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PERSUASIVE LANGUAGE IN CEO LETTERS: A CASE STUDY OF UNILEVER

Abstract

This study examines the use of persuasive language in Unilever CEOs' letters and focuses on Unilever as a case study to understand how corporate narratives communicate value-based strategies in a modern business environment. Drawing on the company's sustainability agenda, specifically the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan, the article analyses how persuasive discourse is used to shape sustainability commitments and highlight long-term stakeholder value creation.

In the context of growing global challenges such as climate change, resource scarcity and social inequality, Unilever CEOs' communications present sustainability not only as a responsibility but also as a strategic advantage. Through a comprehensive approach that includes a literature review, discourse analysis, SWOT assessment and stakeholder assessment, this study critically examines how persuasive language is used to set priorities, justify strategic decisions and strengthen corporate credibility.

The analysis shows that CEOs' letters strategically integrate themes of economic growth, social responsibility and environmental protection, using persuasive techniques to build trust and align stakeholder expectations. At the same time, the communications acknowledge ongoing challenges, including supply chain complexity, regulatory pressures and the need to influence consumer behaviour, and present them as opportunities for innovation and leadership. The study concludes that persuasive language has played a key role in strengthening Unilever's leadership position in sustainable business practices. It provides recommendations for increasing transparency in communications, deepening stakeholder engagement, adapting messaging to evolving regulatory environments and promoting sustainable innovation through more effective and compelling corporate storytelling.

Keywords: *Persuasive Language, CEO Letters, Corporate Communication, Sustainability Discourse, Stakeholder Engagement, Supply Chain Transparency, Consumer Behavior, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).*

Introduction

Amid growing global challenges such as climate change, resource scarcity, and social inequality, companies are increasingly embracing value-based strategies to achieve long-term sustainability and create value for stakeholders. Unilever, a leading firm in the consumer goods sector, has been a key example of this shift by embedding sustainability into its business model through the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan.

This study seeks to critically examine the importance of value-based strategies by using Unilever as a case study, with a focus on how such strategies are identified, prioritized, and implemented within the context of today's dynamic business environment.

Theoretical and analytical framework

The notion of metadiscourse has evolved over time through the contributions of various scholars, leading to the development of several influential models. Key frameworks have been proposed by researchers such as Vande Kopple, Crismore, and Hyland, each offering different perspectives on how metadiscourse functions in communication.

Among these, Vande Kopple was one of the earliest to present a structured model, categorizing metadiscourse into two main types: textual and interpersonal. Textual metadiscourse refers to linguistic elements that help organize and guide the structure of a text, including features like connectives, code glosses, illocution markers, and narrators. On the other hand, interpersonal metadiscourse focuses on the relationship between the writer and the reader, encompassing elements such as validity markers, attitude markers, and commentaries, which serve to express the writer's stance and engage the audience [1].

The implementation of the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan by Unilever represents a significant milestone in recognizing and addressing the close relationship between long-term business success and sustainable development. This initiative reflects a shift in corporate thinking, moving beyond a sole focus on profit toward a broader commitment that includes social and environmental responsibility. The USLP highlights Unilever's aim to separate business growth from environmental impact while simultaneously increasing its positive contribution to society, in line with rising global expectations for corporate accountability.

Unilever's integration of sustainability into its core business operations is evident in its CEO letters, where sustainability is presented not only as a strategic choice but also as a fundamental responsibility of modern companies. These letters present sustainability as part of a broader vision, where businesses are positioned not as passive beneficiaries but as active contributors to global environmental and social well-being. This rhetorical approach reflects a growing trend among multinational corporations to embed sustainability into long-term strategic narratives and corporate identities. From Ken Hyland's meta-discourse framework, CEO communications

rely heavily on interactive meta-discourse to generate persuasion. CEOs guide reader interpretations and align stakeholders with corporate values using attitudinal indicators, engagement indicators and self-reports. In Unilever's case, these meta-discursive elements help to present sustainability not only as an ethical obligation but also as a logical and necessary path to long-term success. Therefore, persuasion is achieved not only through factual reporting but also through the strategic shaping of reader attitudes and expectations.

A central theme in Unilever's CEO letters is the redefinition of business success. Rather than focusing solely on financial metrics, the letters consistently integrate discussions of environmental management, social impact, and governance practices. This shift is rhetorically reinforced through evaluative and inclusive language that encourages stakeholders to embrace a broader set of performance criteria. In this sense, meta-discourse plays a crucial role in persuading readers to embrace a more holistic understanding of corporate values, in which profitability and sustainability are mutually reinforcing.

Furthermore, the presentation of Unilever's Sustainable Living Plan (USLP) in the CEO letters reflects the principle of shared value creation. By highlighting initiatives that improve health, reduce environmental impact, and enhance livelihoods, the CEO builds a narrative that business innovation is directly linked to societal progress. Here, the reciprocal meta-discourse – particularly attitudinal cues – serves to positively evaluate these initiatives and enhance their persuasive appeal, encouraging readers to view them as both effective and credible. However, the CEO letters also address the ongoing challenges of fully integrating sustainability into global operations. Issues such as complex supply chains, changing consumer behavior, and financial constraints are addressed with carefully balanced language that maintains trust while acknowledging the challenge. This balance is achieved through meta-discursive strategies that reduce potential concerns and maintain trust, enhancing the persuasive function of the text.

In conclusion, the letters from the CEO of Unilever demonstrate how the sustainability discourse is structured and communicated through the strategic use of meta-discourse. By using reciprocal resources to engage readers, express appreciation, and shape interpretation, these letters go beyond information transmission and actively persuade stakeholders. The integration of sustainability into this rhetorical framework not only reflects evolving corporate priorities, but also demonstrates how meta-discourse functions as an important mechanism in aligning business strategy with stakeholder expectations and broader societal values.

The framework in Table 1 below outlines an analysis of Unilever's Value-Based Strategy, detailing aspects of their approach, descriptions of these aspects, tools for analysis, and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to measure success [2].

Table 1
Analysis of Unilever's Value-Based Strategy

Aspect	Description	Tools for Analysis	KPIs
Stakeholder Engagement	Approach to engaging with and incorporating feedback from all stakeholders.	Stakeholder feedback systems, engagement metrics	Engagement rate, Stakeholder satisfaction index
Sustainability Integration	Methods for embedding sustainability into all levels of business operations.	Sustainability reporting, environmental impact assessments	Reduction in carbon footprint, Increase in CSR reporting scores
Innovation and Market Response	Capacity to innovate and respond to market demands for sustainable products.	R&D investment metrics, product lifecycle analysis	Number of sustainable products developed, Market share of sustainable products
Supply Chain Management	Strategies for managing a sustainable and ethical supply chain.	Supplier audits, carbon footprint analysis	Percentage of suppliers compliant with sustainability standards, Reduction in supply chain emissions
Regulatory Adaptation	Ability to navigate and adapt to global regulatory environments.	Compliance scorecards, policy advocacy tracking	Number of regulatory challenges proactively addressed, Success rate in policy advocacy
Consumer Engagement	Techniques for influencing consumer behavior towards sustainable choices.	Consumer surveys, social media analysis	Increase in consumer awareness, Uptake rate of sustainable products

This framework offers a detailed view of Unilever’s value-based strategic approach, emphasizing how the company incorporates sustainability into its operations and relationships with stakeholders. It also illustrates efforts to drive innovation in line with market expectations, ensure sustainable supply chain management, respond to regulatory requirements, and actively involve consumers in sustainability initiatives [2].

Table 2 presents an analysis of the various stakeholder needs and priorities, along with the corresponding opportunities for value creation associated with each.

Table 2

Stakeholder Needs Analysis and Value Creation Opportunities

Stakeholder	Needs and Priorities	Value Creation Opportunities
Consumers	Sustainable products, transparency, affordability	Develop eco-friendly products, enhance product information, implement fair pricing strategies
Employees	Safe working conditions, career development, fair Compensation	Improve safety standards, offer training programs, establish equitable pay structures
Suppliers	Long-term contracts, sustainable practices, fair pricing	Engage in partnerships for sustainability, offer fair trade terms, ensure timely payments
Com-munities	Environmental protection, social investments, local employment	Invest in local environmental projects, contribute to social programs, create job opportunities
Investors	Financial returns, corporate governance, sustainability performance	Adopt strong ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) practices, ensure transparent reporting, focus on sustainable growth

This analysis emphasizes the varying needs and priorities of different stakeholder groups and identifies targeted opportunities for value creation that respond to these differences, thereby promoting a holistic and inclusive approach to stakeholder engagement and sustainability [2].

Data and method

Corporate communication plays a vital role in shaping and maintaining positive relationships with stakeholders. Within this domain, statements issued by the Chairman or Chief Executive Officer (CEO) are particularly significant, as they help construct the organization’s public image and reflect what is often described as the “tone at the top.” A substantial body of research has examined how CEOs use impression management strategies in these statements to present a favorable corporate identity. Typically positioned at the beginning of annual reports and corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports, CEO statements summarize a

company's performance, strategic direction, and core objectives. Owing to their prominence, these texts have attracted considerable scholarly attention across disciplines such as accounting and applied linguistics. However, most previous research has focused on CEO statements in annual reports, while comparatively limited attention has been given to those found in CSR reports [3].

Given that CEOs communicate in both annual and CSR reports, it is important to investigate how they adapt their language and messaging across these two related yet distinct genres. This study is motivated by the observation that some companies reuse identical or highly similar CEO statements in both types of reports, suggesting a lack of differentiation in communication strategies. In reality, annual reports and CSR reports serve different purposes and target different audiences. Annual reports primarily address investors and shareholders, whereas CSR reports are directed toward a broader and more diverse group of stakeholders. Because these groups have varying expectations, it is essential for corporate leaders to tailor their communication to meet specific stakeholder needs and to build trust effectively [3].

Effective CEO communication requires not only linguistic competence but also an understanding of genre conventions, including the ability to select appropriate content for a particular context and purpose. Since CEO statements are voluntary and not subject to formal auditing, executives have considerable flexibility in shaping their content. As a result, identifying recurring themes within these statements is valuable, as it reveals the priorities and concerns of corporate leadership.

This article uses a qualitative discourse analysis approach to examine persuasive language in CEO letters, taking Unilever, a global company that actively integrates sustainability into its corporate communications, as a case study. CEO letters were chosen as the primary data source because they are the primary platform corporate leaders use to communicate strategic priorities, justify performance, and influence stakeholder perceptions. The analysis is based on Ken Hyland's meta-discourse framework, which provides a systematic model for examining how authors construct discourse and influence readers through linguistic choices. The data set consists of CEO letters collected from Unilever's annual and sustainability reports for a selected period (e.g. 2015–2023), obtained from official corporate publications to ensure reliability. Purposive sampling was used to select texts that highlight themes of sustainability, corporate performance, and long-term strategy. The analysis focuses on Hyland's distinction between interactive meta-discourse that regulates the flow of information and interactive meta-discourse that reflects the author's position and relationship with the audience. In particular, attention is paid to interactive features such as attitude indicators, engagement indicators, and self-references, as they play a significant role in the persuasion process. The analytical procedure combines qualitative content analysis with elements of text-based discourse analysis. The texts are examined primarily through close reading to identify recurring rhetorical

patterns, and then meta-discourse features are systematically coded according to Hyland’s framework. Patterns and frequencies are then analyzed to examine how these linguistic resources operate persuasively, particularly in shaping corporate identity, enhancing credibility, and aligning stakeholder relationships with the company’s sustainability agenda. Overall, the study conceptualizes meta-discourse not only as a textual or interpersonal feature, but also as a strategic tool of persuasion. It demonstrates how CEO letters interactively leverage interactive resources, influence interpretation, legitimize corporate actions, and support a coherent narrative of responsible and sustainable business practices. While focusing on a single case limits generalizability, this study provides an in-depth look at the relationship between meta-discourse and persuasion in contemporary corporate communication.

Analysis and discussion

The quantitative examination of metadiscursive features reveals general patterns in their use within the corpus, particularly in relation to achieving rhetorical appeals such as pathos, ethos, and logos. Table 3 presents the frequency of metadiscourse occurrences (per 1,000 words) in the corporate press releases analyzed in this study. All identified metadiscursive elements can be categorized according to the ten classifications proposed by Hyland (2005) [2].

However, two clarifications are necessary. First, although Hyland (2005) distinguishes between inclusive and exclusive uses of the first-person plural pronoun “we,” this study categorizes “we” solely as a self-mention. This is because it is used to represent the corporate entity and its institutional voice rather than to include the reader. Second, while attitude markers in Hyland’s framework are typically expressed through adjectives and sentence adverbs, this study identifies a broader range of forms, including certain nouns such as *success* and *convenience*, as markers of attitude.

Table 3. Frequency of Metadiscourse Occurrence in Corporate Press Releases (per 1,000 Words).

Interactive	Interactional
Transition markers 20.1	Hedges 6.9
Frame markers 4.51	Boosters 3.86
Endophoric markers 0.05	Attitude markers 18.6
Evidentials 0.12	Self-mentions 12.3
Code glosses 1.4	Engagement markers 15.6
Total 26.18	Total 57.26

As shown in Table 3, corporate press release writers use more interactive metadiscourse than non-interactive metadiscourse, emphasizing a deliberate effort to engage readers and foster a sense of interpersonal connection. Among these features, attitude markers are the most frequently used, indicating their importance in expressing evaluation and defining the writer's position. However, the specific mechanisms by which these markers contribute to persuasion within the context of interaction have not yet been explored. In particular, the role of attitude markers in shaping readers' perceptions, influencing their judgments, and reinforcing the persuasive intent of the text has not been sufficiently articulated, leaving a gap in our understanding of how interaction resources function as persuasive tools.

This prominence can be explained in two main ways. First, it may relate to issues of legitimacy. In corporate contexts, particularly during periods of change—such as product launches or strategic partnerships—organizations often face challenges in establishing or maintaining legitimacy. Attitude markers (e.g., *leading*, *affordable*), commonly expressed through adjectives and nouns, are associated with evaluative meanings and align with key legitimation strategies, including moral evaluation. Such expressions help present corporate actions in a positive light and reduce potential criticism or debate [3].

Second, the frequent use of attitude markers can be linked to the promotional nature of corporate press releases. A central objective of this genre is to enhance the company's image. Evaluative language plays a crucial role in achieving this goal by shaping how information is perceived. These markers can influence readers' interpretations, subtly guiding them to adopt the perspective intended by the writer.

Comparing this metadiscourse pattern with other persuasive genres reveals notable similarities. Genres such as CEO letters, director reports, and workplace request emails also rely heavily on metadiscursive resources to achieve persuasive effects. Despite differences in context, these genres share a common communicative purpose: influencing their audiences. For example, CEO letters and director reports aim to build confidence among investors and stakeholders regarding the company's performance and future prospects, while workplace emails use similar strategies to achieve professional persuasion.

Conclusion

In the context of persuasive language in CEO letters, Unilever's communication surrounding the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan reflects a deliberate rhetorical shift from a profit-centered narrative to one that emphasizes social and environmental responsibility. CEO discourse strategically frames sustainability as both a moral obligation and a source of competitive advantage, using persuasive techniques to position the company as a leader in responsible business practices.

The analysis suggests that CEO letters highlight progress, commitment, and long-term vision, thereby reinforcing stakeholder trust and credibility. At the same time,

challenges—such as supply chain complexity, regulatory pressures, and the need for consumer engagement—are framed as opportunities for innovation and continued leadership. Through this balanced narrative, CEOs effectively justify strategic priorities while maintaining a positive corporate image.

To strengthen the persuasive impact of these communications, greater emphasis on transparency, stakeholder inclusion, adaptive regulatory messaging, and innovation in sustainable products is essential. Overall, the case demonstrates how persuasive language in CEO letters can shape stakeholder perceptions, support value-based strategies, and promote sustainability as a core element of corporate identity.

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Ləman İsayeva

CEO MƏKTUBLARINDA İNADICI DİL: UNILEVER İLƏ BAĞLI BİR NÜMUNƏ

Xülasə

Bu tədqiqat, Unilever şirkətinin CEO-larının məktublarında inandırıcı dilin istifadəsini araşdırır və Unilever şirkətinə müasir biznes mühitində korporativ hekayələrin dəyər əsaslı strategiyaları necə çatdırdığını anlamaq üçün bir nümunə tədqiqatı kimi diqqət yetirir. Şirkətin davamlılıq gündəliyinə, xüsusən də Unilever

Davamlı Yaşam Planına əsaslanaraq, məqalədə inandırıcı diskursun davamlılıq öhdəliklərini formalaşdırmaq və uzunmüddətli maraqlı tərəflərin dəyər yaratmasını vurğulamaq üçün necə istifadə edildiyi təhlil edilir. İqlim dəyişikliyi, resurs çatışmazlığı və sosial bərabərsizlik kimi artan qlobal çətinliklər kontekstində Unilever şirkətinin CEO-larının kommunikasiyaları davamlılığı təkcə məsuliyyət kimi deyil, həm də strateji üstünlük kimi təqdim edir. Ədəbiyyat icmalı, diskurs təhlili, SWOT qiymətləndirməsi və maraqlı tərəflərin qiymətləndirilməsini əhatə edən hərtərəfli yanaşma vasitəsilə bu tədqiqat prioritetləri müəyyən etmək, strateji qərarları əsaslandırmaq və korporativ etibarlılığı gücləndirmək üçün inandırıcı dilin necə istifadə edildiyini tənqidi şəkildə araşdırır. Təhlil göstərir ki, CEO-larının məktubları iqtisadi artım, sosial məsuliyyət və ətraf mühitin qorunması mövzularını strateji cəhətdən birləşdirir, etimad yaratmaq və maraqlı tərəflərin gözləntilərini uyğunlaşdırmaq üçün inandırıcı üsullardan istifadə edir. Eyni zamanda, kommunikasiya təchizat zəncirinin mürəkkəbliyi, tənzimləyici təzyiqlər və istehlakçı davranışına təsir etmək ehtiyacı da daxil olmaqla davam edən çətinlikləri qəbul edir və onları innovasiya və liderlik üçün imkanlar kimi təqdim edir. Tədqiqat nəticəsində inandırıcı dilin Unilever-in dayanıqlı biznes təcrübələrində lider mövqeyinin möhkəmləndirilməsində mühüm rol oynadığı qənaətinə gəlinir. O, ünsiyyətdə şəffaflığın artırılması, maraqlı tərəflərin iştirakının dərinləşdirilməsi, mesajlaşmanın inkişaf edən tənzimləyici mühitlərə uyğunlaşdırılması və daha təsirli və inandırıcı korporativ hekayələr vasitəsilə dayanıqlı innovasiyanın təşviqi üçün tövsiyələr təqdim edir.

***Açar sözlər:** Inandırıcı Dil, Baş Direktorun Məktubları, Korporativ Ünsiyyət, Davamlılıq Söyləmi, Maraqlı Tərəflərin Əlaqəsi, Təchizat Zəncirinin Şəffaflığı, İstehlakçı Davranışı, Korporativ Sosial Məsuliyyət (KSM).*

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УБЕДИТЕЛЬНЫЙ ЯЗЫК В ПИСЬМАХ ГЕНЕРАЛЬНОГО ДИРЕКТОРА: ПРИМЕР КОМПАНИИ UNILEVER РЕЗЮМЕ

В данном исследовании рассматривается использование убедительного языка в письмах генеральных директоров, на примере компании Unilever, чтобы понять, как корпоративные нарративы передают стратегии, основанные на ценностях, в современной деловой среде. Опираясь на программу устойчивого развития компании, в частности на План устойчивого развития Unilever, в работе анализируется, как убедительный дискурс используется для формулирования обязательств в области устойчивого развития и подчеркивания создания долгосрочной ценности для заинтересованных сторон.

В контексте растущих глобальных проблем, таких как изменение климата, дефицит ресурсов и социальное неравенство, коммуникации генерального

директора Unilever представляют устойчивое развитие не только как ответственность, но и как стратегическое преимущество. Благодаря комплексному подходу, включающему обзор литературы, дискурсивный анализ, SWOT-анализ и оценку заинтересованных сторон, это исследование критически изучает, как убедительный язык используется для определения приоритетов, обоснования стратегических решений и укрепления корпоративного доверия. Анализ показывает, что письма генеральных директоров стратегически интегрируют темы экономического роста, социальной ответственности и охраны окружающей среды, используя убедительные методы для построения доверия и согласования ожиданий заинтересованных сторон. В то же время, в коммуникации признаются сохраняющиеся проблемы, включая сложность цепочки поставок, регуляторное давление и необходимость влиять на поведение потребителей, представляя их как возможности для инноваций и лидерства. Исследование приходит к выводу, что убедительный язык играет решающую роль в укреплении позиций Unilever как лидера в области устойчивых деловых практик. В нем предлагаются рекомендации по повышению прозрачности коммуникации, углублению взаимодействия с заинтересованными сторонами, адаптации сообщений к меняющейся нормативно-правовой среде и продвижению устойчивых инноваций посредством более эффективных и убедительных корпоративных нарративов.

Ключевые слова: *Убедительный язык, Письма генерального директора, Корпоративная коммуникация, Дискурс об устойчивом развитии, Взаимодействие с заинтересованными сторонами, Прозрачность цепочки поставок, Поведение потребителей, Корпоративная социальная ответственность (КСО).*

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