

# Online corporate communication of diversity and inclusion: washing as aspirational talk

Online  
corporate  
communication

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39

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The article aims to investigate how washing practices focused on appeasing sceptics of diversity work in for-profit organizations play out in corporate online communication of diversity and inclusion efforts, and how these enable communication to a wide audience that includes social equity advocates.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Online corporate communication data of diversity and inclusion themes were compiled from the websites of eight Swedish-based multinational corporations. The data included content from the companies' official websites and annual reports and sustainability reports as well as diversity and inclusion-themed blog posts. A thematic analysis was conducted on the website content.

**Findings** – The study showcases how tensions between conflicting external demands are navigated by keeping the communication open to several interpretations and thereby achieving multivocality. In the studied corporate texts on diversity and inclusion, this is achieved by alternating between elements catering to a business case audience and those that appeal to a social justice audience, with some procedures managing to appease both audiences at the same time.

**Originality/value** – The article complements previously described forms of washing by introducing an additional type of washing – *business case washing* – an articulation of the business case rhetoric that characterizes the diversity management discourse. While much has been written about washing to satisfy advocates of social change and equity, washing to appease shareholders and boardroom members, who are focused on profit and economic growth, has received less attention. The article suggests that online corporate communication on diversity and inclusion, by appeasing diverse audiences, can be seen as aspirational talk.

**Keywords** Qualitative, Aspirational talk, Diversity and inclusion, Business case washing,  
Online corporate communication

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Today's organizations face numerous competing and incompatible demands applying to, e.g. safety, integrity, social justice and environmental issues. Organizations are urged to act in various roles and relate to many constituents – consumers, employees, shareholders, interest groups and the media (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2013). The growing emphasis on transparency and accountability, make conflicting demands ever more prevalent (Bromley and Powell, 2012). Contemporary organizations are expected to communicate corporate social responsibility efforts (Balluchi *et al.*, 2020). In this communication, issues of diversity and inclusion are among those that organizations are compelled to address. Actively addressing diversity and inclusion is both a legal obligation and a consequence of consumers' and potential employees'

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expectations that companies act in accordance with social justice and sustainability standards (Jonsen *et al.*, 2019; Ng *et al.*, 2010).

Communicating diversity and inclusion efforts means adapting to the expectations and preferences of different stakeholders. While appealing to all stakeholders might not be feasible, communication must try to cater to all parts of a heterogeneous audience. As organizations face numerous, potentially conflicting and incompatible, demands, a common practice has been to differentiate between audiences, using different modes and channels for communicating with different stakeholders. In online settings such as on corporate websites, differentiation between audiences is not possible, making the websites a site where contradictions may be displayed and exposed. To avoid conflict, organizations may achieve multivocality by keeping the communication open to several interpretations (Meyer and Höllerer, 2016). The diversity of a corporate website's audience hence has implications for *how* statements can be made (Coupland, 2005).

Organizations increasingly allocate space and resources to conveying their corporate social responsibility (CSR) work, including diversity and inclusion efforts, in online settings (Dade and Hassenzahl, 2013). Corporate online presence plays an important part as a symbolic representation of impression management in the eyes of stakeholders and shareholders (Pasztor, 2016).

Corporate communication aiming to address society's demand for equality and sustainability has sometimes been criticized for constituting a symbolic instead of substantive commitment to causes sorting under a CSR umbrella (Van der Waal and Thijssens, 2020). In the case of multinational corporations (MNCs), criticism has concerned communication being used mainly as a PR tool (Mhlanga *et al.*, 2018) and aimed at impressing stakeholders in the host country while ignoring the conditions produced by the companies' activities in other parts of the world (Barbosa and Cabral-Cardoso, 2010; Reid, 2014). Other critique has concerned "cherry-picking" of "easy" and unproblematic diversity causes and goals (Forestier and Kim, 2020; Siegel and Lima, 2020). Researchers have labeled their critique CSR-washing (Pope and Wæraas, 2016), SDG-washing (Heras-Saizarbitoria *et al.*, 2021) and woke-washing (Sobande, 2020). Washing as concept has generally referred to the occurrence of gaps between symbolic and substantive action (Siano *et al.*, 2017).

Building on previous works of, e.g. Scandeliuss and Cohen (2016) and Christensen *et al.* (2013, 2021), this article sets out to illustrate how communication with a diverse audience can promote change and facilitate smooth co-existence among a range of stakeholders with different perceptions and preferences. The aim is to investigate how washing practices, focusing on appeasing sceptics of diversity work in for-profit organizations, play out in corporate online communication of diversity and inclusion efforts, and how these enable communication to a wide audience that includes social equity advocates. The aim is channeled into the following questions: How is online corporate communication on diversity and inclusion catering to competing preferences and interests of a diverse audience? By appeasing diverse audiences, how can online corporate communication on diversity and inclusion be seen as aspirational talk?

Drawing on literature that focuses on the doing of language in settings of contending demands, the article adds to previous critical literature analyzing CSR communication from a performative and constitutive perspective and with a particular focus on tension management (Høvring *et al.*, 2018; Koep, 2017; Mease, 2016). Furthermore, the article contributes to the writings on divergences perceived as everyday expected parts of organizations rather than problems in need of solutions (Putnam *et al.*, 2016; Smith and Lewis, 2011).

Following the introduction, an overview of the emergence of CSR communication is provided, from diversity management in physical settings to performative communication in digital contexts. The performative view of communication is introduced, along with the concept of aspirational talk situated within it. The methodology section covers the study's sample and approach to collecting and analyzing data. In the subsequent results section, the collected online corporate online communication data from multinational corporations are

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presented thematically. A discussion section, containing theoretical and practical implications of the results, concludes the article.

### **From diversity management to performative communication**

#### *The development of the diversity management field*

Rooted in a human rights movement, what later became the field of diversity management, appeared on the scene of corporate America in the 1960s when, following changes in legislation, formal efforts to eliminate discrimination began to emerge (Kelly and Dobbin, 1998). To comply with antidiscrimination legislation, companies in the 1970s increasingly started employing equal employment opportunity and affirmative action specialists to be in charge of compliance programs that would protect them from legal action. In the 1980s, legislative compliance lost in importance, creating a need for compliance professionals, to legitimize their organizational positions in alternative ways. Work to prevent discrimination was now linked to efficiency and framed as something companies engaged in, not to avoid litigation, but for the benefit of the company's performance.

In the 1990s, diversity and inclusion gradually replaced equal opportunity as the fundamental concept. The benefits from an efficiency and business performance perspective of a pluralistic and integrated workforce were focused (Kalev *et al.*, 2006). While diversity signified an acknowledgement of the value of differences within a workforce, inclusion referred to the realization of this value (Oswick and Noon, 2014). Depicting it as little more than repackaging of what was essentially affirmative action (Kelly and Dobbin, 1998), critical researchers identified the launch of the new concepts as a strategic move and a way of making equality efforts a cause that white men could relate to, accept and even get behind (Ahmed, 2007b; Liu, 2017). Distancing itself from affirmative action, the new direction presented a way to deal with the corporate myth of meritocracy, according to which organizations are seen as neutral and apolitical (Amis *et al.*, 2020). The move hence enabled social change through rhetoric (Arciniega, 2021; Kelly and Dobbin, 1998) by linking diversity to economic growth and profit rather than to social justice. It allowed for practical employment without challenging the established organizational ideals.

#### *The business case for diversity*

While equality had been legitimized by demands for social justice and rooted in an equal opportunity movement, diversity and inclusion based their legitimacy on the alleged link to profit and economic growth. In an increasingly neoliberal era, economic rationality was emerging as the go-to rationale for diversity professionals trying to make managers and employees commit to their cause by certifying that their cause was everyone's cause. Not by virtue of any moral stance, but because increased diversity would have a positive impact on the organization's economic performance. The business case approach to diversity and inclusion was institutionalized by the implementation of diversity initiatives, practices, policies and programs launched as the solution to business-related problems (Arciniega, 2021).

The simultaneous emphasis on the business case and the de-politicization of the field brought about by the adoption of "diversity and inclusion", helped legitimize diversity work in organizations (Kirton and Greene, 2009). With the transition from equal opportunity to diversity management the main constituents also shifted from disadvantaged groups to the most advantaged groups (shareholders, management and board members).

#### *Washing and a functional perspective on communication*

The emergence of the business case for diversity discourse took place in parallel with companies increasingly facing expectations to communicate their CSR work (Balluchi *et al.*, 2020).

