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Lisa Koep

Technological University Dublin, elisabeth.koep@dit.ie

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Investigating industry expert discourses on aspirational CSR communication

Lisa Koep

School of Marketing, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dublin, Ireland

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate industry expert discourses on aspirational corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication. Analysing CSR managers' and communication consultants' talk about aspirational talk as constitutive of aspirational CSR communication, the data provide valuable insights into the dominant discourses, and draw attention to the manifold elements in the process of aspirational CSR communication.

Design/methodology/approach – Data gathered during 11 in-depth, qualitative interviews with food industry experts in CSR and CSR communication roles in Ireland, the UK and the USA are studied.

Findings – The analysis of industry expert discourses suggests that communicating CSR, and in particular the communication of CSR aspirations, is a source of tensions and ambiguity for organisational members. It is evident that aspirational talk acts as a “commitment and alignment device”, raising the bar for the organisation by encouraging enhanced performance and ensuring a competitive differentiation – and thus revealing a performative character. However, it is also shown that industry experts favour action over talk and consider verification crucial to reduce reputational risk. The challenge ahead will be to encourage organisations to embrace aspirational talk in the age of CSR professionalisation and standardisation to ensure incremental and continual CSR improvements.

Practical implications – The research findings suggest that aspirational talk is a useful resource for organisations to transition towards becoming more responsible businesses. Rather than censoring aspirational talk to prevent scepticism by some, managers rely on robust auditing and verification systems to provide proof of achievement over time.

Originality/value – The study provides data on the topic of aspirational talk, where there has been much theory development, but limited empirical evidence. It does so in the context of the food industry, an industry manifestly to the forefront in the sustainability/CSR agenda.

Keywords CSR communication, Discourse, Tensions, Aspirational talk, Talk-action dichotomy

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

A forceful or vociferous promotion of its sustainability/corporate social responsibility (CSR) aspirations may well help to improve the reputation of a firm (Du *et al.*, 2010). However, failure to deliver on them can cause reputational shortcoming. This type of communication, often seen as “greenwashing”, is strongly criticised (Laufer, 2003; Prasad and Holzinger, 2013), and may result in consumer scepticism (Skarmeas and Leonidou, 2013). Alternatively, a more nuanced and understated approach to claim-making may yield little in the shorter term, but can undergird a valuable marketplace position over the longer term. This is the “catch-22” of CSR communication (Morsing *et al.*, 2008) and it presents challenges to firms and organisations today. While separating CSR aspiration from achievement, the talk from the action, has received considerable academic attention, it is generally the case that a tight alignment between words and actions is favoured (Bronley and Powell, 2012; Ravasi and Phillips, 2011).

While most research on CSR views the gap between organisational CSR talk and action as problematic (Aras and Crowther, 2009; May *et al.*, 2007), recent work by Christensen *et al.* (2013) has proposed that such discrepancies can in fact be treated as positive due to their potential to act as a stimulant to CSR improvements and to raise standards in relation to practice. This paper seeks to build on this recent research by analysing industry experts'

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representations of CSR communication, and more specifically, their lived experience of communicating CSR achievements and intentions. This is in the context of sustainability claims in the food industry: a prominent industry in the sustainability/CSR agenda, given the challenges facing producers and firms in providing food to a growing global population.

Thus, the principal objective of this paper is to add empirical insights by engaging with industry experts to explore their views and interpretations of aspirational CSR claim-making, and to study their attitudes to combining talk and action. By analysing the dominant discourses among practitioners in relation to the talk-action relationship, valuable insights are generated on the opportunities and challenges of this type of communication. For this purpose, in-depth qualitative interviews were carried out with industry experts in Ireland, the UK and the USA. First, constitutive approaches to communication are reviewed and concepts related to aspirational CSR communication are discussed. Data are then presented on the issues raised in the theoretical discussion. The paper concludes with some reflections on the significance of this work for the theoretical development of the concept of aspirational talk, as well as managerial relevance.

Theoretical background

Communication

The role of organisational communication is often thought of in functionalist “conduit metaphor” terms (Reddy, 1979): a process of sending and receiving information. This view is heavily criticised (Axley, 1984) for reducing communication to a linear, asymmetrical model that does not take account of the complex process of meaning negotiation (Schoeneborn and Trittin, 2013). Building on Axley’s critique, constitutive approaches to communication have flourished, emphasising the dynamic nature of meaning negotiation and co-construction of communication (Ashcraft *et al.*, 2009; Luhmann, 1992). This shift is also mirrored in corporate contexts where communication has been traditionally seen as a strategic management tool, aimed at informing and influencing. However, here also communication is increasingly conceptualised as constitutive of businesses and organisations, emphasising the collaborative and participatory nature of business communication (Deetz and McClellan, 2013). It is now appreciated within the domain of corporate communication that organisational members creatively co-construct or deconstruct the meanings of corporate messages in ways not necessarily intended by management (Christensen and Cheney, 2000; Humphreys and Brown, 2002).

As a result, constitutive approaches to communication have thrived, and offer a new epistemological and ontological way of thinking about communication (Schoeneborn and Trittin, 2013). Adopting a constitutive view means that “communication is theorized as a process that produces and reproduces – and in that way constitutes – social order” (Craig, 1999, p. 128). Further developing this notion, communication can be viewed as a fundamental activity by which humans constitute their social world as a “real” phenomenon, which facilitates shared understanding and co-ordinated interaction (Bartesaragi and Castor, 2008).

Constitutive CSR communication

Drawing from a range of theories such as economics, politics and ethics, most of the CSR theory has been traditionally approached from an instrumental perspective (Garriga and Mele, 2004), presenting causal relationships and producing arguments for the CSR business case (Gond and Matten, 2007). Conceptualising CSR in such a way has resulted in functionalist ways of thinking about CSR communication, as one-way, asymmetrical stakeholder information strategies (Morsing and Schultz, 2006). However, this type of thinking fails to acknowledge the more active role of stakeholders in the CSR process (Caruana and Crane, 2008; Hildebrand *et al.*, 2011). To address the shortcomings of functionalist views of CSR communication, a shift from “traditional” to “alternative” underpinning has been observed

(Golob *et al.*, 2013), with academics embracing more constitutive conceptualisations of CSR communication (Schoeneborn and Trittin, 2013; Schultz *et al.*, 2013), in line with the “communication constitutes organisations” (CCO) perspective. Within CCO theorising, communication is viewed as co-orientation, where stakeholders align actions in relation to shared goals through an ongoing interaction of conversations and texts (Taylor and Van Every, 2000). Adopting such a view means consideration of CSR communication as an active process where CSR aspirations and expectations are articulated, negotiated and further developed between organisations and their stakeholders (Christensen and Cheney, 2011).

More importantly, to adopt a CCO lens is to view communication as the building block that constitutes organising, meaning that without communication there would be no organisation (Ashcraft *et al.*, 2009; Cheney *et al.*, 2004; Fairhurst and Putnam, 2004; Phillips *et al.*, 2004; Taylor and Van Every, 2000). Ashcraft *et al.* (2009) summarise the constructive potential of communication and state that through communication, stakeholders “jointly produce reality by co-creating meanings that establish ‘what is’ and co-ordinate and control activity accordingly” (p. 5). How organisations talk about themselves shapes and reproduces organisational reality, with language playing an important role in forming the thinking and interpretations, as well as actions, of stakeholders (Heracleous *et al.*, 2013). Among language theorists, talk is considered to actively shape and constitute reality (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), and talk itself is regarded as action. Adopting such a view means that CSR programmes are not merely decided upon, but are made “real” through communication. In many cases, organisations initially talk about which CSR goals to focus on, followed by decisions to introduce measures to move towards these goals, resulting in organisational action. So here the action follows the talk, while the talk produces action. The academic concept of aspirational CSR talk is built on these theoretical foundations.

Aspirational talk and performativity of talk

Embracing the CCO view, where the CSR experience is co-created and a process during which meaning is negotiated between various stakeholders, entails the idea that CSR communication should not only take place in relation to completed, successful CSR, but that organisations should also communicate about corporate ambitions, commitments and doubts (Christensen and Cheney, 2011). This type of communication is often referred to as “aspirational talk”, “communication which announces ideals and intentions rather than reflect actual behaviours” (Christensen *et al.*, 2013, p. 373). The articulation of the companies’ aspirations reinforces motivations for engaging in CSR communication such as achieving legitimacy (Du and Vieira, 2012; Seele and Lock, 2015) and strengthening reputation (Du *et al.*, 2010; Eberl and Schwaiger, 2005; Fombrun and Shanley, 1990; Nielsen and Thomsen, 2007; Pelozo, 2006), as it gives the organisation an opportunity to present an idealised version of itself. However, it also presents challenges, as trust and credibility may be damaged potentially should the company not deliver on these promises. Consequently, the relationship between talk (intentions and commitments) and action (completed projects) is much debated, and action is generally favoured over talk (Grant *et al.*, 1998).

Austin’s (1962) general theory of speech acts counters the notion that talk is of less value than action. It highlights that the use of language is not simply descriptive but has a performative dimension, therefore, playing an active role within the organisation (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Performativity can be described as a “reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (Butler, 1993, p. vii). CCO researchers are at the forefront of the scholarship of communication, identifying performativity in texts (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002; Winsor, 2000) or language (Ashcraft *et al.*, 2009; Brummans *et al.*, 2014). Here the performative effects of language are examined, arguing that talk itself is action, and the interplay between talk and text is ascribed constitutive and performative qualities (Putnam and Nicotera, 2009) There is, however, little empirical evidence outlining the

practical implications of the concept of aspirational talk. This study seeks to close this gap by analysing how practitioners talk about, apply and also struggle with aspirational CSR talk.

Explicit aspirational claim-making can also be conceptualised as a means of auto-communication. Here the claims that are directed at external stakeholders are also picked up from within the organisation (Broms and Gahmberg, 1983; Lotman, 1977). Theories of auto-communication have been explored within corporate/organisational communication, and studies have underlined the concept's positive impact on strengthening member identification and reinforcing corporate identity (Morsing, 2006). It is contended that these self-referential practices (auto-communication) support and strengthen organisational culture (Christensen, 1997). In the context of aspirational CSR communication, auto-communication, in the form of aspirational claims, is viewed as something that positively guides organisational members in their daily decision making and actions (Christensen *et al.*, 2013). The binding qualities of the external aspirational claims (Christensen, 1997) are emphasised. In their empirical study, Haack *et al.* (2012) illustrate the performativity of CSR talk: the adoption of CSR standards by financial institutions and their external commitment are shown to act as "moral entrapment", meaning these organisations seek to deliver on their promise in order to keep face, thereby "talking themselves into a new reality" (Haack *et al.*, 2012, p. 835). A more positive interpretation of Haack *et al.*'s findings is that the articulation of aspirations allows the organisation to further define its vision and set goals, and helps it to visualise how to become better and more responsible (Broms and Gahmberg, 1983; Lotman, 1977). Furthermore, the process of aspirational claim-making may help organisations to develop a framework for action for the employees across all hierarchical levels of the organisation (Frandsen, 2012).

Aspirational talk as sensemaking

Organisations and individuals are likely to undergo a process of sensemaking to comprehend and understand ambiguous concepts (Colville *et al.*, 2009; Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995). Adopting the view that CSR is a contested concept (Okoye, 2009), the communication of CSR is likely to be a process during which organisational sensemaking occurs. The process is succinctly summarised by Weick (1995) in his sensemaking recipe "how can I know what I think until I see what I say?", which underscores the retrospective properties of the process. Research examining CSR and sensemaking to date has mainly focussed on sensemaking as a retrospective technique (Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010) facilitating CSR strategising (Basu and Palazzo, 2008). This opens a debate about the role of the future in the sensemaking process, or "prospective" sensemaking (Gioia and Mehra, 1996), which is highly relevant to aspirational CSR communication as it is primarily focussed on forward-facing statements. Here sensemaking is future oriented, likely to trigger processes within the organisation such as formulating goals and plans for the future based on the organisation's CSR performance to date and stakeholder expectations. In this context, CSR communication, and more specifically aspirational CSR communication, can be considered a forum for retrospective and prospective sensemaking, for looking at the past and the future, and for announcing intentions and aspirations.

Talk-action gap and hypocrisy

The relationship between talk and action has been challenged by a series of corporate CSR scandals – Enron, Shell, Volkswagen and many more – highlighting a disconnect between talk and action. These cases highlight the division that can exist between what organisations say about their responsible conduct and what they do in reality, leading to observed hypocrisy (Christensen *et al.*, 2013). It may not always be possible to underpin aspiration with action at the outset, and thus allowing for temporary decoupling may be necessary to allow organisations to formulate new CSR visions. However, more long-term and sustained decoupling between talk

and action may and does take place (Boiral, 2007; Khan *et al.*, 2007) and is viewed as rather negative. Robust third-party auditing has been shown to discourage the decoupling of talk and action, and greenwashing (Parguel *et al.*, 2011). This decoupling in relation to CSR is often viewed as problematic, potentially threatening legitimacy and credibility (Scherer *et al.*, 2013; Wagner *et al.*, 2009). However, decoupling talk and action may offer some strategic choices for organisations to promote unified diversity[1] (Eisenberg, 1984) and to satisfy multiple stakeholder demands as is the case in the context of an essentially contested concept such as CSR (Okoye, 2009). While Eisenberg emphasises the strategic advantages of ambiguity in successful organising, he later admits that his work does not take account of power relations, deceit and pretence, which are highlighted by empirical studies (Boiral, 2007; Khan *et al.*, 2007). Khan *et al.* (2007) highlight how the reporting of child labour in fact deflects concerns about negative aspects of institutional reform, and Boiral (2007) demonstrates that the adoption of ISO 14001 in the Canadian companies he studied actually led to daily practices being decoupled from the prescriptions of the ISO 14001 system. Both studies underscore the “dark” side of strategic ambiguity, further polarising the talk-action debate.

The talk-action gap is picked up again by Brunsson (2003), who explores the “discrepancies between what is said, what is decided and what is done” (p. 202). These discrepancies in their harshest form are hypocritical, where actions contradict talk and/or decisions. In line with Eisenberg’s essay, it is argued that hypocrisy offers a way for organisations to deal with conflicting stakeholder demands, “a way of handling several conflicting values simultaneously”, and thus has functional value, particularly when considering the talk-action gap. While hypocrisy is not necessarily ethical or in line with moral standards, if no other avenues or solutions to conflict are being sought, it does provide a means for organisations to fulfil conflicting demands, particularly in relation to CSR and sustainability. Brunsson’s (2003) work indirectly connects hypocrisy to performativity, as he points out that hypocrisy “facilitates action in conflict situations” (p. 221) by allowing organisations to respond to a number of contrasting stakeholder demands in different ways. Brunsson finds that “certain actions would not be possible if contrary talk and decision were not possible” stressing that if companies exclusively focussed on aligning talk with actions, there would be little stimulus to aim to do better. Without at least temporary decoupling of talk and action, organisations would not be able to engage in goal setting and articulating plans for the future. In the context of the food industry, allowing for differences between talk and action means that corporations such as Nestlé can compile and publish reports detailing their sustainability vision, commitments and achievements, thus motivating competitors in the industry to follow suit. Therefore, one could argue, hypocrisy is not necessarily negative, as perceived by many, but also has a positive and performative character. The concept of hypocrisy has been further developed in recent years, and frameworks have been developed to explore the link between communication strategies and perceived hypocrisy (Wagner *et al.*, 2009). Fassin and Buelens (2011) demonstrate the various nuances of hypocrisy, depending on divergence between CSR communication and implementation. However, these studies fail to address the performative character of the aspirational CSR communication, which is centred on creating differences between what organisations have achieved and what they intend to do, something this study seeks to generate some insights into.

Research gap addressed

This study seeks to deepen the understanding of aspirational communication in CSR and shed worthwhile light on the talk-action dichotomy. Empirical material is presented that provides insights into how organisational members perceive, experience and struggle with aspirational talk. This research, therefore, aims to address Christensen *et al.*’s (2013) call for empirical studies exploring the nuances of aspirational talk. Furthermore, this study is part of a larger inquiry that analyses CSR communication

within a process-oriented framework. Wehmeier and Schultz (2011) highlight that CSR communication research would benefit from further empirical insights from a process-oriented perspective to explain how organisations deal with the challenges of CSR communication. Understanding how aspirational talk is perceived, experienced and constructed by organisational members is important, as it exposes the challenges and opportunities of CSR communication at an organisational level. Learning more about managers' perception of aspirational CSR talk will provide important insights into the dynamics of how far aspirational talk is allowed to act as a stimulus for organisational change, and which boundaries may limit this process.

Method

Given the relative scarcity of empirical research on aspirational CSR communication, and more specifically research into organisational members' perceptions of aspirational talk, grounded theory methods are employed in this study to explore how organisational members make sense of this phenomenon. Organisational members' talk, in the form of interviews, is analysed. In line with constructivist grounded methods, the various voices, viewpoints and visions of the participants are included to gain an insight into their lived experience (Charmaz, 2006), to identify important concerns (Glaser, 2002) and to learn more about the practice of aspirational CSR communication.

