

**The Rise of Corporate Sustainability Among the Largest  
Corporations in Norway**

*A Content Analysis of Key Concepts and Rhetorical  
Presentations of the Sustainable Development Goals in Non-  
Financial Reports*

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**Master's Thesis in Media Studies**

**Political Communication: Nordic Perspectives**

**Department of Media and Communication**

**University of Oslo**

June 1, 2022.



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<http://www.duo.uio.no>

Print: Grafisk senter, Universitetet i Oslo

# Abstract

In 2015, the United Nations launched the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a framework consisting of 17 goals to achieve a more sustainable future within 2030. The SDGs strengthen the role of sustainability in business, and companies play a decisive role in achieving them. Consequently, companies must deal with sustainability and the SDGs to an increasing extent. Corporate sustainability reporting is a central platform for communicating their efforts on these elements. Although there is an emerging focus on corporate sustainability reporting, the idea of businesses' social responsibility is not new, as corporations have long reported on their corporate social responsibility (CSR). This master's thesis addresses the overarching topic of corporate sustainability and SDG reporting among the largest corporations in Norway with a two-folded approach. The first part of the thesis examines the frequency of keywords related to corporate sustainability and corporate social responsibility. Through a quantitative content analysis, the study finds that the largest corporations in Norway focus more on sustainability in their reporting of 2020 compared to 2010. Moreover, the study finds that corporations focus more on sustainability than corporate social responsibility over time. The second part of the thesis examines the rhetorical strategies applied by the same corporations when addressing the SDGs in their non-financial reporting for 2020. Through a qualitative content analysis of rhetorical topics, I find that the corporations use four general rhetorical strategies. They 1) recognize the SDGs as a vital framework for the business, 2) prioritize the SDGs that are relevant to their business, 3) promote their results and impact, and 4) point to the SDGs as a guideline for future business activities. The study demonstrates how corporations apply these strategies with various approaches to show their stakeholders and the public that they are sustainable and aligned with the SDGs. Moreover, the study argues that this may be problematic in terms of "SDG-washing." In sum, corporate sustainability is on the rise among the largest corporations in Norway, and the SDGs are and will continue to be high on the corporation's agenda.



# Acknowledgements

After almost two years of work with this thesis and six years as a student at the University of Oslo, it is a great relief to finish my master's degree finally. Working with this thesis has been exciting, challenging, frustrating, and, most of all, educational. Corporate sustainability communication is a field for which there is a great need to gain a broader understanding in academia. It has been inspiring to make a small contribution to it.

Several important people deserve my greatest gratitude for their role in helping me complete this thesis. First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Øyvind Ihlen (S21, A21, S22) for his excellent guidance, feedback, and input. It has been a privilege to be supervised by an expert in strategic communication. I would also like to thank those who have proofread the thesis, especially Robin Bringsværd.

Moreover, thank you my fellow students in reading room 415 for making the last semester the best one! Thank you to my family for cheering me on and always supporting me. Thank you to Karoline for your invaluable patience and love. Finally, thanks to my employer Kruse Larsen for allowing me to work with everything I have learned from writing this thesis.

*Jonas Nicolay Corneliussen*

Oslo, June 1, 2022.

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## **1.0 Introduction**

In 1983, the former Norwegian Prime Minister and Secretary-General of the United Nations' (UN), Gro Harlem Brundtland, established the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). In 1987, WCED published the report *Our Common Future*, a report that has proven to have a fundamental impact on the whole world. The report provided an overview of global environmental problems, outlined future strategies for solving them, and had significant contributions to the international agenda (Holden & Linnerud, 2021, p. 11). Moreover, the report introduced a concept that links poverty reduction, environmental protection, and the needs of future generations (Holden & Linnerud, 2021, p.11). The idea is what the Commission refers to as sustainable development - "a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987, p. 43). From this idea, the concept of sustainability has emerged. Although sustainability is a dynamic term that applies in various settings and for different purposes (Brockett & Rezaee, 2012, p. 1), it is closely linked to the idea of sustainable development and the terms are often used interchangeably (Ihlen & Roper, 2014, p. 43). In that sense, sustainability concerns "the progressive maintenance of the life-supporting capacities of the planet's ecosystems" (Milne & Gray, 2013, p. 16).

Since the publication of *Our Common Future* in 1987, discussions about the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development have intensified in different areas of society (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011, p. 1). As public and private companies are integral to society and vital to economic, social, and environmental development, sustainability and sustainable development have become a part of the standard business language (Ihlen & Roper, 2014, p. 48). Meuer, Koelbel and Hoffman (2020, p. 321) argue for a raised attention to sustainability in business due to, among other things, "the increasing salience of global problems, such as climate change, and a shift in public perception that firms will have to provide solutions to these problems." Landrum (2018, p. 287) states that "while the scientific case for sustainability focuses on climate change and the human impact on environmental degradation, the business case concerns benefits such as reputation, higher stock value, and enhanced competitiveness." From a corporate perspective, sustainability is about taking long-term responsibility for the corporation and the relationship between economic, social, and environmental factors (Carson & Skauge, 2019, p. 126). Dyllick and Hockerts (2002, p. 121)

connect the idea of sustainable development from Our Common Future to business and define corporate sustainability as follows:

“When transposing this idea to the business level, corporate sustainability can accordingly be defined as meeting the needs of a firm’s direct and indirect stakeholders (such as shareholders, employees, clients, pressure groups, communities, etc), without compromising its ability to meet the needs of future stakeholders as well.” (Dyllick & Hockerts (2002, p. 121)

Although the concept of corporate sustainability defines the relationship between companies and society, the idea of businesses’ social responsibility has been important for decades. This responsibility has traditionally been defined through the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR). In the late ‘70s, Archie B. Carroll (1979, p. 500) stated that “the social responsibility of business encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time.” From a business perspective, CSR involves taking responsibility for the company's negative externalities and ensuring that the company has a positive net effect on society (Carson and Skauge, 2019, p. 200). Thus, companies' social responsibility involves how they respond to the consequences of their impact on society (Ihlen, 2011, p. 11).

Globalization, increasing environmental problems, and economic crime since the 1990s has intensified the importance of corporate social responsibility, according to Bruhn and Zimmerman (2016, p. 4). While research on corporate sustainability often points to the interconnection of the economic, social, and environmental pillars, most research on corporate social responsibility reviews the independent relationship of companies’ social and financial performance, according to Montiel (2008, p. 259). However, Montiel (2008, p. 260) underlines how both concepts “aim to balance economic prosperity, social integrity, and environmental responsibility, regardless of whether they conceptualize environmental issues as a subset of social issues or as the third element of sustainability.”

In September 2015, all 193 Member States of the United Nations adopted a 15-year plan to achieve a better future for all, naming it Agenda 2030. A total of 17 goals and 169 underlying targets lie at the core of this plan and constitute the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Holden & Linnerud, 2021, p. 42). The SDGs function as a blueprint to achieve a more

sustainable future and illustrate the global challenges the world is facing such as poverty, inequality, and climate change (Ravndal & Halleraker, 2021). If these are to be achieved within 2030, the world depends on the business contribution. Hence, the Sustainable Development Goals are applied actively in work on sustainability by many small and large corporations and organizations (Carson & Skauge, 2019, p. 133). Former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, made this point clear when the SDGs were adopted in 2015:

“Business is a vital partner in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Companies can contribute through their core activities, and we ask companies everywhere to assess their impact, set ambitious goals, and communicate transparently about the results.” (in SDG Compass, 2015, p. 4)

As environmental and social issues have increased significantly in the last decade, the importance of the Sustainable Development Goals and corporate sustainability has been strengthened. Every five to seven years, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a body of the United Nations, publishes reports on regular assessments and summaries of the current state of knowledge about climate and climate change. Over time, various reports have concluded that the climate will change, and people's contribution to this change is becoming increasingly clear (Holden & Linnerud, 2021, p. 87). The consequences of climate change are more significant than before, and actions are required. In that case, every single measure counts, and the business community has a special responsibility. However, sustainability challenges do not only include environmental issues. Over the last years, social sustainability has also increased attention due to significant events such as the Covid-19 pandemic (PWC, 2021, p. 3).

As stakeholders increasingly demand transparency on social and environmental issues, corporations worldwide have begun to report their work on sustainability (Siew, 2015, p. 180). The process of sustainability reporting is the most widespread tool companies apply when reporting their sustainability engagement and performance (Bini & Bellucci, 2020, p. 53). In 2020, 80 % of companies worldwide reported on sustainability (KPMG, 2020, p. 5). Such reports have become vital for companies in communicating their contribution to sustainability. Accordingly, it enables businesses to report their performance on environmental, social, and governmental issues. As Milne and Gray (2013, p. 16) emphasize,

“the business engagement with the sustainability agenda is firmly rooted in a history of practices of corporate reporting practices” and reporting of impacts that go beyond the corporations’ financial performance.

Companies have also started to include the SDGs in their non-financial reporting. In 2020, 82% of Norway's 50 largest companies mentioned the SDGs in their annual report (Deloitte, 2021, p. 6). As emphasized by the consulting firm EY (2017, p. 2), “the SDGs offer a lens for companies to address these challenges while also proactively working with their stakeholders toward achieving the SDGs.” Reporting is embedded in SDG target 12.6, which “requires the Member States to encourage companies, especially large and transnational companies, to adopt sustainable practices and to integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle” (Pizzi, Rosati & Venturelli, 2021, p. 404). Rosati and Faria (2019b, p. 1313-14) define SDG reporting as “the practice of reporting publicly on how an organization addresses the SDGs.” Such reporting can play a vital role in advancing sustainability reporting and can be useful for companies to plan, implement, measure, and communicate their efforts in achieving the SDGs (Rosati & Faria, 2019a, p. 588). Thus, the SDGs and reporting on these can have a prominent role for both Norwegian and international companies in meeting the complex global challenges we face.

## **1.1 Research Questions and Objective of the Study**

As the world and business markets are changing, stakeholders’ need for information increases, not only when it comes to financial information, but also concerning non-financial matters such as sustainability. Corporate sustainability “requires firms to address interconnected and interdependent economic, environmental and social concerns at different levels” (Hahn, Pinkse, Preuss & Figge, 2014, p. 297). As there is a considerable focus on corporate sustainability, it is crucial to understand how the corporations address the issues and communicate their sustainability through sustainability reports (Hossain, Islam, Momin, Nahar & Alam, 2018, p. 581). This master's thesis addresses the overarching theme of corporate sustainability reporting among Norway’s largest corporations, with a two-fold focus.

The first part of the study focuses on examining if there has been an increase or decrease in keywords related to the concepts of corporate sustainability and corporate social responsibility

in annual reports of the largest corporations in Norway from 2010 to 2020. As Montiel and Delgado-Ceballos (2014, p. 113) state, “it is almost impossible to browse a company’s websites or annual reports without finding references to sustainability or sustainable development.” Sveen, Gresaker, Hæhre, Madsen and Stenheim (2020, p. 118) make the argument that sustainability is an increasingly important concept in both public and business discourse, and “one of the biggest buzzwords and catchphrases of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” By searching for “bærekraft” (sustainability) in Retriever’s digital media database Atekst, I observed how many times the word was used in Norwegian media from year to year. In 2010, the frequency of “bærekraft” was 2,168, while the frequency was 5,093 in 2015. In 2020, the frequency was as much as 18,628. There is also a significant increase in “bærekraftig utvikling” (sustainable development). In 2010, the frequency was 4,661. In 2020, the frequency was 11,366.

This search in Retriever indicates that sustainability as a keyword has gained an increasingly important place in Norwegian media over the last decade. Nevertheless, we have little knowledge about whether the same applies to corporate annual reports. The objective of the first part is to examine if there is an increased focus on sustainability in the non-financial reporting of the largest corporations in Norway from 2010 to 2020. Another objective is to examine if corporations focus most on the concept of sustainability or the concept of corporate social responsibility. Thus, the first research question of the study is as follows:

**RQ1** *To what extent has there been an increased focus on sustainability and corporate social responsibility in the non-financial reporting of the largest corporations in Norway from 2010 to 2020?*

To answer this research question, I conduct a quantitative content analysis of the frequency of keywords related to the concepts of corporate sustainability and corporate social responsibility. The search in Retriever indicates that sustainability as a keyword has gained an increasingly vital place in Norwegian media over the last decade. The media, research literature, and the business community point to an increased focus on sustainability in Norway and worldwide. Nevertheless, we know little concrete about how significant this increase is. The quantitative content analysis of annual reports from 2010 and 2020 can provide a quantitative picture of the frequency of different keywords related to sustainability among the largest corporations in Norway. Thus, it can indicate how much focus the largest corporations

in Norway have on sustainability and corporate social responsibility in their reports. Moreover, it can tell if there has been a change in this focus from 2010 to 2020. In addition, the analysis can also showcase if there are any differences in this focus across companies and industries.

The second part of the study focuses on how the largest corporations in Norway rhetorically present the Sustainable Development Goals in their reports. Rhetoric is a classical discipline within linguistics and “offers a well-established reservoir of ideas, categories, and analytical tools” (Catellani & Ihlen, 2022, p. 15). Rhetoric and strategic communication are essential components for companies to present their work and results with the SDGs. Ihlen and Heath (2018, p. 3) state that “rhetoric helps us to understand how knowledge is generated and socially constructed through communication.” However, there is a lack of research on how the SDGs are rhetorically presented in the non-financial reporting of the largest corporations in Norway. Thus, there is a need for empirical evidence in order to gain an understanding of how the SDGs are adopted in corporate business practices and reporting (Hummel & Szekely, 2022, p. 153). One of the classical rhetorical theories is the theory of topics. In the rhetoric, topics are used for the “commonplace,” where the rhetor can find specific types of arguments or argumentation patterns (Eide, 2015, p. 128). Rhetorical topics offer insight into different types of arguments and are useful for understanding and analyzing business rhetoric (Ihlen & Lie, 2019, p. 2). As Ihlen and Raknes (2020a, p. 2) state, “the most common understanding is that topics are a more general method for finding arguments.” Accordingly, the second research question is as follows:

**RQ2** *Which rhetorical topics are applied by the largest corporations in Norway when they address the UN’s SDGs in their non-financial reporting for 2020?*

To answer this research question, I conduct a qualitative content analysis, focusing on the rhetorical theory of topics. As van Zanten and van Tulder (2021, p. 3704) imply, “the key question is no longer why companies should adopt sustainability strategies but how they can make them effective in advancing the SDGs.” The objective is to locate the common rhetorical strategies Norwegian corporations apply when addressing the SDGs in their reports. Another objective is to examine the different ways the companies structure their arguments. The rhetorical theory of topics can help to deconstruct and analyze the arguments corporations



make when arguing for the relationship between their business and the Sustainable Development Goals.

## **1.2 The Structure of the Thesis**

This master's thesis consists of 6 chapters. The introductory chapter presented the context for the study and outlined the overall theme - *corporate sustainability reporting among Norway's largest corporations*. I have also illustrated how the thesis consists of two parts. The first part concerns the development of reporting on corporate sustainability and corporate social responsibility from 2010 to 2020. The second part of the study examines how the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are rhetorically addressed in the non-financial reports of 2020 for the same corporations. The further outline of the thesis is as follows: The next chapter presents relevant literature and the theoretical framework for the thesis. The first section of the chapter further elaborates on corporate sustainability, corporate social responsibility, sustainability reporting, the Sustainable Development Goals, and other relevant concepts. The theory chapter will also present the theoretical framework of rhetoric and rhetorical topics. Chapter 3 presents the methodological framework for the thesis. This chapter discusses the sample, methodological evaluations, quantitative and qualitative approaches, and the quality of the study. Chapter 4 presents the quantitative keyword analysis, which is to answer RQ1. Chapter 5 presents the analysis of the rhetorical SDG topics, which is to answer RQ2. The findings and results are discussed separately in Chapters 5 and 6. Chapter 6 summarizes and concludes the results of the analysis and aims to answer the study's research questions. Chapter 6 also discuss the limitations of the study and suggest areas for further research.

## **2.0 Literature Review and Theoretical Perspectives**

This theory chapter is divided into two subchapters. The first subchapter will further address the topics mentioned in the introductory chapter and discuss other relevant theories to sustainability. It will also aim to present the most important areas for corporate sustainability reporting. The second subchapter will first present the theoretical framework for word frequency. Moreover, the subchapter will give a general overview of rhetoric and rhetorical topics before I present the analytical approach to rhetorical topics applied in this study.

### **2.1 Sustainability**

#### **2.1.1 Corporate Sustainability (CS)**

As outlined in the introduction, the concept of corporate sustainability has emerged in light of the idea of sustainable development. Meuer et al. (2020, p. 319) argue that «corporate sustainability is an increasingly important goal for managers across all industries.» Moreover, sustainability has a continuous material impact on corporate strategies and operations (Dyllick & Muff, 2016, p. 157). However, corporate sustainability (CS) is defined with different approaches, depending on how it is meant to be used. Montiel (2008, p. 254) states that “there are two different ways of defining and conceptualizing corporate sustainability”, where “one approach uses the term ecological sustainability to identify CS primarily with the environmental dimension of business”, while the other identifies CS in terms of “ecological, economic, and social dimensions.” Moreover, being a sustainable business is highly interconnected with strengthening the reputation and legitimacy of the business, according to Ihlen (2007a, p. 23). In this case, reputation involves the continuous impression and expectations the outside world has to a company (Ihlen, 2007a, p. 8).

Although Montiel and Delgado-Ceballos (2014, p. 113) argue that there is a lack of standardized definitions of corporate sustainability and methods to measure it, several scholars have defined the concept. Neubahn and Zahra (2005, p. 121) define corporate sustainability as “the ability of a firm to nurture and support growth over time by effectively meeting the expectations of diverse stakeholders.” Moreover, Ihlen (2015, p. 146) argues for the tendency that “corporations tend to put themselves at the center,” an argument that emphasizes the difference between the environmental and corporate perspectives on

sustainability. Thus, while the term *sustainability* highlights the environment and society, *corporate sustainability* sets the company in focus, according to Ihlen (2015, p. 146).

Dyllick and Hockerts (2002, p. 132) identify three critical elements of corporate sustainability: “(1) Integrating the economic, ecological, and social aspects in a 'triple-bottom-line,' (2) integrating the short-term and long-term aspects, and (3) consuming the income and not the capital.” The triple-bottom-line (TBL) of sustainability refers to the economic, environmental, and social aspects of sustainability and was introduced by John Elkington in 1997 (Rambaud & Richard, 2015, p. 92). According to Milne and Gray (2013, p. 14), these are the underlying core and dominant concepts of much non-financial reporting. The idea behind the TBL is to clarify how corporations influence other aspects of society beyond their financial contribution. This triple-bottom-line applies to social, environmental, and economic conditions so that a company's results also include these aspects (Rapp Nilsen, 2020). In that case, the triple-bottom-line is an operationalization of the ESG-dimensions in the concept of sustainability. A "bottom line" in business refers to the results of a company (Carson & Skauge, 2019, p. 135). An expansion to a triple bottom line raises the idea that it should also be possible to measure and report financial and non-financial results. A company's success not does not only rely on the financial aspect, but also its impact on the environment and society.

### **2.1.2 Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)**

The concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has been an essential part of business for decades and forms a basis for how companies work on issues related to sustainability. A standard description is that “Corporate Social Responsibility involves allocating and taking responsibility by an organization towards the stakeholders based on social, economic, and ecologic sustainability” (Weder, 2017, p. 24). The academic discussion on CSR began in the 1950s, and has over the years evolved “from being a mere social idea to becoming a corporate concept and philosophy” (Bruhn & Zimmerman, 2017, p. 3-4). According to Ihlen (2011, p. 26), there is a distinction between theories stating that CSR is only linked to profit creation and theories emphasizing that CSR is linked to stakeholders other than the owners. Accordingly, CSR has been defined in different ways based on how it is meant to be used.

Despite the many definitions of the concepts, there are several similarities, such as how businesses focus on reducing their negative impact on society, the consideration of various

stakeholders, and the connection between economic and social interests (Ihlen, 2011, p. 30). Moreover, discussions about CSR have become an international leadership trend and have developed into a global discourse on this concept (Ihlen, 2011, p. 11). Corporate social responsibility has also been on the agenda for a long time in Norwegian business life. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has participated actively in the CSR debate (Ihlen, 2011, p. 18-19). In a whitepaper to the Storting (Report No. 10 (2008-2009)), they state as follows:

“All enterprises and organisations, whether private companies, the state, or other public agencies, have a responsibility to take social and environmental considerations into account in their operations. The Norwegian authorities play an important role here as owner, investor and procurer.” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2008-2009, p. 5)

As companies are held responsible for their actions, they communicate their social responsibility as a means of strengthening their reputation Ihlen (2007b, p. 43-44). Communication on CSR is mainly identified on corporate websites and in CSR reporting (Weder, 2016, p. 24). Such reports can help increase the company's reputation or generate goodwill among the public (Brunner & Langner, 2017, p. 149). In that sense, communication on CSR is strategic as it involves gaining legitimacy and reputation (Ihlen, 2011, p. 7). Thus, CSR should be anchored internally in the business and at the management level in order to communicate about this responsibility (Ihlen, 2011, p. 90). Companies must also maintain a dialogue with their stakeholders to map and understand the stakeholder's expectations and demands.

### **2.1.3 The Relationship Between Corporate Social Responsibility and Corporate Sustainability**

As demonstrated so far, corporate sustainability and corporate social responsibility are two essential concepts in today's business world. Therefore, several academic studies discuss the relationship between the concepts and their similarities and differences. Strand, Freeman and Hockerts (2014, p. 2) point out that corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability are discussed as both near-synonyms and completely distinct concepts and make the argument that over time, “the expression sustainability appears to be gaining favor over CSR.” Moreover, Bogren and Sörensson (2021, p. 478) emphasize that companies have started to use the term sustainability instead of CSR, as CSR includes the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability. Thus, sustainability has become an integrated concept that includes corporate social responsibility. Since the UN adopted the Sustainable

Development Goals in 2015, corporate sustainability has primarily replaced the term corporate social responsibility (Holden & Linnerud, 2021, p. 238).

In their study, Aslaksen, Hildebrandt and Johnsen (2021, p. 1) make the argument that “sustainability has become the dominating term in popular usage for describing the relationship between business and society”. Moreover, their study concludes that “the increased attention to sustainability has become an overriding concern that has changed the way CSR is discussed” (Aslaksen et al., 2021, p. 12). According to Bruhn and Zimmerman (2016, p. 4), this may be due to how companies adopt the principles of corporate social responsibility in order to respond to an increasing trend of consumers taking more sustainable decisions. Visser (2014, p. 4) connects the concepts and perceives CSR as standing for *Corporate Sustainability and Responsibility*. Moreover, Visser refers to the distinction between the terms sustainability and responsibility: sustainability is “the destination—the challenges, vision, strategy, and goals, i.e., what we are aiming for - while responsibility is more about the journey - our solutions, responses, management, and actions, i.e., how we get there,” (Visser, 2014, p. 4-5). In their study, Ashrafi, Adams, Walker and Magnan (2018, p. 679) argue that CSR is the transitional or ultimate goal for corporations and claim that corporate sustainability is the leading approach to transforming businesses to contribute to sustainable development.

#### **2.1.4 The Sustainable Development Goals**

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) extend the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which the UN launched in 2000. The MDGs consisted of eight goals and were first and foremost oriented towards change in developing countries, while the Sustainable Development Goals are universal (Pedersen, 2021, p. 104). The MDGs were successful in several ways, but were also criticized for only focusing on symptoms of poverty instead of the causes (Ravndal & Halleraker, 2021). In that matter, the SDGs are more ambitious and comprehensive as they focus on the causes of poverty and establishing a link to the work of fighting climate change. The SDGs recognize how the work of combating poverty and inequality must be seen in the context of plans to improve access to education and health services, and facilitate economic growth while working to stop climate change and preserve nature, according to Ravndal & Halleraker (2021). In general, the SDGs extend the MDGs as a framework and tie economic, social, and environmental development to each other by

emphasizing how fighting poverty cannot go beyond ecological considerations (Carson & Skauge, 2019, p. 128).

The Sustainable Development Goals express a vision and are not binding (Pedersen, 2018, p. 105). A country, for instance, will not be sanctioned if it does not achieve its goals, which offers both advantages and disadvantages. In the opinion of Pedersen (2018, p. 105), a benefit may be that countries take on more ambitious goals if the agreement is not binding. On the other hand, it can be a disadvantage because governments will not necessarily make the required effort to achieve the goals if it does not suffer any consequences. Norway has high ambitions of contributing to the achievement of the SDGs and was a significant driving force in the preparation of the goals. In a whitepaper to the Storting (Meld. St. 40 (2020-2021)), the Government writes the following:

“The government has decided that the 2030 agenda with the Sustainable Development Goals will be the main political track for addressing the most significant challenges of our time. Therefore, the Sustainable Development Goals constitute a structure for the government's national and international policy.” (Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation, 2020-2021, p. 9, translated from Norwegian)

This quote illustrates the importance of the Sustainable Development Goals in Norwegian politics. The SDGs provide guidelines for local, national, and international politics, and Norway has already achieved several goals. However, there is still plenty of work left in order to reach them all. The Office of the Auditor General of Norway has, among other things, criticized Norway for not having a comprehensive plan to implement the 2030 Agenda and for lack of coordination on the national follow-up of the goals (Holden & Linnerud, 2021, p. 55). The Voluntary National Review from 2021, a process where countries voluntarily report on the progress, stated that Norway is well-positioned to achieve the goals within 2030, but still has several challenges with some of the main objectives (Ravndal & Halleraker, 2021). Examples are Norwegian greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity conservation, and sea pollution (Ravndal & Halleraker, 2021). Norway is ranked seventh out of the 165 countries that have received an overall score, close behind the other Nordic countries.

As I emphasized in the introduction, the Sustainable Development Goals are becoming increasingly important to businesses, as the world depends on their contribution to achieving the goals. As put forth by van Zanten and van Tulder (2021, p. 3702), “companies play a

decisive role in reaching the Sustainable Development Goals” as “they have unique capabilities that advance sustainability objectives”. Based on the SDGs, companies are no longer able to solely make decisions in accordance with financial considerations, but also environmental and social concerns (Carson & Skauge, 2019, p. 126). The role of companies in achieving the SDGs are further addressed in chapter 2.1.7 SDG Reporting.

In 1999, The United Nations established the global network UN Global Compact (Carson & Skauge, 2019, p. 158). The organization is the world’s largest business initiative for sustainability. Approximately 20,000 companies from 162 countries take part in the organization. The UN Global Compact is an organization for companies that aim to work with social responsibility and sustainability and consists of local networks on all continents (Holden & Linnerud, 2021, p. 239). In Norway, the organization was established in 2019. The UN Global Compact has a vision to “create a sustainable and inclusive global economy that delivers lasting benefits to people, communities, and markets” (Bowie, 2017, p. 945). Moreover, The UN Global Compact has established ten guiding principles based on human rights, labor standards, the environment, and anti-corruption with which member organizations must align their strategies and operations (Holden & Linnerud, 2021, p. 240). The members must also take strategic actions towards the SDGs.



Picture 1: The United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 2015.

### **2.1.5 The Role of Communication in CSR and Corporate Sustainability**

All companies must relate to and communicate with the outside world (Ihlen, 2013, p. 11). Communication is a tool that companies can use strategically to achieve various goals, especially when it comes to CSR and sustainability. Cornelissen (2011, p. 5) has defined corporate communication as “a management function that offers a framework for the effective coordination of all internal and external communication to establish and maintain favorable reputations with stakeholder groups upon which the organization is dependent.” Accordingly, strategic communication involves a corporation's targeted use of communication to fulfill its mission (Ihlen, 2013, p. 15).

The vital role of communication in sustainable development has increased its recognition and “evolved into the discipline of sustainability communication over the past five decades” (Barendsen, Muß & Silvius, 2021, p. 1). As claimed by Nwagbara and Reid (2013, p. 406), “sustainability communication deals with communicating a company's CSR issues by taking cognizance of economic, social, and environmental concerns and considering the inputs of diverse stakeholders in the process.” Such communication is fundamental for managing the reputation of the company and demonstrating sustainability to the company's stakeholders. Sustainability communication is a concept that has been approached from different angles and is not a separate theoretical framework (Barendsen et al., 2021, p. 3). Nevertheless, such communication introduces an understanding of the relationship between the environment and society and has become an established research field (Weder, Karmasin, Krainer & Voci, 2021, p. 2). As Godeman and Michelsen (2011, p. 6) point out, the process of sustainability communication occurs in different contexts and levels, such as between individuals, institutions, individuals, media, business, and politics.

Newig, Schulz, Fischer, Hetze, Laws, Lüdecke and Rieckmann (2013, p. 2976) have proposed a typology of three ways of communicating sustainability; communication (1) of, (2) for, and (3) about sustainability. Communication *of* sustainability is “managerial or instrumental”, focusing on the sender-receiver flow of communication, while communication for sustainability focuses on facilitating “societal transformation towards the normative goals of sustainable development” (Newig et al., 2013, p. 2979-80). Corporate sustainability reports can be considered as communication of sustainability. Communication about sustainability occurs when “information, interpretations, and opinions regarding sustainability issues are



exchanged and debated” (Newig et al., 2013, p. 2978). This framework helps distinguish the different modes of sustainability communication, according to Barendsen et al. (2021, p. 3).

### **2.1.6 Sustainability Reporting**

Sustainability reporting addresses information about non-financial aspects of the business. Non-financial information is defined by Erkens, Paugam and Stolowy (2015, p. 25) as “disclosure provided to outsiders of the organization on dimensions of performance other than the traditional assessment of financial performance from the shareholder’s and debt-holder’s viewpoint.” Sustainability reporting is emerging as one of the most central topics around non-financial matters. Such reports can help to promote the company and are “a source of accessible information to consumers, real and potential investors, and/or other interested parties about the real impact of the enterprise’s activity on society and the environment” (Oncioiu, Petrescu, Bîlcan, Petrescu, Popescu & Anghel, 2020, p. 9). Several studies support the positive effects of sustainability reports. The study of Kuzey and Uyar (2017, p. 36) concludes that sustainability reporting drives value, while the study of Du, Yu, Bhattacharaya and Sen (2017, p. 313) shows that companies that publish sustainability reports gain higher value relevance to sustainability performance than companies which don’t. Moreover, Whetman (2017, p. 14) argues for “a positive and significant effect of sustainability reporting on a firm’s return on equity, return on assets, and profit margin” in his study.

The Governance Group, a Norwegian consultancy, has reviewed the sustainability reporting of companies listed on the Oslo Stock Exchange (2021). The report's main objective is to map how the 100 largest of them disseminate sustainability information relevant to financial and strategic decision-makers (The Governance Group, 2021, p. 6). A set of different Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) - standards forms the basis for analyzing the corporations. For instance, a standard for Environment is climate risk, while a standard for Social is human rights. A standard for Governance is corruption risk (The Governance Group, 2021, p. 8). The report concludes that the companies prioritize sustainability reporting to a greater extent than before and that more companies receive a better assessment than in previous years (The Governance Group, 2021, p. 30). Furthermore, the report emphasizes the increased importance of sustainability, as it has “risen from the bottom of the companies' marketing departments to the top of companies' finance departments” (The Governance Group, 2021, p. 30).

Sustainability reporting has historical roots back to the 1960s and 70s in Europe, as companies “started to recognize their role in society above and beyond profit maximization” according to Brockett and Rezaee (2012, p. 27). In 1997, Finland was the first country to introduce a mandatory law for sustainability reporting (Brockett & Rezaee, 2012, p. 28). During the same year, the non-profit organization Ceres established the Global Reporting Initiative, which is a guide on how companies can proceed in producing a sustainability report (Carson & Skauge, 2019, p. 139). This standard is developed in cooperation with international corporations, civil society, and academic and professional organizations (Holden & Linnerud, 2021, p. 243). The GRI guidelines have been updated several times since their development. Even though other standards for sustainability reporting exist, the GRI Sustainability Reporting Standards are the most known and commonly used standards (Holden & Linnerud, 2021, p. 243).

An important reason why companies report on sustainability is to act in accordance with the legal requirements in their country (Pizzi, Del Baldo, Caputo & Venturelli, 2022, p. 65). In 1998, Norwegian corporations with an accounting obligation were required to provide information on conditions in the business that can cause a significant impact on the external environment (Carson & Skauge, 2019, p. 140). In June 2013, larger corporations in Norway were required by law to report on their social responsibility, hereby the considerations for human rights, social conditions, fighting corruption, and labor rights (Carson & Skauge, 2019, p. 141). In 2014, the EU launched the Non-Financial Reporting Directive (NFRD), which requires large public interest entities to include non-financial information in their annual reporting (Holden & Linnerud, 2021, p. 247). The Norwegian Accounting Act §3-3c was updated July 1, 2021, to ensure compliance with NFRD.

### **2.1.7 SDG Reporting**

As I have already pointed out, companies have become more aware of the SDGs and have begun to integrate the SDGs in their annual reports (Hummel & Szekeley, 2022, p. 176). In their report *Survey of Sustainability Reporting*, KPMG states that 68 % of 5,200 companies worldwide link their operations to the Sustainable Development Goals. The report also underlines that reporting on the SDGs has increased significantly between 2017 and 2020, as 40 % of the world's largest companies discussed the SDGs in their corporate reporting in 2017 (KPMG, 2020, p. 43). Thus, an argument is that the business interest in the SDGs has increased since they were adopted by the UN in 2015, as there is increased attention from

stakeholders towards the SDGs. In their study, Pizzi, Rosati and Venturelli (2021, p. 406) argue that businesses aim to contribute to the SDGs as they can gain a competitive advantage. Moreover, “the SDGs are estimated to signal US\$12 trillion in annual business opportunities,” according to the Business & Sustainable Development Commission (2017, p. 12). The Commission (2017, p. 12) states that “businesses need to pursue social and environmental sustainability as avidly as they pursue market share and shareholder value” in order to take advantage of these opportunities.

Several studies examine the appearance of SDGs in corporate annual reports. Stakeholder pressure to integrate sustainability into corporate strategies and the ongoing sustainability discourse in the world has led to an interest in studying the specific field of SDG reporting (García-Meca & Martínez-Ferrero, 2020, p. 2). In his study, Vildåsen (2018, p. 256) emphasizes that “companies applying the SDGs are likely to face a tension between business strategy and societal development.” In their study, Rosati and Faria (2019a, p. 595) found that companies that address the SDGs have specific characteristics. They are primarily large organizations with more intangible assets and apply external third-party assurance to a higher extent. Moreover, they often implement other sustainability frameworks (such as GRI) and have a younger board of directors with a higher number of female members (Rosati & Faria, 2019a, p. 595). In their study, Muhmad and Muhamad (2021, p. 303) found that 96 % of previous research publications on the relationship between companies’ financial performance and sustainability practices reported a positive relationship after adopting the SDGs. García-Meca and Martínez-Ferrero (2020, p. 13) argue that SDG reporting is more symbolic than substantive for most organizations, which can support an argument that SDG reporting has little impact on corporate performance. Thus, they suggest that “firms usually engage in sustainability reporting as a symbolic strategy to address legitimacy issues and respond to stakeholder pressure” (García-Meca & Martínez-Ferrero, 2020, p. 13).

In partnership with the Global Reporting Initiative and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, the UN Global Compact has designed a guideline for how businesses can align their business strategy with the SDGs. The guide is named SDG Compass. This guide is a holistic approach to promoting SDG-related business strategies' formulation, implementation, and communication (García-Sanchez, Aibar-Guzmán, Aibar-Guzmán & Rodríguez-Ariza, 2020, p. 1). The SDG Compass was initially developed for large multinational corporations, but is also adjustable to small and medium-sized companies and

other organizations (Holden & Linnerud, 2021, p. 241). The compass includes five steps companies can utilize to maximize their contribution to the goals (Pizzi et al., 2021, p.405). Step number 1 is *understanding the SDGs*, while step number 2 is *defining priorities*. Step number 3 is *setting goals*, step number 4 is *integrating*, and step number 5 is *reporting and communicating* (SDG Compass, 2015, p. 3).

PwC (2021) report *Sustainability 100* (translated from Norwegian) provides an insight into how Norwegian corporations work with sustainability and analyzes the focus on the sustainability work of the 100 largest companies in Norway. The report states that almost three quarters of the largest companies in Norway prioritized one or more of the SDGs in 2020 (PwC, 2021, p. 2). Moreover, the report emphasizes that the proportion of companies communicating a clear strategy for sustainability is increasing and that such companies will be able to utilize the financial opportunities better in the green shift. Additionally, the report claims that almost half of the 100 largest companies in Norway still don't work strategically with sustainability. If companies are lacking an anchoring of sustainability in their business strategy, they may risk missing out on the business opportunities in the SDGs, according to PwC (2021, p. 2-3).

### **2.1.8 Greenwashing and SDG-washing**

As an increasing number of companies are interested “in communicating their environmental and ethical conduct in their marketing” (Ekstrand & Nilsson, 2011, p. 167), in addition to the raised attention to sustainability, the term *greenwashing* has emerged. Delmas and Burbano (2011, p. 64) define greenwashing as “the interaction of two firm behaviors: poor environmental performance and positive communication about environmental performance” and state how greenwashing “occurs due to firms misleading consumers about their environmental performance or the environmental benefits of a product or a service.”

Greenwashing is strongly related to a company's sustainability communication. Deloitte (2019, p. 2) emphasizes the importance of how companies must ensure credible sustainability reporting in order to avoid greenwashing. Pizzeti, Gatti and Seele (2019, p. 22) argue how greenwashing can occur if claims on sustainability are in conflict with the company's actual activities. Thus, “greenwashing is a strategy that companies adopt to engage in symbolic communication of environmental issues without substantially addressing them in actions,” as Walker and Wan (2012, p. 227) argue.

As a result of companies increasingly communicating about the Sustainable Development Goals, a similar concept to greenwashing has emerged: SDG-washing. Pedersen (2021, p. 105) underlines that SDG-washing can occur if a corporation links the SDGs to their business and argues that they are committed to them without making a genuine effort to achieve them. In that manner, companies can appear to be more sustainable than they are (Carson & Skauge, 2019, p. 159). Hence, SDG-washing occurs when companies “use the SDGs as an excuse for malpractice or as a cover-up for modest efforts” (van Zanten & van Tulder, 2018, p. 210). Thus, it is important to maintain a critical view of how the SDGs are implemented, as SDG-washing involves “a symbolic rather than a substantive commitment to the SDGs” (Heras-Saizarbitoria, Urbieto & Boiral, 2021, p. 317). As van Zanten and van Tulder (2021, p. 3705) underline, SDG-washing is not necessarily the same as greenwashing, because SDG-washing signals “a more strategic problem whereby managers may simply find it hard to operationalize corporate strategies for the SDGs.”

### **2.1.9 Summary**

This subchapter of the theory chapter outlined relevant literature, concepts, and terms in the field of corporate sustainability, corporate social responsibility, and corporate reporting. First, corporate sustainability (CS), corporate social responsibility (CSR), and the relationship between the concepts were presented. Moreover, I elaborated on the Sustainable Development Goals. Furthermore, the role of strategic communication was outlined, followed by a presentation on sustainability and SDG reporting. Finally, I presented the concepts of greenwashing and SDG-washing.

## **2.2. Theoretical framework**

### **2.2.1 Rhetoric**

With roots in ancient Greece, rhetoric is a communication discipline that focuses on how language and symbols help to persuade an audience (Ihlen, 2011, p. 91). Traditionally, rhetoric has been defined as “the art of persuasion by words” (Händler Svendsen & Grue, 2019). Kjeldsen (2006, p. 24) states that rhetorical communication is the communication from an actor who addresses specific recipients to achieve a particular form of reaction or response. Rhetoric is an “inevitable part of everyday interaction and communication,” and a “deliberate form of persuasive communication” (Higgins & Walker, 2012, p. 197). Thus, rhetorical

studies and analyses is useful for understanding how knowledge is generated and socially constructed through language and symbols (Ihlen, 2011, p. 92).

Rhetorical theory is useful to examine how “organizations attempt to achieve specific political or economic goals, build identity, and foster relationships with their stakeholders” (Ihlen & Heath, 2018, p. 3). As such, rhetoric can offer a way of understanding business discourse and its effect on and role in society. Rhetoric has also been highlighted as “the core of public relations and strategic communication” (Ihlen, 2013, p. 102). Accordingly, rhetoric is a theory that can help to understand why and how companies communicate about sustainability and the SDGs. As attested by Ihlen (2015, p. 145), corporate sustainability rhetoric is helping to drive the agenda for sustainability.

In *Rhetoric*, the earliest preserved textbook in the field of rhetoric, Aristotle defined rhetoric as “an ability in each case to see the available means of persuasion,” (in Newman, 2001, p. 5). In the book, he introduced the three persuasive appeals in rhetoric: ethos (credibility), pathos (emotion), and logos (reason). Ethos refers to the credibility and perceived character of the speaker; pathos refers to how persuasion can happen through appealing to emotions, and logos refers to the logic of the argument (Kjeldsen, 2006, p. 33). The appropriate use of these forms of appeal makes evidence rhetorical and can make them seem convincing. Moreover, ethos, pathos, and logos “reveal the characteristics of a good argument and identify the dimensions of the persuasive appeal” (Higgins & Walker, 2012, p. 197).

The classical rhetorical system operates with five phases of developing a speech. These are invention (*inventio*), arrangement (*dispositio*), style (*elocutio*), memory (*memoria*) and delivery (*actio*) (Kjeldsen, 2006, p. 38). In *inventio*, the speaker explores the topic and finds ideas and arguments for his speech. In *dispositio*, the speaker arranges the material appropriately and convincingly. In *elucitio*, the speaker works through the linguistic design so that the speech will fulfill the four rhetorical virtues of clarity, propriety, dignity, and purity. In *memoria*, the speech is imprinted and memorized. In the *actio*, the speaker prepares and carries out the speech (Kjeldsen, 2019, p. 38). Central to the preparatory phase of *inventio* is rhetorical topics, the study of how to find and construct arguments (Kjeldsen, 2006, p. 38). Rhetorical topics are further addressed in the next subchapter.

### 2.2.2 Rhetorical Topics

The rhetorical theory of topics (*topos*) stems from ancient rhetoric and has been present for 2,500 years (Leichty, 2018, p. 127). In Greek, the word *topos* (*topoi* in plural) means *place* and in rhetoric, a *topos* is an established opinion or a general argument (Kjeldsen, 2006, p. 151). Thus, *topos* is the “place” where the rhetor can find specific types of arguments or argumentation patterns (Eide, 2015, p. 128). Topics were developed in the early rhetoric to systematize the process of finding and inventing argument (Leichty, 2018, p. 127). Despite roots far back in ancient rhetoric, Aristotle developed the theory of topics in a more coherent and elaborative form (Wolrath Söderberg, 2017, p. 7). In the work of Aristotle, topics function as a tool repertoire for practical reasoning or action wisdom. As Kjeldsen (2006, p. 24) states, it is challenging to explain the concept of topics since their meaning and use have changed throughout history. As the meaning of topics was taken for granted in ancient rhetoric, Aristotle never defined the term, which has led to various explanations of the theory (Leichty, 2018, p. 127). Hence, rhetorical topics are an elastic and diffuse concept with various meanings, according to Gabrielsen (2008, p. 10). Thus, it is necessary to present some descriptions of rhetorical topics.

As Ihlen & Raknes (2020a, p. 2) state, while some perceive topics “as a way of thinking creatively”, others perceive them “as a way of justifying claims.” According to Leichty (2018, p. 127), topics “are a schema for generating and classifying arguments that are likely to appeal to particular audiences.” Maria Wolrath Söderberg (2017, p. 7) underlines how topics help us structure our understanding of, or argumentation about, a phenomenon. In that sense, she views Aristotle's topics as discursive habits preferred and considered valid within a specific argumentative practice (Wolrath Söderberg, 2017, p. 136). When rhetors capture a topics' core values or patterns and formulate them as prototypes for thought structures or arguments, they can transform them into discursive tools in new situations. As such, Wolrath Söderberg defines topics as “discursive tools in the form of discussion points, discussion reasons, or operations used to create meaning in an argumentative practice” (in Ihlen & Lie, 2019, p. 5, translated from Norwegian).

Aristotle made a distinction between special and common topics in his work. Common topics (*koinoi topoi*) are “valuable tools for inventing arguments in diverse subject areas and genres of argumentative discourse,” while special topics (*idioi topoi*) “offer more specific lines of argument for specific subject matters, disciplines, and discourse genres,” as stated by Leichty

(2018, p. 127). Kjeldsen (2006, p. 168) distinguishes between three different forms of topics: structural, formal, and substantive. In rhetoric, structural topics function as mental places where the rhetor can find the general views and persuasive arguments to use in any case (Kjeldsen, 2006, p. 152). Structural topics are linked to what Aristotle refers to as special topics (*idiotopoi*). Ihlen (2004, p. 47) underline how Aristotle tied the special topics to the three branches of rhetoric: deliberative (political), epideictic (demonstrative or ceremonial), and judicial. Accordingly, the structural topics function as mental maps, lists, or schemas that direct the rhetors' search for material or arguments (Kjeldsen, 2006, p. 151). The formal topics are a form of basic arguments or formal ways of thinking that form the basis of concrete ways of thinking (Kjeldsen, 2006, p. 151-52), which is what Aristotle refers to as common topics. The substantive topics are different forms of fixed expressions, arguments, and ways of thinking (Kjeldsen, 2006, p. 152).

### **2.2.3 The Duality of Rhetorical Topics**

According to Ihlen and Lie (2019, p. 6), an essential aspect regarding topics is the difference between the rhetor relying on already existing arguments and the case where the rhetor constructs an argument that does not already exist. As topics can be considered constitutive, the rhetor adapts and shapes the case conditions through his or her persuasive goal through active choices, according to Ihlen and Lie (2019, p. 6). Considering this point, the Danish scholar Jonas Gabrielsen (2008) has developed an analytical approach to topics, where special and common topics work in interaction. According to Gabrielsen (2008, p. 83), rhetorical topics consist of the content – *what one is discussing* – and form – *how that is discussed*. Accordingly, he distinguishes between content and form and argues for the duality of rhetorical topics.

According to Gabrielsen (2008, p. 116), practical rhetorical arguments consist of two different types of premises: a concrete factual premise and a general inferential premise. The factual premise connects the argument with what the argument is about and therefore consists of a general statement that states that a given circumstance is the case (Gabrielsen, 2008, p. 115). Inferential premises are general statements that give the argument its inferential character. Thus, topics are a tool to locate and establish the premises of an argument. In that sense, as an argument consists of two types of premises, it is useful with two topics. Accordingly, the two



types of topics, special and common, complement each other and exist in concrete arguments, according to Gabrielsen (2008, p. 115). With the help of topics, the rhetor establishes an argument consisting of both a factual premise and an inferential premise (Gabrielsen, 2008, p. 176-177). The special topics help the rhetor point out possible factual starting points for the argument, while the common topics help the rhetor to point out the closing process of the argument (Gabrielsen, 2008, p. 119.) The rhetor chooses the angle for the debate and connects it to a specific theme. On the other hand, the rhetor will evaluate which conclusions are helpful to focus on in this context (Ihlen & Lie, 2019, p. 6).

#### **2.2.4 Corbett and Connors' typology of Common Topics**

As stated, Gabrielsen (2008) proposes an analytical approach where special/material topics and common/general topics complement each other. In their work "Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student", Edward P.J Corbett and Robert J. Connors (1999, p. 87) distinguish between five regular common topics which the rhetor might argue from: *definition*, *comparison*, *causal relationship*, *circumstance*, or *testimony*. According to Corbett & Connors (1999, p. 85- 86), "the common topics can provide the rhetor with a stock of general lines of arguments that the rhetor can use in developing any subject." Common topics are about general statements in various types of inference (Ihlen & Lie, 2019, p. 6). Considering Gabrielsen's division of topics, the common topics presented by Corbett & Connors are the different ways the rhetor can establish an inferential premise for the argument. As stated by Ihlen and Raknes (2020a, p. 2), the common topics of Aristotle can be tied to the list of Corbett and Connors. According to Corbett and Connors (1999, p. 85- 86), the common topics can "provide the rhetor with a stock of general lines of arguments that can be used in the development of any subject." Their list of common topics is a refinement of what Aristotle referred to as common topics in his work.

##### Definition

According to Corbett and Connors (1999, p. 88), "definition is a way of unfolding what is wrapped up in a subject being examined. One of the rhetorical uses of this topic is to ascertain the specific issue to be discussed." Within this common topic, they operate with two sub-categories: genus and division. As Ihlen (2004, p. 48) put forth, "the rhetor could try to devise its own definition to ascertain the issue being discussed by arguing from genus or division." Moreover, Corbett and Connors (1999, p. 90) argue for how rhetorical force of the sub-topic

genus lies in the fact that “what is true (or untrue) of the genus must be true (or untrue) of the species. «Accordingly, the definition in an argument establishes the premise for a further argument. With division, the rhetor can divide the argument and define the different parts of the argument (Corbett & Connors, 1999, p. 91).

### Comparison

The topic of comparison is about how the rhetor can use comparisons, by combining two or more things and comparing them to three sub-topics: similarity, difference, or degree (Ihlen, 2004, p. 48). As Corbett and Connors (1999, p. 92) argue, people often tend to compare things as much as they define things. When comparing things, a possible result is detecting similarities, which is “the basic principle behind all inductive arguments and all analogy,” (Corbett & Connors, p. 93). The sub-topic of difference is another possible result of the comparison. Corbett and Connors (1999, p. 96) put forth that a rhetor can use the sub-topic of difference to “gather arguments for confirmation or refutation”. The third sub-topic in the common topic of comparison is the degree, which Aristotle addresses in *Rhetoric*. This sub-topic can be applied by the rhetor by pointing out that “one thing will be better, or worse, than another ” (Ihlen, 2004, p. 48).

### Relationship

Furthermore, the rhetor can point to relationships. Corbett and Connors distinguish between four sub-topics under the relationship topic: cause and effect, antecedent and consequence, contraries, and contradictions (Ihlen, 2004, p. 49). Corbett and Connors (1999, p. 101) argue that cause-and-effect relationships compose useful sources of arguments. The main essence of this sub-topic is that “the rhetor can argue from an effect back to a cause,” or the rhetor can begin with the cause to demonstrate the specific effect(s) it can produce (Ihlen, 2004, p. 49). The sub-topic of antecedent and consequence is “a looser form of cause-and-effect arguments practiced in logic” and is perceived as the following sentence: “Given this situation (the antecedent), what follows (the consequence) from this?” according to Corbett and Connors (1999, p. 104). The third sub-topic, contraries, involves how the rhetor can point to the “opposite or incompatible things of the same kind” (Corbett & Connors, 1999, p. 105). The fourth sub-topic, contradictions, “is built on the principle that a thing cannot at the same time and in the same respect be and not be” (Corbett & Connors, 1999, p. 107). Accordingly, the rhetor could suggest the basis of this principle in its argumentation (Ihlen, 2004, p. 50).

## Circumstance

The rhetor can also argue from circumstance. For this common topic, Corbett and Connors (1999, p. 108) distinguish between the two sub-topics, possible and impossible, and past/future fact. According to Corbett and Connors (1999, p. 108), the rhetor must show how the suggested action is realizable when attempting to persuade others to do something. Similarly, the rhetor has to offer that this suggested action is impossible if he or she aims to deter others from doing something. The second sub-topic, past fact/future fact, deals with whether something has or has not happened (Corbett & Connors, 1999, p. 110). Accordingly, as Ihlen (2004, p. 49) states, “the rhetor could indicate that if the less probable of two events has occurred, the more probable event is likely to have occurred too.”

## Testimony

The last common topic presented by Corbett and Connors (1999, p. 112) is testimony, which is about basing the arguments on material from external sources. This topic stands in contrast to the other common topics presented by Corbett & Connors, which “derive their material from the nature of the question up for discussion” (Corbett & Connors, 1999, p. 112). Corbett & Connors present six sub-topics for the common topic of testimony: authority, testimonial, statistics, maxims, law, or point to precedents. The sub-topic authority is about the rhetor pointing out that someone with authority agrees with the argument, while the sub-topic of testimonial is about how the rhetor can engage someone to support the argument (Ihlen, 2004, p. 50). The latter is found in many forms, including letters of recommendation, best-seller lists, and opinion polls, according to Corbett & Connors (1999, p. 114). The third sub-topic, statistics, is about the rhetor referring to statistics in order to strengthen the argument. Polls and surveys are examples of this listed by Corbett & Connors (1999, p. 115). The sub-topic of maxims involves statements about universal matters (Corbett & Connors, 1999, p. 117). Accordingly, the rhetor can apply “general statements about human actions to be chosen or avoided” (Ihlen, 2004, p.50). Moreover, the sub-topic of law includes “all statutes, contracts, testaments, records, and documents that the rhetor can be drawn on to substantiate or refute a claim” (Corbett & Connors, 1999, p. 117). The last sub-topic, precedents, is also referred to as examples by Corbett & Connors (1999, p. 119). Hence, rhetors can point to examples that support and strengthen their arguments (Ihlen, 2004, p. 50).

### **2.2.5 The Analytical Approach to Topics in this Study**

The second part of this study focuses on how the largest corporations in Norway rhetorically present the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals in their annual reports. Thus, I am interested in disclosing what type of common rhetorical strategies they apply. I am also interested in studying the different ways corporations carry out these rhetorical strategies. As Ihlen (2004, p.47) argues, “an analysis of topics might help to categorize the appeals made by the rhetor in more precise ways than just pointing out that the rhetor, for instance, uses a particular enthymeme” (argument or reasoning). In order to succeed with their rhetoric, companies must understand their audience and know the possible and appropriate ways of communicating in different situations. Thus, they should review the rhetoric of other companies and find elements that they can reuse (Ihlen & Lie, 2019, p. 2).

Furthermore, the analysis of topics can help understand society's doxa, according to Ihlen and Lie (2019, p.6). Doxa is the values and perspectives that people usually take for granted. In the Aristotelian sense, the concept of doxa is known as the collective presuppositions and thought habits of a community of culture or practice (Wolrath Söderberg, 2017, p. 17). Thus, the doxa is collective wisdom or the forms of understanding that make our world cohesive as a meaningful whole (Wolrath Söderberg, 2017, p. 17). The Sustainable Development Goals have become a critical international framework for many corporations' sustainability reporting. Working with the SDGs is no longer something large corporations can choose to not prioritize. Accordingly, a doxa can be that if the SDGs are to be achieved by 2030, the world ultimately depends on the contribution of corporations. Thus, it is of great interest to look at the presentation of the SDGs corporate annual reports and what arguments the companies use to discuss their contribution.

In this topics analysis, I follow Jonas Gabrielsen's (2008) analytical approach that first focuses on the material function of topics and second on the inferential function. Accordingly, “the rhetor chooses an angle (material topic) and then searches for a persuasive argument within that angle (inferential topic)” (Ihlen & Raknes, 2020b, p. 2). Thus, topics are examples of the thought structures expressed by corporations in factual statements and arguments about the SDGs. A topics analysis can showcase how companies may attempt to direct focus toward certain areas over others and aim to establish certain conclusions in that context (Ihlen & Lie, 2019, p. 12). The analytical approach of Gabrielsen “is useful because it presents a concrete method for conducting a topics analysis” (Ihlen & Raknes, 2020a, p. 2). Ihlen & Lie (2019, p.

15) applied this analytical approach with Corbett & Connors' list of five common topics (inferential types) in their analysis. So did Ihlen and Raknes (2020a & 2020b). Following Gabrielsen's division of topics, I look for both the material topics applied by the corporations and the various common topics they apply to make inferences for these material topics. To explain the different inference premises the corporations use within the material topics, I apply Corbett & Connors' (1999) list of five common topics. According to Leichty (2018, p. 129), this is the most used list of classical common topics in rhetorical studies. As argued by Ihlen (2004, p. 47), the work of Corbett and Connors provides a good overview of different categories of common topics.

As the literature review of rhetorical topics shows, different terms are used interchangeably to discuss the two forms of topics. Aristotle distinguished between special and common topics. Corbett & Connors (1999) do the same. Jens E. Kjeldsen (2006) has described these as structural and formal. Jonas Gabrielsen (2008) uses the concepts of material and formal topics (translated from Danish). In this thesis, I use material topics for the factual premises and formal topics for the inferential premises. Ihlen & Lie (2019) also use material topics and formal topics in their study. From now on, I will use these terms.

### **2.2.6 Summary**

This subchapter of the theory chapter has presented the theoretical framework of rhetoric and rhetorical topics. First, a brief theoretical background of rhetoric was outlined, before the theory of rhetorical topics was presented. Furthermore, Gabrielsen's analytical approach on the duality of rhetorical topics and Corbett & Connors' typology of common topics was described. As demonstrated, this thesis applies Gabrielsen's (2008) analytical approach to the combination of material and formal (common) topics.

## **3.0 Methodology**

This chapter will address the methodological assessments I have done to answer the research questions. First, the overall research design and the sample of the study are presented.

Furthermore, I outline the methods and research process, first for the quantitative content analysis of keywords and then for the rhetorical analysis. Finally, I discuss the quality of the study and ethical considerations.

### **3.1 Research Design**

The choice of research method is related to knowledge development and the theoretical perspective. In order to develop interesting knowledge, and to be able to build this knowledge on valuable theories, we must rely on research methods that are appropriate to the study, according to Grønmo (2016, p. 15). This master thesis is a content analysis of the sustainability reporting of the largest corporations in Norway. The research questions of the study are:

**RQ1** *To what extent has there been an increased focus on sustainability and corporate social responsibility in the non-financial reporting of the largest corporations in Norway from 2010 to 2020?*

**RQ2** *Which rhetorical topics are applied by the largest corporations in Norway when they address the UN's SDGs in their non-financial reporting for 2020?*

In order to answer these research questions, I apply both qualitative and quantitative research methods in this thesis. A quantitative content analysis of the frequency of keywords is conducted to answer RQ1, while a qualitative content analysis is conducted to answer RQ2. Grønmo (2016, p. 231) outlines a strategy for how to combine quantitative and qualitative data collection, where the qualitative study is a follow-up of the quantitative study. As Grønmo argues (2016, p. 231), it may be useful with a qualitative study to understand the general results of the quantitative analysis. The qualitative content analysis is not a direct follow-up study of the quantitative data. Nevertheless, a possible increase as defined in RQ1 may be related to the Sustainable Development Goals, which are studied in the qualitative content analysis. They were established in 2015, halfway between 2010 and 2020.

Consequently, the SDGs may possibly be an important indicator for a potential increase. That point is further elaborated on in the analysis chapter.

### 3.2 Sample

Each year, the Norwegian financial media outlet, Kapital, publishes a list of the 500 largest companies in Norway from both the private and the public sector. Non-profit organizations, health trusts, and subsidiaries are excluded. The sample in this study is based on the 30 largest corporations from the list published by Kapital in 2021. The list covers the reporting year of 2020. The data material consists of non-financial reports from these companies from 2010 and 2020. In ranking the corporations, the indicators were turnover, annual result, return on equity, profit margin, and the number of employees (Kapital, 2021). 11 of the corporations were not on the same list of the 30 largest in 2010: ATEA, Mowi/Marine Harvest, Norsk Tipping, Veidekke, Elkem, AF Gruppen, Aker BP, Sparebank 1, Subsea 7 Norway, Møller Mobility Group and Kongsberg Gruppen (Bjarnroll, 2017, p. 59). Deloitte based their sample on the same list in their report *Sustainability and integrated reporting - An analysis of Norway's 50 largest companies* from 2021.

Hummel and Szekely (2022, p. 153) underline how “annual reports are the most informative public documents a company produces and as such receive attention from a broad group of stakeholders.” Thus, annual reports can provide valuable data to answer the research questions because they contain the most vital information from the corporations. Since I have selected reports from Norwegian corporations for a specific time period and from a specific list, the sample in the thesis is a strategic sample. Such samples rely on systematic assessments of the units which are most relevant and interesting based on theoretical and analytical purposes (Grønmo, 2016, p. 103). The table below provides a brief overview of the 30 largest corporations from Kapital’s list (2021):

Table 1: *The 30 largest corporations in Norway.*

<b>Ranking</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Industry</b>	<b>Report for 2010</b>	<b>Report for 2020</b>
1.	Equinor ASA	Petroleum	<i>Sustainability Report 2010</i>	<i>Sustainability Report 2020</i>
2.	Norsk Hydro ASA	Metals	<i>Annual report 2010</i>	<i>Annual Report 2020</i>
3.	Telenor ASA	Telecommunications	<i>Annual Report 2010</i>	<i>Annual Report 2020</i>
4.	Yara International ASA	Chemicals	<i>Citizenship Review 2010 – Close the gaps</i>	<i>Yara Sustainability Report 2020 – Leading with a sustainable purpose</i>
5.	NorgesGruppen ASA	Grocery wholesale	<b>Only available in Norwegian</b>	<i>Norgesgruppen's Annual and Sustainability Report 2020</i>
6.	Storebrand ASA	Insurance	<i>Storebrand ASA Annual Report 2010</i>	<i>Storebrand ASA Annual Report 2020</i>
7.	Reitan AS	Retailing	<b>No report available</b>	<b>No report available</b>
8.	DNB Bank ASA	Banking	<i>DnB NOR Bank Annual Report 2010</i>	<i>DNB Annual Report 2020 – Results that count</i>
9.	Kommunal Landspensjonskasse (KLP)	Pension	<i>KLP Annual Report 2010</i>	<i>KLP Annual Report 2020</i>
10.	Coop Norge SA	Retail	<b>Only available in Norwegian</b>	<b>Only available in Norwegian</b>
11.	Orkla ASA	Conglomerate	<i>Sustainability Report 2010</i>	<i>Sustainability – Chapter 3 of the Annual Report 2020</i>
12.	Norsk Tipping AS	Lottery/gambling	<i>Annual and Social Report 2010</i>	<b>Only available in Norwegian</b>
13.	Mowi ASA	Sea food	<i>Marine Harvest Annual Report 2010</i>	<i>Integrated Annual Report 2020</i>
14.	Atea ASA	IT infrastructure	<i>Atea Delivers Annual Report 2010</i>	<i>Corporate Responsibility &amp; Sustainability Report 2020</i>



15.	Statkraft AS	Electricity	<i>Annual Report – Sustainability Report 2010</i>	<i>Annual Report 2020</i>
16.	Veidekke ASA	Construction and Civil Engineering	<i>Financial Report 2010</i>	<i>Annual and sustainability report 2020</i>
17.	Møller Mobility Group AS	Car Retail	<b>No report available</b>	<i>Annual Report and Sustainability Report 2020</i>
18.	Subsea 7 Norway AS	Engineering	<i>Leveraging our global capacities – Subsea 7 S.A Annual Report and Financial Statements 2010</i>	<i>Delivering Sustainable Value Across the Energy Lifecycle – Subsea 7 Sustainability Report 2020</i>
19.	Gjensidige Forsikring ASA	Engineering	<i>Annual Report 2010</i>	<i>Integrated Annual Report 2020 – We are Gjensidige</i>
20.	Aker Solutions ASA	Oilfield Services, Engineering, Subsea technology	<i>Annual Report 2010</i>	<i>Sustainability Report 2020 – The time for change is now.</i>
21.	Aker BP ASA	Oil and gas	<b>No report available</b>	<i>Sustainability Report 2020 – ESG in Aker BP</i>
22.	Wallenius Wilhelmsen ASA	Shipping	<i>Annual Report 2010</i>	<i>Annual Report 2020 – From Sea to Land</i>
23.	Vår Energi ASA	Oil and gas	<b>No report available</b>	<i>Sustainability Report 2020</i>
24.	AF Gruppen Norge AS	Construction	<i>Annual Report 2010</i>	<i>Ability to succeed – Annual Report 2020</i>
25.	Sparebank 1 Gruppen AS	Banking	<i>Annual Report 2010</i>	<i>Annual Report 2020</i>
26.	Kongsberg Gruppen ASA	Defense, shipbuilding, aerospace, offshore oil and gas	<i>Annual Report 2010</i>	<i>Annual Report and Sustainability Report 2020</i>
27.	Nordea Bank Abp	Banking	<i>CSR Report 2010</i>	<i>Annual Report 2020</i>
28.	Nortura SA	Meat processing	<b>No Report available</b>	<b>Only available in Norwegian</b>
29.	Elkem ASA	Materials	<b>No report available</b>	<i>Annual Report 2020</i>

30.	Posten Norge AS	Postal services	<i>Annual and sustainability report 2010</i>	<i>At the forefront of the future – Annual and sustainability report 2020</i>
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Source: Kapital (June 17, 2021).

As the table shows, there is significant variation between the reporting practices and the availability of reports from each corporation. Some have separate sustainability reports, while others have sustainability reporting integrated in the annual report. The first part of the analysis is a comparative quantitative content analysis where I compare the use of keywords in reports from 2010 and 2020. The qualitative content analysis studies the rhetorical use of the SDGs in the annual reports of the same corporations, but only for 2020. Accordingly, it is important to distinguish between the sample used in the quantitative content analysis and the analysis of the rhetorical topics. The reason for this is the lack of available reports from 2010. There are several companies where I have not been able to obtain the annual report for 2010. Thus, the availability of annual reports from 2010 determines which companies are analyzed in the first part of the analysis. More detailed information about the sample is attached in the appendix (1.0 Description of the sample).

**3.2.1 Sample in the Quantitative Analysis**

As I have not been able to gather sufficient data material for the corporations from 2010, the following are excluded: *Nortura, Norgesgruppen, Coop Norge, Møller Mobility Group, Norsk Tipping, Reitan, Elkem, Aker BP* and *Vår Energi*. Hence, 21 companies and 42 reports constitute the sample for the quantitative content analysis.

Reitan is a group that, among other things, owns one of Norway's largest grocery chains, REMA 1000. They do not publish their own annual reports for the group. Nortura, one of Norway’s largest food manufacturers, has no annual report for 2010 available online, only a short document that shows key figures and information. Elkem is one of the world’s primary providers of silicone and was owned by Orkla until January 1, 2011. I have not been able to find the company's annual report for 2010, even though I have tried to contact them by both email and telephone. The state-owned lottery company, Norsk Tipping, did not publish their annual report for 2020 in English in PDF format. Only the formal and essential parts of the

report have been translated into English and are available as an online version on their website. I contacted Norsk Tipping by email and was informed that it is not possible to have it sent in a PDF version.

Coop Norge and Norgesgruppen only published the annual reports in Norwegian in 2010. Since this thesis and analysis are carried out in English, these corporations are omitted from the quantitative analysis. I could have translated the keywords into Norwegian, but I have chosen not to do so, as it is challenging to find a translation that will provide good enough results to match the same keywords in English. Møller Mobility Group has no annual report for 2010 available online. I have tried to get in touch with the company by phone and email, but I have not received a response. The company is therefore excluded from the quantitative analysis. *Aker BP* is an oil exploration and production company, established in 2016. Therefore, the company is excluded from the quantitative analysis, as there is no report available from 2010. The fossil fuel producer Vår Energi was established due to a merger between ENI Norge and Point Resources in 2018 and is therefore also excluded.

### **3.2.2 Sample in the Qualitative Analysis**

All of the corporations, except Reitangruppen, published reports in 2020. Nortura and Coop Norge have reports only available in Norwegian. As I stated, Norsk Tipping does not have their report for 2020 available as a PDF-file in English. The rest of the corporations in the sample have reports available in English. Correspondingly, a total of 26 corporations and 26 reports are analyzed in this part. These are the same reports used in the quantitative analysis to study keywords in 2020. The corporations that are not included in the quantitative analysis, but included in the rhetorical analysis, are Møller Mobility Group, Norgesgruppen, Aker BP, and Elkem.

### **3.3 Quantitative Content Analysis: Frequency of Keywords**

To answer **RQ1**, I conducted a quantitative content analysis of the frequency of selected keywords in the reports of 2010 and 2020. Neuendorf (2017, p. 1) defines content analysis as “a systematic and objective quantitative analysis of message characteristics.” Accordingly, a quantitative content analysis is a data registration and analysis technique that seeks a frequent,

objective, and quantitative description of the content of a message (Østbye, Helland, Knapskog, Larsen & Moe, 2013, p. 208) and is well suited for examining the occurrence of words and expressions in larger amounts of text (Østbye et al., 2013, p. 62). The data material in the quantitative content analysis consists of extensive text material that includes 42 reports. A strength of the quantitative content analysis is that the method is an effective way of examining a large body of text material. Brysbaert, Mandera & Keuleers (2017, p. 45) argue that “frequency of occurrence is one of the strongest predictors of processing efficiency when word recognition is analyzed.” Content analysis often involves frequency distribution of individual words (Dicle & Dicle, 2018, p. 379). As put forth by Baier, Berninger & Kiesel (2020, p. 94), the method of using a word list aims at drawing conclusions based on the frequency of specific words in documents. In his study, *Business and Climate change: The Climate Response of the World’s 30 largest Corporations*, Øyvind Ihlen (2009) combined word frequency analysis with rhetorical topics analysis to study how the corporations addressed the problem of climate change in their reporting. Ihlen (2009, p. 247) applied various relevant keywords and found a significant variance between the corporations (Ihlen, 2009, p. 249).

In their study *Corporate Reports on Sustainability and Sustainable Development: “We have arrived”*, Øyvind Ihlen and Juliet Roper (2014, p. 42) analyze the non-financial reports of the world’s 30 largest corporations to study how their communication about sustainability and sustainable development. Ihlen and Roper (2014, p. 44) downloaded 57 reports in total based on the Fortune Global 500 list. Moreover, they searched for keywords in the titles of the reports to examine which keywords were used most frequently. Ihlen & Roper (2014, p. 45) used the keywords *sustainability, sustainable development, environmental/social responsibility, corporate responsibility, corporate social responsibility, and corporate citizenship*. Inspired by Ihlen and Roper (2014), I use the same approach. Hence, I apply the same keywords but have chosen to omit *environmental responsibility, corporate citizenship, and corporate social responsibility*. Environmental responsibility and corporate citizenship are omitted because they are not of relevance with regards to the research question and the purpose of the study, which is the focus on sustainability and social responsibility in the annual reports from 2010 and 2020. The keyword corporate social responsibility is omitted because I prefer to apply respectively social responsibility and corporate responsibility. This means that when searching for «social responsibility», the places where corporate social

responsibility is written in the text are also included in the results. Therefore, the variables under overall concept of corporate sustainability are:

- sustainability
- sustainable development

The variables under the overall concept of corporate social responsibility are:

- social responsibility
- corporate responsibility

I performed the word frequency analysis in NVivo 12. This is a recognized analytical tool applied by many researchers. All reports were uploaded to the program and sorted under two categories: “Reports from 2010” and “Reports from 2020”. NVivo 12 has two possible functions that can carry out a frequency analysis: word frequency and text search. I applied the former because three of the keywords consist of two words. Thus, the keywords were sustainability, sustainable\_development, social\_responsibility, and corporate\_responsibility. When running the analysis, the program shows the frequency of the word in each report. In that way, I got the results for each keyword for 2010 and 2020, respectively. I inserted the results into a table for each word. The tables are presented in the analysis chapter. The units of analysis are 21 reports from the year 2010 and 21 reports from the year 2020. The variables are the four keywords. The values are the frequency (number) of times each keyword occurs in each report, with the percentage increase or decrease in the use of each term.

### **3.4 Qualitative Content Analysis: Rhetorical Topics Analysis**

To answer **RQ2**, I have done a qualitative rhetorical analysis based on the theory of topics (topos). Qualitative methods are research methods used to collect and analyze qualitative data. Such data are usually available in the form of text. Thus, qualitative content analysis is a systematic review of documents to categorize the content and record data relevant to the study's research question (Grønmo, 2016, p. 175). In rhetorical analysis, the researcher reconstructs characteristics of text properties, such as the argumentation structure and the form of the message (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 5). Thus, rhetorical analysis involves detailed reading of fragments and has been widely applied to analyze various forms of

communication, including advertising, political speech, and news content, according to Neuendorf (2002, p. 5).

An objective of qualitative analyses is to develop a holistic understanding of specific conditions, or to develop theories and hypotheses about specific social contexts (Østbye et al., 2013, p. 129). As described in the theory chapter, I apply Jonas Gabrielsen's (2008) analytical approach to the division between material and inferential operations, i.e., the combination of material and formal topics. Gabrielsen's theoretical model is a measure to systematize the analysis of corporations' rhetorical arguments about SDGs. In their study, Ihlen & Lie (2019, p. 9) identified the material topics through an open and inductive close reading, and the common topics through a deductive analysis based on the typology of Corbett and Connors. I follow the same steps as Ihlen and Lie (2019). Induction is "the logical model in which general principles are developed from specific observations" (Babbie, 2014, p. 491), while deduction is "the logical model in which specific expectations of hypotheses are developed on the basis of general principles" (Babbie, 2014, p. 489). While inductive approaches aim at developing a theory, deductive approaches aim at testing an existing theory. The inductive approach is applied to find the material topics, as I present general rhetorical strategies I have found through my operations. The deductive approach is applied to find the different common topics, by testing the theoretical framework of Corbett & Connors.

In his study, Ihlen (2009, p. 49) conducted the findings in the analysis by pending between the theoretical framework and a document consisting of relevant quotes on the climate issue from the corporate reports in his sample. Moreover, Ihlen & Lie (2019, p. 9) also collected citations in a document to constitute their data material. Comparison of the research literature and the data provided a basis for their qualitative analysis and classification of various combinations between material and formal topics. I follow the same approach to identify the material and formal topics the corporations in the sample apply when addressing the SDGs. First, I searched through all the reports to retrieve quotes where the corporations mentioned the SDGs to structure the data. The data was systematized in NVivo, and each quote was coded into "nodes." In NVivo, a node is an established code and a reference to a specific theme, case, or relationship (Babbie, 2014, p. 408). The nodes were named "SDG in Equinor," "SDG in Telenor," "SDG in Mowi," and so on. These nodes provided a structured overview of relevant quotes from each corporation that can be linked directly to the SDGs. The number of references varied between the corporations, from 2 (AF Gruppen) to 30 (DNB).

To disclose similarities and differences between corporations, I examined all of the nodes and looked for common phrases and words across the reports. A close reading of the data material led to four rhetorical strategies (material topics) the corporations use when addressing the SDGs. Thus, the data material was categorized into four categories. Categorization is usual in qualitative analysis and is useful in developing new concepts or gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the data material (Grønmo, 2016, p. 180). These four categories are based on my interpretations of the common features I found for the corporations. To structure the various arguments under each category (material topic), I created a table in Microsoft Word. The table had two columns, one with the corporations and one with relevant quotes related to the category. These tables provided the foundation for linking the formal topics to the material topics. The formal topics presented in the analysis are also based on my own interpretations of the different arguments the analyzed corporations make. These were identified by pending between the Corbett & Connors framework, and the tables. One of the tables are attached in the appendix (3.0 Codebook and Example of Table for the Qualitative Analysis).

### **3.5 The Quality of the Research**

Research should provide insight into reality and seek to answer specific research questions through various research methods and theories. However, there will always be a discrepancy between reality and what the researcher is able to observe and analyze (Østbye et al., 2013, p. 25). Accordingly, the researcher must be able to evaluate and reflect with a critical view of the various choices made during the research process. It is also crucial to assess the quality of the research. This section will discuss the quality of the research in this thesis through the assessment criteria's reliability, validity, and generalization. These criteria can have different meanings in quantitative and qualitative analysis (Østbye et al., 2013, p. 25).

#### **3.5.1 Reliability**

Neuendorf (2002, p. 112) defines reliability as “the extent to which a measuring procedure yields the same results on repeated trials,” and puts forth that “a measure is not valuable if it can only be conducted once or by one particular person.” For this study, this is dependent on whether I have sufficient quality in the data collection, the data processing, and the analysis. High reliability means high accuracy for the results, i.e., the results are reliable. Ideally, one

should use an intercoder test in quantitative analysis. Intercoder reliability is “the amount of agreement or correspondence among two or more coders”, according to Neuendorf (2002, p. 141). For the word frequency analysis, it means testing if another researcher would have found the same frequencies for the same keywords. On the other hand, the quantitative framework in this thesis is quite simple. The objective is only to explore a possible increase or decrease in keywords. An intercoder test would be more appropriate if, for example, the purpose was to quantify the various identified topics in the qualitative analysis. NVivo is a reliable software program used by many researchers. Thus, the text search function I have used should give an exact result. To secure that the results were accurate, I have taken random samples of selected reports and manually searched for the keywords in the PDF files using Command + F. Those results corresponded to the results in NVivo. In addition, the results from NVivo are attached in the appendix (2.0 Word Frequency in NViVo).

Usually, it is impossible to test and calculate reliability using standardized methods in qualitative research (Grønmo, 2016, p. 248). As the data collection takes place in close connection with analysis and interpretations, the significance of the researcher is higher than in quantitative research. Thus, qualitative research and analysis rely to a great extent on the researcher's interpretations. For this study, this means that another researcher could have arrived at different rhetorical topics than I have, based on the same material. This analysis attempts to find similarities and differences among the corporations when addressing the SDGs, based on rhetorical theory. However, these are my interpretations based on the data material and the theoretical framework I have used.

Since it is challenging to test reliability in qualitative research, a solution is to explain, in detail, the different choices made through the research process. Therefore, the term credibility is often used instead of reliability in qualitative research, according to Grønmo (2016, p. 249). Explaining the different theoretical and methodological evaluations can strengthen the credibility of research and ensure that data collection is carried out systematically. I have discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the theoretical framework. I have also thoroughly described the procedure for data collection, including why rhetorical topics analysis provides a reasonable basis for looking at the intentions behind which arguments the corporations apply when presenting the SDGs. I have also reviewed the sample in the thesis and its strengths and weaknesses. In addition, I follow the same methodological design that other similar studies have followed (Ihlen & Lie, 2019).



### **3.5.2 Validity**

Neuendorf (2002, p. 112) defines validity as “the extent to which a measuring procedure represents the intended, and only the intended concept” and puts forth that validity is related to the question of “are we measuring what we want to measure?” That, in this study, refers then to the measurement of potential increase in focus on corporate sustainability and corporate social responsibility among the largest corporations in Norway, and which rhetorical topics these companies apply when they present the SDGs. Validity assessments are usually more complicated than reliability assessments, as there are no precise measures for validity (Grønmo, 2016, p. 257). Thus, the researcher should critically and systematically review the research design, the collection of data, and the data material when assessing the validity, according to Grønmo (2016, p. 257).

The quantitative analysis measures frequencies for four keywords. The frequency of the keywords can be an indicator of either an increase or decrease. In this study, the validity relies on whether the four keywords correspond to the intention of RQ1. I have thoroughly defined corporate sustainability and corporate social responsibility. Furthermore, I have explained why the four keywords are selected as variables. I have used keywords from a previous study (Ihlen & Roper, 2014). This aids in strengthening reliability and validity.

The qualitative research in this study intends to measure rhetorical strategies applied by Norwegian corporations when they address the SDGs. Grønmo (2016, p. 254) argues that the term confirmability is often used instead of validity in qualitative research, due to the differences between quantitative and qualitative data. To strengthen the validity in the rhetorical analysis, I have based my theoretical framework on previous research and the recognized theory of rhetorical topics. Previous research and rhetorical theory are applied throughout the analysis. Therefore, I have also been concerned with having a critical look at my own findings and evaluating these compared to previous research.

### **3.5.3 Generalization**

In research, generalization is about whether the findings in the analysis can be made universal (Østbye et al., 2013, p. 28). In quantitative research, the goal is often statistical generalization. In the quantitative analysis of this study, this means that for instance, if one were to carry out a study that followed the same methodological approach for similar companies in other countries, one would arrive at the same results. It is hard to tell if that would have been the

case, but an assumption is that reports from other countries follow the same trend as Norwegian companies. However, the results will not be directly generalizable. In qualitative research, there is no goal of statistical generalization. The goal is rather in-depth knowledge of a specific phenomenon (Østbye et al., 2013, p. 124). The findings that are presented in the rhetorical analysis are therefore not generalizable. Other researchers can come to other conclusions and interpretations of the same data material. For this study, this means that another researcher could have found other SDG topics, based on the same data material and reports.

### **3.6 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations are required in all research and concern a set of norms to ensure that the scientific activity is morally justifiable (Grønmo, 2016, p. 436). Ethical considerations are crucial when the researcher processes confidential information. In such research, the researcher must report this, generally to the Norwegian Center for Research Data - NSD (Grønmo, 2016, p. 34). The data material in this master's thesis is based on non-financial reports from the largest corporations in Norway. Such reports are documents that are openly available online. These corporations are also required by Norwegian law to publish non-financial information. Thus, I have not had a duty to report to NSD. Yet, I have focused on maintaining good research ethics throughout the whole project. I have also focused on avoiding bias by carefully discussing the various theoretical and methodological choices throughout the research process. Moreover, I have followed and applied theories and analytical methods that renowned researchers have used in the past.

### **3.7 Summary**

This chapter has presented the methodological framework of the thesis. First, I reviewed the sample of the study, which consists of non-financial reports of the largest corporations in Norway. Then, I discussed the approach for the first part of the study, a quantitative content analysis of the frequency of keywords in reports from 2010 and 2020. Moreover, I discussed the second part of the study, a qualitative content analysis of rhetorical topics applied by Norwegian corporations when the SDGs are addressed in the reports for 2020. The chapter ended with a discussion about the quality of the study and a brief assessment of the ethical considerations I have made.

## **4.0 Quantitative Content Analysis of Keywords**

In this chapter, I will present the findings from the quantitative content analysis. The objective is to disclose if there has been an increased frequency of the keywords “sustainability,” “sustainable development,” “social responsibility,” and “corporate responsibility” in the reports from 2010 to 2020. That will help answer whether there has been an increased focus on sustainability in Norwegian business and whether corporate sustainability or corporate social responsibility is the dominant concept among the largest corporations in Norway. The quantitative results for the four keywords are presented, followed by a discussion of the findings.

### **4.1 Results**

#### **4.1.1 Sustainability**

Table 2: *Keyword search in NVivo for sustainability.*

<b>Name of company</b>	<b>Frequency in report for 2010</b>	<b>Frequency in report for 2020</b>
<b>Equinor</b>	50	123
<b>Norsk Hydro</b>	10	94
<b>Telenor</b>	2	93
<b>Yara International</b>	12	115
<b>Storebrand</b>	11	243
<b>DNB</b>	5	218
<b>KLP</b>	0	16
<b>Orkla</b>	52	76
<b>Mowi</b>	13	105
<b>Atea</b>	0	103
<b>Statkraft</b>	23	142
<b>Veidekke</b>	0	99
<b>Subsea 7 Norway</b>	0	75
<b>Gjensidige</b>	0	86
<b>Aker Solutions</b>	0	67
<b>Wallenius Wilhelmsen</b>	2	56

<b>AF Gruppen</b>	0	10
<b>Sparebank 1 Gruppen</b>	0	151
<b>Kongsberg Gruppen</b>	1	177
<b>Nordea Bank Norge</b>	10	64
<b>Posten</b>	31	49
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>222</b>	<b>2162</b>

- **The results correspond to an increase of 874 %.**

As shown in the table, the corporations' total use of the keyword "sustainability" was 222 times in the report of 2010 and 2,162 times in the report for 2020. The result corresponds to an increase of as much as 874 %. In their study, Ihlen and Roper (2014, p. 45) found an increase in the use of "sustainability" as a keyword in the title of non-financial reports in their sample, from 38 in 2006 to 41 in 2008. The increase in the use of the keyword is significant for all of the companies in the sample. It can strongly substantiate an argument that sustainability was higher on the agenda of Norwegian corporations in 2020 than it was in 2010. However, some results stand out. The most significant increase is found in the reports of Storebrand. The financial services company increased the frequency from 11 to 243, followed by the bank DNB, with an increased frequency from 5 to 218. The third-largest increase is found in the reports from Kongsberg Gruppen, with an increased frequency from 1 to 177. AF Gruppen has a frequency of 10, which is the lowest in the sample.

While all of the corporations in the sample used the word in the report from 2020, 8 of them (KLP, ATEA, Veidekke, Subsea 7 Norway, Gjensidige Forsikring, Aker Solutions, AF Gruppen & Sparebank 1) had a frequency of 0 for 2010. Correspondingly, 38 % of the corporations in the sample did not use the word in 2010. Four corporations stand out in the use of the word in 2010. Equinor, Orkla, Posten, and Statkraft had the most significant frequencies in 2010. These are companies from four industries: oil and gas, conglomerate, postal services, and electricity. Besides Orkla, all are state-owned companies. Compared with the rest of the sample, Orkla (from 52 to 76) and Posten (from 31 to 49) have a relatively small increase.

There are some remarks I need to clarify for the keyword "sustainability." Yara, Storebrand, Aker Solutions, and Kongsberg Gruppen all use the word "sustainability" in the header of each page in their report for 2020. Kongsberg Gruppen also uses the word in the footer.

Statkraft uses the word in the side margin on each page in the report from 2020. Equinor used the word 99 times in the header and 128 times in the report's footer in 2010. Therefore, the results for these corporations are the result that appeared in NVivo minus the frequency of “sustainability” in the header/footer/side margin.

#### 4.1.2 Sustainable Development

Table 3: *Keyword search in NVivo for sustainable\_development.*

<b>Name of company</b>	<b>Frequency in report for 2010</b>	<b>Frequency in report for 2020</b>
<b>Equinor</b>	27	20
<b>Norsk Hydro</b>	6	19
<b>Telenor</b>	0	7
<b>Yara International</b>	1	5
<b>Storebrand</b>	11	14
<b>DNB</b>	1	38
<b>KLP</b>	2	59
<b>Orkla</b>	0	19
<b>Mowi</b>	3	20
<b>Atea</b>	1	6
<b>Statkraft</b>	2	6
<b>Veidekke</b>	1	7
<b>Subsea 7 Norway</b>	1	5
<b>Gjensidige</b>	0	42
<b>Aker Solutions</b>	0	5
<b>Wallenius Wilhelmsen</b>	0	3
<b>AF Gruppen</b>	1	3
<b>Sparebank 1 Gruppen</b>	1	5
<b>Kongsberg Gruppen</b>	3	15
<b>Nordea Bank Norge</b>	1	1
<b>Posten</b>	9	38
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>337</b>

- The results correspond to an increase of 375 %.

Similar to “sustainability,” there has been a significant increase in the use of the keyword “sustainable development.” In 2010, the corporations in the sample had a total frequency of 71, while there was a total frequency of 337 in 2020. That corresponds to an increase of 375 % from 2010 to 2020. The high increase indicates a notably stronger focus on sustainable development among the largest corporations in 2020 compared to 2010. Ihlen & Roper (2014, p. 45) also found an increase in the use of “sustainable development” when they searched for the keyword in the titles of the world’s largest corporations from 2006 (10) to 2008 (14).

KLP had the highest frequency in 2020, with 59. For "sustainability," KLP had a frequency of 16. Accordingly, KLP used the word “sustainable development” 43 more times than “sustainability” in their annual report for 2020. KLP is the only company in the sample that used "sustainable development" more than "sustainability" in 2020. After KLP, DNB and Gjensidige Forsikring had the highest frequencies in 2020. DNB had a frequency of 1 in 2010 and 38 in 2020, while Gjensidige Forsikring had a frequency of 0 in 2010 and 42 in 2020. Equinor had the highest frequency in 2010. They are also the only company with a decreased frequency, from 27 in 2010 to 20 in 2020. Nordea Bank Norge had the same frequency (1) in 2010 and 2020. Sustainable development has been relevant since the Brundtland Commission introduced it in 1987. Yet, five of the companies (Telenor, Orkla, Gjensidige Forsikring, Aker Solutions & Wallenius Wilhelmsen) had a frequency of 0 in the 2010 report. In the report from 2020, all of the corporations used the word.

“Sustainable development” is often used in conjunction with the Sustainable Development Goals. The introduction of these in 2015 may be an influencing factor in why the increase has been as large as it has been. Every company that works with sustainability has explicit connections to the SDGs, according to Holden & Linnerud (2021, p. 38). All of the corporations in the sample mention the SDGs up to several times in their report for 2020. The SDGs are further addressed in the rhetorical analysis.

**4.1.3 Corporate Responsibility**

Table 4: *Keyword search in NVivo for corporate\_responsibility.*

<b>Name of company</b>	<b>Frequency in report for 2010</b>	<b>Frequency in report for 2020</b>
<b>Equinor</b>	2	0
<b>Norsk Hydro</b>	10	4

<b>Telenor</b>	4	0
<b>Yara International</b>	1	1
<b>Storebrand</b>	50	0
<b>DNB</b>	0	104
<b>KLP</b>	0	10
<b>Orkla</b>	53	6
<b>Mowi</b>	0	0
<b>Atea</b>	0	0
<b>Statkraft</b>	1	1
<b>Veidekke</b>	1	0
<b>Subsea 7 Norway</b>	2	0
<b>Gjensidige</b>	0	0
<b>Aker Solutions</b>	19	1
<b>Wallenius Wilhelmsen</b>	0	0
<b>AF Gruppen</b>	0	0
<b>Sparebank 1 Gruppen</b>	0	0
<b>Kongsberg Gruppen</b>	0	2
<b>Nordea Bank Norge</b>	3	0
<b>Posten</b>	0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>128</b>

- **The results correspond to a 12 % decrease.**

In contrast to “sustainability” and “sustainable development,” there was a decrease in the keyword “corporate responsibility.” The total frequency for the corporations was 146 in 2010 and 128 in 2020. That corresponds to a total decrease of 12 %. