence, firms use rectification strategies to reassert control and reaffirm their values:

We don't want to appear reactive or defensive. Taking the initiative reassures stakeholders that we are in control and committed to better outcomes. (Sustainability Reporting Manager, COMP6)

By positioning corrective actions as part of a continuous improvement process, companies communicate a narrative of growth and responsibility. These findings suggest that rectification strategies are not only reputational tools but also expressions of corporate values that reinforce the organisation's credibility and long-term legitimacy.

4.2.6 Building relationships with stakeholders through acknowledgement and self-promotion. The final theme highlights the use of rhetorical strategies aimed at reinforcing stakeholder relationships. Managers consistently emphasised that acknowledging contributions and showcasing strengths were vital in maintaining trust and fostering long-term engagement:

We aim to acknowledge the role of partners and stakeholders in our achievements to foster goodwill and collaboration. (Sustainability Reporting Manager, COMP2)

Other managers discussed how highlighting internal successes helps solidify relationships with key external audiences:

Highlighting our success in managing customer complaints and ensuring product quality is key to building trust with our clients. (Quality Assurance Officer, COMP5)

Another manager shared:

We make a point of featuring employee initiatives and local partnerships to show that we're a collaborative, community-minded organisation. (Sustainability Reporting Manager, COMP11)

This relational tone is part of a broader self-promotion strategy, where companies highlight achievements and partnerships not just for visibility but to reinforce values that stakeholders care about:

It's not just about saying we're responsible—it's about showing we care about the people and ecosystems around us. (Vice President of Corporate Secretary, COMP8)

These practices serve to humanise corporate narratives, transform abstract policies into relational gestures and signal alignment with stakeholder values. By acknowledging contributions and celebrating impact, companies strategically build relational capital that can buffer against criticism and foster stakeholder loyalty.

5. Discussion

The content and thematic analyses reveal that companies strategically use rhetorical responses in sustainability reporting. These tactics align with institutional theory's concept of decoupling – projecting compliance, while masking the gap between rhetoric and actual practice. This study extends prior research by showing how Indonesia's evolving regulatory landscape (e.g. POJK 51/2017) and sociopolitical pressures shape such strategies. Firms navigate a complex tension between international expectations and local realities, often reinforcing symbolic compliance.

These findings have important implications for sustainability practice, especially in emerging markets like Indonesia. Practitioners must look beyond the content of disclosures to the strategic motives behind them. In Indonesia's context of limited regulatory enforcement and strong sociopolitical influences, the risk of symbolic compliance is high. Sustainability professionals – including managers, auditors and consultants – should recognise that rhetoric may satisfy formal requirements without prompting real change. This highlights the need for stronger internal accountability and integrated governance. Indonesian firms, in particular, must navigate pressures from international investors demanding credible disclosures and local norms favouring harmony and face-saving. To move beyond image management, companies must engage stakeholders authentically and embed sustainability into core strategies with measurable outcomes.

The content analysis revealed a strong reliance on rhetorical strategies, particularly bolstering, which appeared in 92 of the 144 reports. This suggests that companies often emphasise achievements to present a proactive stance on sustainability. Thematic analysis supports this, with managers citing the need to “balance public perception” and “maintain stakeholder support” – especially in high-scrutiny sectors like energy and extractives. The widespread use of bilingual reports (97 of 144) also indicates impression management aimed at both domestic and international audiences. This emphasis on positive narratives reflects a strategy of reputation management rather than genuine transparency. Longer reports typically include more bolstering, helping companies highlight strengths while omitting or downplaying weaknesses. This pattern illustrates symbolic compliance – where firms appear to meet sustainability norms without enacting real change. Moreover, the selective referencing of GRI, POJK 51/2017 or SASB standards (cited in 120 reports) shows how companies align disclosures with varying institutional pressures, while maintaining reporting flexibility.

Evasion strategies like simple denial and blame-shifting were less common but still significant. Content analysis showed that some firms concealed or reframed negative outcomes, attributing issues to external factors to avoid accountability. Thematic findings revealed managers see these tactics as necessary to “safeguard the company's image” and “deflect responsibility”. In Indonesia, this is reinforced by pressures from regulators and informal networks, such as business associations and state-owned enterprises, which encourage cautious disclosures. These practices exemplify decoupling – using symbolic communication to manage perceptions without enacting substantive change. By denying issues or shifting blame, firms appear responsive, while deflecting scrutiny (Lodhia and Mitchell, 2022; Pigatto *et al.*, 2023; Zhong *et al.*, 2022).

The absence of downplaying strategies in the content analysis is notable. Interviews suggest that managers deliberately avoid such tactics, aware that minimising issues could appear insincere and damage trust. This contrasts with Western contexts, where downplaying is more common (Lodhia and Mitchell, 2022). In Indonesia, avoidance may reflect cultural norms that favour harmony and optimism, even amid challenges. While this may suggest accountability, it more likely reflects a strategic communication choice aligned with image

management goals (Mapa *et al.*, 2019). This selectivity illustrates another form of decoupling – maintaining narrative control without committing to substantive change (Almeida and Fett, 2016).

Excusing strategies – especially provocation and defeasibility – were prominent in the content analysis, framing sustainability challenges as outcomes of external factors. This aligns with thematic insights, where managers stressed the need to “explain the broader situation” to stakeholders. For example, firms often attributed rising greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to Indonesia’s reliance on coal, rather than internal inefficiencies. Such framing aligns disclosures with national policy while deflecting responsibility. By citing market dynamics, regulation or unforeseen events, companies create a buffer between rhetoric and reality (Bice and Coates, 2016), reflecting decoupling through narratives that signal compliance while distancing from full accountability (Caliskan *et al.*, 2021).

Attack and rectification strategies reveal the complexity of corporate responses to external pressures. Firms use attack strategies to defend against criticism, challenging accusers’ credibility to control the narrative and protect legitimacy. Rectification strategies, such as corrective actions, help portray companies as proactive and responsible. However, thematic analysis shows these strategies are applied selectively, especially under intense scrutiny – such as from environmental NGOs. This response pattern reflects decoupling, where firms project compliance and responsiveness without substantive change (Corazza *et al.*, 2020), using symbolic actions to meet institutional expectations while preserving operational flexibility.

Relationship-building strategies, such as self-promotion and attribution, are commonly used to strengthen stakeholder ties. Content analysis shows companies often highlight sustainability efforts and partnerships, while thematic insights reveal managers view these tactics as essential for building trust. However, these efforts tend to prioritise favourable impressions over substantive engagement (Fialho *et al.*, 2021). This reflects broader patterns of symbolic compliance in emerging markets, where firms navigate complex regulatory, investor and sociopolitical pressures (Posadas *et al.*, 2023).

This study advances institutional theory by showing how decoupling in sustainability reporting is shaped by Indonesia’s distinct regulatory and cultural context. While most prior research focuses on Western settings, this study highlights how emerging market dynamics – such as evolving regulations, investor expectations and cultural norms – influence corporate rhetoric. Companies use strategies like bolstering and rectification to maintain legitimacy without enacting substantive change, reinforcing symbolic compliance. From a policy perspective, stronger enforcement by regulators such as Indonesia’s otoritas jasa keuangan (OJK) – through third-party audits, stricter mandates and penalties for misleading claims – could reduce symbolic reporting. NGOs and watchdogs can use these findings to enhance accountability by exposing inconsistencies in reported commitments. Investor and consumer pressures also shape behaviour, but firms often mimic best practices without internalising them. Enhancing transparency and cross-sector accountability can help shift firms from symbolic gestures to substantive sustainability practices.

Enhancing the authenticity of sustainability disclosures and moving from symbolic to substantive compliance requires a multifaceted approach. Stronger oversight by Indonesia’s OJK – through stricter disclosure rules, mandatory third-party assurance and standardised metrics – can curb selective reporting. Incentives like tax breaks, sustainability-linked loans and recognition awards can motivate measurable progress. Stakeholder engagement should be improved by requiring feedback mechanisms and disclosures on how concerns shape decisions. Finally, linking sustainability performance to executive compensation and governance codes can embed accountability and promote long-term responsibility.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the rhetorical strategies used by the top 50 large-cap companies on the IDX in their sustainability reports from 2006 to 2023. Content analysis of 144 reports revealed six rhetorical strategy groups, with bolstering being the most prevalent, reflecting companies' focus on highlighting achievements to maintain a positive image. In contrast, simple denial was rarely used, indicating selective efforts to manage reputational risks. Thematic analysis highlighted that these disclosures often serve reputation management rather than substantive sustainability efforts. The findings align with the concept of decoupling in institutional theory, where companies symbolically comply with sustainability norms to protect their reputation while avoiding deeper operational changes. This strategic use of rhetorical tactics raises questions about the authenticity and effectiveness of sustainability reporting in driving genuine change.

The study contributes to institutional theory and sustainability reporting literature by showing how rhetorical strategies align with decoupling, providing insights for stakeholders to critically evaluate corporate claims. It emphasises the need for companies to move beyond symbolic compliance towards substantive action. However, the focus on large-cap Indonesian companies limits the findings' generalisability. Future research could explore rhetorical strategies across diverse contexts, such as comparing sectors with varying environmental impacts (e.g. energy, finance and consumer goods) to assess whether sectoral differences influence the choice of rhetorical tactics. Additionally, examining the impact of regulatory changes, such as the enforcement of POJK 51/2017, on corporate sustainability communication would provide valuable insights into how firms adapt their reporting in response to evolving governance frameworks. Longitudinal studies could also investigate whether increased stakeholder scrutiny and shifting investor expectations lead to more substantive sustainability commitments over time. Finally, expanding the analysis to smaller firms and different institutional settings beyond Indonesia could offer a broader understanding of how sustainability rhetoric varies across regulatory and cultural environments.

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About the authors

Eka Ardhani Sisdyani is a Chartered Accountant and Associate Professor in the Department of Accounting at Udayana University, Bali, Indonesia. She obtained her Master's degree in Commerce (Accounting) from Macquarie University, Australia, and completed her PhD in Accounting at Brawijaya University, Malang, Indonesia. Eka Ardhani Sisdyani is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: eka_ardhani@unud.ac.id

I Putu Sudana is a Chartered Accountant and Associate Professor in the Department of Accounting at Udayana University, Bali, Indonesia. He earned his Master's degree in Accounting from the University of Colorado, Denver, USA, and received his PhD in Accounting from Brawijaya University, Malang, Indonesia.

JFRA

Putu Agus Ardiana is a Chartered Accountant and Assistant Professor in the Department of Accounting at Udayana University, Bali, Indonesia. He completed his master's degree in Accounting and Finance with distinction at the University of Adelaide, South Australia, and earned his PhD in Accounting from Durham University Business School, United Kingdom. His PhD thesis received an unconditional pass (no revisions required) under the supervision of Professor Richard Slack and Professor Carol Adams.

I Gusti Agung Ayu Apsari Anandari is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Economics at Udayana University, Bali, Indonesia. She completed her Master's degree in Economics at Gadjah Mada University, Indonesia.

Kadek Dwi Linda Yanthi completed her Master's degree at Udayana University, Bali, Indonesia, where she also earned her Bachelor's degree in Accounting. She is currently a Graduate Research Assistant.

Radheeya Aishvarya Uttari is a Bachelor's degree student in Accounting at Udayana University and currently serves as a Research Assistant.

Komang Puja Astiti completed her Bachelor's degree in Accounting at Udayana University and is currently a Graduate Research Assistant.

Anak Agung Vidyaswari Kedisan completed her Master's degree at Udayana University, Bali, Indonesia, where she also obtained her Bachelor's degree in Accounting. She is a Lecturer in the Department of Accounting at Udayana University, Bali, Indonesia.