These expectations meant that companies, both by internal and external stakeholders, were evaluated on the basis of the perceived coherence between what they said they aspired to and what they did. The alignment between walk and talk – articulated as walking the talk or practicing what you preach – was emphasized (Christensen *et al.*, 2013; Schoeneborn *et al.*, 2020). The discourse surrounding the “walk and talk” discussions typically rested on the premise that there should be alignment between verbal expression and behavior and that any disparities between rhetoric and actions are hypocritical and immoral (Greenbaum *et al.*, 2015; Wagner *et al.*, 2009). Underpinning these claims was a functional or representational perspective on communication, which saw talk as ideally a representation of reality. This approach to communication was the basis for discussions revolving around hypocrisy, decoupling and the concept of washing.

The disparity between symbolic (talk) and substantive (walk) actions (Gatti *et al.*, 2019; Hamza and Jarbouï, 2022; Siano *et al.*, 2017) is often referred to as washing. Washing is described as a decoupling behavior (Guo *et al.*, 2014; Walker and Wan, 2011) in which communication represents symbolic rather than substantive actions (Marquis *et al.*, 2016; Siano *et al.*, 2017). Articulations of washing range from selective disclosure (de Freitas Netto *et al.*, 2020) and attention deflection (Siano *et al.*, 2017) to distortion of internal practices to project a favorable image (Boiral *et al.*, 2017; Pittman and Sheehan, 2021). Washing accusations, in large part, can be linked to the interpretation of written documents as unproblematic reflections of reality, i.e. that documents should indicate that an organization “is” diverse (Ahmed, 2007a). The conventional notion of communication as a representation of reality therefore constitutes a foundation for the concept and perception of washing.

#### *Performative communication and aspirational talk*

While the functional perspective on communication thus insists that communication and action should be consistent, the constitutive or formative perspective perceives talk as at least partly constituting the walk (Schoeneborn *et al.*, 2020). According to this perspective, communication is constitutive in that it produces and shapes both organizations and their understanding of reality (Coreen, 1999; Fairhurst and Putnam, 2004). An implication is that practice and rhetoric do not need to match for communication to be valuable in the sense of achieving social change. Researchers adopting a formative approach to communication have suggested that an allowed discrepancy between current practices and described aims, can work to promote change (Glavas *et al.*, 2023). Communication, they argue, can be seen as a potential instigator of social change rather than a depiction of practices taking place.

Building on a performative understanding of language and opposing both the dialectic view of communication and action and the view that discrepancy between communication and action is intrinsically bad, Christensen *et al.* (2013) propose the concept of *aspirational talk*. Aspirational talk is performative insofar as it mobilizes expectations for change and at the same time evokes pressure from stakeholders for action and follow-up (Bromley and Powell, 2012; Christensen *et al.*, 2015).

The performative view implies that talk and action are inseparable. In the words of Christensen and colleagues, “talk about plans and intentions with respect to CSR are actions just as actions in this area simultaneously speak” (2013, p. 5). Arguing in the same spirit as Brunsson (2002), Christensen *et al.* maintain that decoupling between talk, decisions and actions can serve organizational purposes. Regardless of its correspondence with the CSR practices of an organization, CSR communication has the potential to contribute to positive social change and encourage CSR action. But while Brunsson settles for stating that decoupling can assist organizations in keeping stakeholders with conflicting expectations satisfied, Christensen and colleagues go further, asserting that talk can stimulate social change. By publicly declaring CSR missions, expectations are created, and potential pressure

is exercised from both internal and external stakeholders. Scandeliuss and Cohen (2016) study how strategic ambiguity can serve the purpose of encouraging cooperation among diverse stakeholders by unifying them and inspire innovation. The strategic use of vagueness (Christensen *et al.*, 2021) allows for multiple interpretations among diverse stakeholders. Depicting strategic ambiguity as vital to organizing, Eisenberg (1984) is concerned with strategic use of vagueness to enable noncommittal communication that allows diverse stakeholders to make interpretations in line with their preferences. Eisenberg states that it enables diverse audiences to engage with the same content and interpret it in different ways.

Aspirational talk brings about issues of whether CSR communication should focus solely on already achieved objectives or also include not yet realized practices and visions (Brunsson, 2002; Christensen *et al.*, 2013). Engaging in aspirational talk involves a dynamic of forward- and backward-facing statements (Koep, 2017), where the latter work to gain credibility to the former (Blombäck and Scandeliuss, 2013). The temporal aspect of aspirational talk is brought up by Christensen *et al.* (2020). They state that while utterances marked as aspirational talk may be seen as hypocritical at the time of them being uttered, with time the meaning can be reshaped in a way that instead showcases them as potential change agents. A prerequisite for this is that the communication evokes pressure from stakeholders to deliver on promises made or implied within the communicated messages (Christensen *et al.*, 2013). Christensen and colleagues invite a reconsidered notion of hypocrisy where the concept is divided into two categories. One that is largely synonymous with lying and deceiving and one that they call aspirational, where the communication is seen as presenting a vision. The aspirational version of hypocrisy, they understand as motivating audiences using idealized pictures of reality. An operationalization would be when an organization communicates about their idealized reality or goal as if it were already a reality. A main difference between the two types of hypocrite is the outcome they produce. While the deceptive version breeds cynicism, the aspirational version of hypocrite can inspire and motivate. In this view, differences between communication and actions can be seen as productive idealizations.

According to Arciniega (2021), the practice of diversity professionals to justify the need for their work with reference to the “business case” reflects a strategic and pragmatic choice. Dressing the need for diversity work in economic terms presents a way to gain legitimacy and enable efficiency. Demonstrating how diversity supports profit and economic growth can thus be seen as a way of performing the stimulating work of aspirational talk described by Christensen *et al.* (2013). However, when justifying diversity efforts on the basis of economic growth, inequalities are also reproduced. The business case argumentation inevitably entails focusing on the benefits for white men, as they constitute a majority of the beneficiaries in the business model (Arciniega, 2021). Consequently, emphasis on financial benefits favors already favored groups of managers and shareholders (Grimes, 2002; Lee Ashcraft and Allen, 2003).

## Materials and methods

### *Empirical setting and data collection*

The present study of online corporate communication of diversity and inclusion themes was conducted within a larger research project focusing on diversity and inclusion in Swedish-based multinational corporations. The idea of studying larger corporations is linked to their need to publicly communicate with a diverse audience and, to a larger degree than smaller companies, employing formalized distribution channels to this end. Swedish corporations have traditionally had a reputation for promoting progressive values and being at the forefront of specifically gender diversity (Molander *et al.*, 2019; Romani *et al.*, 2017). Related to the business case context and multinational context they reside within, these corporations and their CSR communication may, in light of this, provide a fruitful ground for studies. With

an aim to include Swedish-based multinational corporations, corporate online material pertaining to diversity and inclusion was compiled from the following companies: Astra Zeneca, Ericsson, H&M Group, IKEA, Sandvik, Skanska, Spotify and Volvo Group. The data included content from the companies' official websites as well as annual reports and sustainability reports from 2020. For some corporations, annual and sustainability reports were separate products, for others they were one entity. The reports were retrieved online between January and June of 2021. Additionally, the data comprised corporate diversity and inclusion-themed blog posts from 2020 to 2021 for Spotify, as the communication of diversity and inclusion themes in this corporation was largely performed through their blog. [Table 1](#) shows the included corporations, data and date of retrieval.

*Data analysis*

By looking for patterns and themes relevant to the research questions, a thematic analysis was conducted on the corporate website content pertaining to diversity and inclusion ([Braun and Clarke, 2006](#)). This analytical approach lends itself to investigating trends and patterns in documents and can be applied to texts, audio and visual material. The data were analyzed using *emergent coding*, i.e. by going into the research process without a particular theory, and then making use of the data to develop a theoretical framework ([Stemler, 2015](#)). It was in this process that aspirational talk developed into a central concept of analysis. Once the theoretical framework was in place, the data were coded again, this time with the view to finding patterns and themes relevant to the chosen theory. The research process followed an abductive approach through which empirical findings and theoretical understandings were continuously adapted to and developed in light of one another ([Dubois and Gadde, 2002](#)). This means, for example, that the research questions were continuously developed throughout the research process and adapted as data were collected and interpreted. An abductive approach is ideal for case studies and qualitative research, emphasizing the importance of deep understanding and interpretation in complex phenomena. It allows for exploring diverse explanations and interpretations of data, offering flexibility in research design to adapt to discoveries made during the process, which is particularly valuable when studying complexities and dynamics.