This paper is built on data collection in the form of in-depth qualitative interviews with 11 food industry experts from diverse backgrounds, ranging from CSR directors/managers in food producing companies, to CSR consultants, and from NGO directors to CSR ambassadors from Ireland, the UK and the USA (see Appendix for a breakdown of interviewees and more detailed information on the methodology). The focus of this study is the food industry, where significant challenges need to be addressed to ensure sustainable food supply for the world's growing population. The interviews were approached in an exploratory way, with the overall aim of discovering how industry experts were making sense and experiencing the process of communicating achievements and intentions.

The manual interpretative coding resulted in 72 first-order codes (e.g. missed opportunities, lack of training, varying degrees of process). The second stage consisted of more focussed coding, grouping the first-order codes into second-order categories (e.g. tensions in communicating CSR talk and action) where overlap or a connection existed. The codes were then refined and reviewed. The final stage of the coding process was focussed on axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to relate the concepts to each other. Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between the second-order codes based on the accounts of the participants. Here the key elements in the communication process of talk and action are outlined and linked, allowing for a deepened understanding of the "on the ground" experience of aspirational CSR communication, as described by organisational members tasked with this process. Drivers such as competition cause organisations to formulate aspirational goals and to communicate them, while simultaneously the companies are forced to demonstrate that they are delivering on their promises. Arising from this process, organisational members experience tensions, prompting them to develop strategies to combine talk and action. These strategies are impacted upon by intervening conditions, such as the level of top management commitment and internal buy-in, which influence the consequence or outcome of aspirational CSR communication.

The selection of quotations from interviews aims to be illustrative of issues where consensus between participants was identified. Participant identifications (position, type of company, gender) have been appended to the quotes to allow readers to differentiate between the participants.

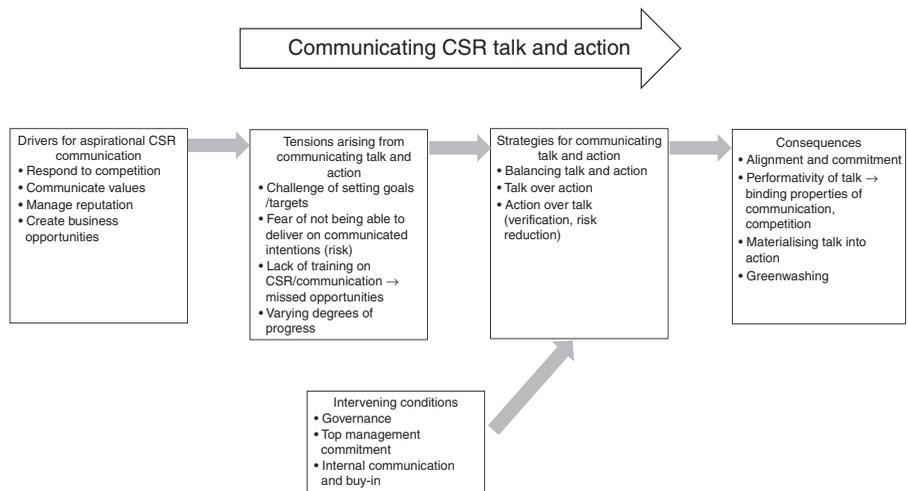


Figure 1.
Relationship between the main themes in the interview data

Findings

Five key themes emerged from the analysis: drivers for aspirational talk, tensions arising from communicating talk and action, strategies for communicating talk and action, intervening conditions impacting on these strategies, and consequences (see Figure 1). These groups of categories are based on the participants' representations and talk about aspirational CSR communication. The key themes are now unfolded in more detail to draw out the complexities of aspirational CSR talk.

Drivers for aspirational CSR communication

The most commonly discussed motivation for communicating CSR aspirations is competition. Competition not only drives business development and innovation, but also appears to be driving aspirational CSR communication. It seems that the desire to “stand out from their counterparts” and “to be a leader” drives organisations to compete on their CSR aspirations and to articulate idealised versions of themselves, potentially allowing them to maximise reputational benefits and legitimacy:

They do look across the road and look at what other companies are doing and recognise that they may be more aggressive, or more thoughtful, or more sophisticated in what they're doing in this area. And it's something to take note of (Director of CSR Communication, communication consultancy, USA, female).

The above quote highlights the common practice of competitor analysis with regard to CSR to assess the status quo within industry and to identify potential shortcomings of the organisation. In the context of the food industry the impact of Marks & Spencer's Plan A is significant, with many competitors being inspired to make their operation in their organisation and within their supply chain more sustainable. The gap between a sustainability leader and other companies in the industry creates a motivation to narrow this divergence and improve environmental and CSR performance across a whole industry. Aiming to be a sustainability leader will cause the sustainability pioneer to innovate again. And so the cycle continues, emphasising the important role competition plays in buttressing aspirational talk.

The communication of values surfaces as an important driver of aspirational CSR communication. By talking about their intentions, organisations have the opportunity to

publicly share their values even if they have not fully implemented or enacted them across all business operations, aiding the organisational sensemaking process. The communication of values, whether fully incorporated or still in the adoption stage, is also considered an important factor in managing the “reputational piece” of the organisation and in enhancing performance. Aspirational CSR communication is considered to create opportunities not only for the business but also for society by “supporting the growth of the country at large”.

Tensions in communicating CSR talk and action

I think those goals and the aspirational claims have caused headaches generally in company X that were, how the hell do we deliver that? (CSR & Communications Director, food conglomerate, UK, male).

During the analysis of the interview data, tensions in communicating talk and action emerged as a prominent theme and are succinctly exemplified by the above quote. On the one hand, the participants highlighted the need to fully utilise the reputational benefits of including communication about their vision; on the other hand, they described the struggle of not knowing if and how they will be able to deliver on these future-oriented statements, leaving them with an acute sense of vulnerability to risk. Aspirational CSR communication is portrayed as a necessary evil: one which is challenging and difficult, and at times near impossible. The desire not to “lean too far out of the window” significantly limits the articulation of very ambitious and visionary statements, and instead participants highlight the common practice of careful auditing to determine feasible goals prior to deciding and communicating them:

And we were getting into some circular conversation, but we could not set close targets without knowing exactly what was possible (Director of Sustainable Business, NGO working with MNCs, UK and worldwide, male).

We’ve got this target for 2020 and if some diligent person out there decides to check, and we were not reaching the target that we are quoting officially, then that might cause us a challenge (CSR Manager, consultancy firm, UK, female).

The fear of failing to deliver on externally communicated aspirations and the associated reputational risk is compounded by a lack of training in relation to CSR communication. Often, personnel discussing these aspirations and achievements in meetings with business partners, such as sales staff, do not have the expert knowledge needed, resulting in unease. Communication of the organisation’s aspirations requires extensive knowledge and skills, in relation not only to corporate communication, but also to technical aspects of CSR and sustainability. This mismatch between duty and skill set highlights a considerable tension between the need/desire to communicate and the ability to communicate:

And it’s that fear of being challenged when they are standing up there, not being 100% confident of what they’re saying (CSR Ambassador, Food Marketing, Ireland, female).

The relevant people may not have the right training to confidently communicate the organisation’s CSR aspirations, and in some instances the goal-setting process and compilation of reports get more attention than implementation within daily practice. Opportunities can thus be missed:

So there’s a massive opportunity to use the talk to inform your action. But those people often, it seems, fail to create those feedback loops and so they put a lot of effort those internal reports and micro sites or something. Then it goes out into the world and then everyone breathes a sigh of relief because the website’s gone live and then they walk away like nothing else happens to them (Director of CSR Communication, communication consultancy, USA, female).

A further tension discussed by the participants was being part of an umbrella organisation, as is the case for companies aiming to obtain a certain label, accreditation or standard, which is portrayed as a double-edged sword. While membership and accreditation are considered a major benefit in terms of marketing to consumers, there are complexities in the varying degrees of implementation of aspirations by the member organisations:

Taking into account that the companies are at different stages and have different impacts, that presents challenges when you come down the line to putting a label on pack (CSR Communication Consultant, Food Marketing, Ireland, female).

This illustrates a tension between the ambition to be part of accredited schemes and labels and wanting to set them apart. The large number of text passages coded to this theme highlights the ambiguous nature of the practice of aspirational talk. The tensional relationship between managing talk and action is described as resulting in contradictory and sometimes even paradoxical scenarios to which organisational members respond in a number of ways.

Strategies for communicating CSR talk and action

Organisational members have developed a range of responses to the challenge of communicating talk and action. The range of approaches varies from balancing talk and action to favouring talk over action and to focussing on action over talk, with emphasis on the verification of talk:

Any organisation would want to be careful to keep the right balance between generally talking, blowing their own horn and talking about cool things that they are doing, while also backing it up (CSR Ambassador, Food SME, Ireland, female).

This quote exemplifies the “striking a balance” approach, focussed on balancing talk and action. However, when probed, the participants cannot elaborate on how to get the “right balance”. It appears that the description is vague and simplistic without specific guidelines as to how this balance can be achieved, highlighting the ambiguity surrounding communication of talk and action.

A second approach is to favour talk over action, or more specifically to see value in communicating things that are aspirational, even though an exact plan of how to achieve the vision has not been compiled, or that significant progress has been made yet:

It’s great that they’ve set goals, some things that may not sound very newsworthy, because they have not done that much. But then, not that you have to have saved the world to start communicating things (Director of CSR Communication, communication consultancy, USA, female).

This statement encapsulates the binding properties that the external articulation of aspirations creates, which will be further discussed in the “Consequence” section of the analysis. Decoupling between talk and action is accepted. While some participants comment on the reputational risk associated with decoupling, none of the participants disclose a view that decoupling is intentionally used for strategic purposes, as is the case with strategic ambiguity. In line with a performative view of external claim-making, the participants say that communication can and should start, even if the company is in the early stages of implementing CSR (a form of temporary decoupling). However, the interviewees also stress the reputational risk of not delivering on their promises, putting forth a view that decoupling between talk and action in order to deceive stakeholders is not intended. A third strategy is to focus on action over talk. Here the communication of achievements is privileged over the articulation of intentions, and ideally they are a reflection of current reality:

I think when you have something to talk about; I think that is when you talk about it. When you have actually achieved something, something that you can share, that is meaningful (Sustainability Head of Department, consultancy firm, Ireland, female).

So, we're grounded in a culture which is very much focused on materiality of risk by individual business and also a culture which places an emphasis upon action and doing and making things happen and pragmatism, rather than aspiration (Director of CSR Communication, communication consultancy, USA, female).

The analysis points towards the fact that the dominant discourse among practitioners is about doing, about making things happen. Verification is raised in this context. It is important for organisations to demonstrate not only that they are "walking the talk" but that they are verifying actions and achievements, to "prove that you have done something". One way of doing so is by focussing on "measurable metrics":

So, just talking about the aims and the ambitions of programme x, and things like that wasn't sufficient. We needed to be able to demonstrate what we've achieved (CSR Communication Consultant, Food Marketing, Ireland, female).

The role of external, independent professionals, such as academics and auditors, is highlighted, to verify that the organisations are honest and credible in the reporting of their activities. Verification is deemed an important factor in reducing risk associated with CSR communication and preventing accusations of greenwashing. These findings concur with recent developments in the food industry, where widespread verification and standardisation can be observed, marked by proliferation of ecolabels and independently verified sustainability programmes.

To further limit any liabilities associated with risk, the formulation of aspirations is carefully designed, and this process is very much influenced by prior audits and research. Therefore the CSR objectives are set as goals that are ambitious, but can be met, thereby ensuring that the organisations will most likely achieve these goals:

So, it's a challenging target, it's not really what you would call an aspiration, it's not one which we can't even begin to imagine how we might achieve it. It's one which is going to be challenging but can be met with the right management framework in place (MD Sustainability Services, consultancy, worldwide, male).

Based on the frequency of references and number of incidences across sources, there is a bias for action over talk. The emphasis on action and measurable matrices, which are independently verified through external experts, represents the dominant discourse in relation to dealing with the talk-action dichotomy. The adoption of these strategies has consequences and intervening conditions impact on the approach, which will now be discussed.

Intervening conditions

The managers discussed a number of intervening conditions that appear to impact on their representations of aspirational talk. These conditions include governance within the organisation, top management commitment, internal communication and buy-in. Governance and top management commitment were raised as an important influence on the selection of strategies, indicating that top management commitment to visionary communication impacts on the implementation throughout the organisation:

These are organisations where at least one senior person really, really gets it and they have enough power and control, they go for public targets and mean it (Director of Sustainable Business, NGO working with MNCs, UK and worldwide, male).

When I look at the company X model, you know, there you've got [MDs name] who will stand up, and he will make really strong commitments about where he sees the business going in the future and he will say, 'we've got the first generational opportunity to eradicate poverty'. That is a leadership statement from the front and I'm not going to detract from it, I think it's very, very powerful (CSR & Communications Director, food conglomerate, UK, male).

But when deepening the discussion with the participants, a tension surfaces between the dominant discourse of “action over talk” of the organisational members and the aspirations expressed in the CEO leadership statements. While the managers seem to consider these visionary leadership statements useful, in their daily lives they still feel compelled to focus on demonstrating achievements.

Internal communication is emphasised as an important factor in successfully communicating the organisation’s vision and in creating engagement and buy-in, with the additional aim of getting employees to communicate this vision externally:

I suppose, even if a company is advanced, that does not mean that every person within that organisation is equally bought in (Sustainability Head of Department, consultancy firm, Ireland, female).

I think that external stakeholders are very important. When it comes to getting stuff done, internal stakeholders even more, they are the first audience and they are the ones that actually have to take the action (CSR Manager, consultancy firm, UK, female).

The above quotes indicate how aspirational CSR communication possesses auto-communication properties and facilitates organisational members’ sensemaking processes. Internal aspirational CSR communication is necessary to transform aspirations into actions through garnering employee support and creating internal alignment.

The discussion above highlights how the intervening conditions impact on the strategies employed by the managers to deal with the communication challenge of combining talk and action. Together, these strategies and intervening conditions have specific consequences or outcomes.

Consequences

The final discussion of findings elaborates on the consequences of aspirational CSR communication. When talking about the outcome of communicating talk and action, the managers referred to the organising properties of aspirational CSR communication and indicated that it acted as a “commitment and alignment device”. This in turn adds a performative dimension to aspirational talk, by acting as a road map, a guiding star, pinpointing where the organisation would like to be. Determining CSR goals, and preparing the information for public release, triggers sensemaking processes that promote increased internal alignment and provide structures on which future strategies can be built, thus having a performative character:

A lot of things we already do. But [our sustainability programme] helped us to really put a structure on some of our goals that we sort of knew we had, but they weren’t written down on paper. We did not write out yearly benchmarks. So it did help to put a structure on it, which was good. And we are becoming more sustainable as a result (Sustainability Manager, food SME, Ireland, female).

This performativity is further reinforced through the external and internal claim-making. A highly binding character is ascribed to the process of publicly declaring these goals, emphasising the level of liability this can produce for organisations, with legal and governance structures creating accountability within the organisations:

These corporations require legal and board of director approval because if they fail to meet their goals or fail to demonstrate that they are working to meet the goals, either one, they could be in a liable situation from a material standpoint when it comes to publicly held companies (Director of CSR Communication, communication consultancy, USA, female).

While external communication creates awareness and support along the value chain to help the organisation to move towards the chosen CSR goals, internal communication is considered integral in securing support of organisational members. Their support helps the

organisation put its CSR goals into practice, underscoring the collaborative and constitutive nature of CSR communication:

The public statements however further motivate different players and partners within the enterprise to recognise how committed this company is and to work harder at meeting these goals (Director of CSR Communication, communication consultancy, USA, female).

The interviewees were encouraged to share their experiences in relation to how organisations can successfully materialise their aspirational talk into action. The CSR goal-setting process was described as iterative, constantly changing and adapting to develop with the organisation and its context. Companies are presented as learning organisations, continually transforming themselves, and pushing out the boundaries of CSR practice:

As they learn and as they learn about their own organisation's capacity to change and make changes, they will have to modify their goal. So, we are counselling them that goal setting requires that you report back periodically on how you're doing. Did you miss the goal? Why? What were you doing? How will you improve your processes and your energy from your activities to make those goals meetable or attainable? Are you going to change the goal? Why are you changing the goal? What did you learn? (MD Sustainability Services, consultancy, worldwide, male).

Interestingly, one respondent provides novel insight into how the talk-action dichotomy is made workable within his organisation. Aspirational talk, particularly broad CEO declarations, which the participant terms "audacious leadership statements", is broken down into smaller goals. These can be disseminated within the organisation, throughout the hierarchical levels and across organisational functions, to ensure that they make sense to the relevant organisational member or department. Only then is an action and implementation plan formed around these smaller goals. What emerges from this interview as a noteworthy point is the translation and assimilation of leadership goals within the organisation. Often, these broad leadership statements lack clear definition of what it means to "adopt more sustainable business practices" and thus need to be translated to become more meaningful:

It wasn't until we'd been through the process of really thinking through 'what does nutrition and health mean in the context of our business?' and setting a really clear framework around it [...] [that] we developed a model through which you could evaluate all of our recipes both in terms of the negative nutrients they contained and the positive foods that they contained (CSR & Communications Director, food conglomerate, UK, male).

The above statement indicates that senior and middle management go through a process of sensemaking, whereby the CSR issue is defined and reframed in the organisation's context. Monitoring, reviewing and evaluating CSR goals and performance are considered crucial in ensuring that the organisations are moving in the right direction. They are portrayed as tools to close the gap between talk and action, to ensure recoupling and to reduce the risk of being perceived as hypocritical. However, if this process is not followed by a stretching out of the difference between talk and action through further articulations of aspirations, the impetus to strive to do better is removed, and CSR programmes risk becoming weak and lethargic.

Furthermore, the respondent points out the importance of the process over the goal setting, as goals can often be very vague, preventing organisational members from making sense of them:

My view would be, actually, what's far more important than the target is the process that undertakes the target. So, I think the target is important, and I'm not detracting from that at all, but my main point, I would say, is that you got to make it clear to your senior management what behaviours you want to see and what actions you want to see to move you towards that (CSR & Communications Director, food conglomerate, UK, male).

To address this imbalance, it is suggested that these targets be put into the context of a framework within which complex business decisions can be made. While the quote above could be interpreted as favouring action over talk, it appears to be a gentle pointer that talk is more likely to be followed by action if accompanied by an ambitious but concrete plan guiding the organisational members.

One final outcome or consequence of aspirational CSR communication discussed by the managers is greenwashing. Greenwashing in this instance is linked to an overemphasis on the communication of intentions, combined with a lack of implementation and verification. Many of the interviewees emphasised how irresponsible action on the part of some businesses can have a negative impact on reputation of the whole industry. But instead of this, preventing organisations from making aspirational claims going forward, the importance of third-party auditing and verification was highlighted, linking back to the theme of verification in the strategy section.

Reflections and conclusion

This research gives novel insight into the practice of aspirational CSR communication, and a particular sequence within aspirational claim-making comes to the fore. Here organisations appear to research CSR issues material to them, identify what improvements are achievable, make a decision to formulate goals around this and then communicate these goals as aspirations. The reasons identified for adhering to this particular sequence are increasing legal accountability and complex, binding governance structures. The empirical evidence indicates that organisations engage in careful auditing, exploration of competitor activity and feasibility studies prior to making decisions in relation to specific CSR goals to ensure that they can be met. Only once this process is complete do the organisations declare their intentions publicly. Therefore, the CSR objectives are set as goals that are ambitious, but can be met. Here visions and aspirations morph into carefully designed targets and goals, ensuring that they can be delivered on, protecting companies from possible accusations of hypocrisy. It could be argued that aspirational talk, produced in the above sequence, is self-producing (due to the performativity and binding property of aspirational claim-making) but also self-limiting (insofar as claims are engineered to ensure that targets can be met). However, in line with Thyssen's (2009) thinking, the aim of aspirational communication is not perfection, but simply to keep the difference between real and unreal open as a driving force for a permanent, and continuous effort.

Public statements of these claims create accountability outside of the organisation (in the language of one of the interviewees, they act as a "commitment device"), raising the standard for others by creating competition, as well as internally through auto-communication ("alignment device"). These public statements trigger action in and outside the organisation, and thus have a performative character. The interview data support Christensen *et al.*'s and Haack *et al.*'s (2012) notion that internal and external CSR communication prompts a "creeping commitment" reflected in organisational practice.

Furthermore, the data also suggest that organisations focus on stretching out those realistic goals, and make incremental, continual changes, which are performative and help them materialise their aspirational CSR talk in the long run. The research findings also suggest that the competitive nature of the business environment aids performativity: here goals and targets are set in the context of the standards and practices of CSR/sustainability leaders and first movers. This creates an upward spiral, whereby organisations shape their CSR talk and action around their competitors' accomplishments, thus pushing out and raising CSR standards, in line with Christensen *et al.*'s (2013) view.

However, while competition creates an upward spiral, this is offset by the drive towards verification. Although the reason for engaging in this verification stage is to ward off criticisms of greenwashing, and ultimately to reduce reputational risk for the organisation, avenues

should be explored to ensure that aspirational claim-making is not inhibited by an overemphasis on authentication. Methods may include in-depth stakeholder consultation and education to highlight the performative qualities of aspirational communication. This could potentially create greater acceptance of the gap between talk and action among stakeholders, which in turn could reduce organisations' fear of not being able to deliver fully on their promises, allowing them to freely articulate aspirations. In relation to strategic ambiguity, the research findings suggest that the organisational members do not intentionally engage in it, as it is opposed to their prevalent value of consistency. Instead, ambiguity appears to be unplanned, simply arising in an emergent manner (Guthey and Morsing, 2014).

The research also points towards the importance of translation and interpretation within the prospective sensemaking process (Gioia and Mehra, 1996) within the organisation, for example, by making "audacious leadership statements" tangible for the relevant management teams and organisational members. Broad-spectrum inspirational C-suite encouragement to embrace more sustainable business practices needs to be articulated more precisely and practically at different levels of the organisation.

Tensions and the talk-action gap

The most prominent theme to emerge from the data analysis, however, is the manifold tensions that surface when communicating CSR intentions and achievements. This study highlights the significant role of tensions and contradictions within the process of aspirational CSR communication. They seem to be at the heart of the talk-action dilemma. Thus, these tensions warrant further exploration to pinpoint strategies for organisational members to deal with the contradictory nature of combining CSR talk and action. Understanding how organisational members can alleviate or work through these tensions will generate further worthwhile insights into the process of aspirational CSR communication and its broader societal effects. Organisational paradox theory may be a suitable lens to study this phenomenon in more detail (Lewis, 2000; Lüscher and Lewis, 2008), and to investigate the extent to which paradox thinking (Hahn *et al.*, 2015; Scherer *et al.*, 2013) may be part of organisational life.

On a theoretical level, this analysis of industry expert discourses has generated worthwhile empirical data on the concept of aspirational talk. Taking CSR managers' and communication consultants' discourse as constitutive of aspirational CSR communication, the data provide meaningful insights into the opportunities and challenges of this type of communication, and connects the elements in the process. By asking organisational members to share their experience of managing the interplay between talk and action, it becomes clear that their daily practice is fraught with tension, contradiction and at times even paradox arising from the negotiation of the talk-action dichotomy. While the theoretical debate on aspirational talk is flourishing, the practitioner perspective has been underprivileged to date. This study seeks to address this imbalance. Brunsson (2003) states that "modern organizations are squeezed between ideology and practice" (p. 204). This empirical study finds this to be also true of the lived experience of practitioners, who are squeezed between talk and action.

On a managerial level, the research findings suggest that aspirational talk is a useful resource for organisations to help them transition towards becoming more responsible businesses. Rather than censoring aspirational talk to avert the scepticism of some, the interviewees suggest that robust auditing and verification systems should be adhered to so as to deliver proof of CSR achievements over time, in line with Parguel *et al.*'s (2011) findings. This research finds that the competitive business environment drives a continual widening and narrowing of the talk-action gap between sustainability leaders and other companies within the industry. However, the findings also indicate a tendency to favour recoupling in line with Christensen *et al.* (2015), who suggest that target-driven performance and adherence to technical standards and matrices may prevent organisations from fully discussing and exploring sustainability issues. In the language of these authors, discursive

closure can outweigh discursive opening. The challenge ahead will be to encourage organisations to embrace decoupling and thus to fully engage aspirational talk in an age of CSR professionalisation and standardisation. Only in this way will incremental and continuous CSR improvements continue to be made.

While the sample size of 11 interviews in this study may be considered relatively small, the aim is not to make specific recommendations as regards best practice or prescribed actions at this stage, but to generate rich data on the various attitudes held and to explore the opportunities and struggles professionals face when communicating CSR intentions and achievements. Furthermore, this research has been carried out in the context of the food industry, where significant strides need to be made to ensure sustainable food supply for the world's growing population. The many stakeholders along the supply chain from field to fork indicate the challenge here. Yet food has a special resonance in the economy and society, whereby claim-making has a relevant role. Here the performativity of aspirational talk may catalyse firms' development of more sustainable and societally responsible methods of food production and distribution.

On a broader level, such consideration underscores the prevalence of tensions in the process of aspirational CSR communication. While the responses to these tensions are not fully explored in this study, it nonetheless provides a good starting point by acknowledging the existence of these struggles and contradictions, and identifying them in some detail. As Poole and Van de Ven (1989, p. 569) state "one way to address a paradox is to acknowledge it and use it as a theory-building resource".

Note

1. Eisenberg (1984) describes unified diversity as a concept where values are expressed vaguely to allow for "multiple interpretations while at the same time promoting a sense of unity" (p. 8).

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Appendix. Detailed information on the methodology and participants

The focus of the research into communication of CSR achievements and intentions was stimulated through consultation with an enterprise partner, who expressed a strong interest in exploring general awareness and attitudes towards the talk-action dichotomy among food industry members. Balancing CSR talk and action is a major undertaking for organisations and their members, thus their discursive constitution of aspirational talk provides insights into how it is practised, making it the focal point of this study.

Interviews were conducted between August 2014 and August 2015, and ranged in length from 40 minutes to 1.5 hours. Interviewees were recruited through internet research, personal networks and snowball sampling. Participants' backgrounds (company size) and seniority varied, with half of them being C-suite members and the other half being managers that were involved in the daily communication management of the organisations. The heterogeneous nature of the sample ensured that multiple and diverse views were included. What connected the interviewees was that they were all food industry professionals or consultants advising food businesses. Due to the geographic spread, six interviews took place over the phone, while the remaining five interviews took place in person. Participants were allowed to express their perceptions and experiences freely and spontaneously.

Although a formal schedule of questions was not adhered to, each interview was approached with a general interview guide outlining broad themes (Cassell and Symon, 2004). These themes are the type of CSR programmes and level of integration within the organisation, the communication of CSR initiatives internally and externally and the interplay between communicating CSR intentions (talk) and achievements (action).

In analysing the data, a largely explorative approach was employed to identify key themes related to how organisational members described their experience of aspirational CSR communication. Using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, a thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework was carried out. Initially, inductive, data-driven coding was used to identify broad codes to describe, synthesise and explain the empirical data (Charmaz, 1990). The codes were assigned to meaningful text segments, and analytic thoughts were memoed throughout the coding process (Glaser, 2002; Holton, 2010) to aid the analysis.

Position	Company	Country	Gender
CSR manager	Dairy (SME)	Ireland	Female
CSR consultant	Food (SMEs and MNCs)	Ireland	Female
CSR ambassador	General food (SMEs)	Ireland	Female
CSR communication consultant	Food marketing (SMEs and MNCs)	Ireland	Female
CSR ambassador	Food marketing	Ireland	Female
CSR and communications director	Food conglomerate	UK	Male
Director CSR communication	Consultancy working with big food companies (MNCs)	USA	Female
Sustainability head of department	Consultancy working with big food companies (MNCs)	Ireland	Female
Director of sustainable business	NGO working with large companies (MNCs)	UK	Male
MD sustainability services	Consultancy working with big food companies (MNCs)	Europe, Africa and Latin America	Male
CSR manager	Consultancy working with big food companies (MNCs)	UK	Female

Table AI.
Breakdown
of interview
participants in study