**Results**

The results section presents the findings from the data collection thematically under two main themes: *Talking the walk: Corporate diversity rhetoric* and *Walking the talk: You are what you do - Activities, memberships, affiliations, initiatives and accreditation*. This structure

Corporation	Online corporate material	Date retrieved
Astra Zeneca	Astra Zeneca Sustainability Report 2020	2021-03-03
Ericsson	Ericsson Sustainability and Corporate Responsibility Report 2020	2021-06-07
H&M Group	H&M Group Sustainability Performance Report 2020	2021-03-31
IKEA	IKEA Sustainability Report FY20	2021-01-25
Sandvik	Sandvik Annual Report 2020	2021-05-12
Skanska	Skanska Annual and Sustainability Report 2020	2021-03-09
Spotify	Spotify 2020 Sustainability Report, Spotify diversity and inclusion-themed blog posts 2020–2021	2021-03-10
Volvo Group	Volvo Annual and Sustainability Report 2020	2021-02-24

**Table 1.**  
Material included in the study

**Source(s):** Table by author

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reflects the dynamic relationship between talk and action and how talk and action are parts of a whole. The two main themes are divided into sub-themes that focus on different aspects of legitimacy creation in the online corporate communication.

*Talking the walk: corporate diversity rhetoric*

*Mission statements: mix and match.* The corporate mission statements pertaining to diversity and inclusion offered illustrative accounts of the rhetoric surrounding the concepts. Through their mission statements, corporations demonstrate commitment to diversity and inclusion and define why and how they strategically work with these issues. In the analyzed data, the arguments for identifying the achievement of diversity and inclusion as an organizational goal can be placed in two main categories. One focusing on economic value creation and one focusing on cultural and social value creation. The category concerned with benefits of diversity and inclusion from an economic perspective commonly referred to creativity as an area that benefits from inclusion.

In the Volvo Group, we know that an inclusive work environment unlocks the hidden potential of diversity and drives performance by enriching our creativity, allowing us to be more innovative and improving our decision making. (Volvo Group)

Creativity spurred on by diversity was also stated to improve decision-making.

Diversity boosts our creativity and gives us the ability to make truly innovative business decisions. (H&M Group)

In addition, business value was frequently related to innovation and performance stemming from a diverse and inclusive workforce.

We believe that diverse inclusive teams drive performance and innovation, creating greater business value. (Ericsson)

Finally, the business case for diversity was made when employer brand advantages and internal career opportunities were identified as resulting from the corporate diversity and inclusion strategy.

We consider diversity and inclusion to be key to our success and as a global organization, offer excellent possibilities to work in different functions and locations. (Sandvik)

In the category that focused on diversity and inclusion from a cultural and social value perspective, diversity was emphasized as a core value that the organization is passionate about.

We are passionate about diversity at Volvo Group! Seriously, when we speak about passion as a core value, we talk about how Volvo's diverse and inclusive work environment ignites our passion. We are passionate about sharing ideas, passionate about discovering diverse perspectives and new cultures, passionate about developing beyond our limited view of the world or of our own abilities. (Volvo Group).

Representation was also highlighted as a reason for promoting and ensuring diversity and inclusive environments.

We enable our leaders to realise the potential in our differences, perspectives and experiences in our everyday work. Business intelligence helps us ensure we provide an inclusive environment where everyone can contribute to our business and culture with their unique personalities and perspectives. We promote diverse teams with people that reflect, respect and relate to our customers. (H&M Group)

Belongingness and pride constituted keywords in the social and cultural category statements.

We are committed to attract and develop a diverse workforce and provide inclusive workplaces where all people – regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or other diversity strands and backgrounds – feels a sense of belonging. We are determined to creating spaces where everyone feels that they can contribute and be proud of working for Skanska. (Skanska)

We believe that inclusion and diversity are some of the most important building blocks of our company and they are fundamental to our business development, our company cultures and our core values. (Ericsson)

The two discourses were regularly interwoven within the same statements, bearing traces of both social justice and business case discourses.

We are committed to be a diverse and inclusive organization. An inclusive culture is characterized by openness, fairness, trust and respect and is vital to attract and retain skilled employees as well as building high performing teams. (Skanska)

Other examples of mixed discourse involved the combination of business case and empowerment within the same statement:

Our colleagues bring a diversity of knowledge and talent that contributes to innovation and inclusive products. Everyone at H&M Group has a role to play in creating a better business, and we have a responsibility to empower them to be who they want to be. (H&M Group)

Combining being yourself with innovation and alignment with the values of the company achieved the same blend of the two categories.

Through an inclusive culture and our never-ending work for diversity, we strive to provide equal opportunities and togetherness. We are at our best when we can be ourselves while living the IKEA values. Diversity and inclusion increase our understanding of our customers and are instrumental for innovation based on our vision. (IKEA)

Declaring why and how diversity and inclusion are aimed for at a specific company, the statements fell into two main categories – those that could be described as lending themselves to business case washing (with keywords including business value and performance) and those that served to counteract such washing (with keywords such as passion, core value and pride). Texts were balanced out by continuous moves between the two categories of statements.

*Concepts and their use.* The use of central concepts presented a way for corporations to portray themselves as well versed in the field of diversity and inclusion. For example, the order in which key diversity and inclusion concepts appeared provided a way to signal awareness and enlightenment. Below, H&M Group elaborates on their definition of inclusion and diversity, explaining why inclusion must precede diversity.

Inclusion is diversity in action. That is why inclusion comes first. Diversity is the mix of people while inclusion is about actively advocating for that mix and making it work. In an inclusive and diverse environment, everyone can contribute to optimising decision-making and team performance by reflecting, respecting and relating to our employees, customers and communities. There are many definitions of inclusion and diversity — as a company, we want to embrace all interpretations. (H&M Group)

Explaining the interrelationship of the concepts allowed the corporation to demonstrate its expertise in the field. The addition of a concept served a similar purpose, namely, to demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of field by exploring concepts' interrelatedness and interplay. In clarifying that diversity should be accompanied by inclusion and then belonging, Spotify also claimed a more advanced understanding and treatment of issues related to stratification.

Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging (DIB) (Spotify)



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Spotify signaled a refined understanding in way that allows those in the know to register it while avoiding alienating critics.

We know that diversity without inclusion and belonging will not work. And many times, if you do not strike the right balance with each area, you will see one area falter. Spotify is keenly focused on striking that right balance, without compromising our works towards representation. (Spotify)

When conveying their openness in gender identity issues, by stating that “our people” are defined as women, men and non-binary, Spotify packaged its position as part of a character description rather than as a separate project on gender identity.

The corporations demonstrated a refined understanding through the way central concepts were used or through the addition of and elaboration on new concepts to provide a more nuanced interpretation of older ones. Level and maturity of understanding was then conveyed through arguments about different concepts’ interrelationship. The displays served to accommodate proponents while most likely going unnoticed by opponents.

*A diversity state of mind.* Incorporating diversity and inclusion work into a more comprehensive sustainability package constituted a common procedure in corporative communication of diversity and inclusion commitment. This was the case when diversity and inclusion were embedded in sustainability reports, which were either separate from or merged with the corporation’s annual report. Sustainability also provided a context and frame of reference in other ways, where employment of the sustainability concept was used to showcase how diversity and inclusion work was organized into a cohesive whole consisting of various parts.

Below is a quote from the Spotify corporate blog on diversity and inclusion, which describes the organization of diversity as a whole made up of different parts.

We are bringing together three critical teams, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging, Sustainability, and Social Impact. Our shared mission is to cultivate a more diverse workforce, continue to hone our inclusive culture and drive our impact as a company. (Spotify, blog post)

IKEA depicts themselves as part of a larger context in which they form the center and relate to consumers, employees, business partners and communities.

Our ambition is that by 2030 we will be a leader in creating a fair and equal society. By basing all of our strategic decisions on our humanistic values and everyone’s equal worth, we want to create meaningful change and an inclusive environment for our co-workers, our business partners and the communities around us.

The IKEA business touches millions of lives. From sourcing materials, to producing, transporting and finally selling our products, communities in over 50 markets are impacted by what we do. This is a big responsibility. We want to make sure we have a positive influence, not only in our own operations but in society as a whole. (IKEA)

Describing the work as a whole demonstrates an understanding of the field as complex and interrelated. Using the concept of sustainability to present diversity and inclusion work is a way of providing a whole and context that can appeal to both advocates of equality and economic gain. The former can perceive it as an understanding of the complexity of the field, while the latter may find it easier to embrace the concept of sustainability than inclusion and diversity. Sustainability may be perceived by many as more general and neutral than diversity and inclusion, which may be perceived as more political and specific.

*Figure of speech – figures as rhetoric.* With their status as hard facts, figures carry a particular weight in the eyes of most audiences. In corporate settings, presenting figures is associated with transparency. Hence, figures are well represented in the communication of diversity and inclusion progress, often with a focus on representation. Common data include the proportion of women at different levels of management in the company, at senior

management and at the board of directors. The sense that you cannot hide behind figures – that figures tell “the truth” – can be used to accommodate audiences with different preferences. It can be used to signal to social equity proponents that change is underway. Using numbers and statistics, however, also means that the message is presented in the normative and institutionalized language of business case proponents.

*Walking the talk: you are what you do – activities, memberships, affiliations, initiatives and accreditation*

A main category of communication focused on how goals and commitments were put to practice. Corporations demonstrated their dedication to diversity and inclusion by offering examples of activities they participated in or hosted.

We offer training in diversity and inclusion by offering a leadership workshop and a toolbox that includes e-learning workshops and exercises. We rolled out an online diversity and inclusion training globally in which 19,682 employees participated with a high engagement level. (Sandvik)

We held our first-ever Power of Diversity week which included a series of global and local activities to discuss the importance of inclusion and diversity, and understand the role all employees play in progressing our priorities. Topics ranged from systemic racism to addressing healthcare disparities and were customised by each site or region to be most applicable to local needs. (Astra Zeneca)

... and referring to contexts that you are associated with or have qualified for.

We are one of the 325 companies on the Bloomberg LP Gender-Equality Index 2021, which distinguishes companies committed to transparency in gender reporting and advancing women’s equality. (Astra Zeneca)

Dedication was signaled by listing initiatives that they had started and relating them to the achievements.

– Successfully completing a series of behavioural science experiments designed to reduce bias and barriers faced by women in both the recruitment and performance management processes. Additional inclusion experiments are underway or in planning process for 2021. (Ericsson)

Establishing ALTititude, a leadership acceleration program for women. 52% of initial participants have experienced a role change or promotion since completing the program. 94 new women candidates were nominated to join ALTititude in 2021. (Ericsson)

– Launching a comprehensive transformation of Ericsson’s recruitment process with the objectives of improving the end-to-end experience, increasing speed of hire and reducing bias – all of which will help to achieve Ericsson’s aspirations to accelerate Diversity and Inclusion. (Ericsson)

Self-founded initiatives involving a broad coalition of organizations and industries were linked to objectives such as eradicating racism and contributing to new business standards.

We are a founding partner of the World Economic Forum’s Partnering for Racial Justice in Business Initiative, a coalition of 48 organisations representing 13 industries, with more than 5.5 million employees. It is focused on commitments to eradicate racism in the workplace and set new global standards for racial equity in business. It also provides a platform for businesses to advocate together for inclusive policy change. (Astra Zeneca)

Involving and leveraging employees in creating diversity and inclusion was also frequently highlighted.

We channel our passion for inclusion into our employee networks. These resource groups give a voice to key diversity threads and engage the majority as allies to build a more inclusive Volvo Group. We have networks across the globe supporting: Women and Gender balance, Generational, LGBTQ+, and Multicultural inclusion as well as Diverse Abilities. (Volvo Group)

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The Know the Line program developed by Skanska in USA, aims for everyone in our workplaces to feel safe to be themselves and to feel included, respected and supported to do their best work. The program includes training of HR, Legal and Ethics professionals, communication campaigns, and team conversations led by managers. The program alerts us to the “line” between respect and inclusion and their opposites – disrespect, harassment, bullying and discrimination. (Skanska)

## Discussion

The aim of this article has been to investigate how washing practices, focused on appeasing sceptics and/or opponents of diversity work as a part of for-profit organizations’ activities, play out in corporate online communication of diversity and inclusion efforts. The findings of this study demonstrate the dynamic between forward- and backward-facing statements (Blombäck and Scandeliuss, 2013; Koep, 2017) in CSR communication. An example of this is when accounts of completed projects, affiliations and accreditations contribute to legitimizing the company’s presented visions for the future. Anchored credibility as a CSR practitioner then promotes substantive action by creating expectations and pressure both externally and internally for social change. In this way, the study data can be said to provide an example of aspirational talk, with the potential for promoting social change demonstrated by Christensen *et al.* (2013).

The management of the tension between a social justice discourse and a business case discourse is visible in how diversity and inclusion is defined and justified – alternating between words such as “belongingness” and “pride” and “innovation” and “performance” and arguments such as “business value” and “core value”.

Like earlier studies that have expanded the range of practices within a specific type of washing (see, e.g. Siano *et al.*, 2017), this article adds to the literature on washing practices by introducing an additional type of washing – *business case washing*. Such washing can be seen as an extended articulation of the business case rhetoric that characterizes the diversity management discourse (Arciniega, 2021; Kalev *et al.*, 2006).

While much has been written about washing to satisfy advocates of social change and equity, washing to appease shareholders and boardroom members focusing on profit and economic growth has received less attention. As shareholders are expected to emphasize the financial performance of organizations, convincing them that profit and diversity constitute two sides of the same coin is an important task for corporate communicators. Corporate communication therefore must be concerned with conveying diversity and inclusion content in a way that can be received and accepted by stakeholders with different attitudes toward these issues and their place in for-profit organizational contexts. To this end, corporations engage in balancing acts of promoting social equity and inclusive practices, while presenting these issues as aligned with, and not encroaching on, the core activity of creating profit. Diversity communication, in the contemporary digital form studied, indirectly serves the purpose of legitimizing a business case discourse. Business case washing, on the other hand, serves the purpose of disarming diversity and inclusion work in order to legitimize it to stakeholders opposing it. While diversity or woke washing would aim at *looking good, to give the appearance of, doing good* according to a social equity logic, business case washing is aimed at *looking good while, or in spite of, doing good* according to a social equity logic.

Hence, while most established forms of washing focus on attempts to emulate genuine effort when the overriding aim is to be perceived as a “good” actor, the washing practices in focus here make work appear innocent in the sense of not interfering with or posing a threat to predominating organizational goals related to profit and economic growth.

As balancing between incongruent demands constitutes a prerequisite for businesses to operate effectively, a level of hypocrisy is an inevitable organizational practice (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2013; Smith and Lewis, 2011). This study showcases how tensions between conflicting

external demands are avoided by keeping the communication open to several interpretations and thereby achieving multivocality (Meyer and Höllerer, 2016). In the studied data, this is showcased through corporate diversity and inclusion texts alternating between elements that cater to a business case audience and those that appeal to a social justice audience, with some procedures managing to appease both audiences at the same time.

With the growing demand for transparency and progressive standards and results, business case washing of CSR efforts contributes to enabling and legitimizing diversity initiatives, such as appointment of positions and work on awareness. Through its productive character, the online corporate communication can be seen as a case of aspirational talk according to the definition of Christensen *et al.* (2013). The aspirational talk, produced by a combination of business case washing and counteracting of business case washing, is concerned with communicating a sense of stability to some stakeholders, while at the same time communicating a sense of urgency to others.

The present study has focused on the understanding of corporate online communication of diversity and inclusion as washing that can fulfill the function of aspirational talk. However, the study does not include how the online communication is received by those who consume it. Future research on how corporate online communication can serve as aspirational talk through its management of heterogeneous audiences, could advantageously focus on how the communication is received and perceived at the recipient level.

The study findings suggest that managing the tension between the expectations of actors who oppose non-business activities and actors who advocate social change through aspirational talk can promote action toward social change. Aspirational talk is constructed through alternating between conventions of business case and social justice rhetoric. This knowledge is useful for any organization facing expectations to comply with norms as good citizens and at the same time need to balance the often-conflicting demands of different stakeholders can benefit from this knowledge. The introduction of the concept of business case washing also enhances the understanding of how to use aspirational language to drive social change in practice.

## Conclusion

This article shows how online corporate communication on diversity and inclusion handle tensions between conflicting external demands by achieving multivocality. The article introduces the notion of *business case washing* to refer to practices that appease consumers of online corporate communication, who focus on profit and economic growth and who may oppose diversity and inclusion efforts as part of the operations of for-profit organizations.

By alternating between elements catering to a business case audience and those that appeal to a social justice audience – thereby appeasing diverse audiences – it is suggested that online corporate communication of diversity and inclusion can be seen as aspirational talk and have the potential to promote social change.

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### Further reading

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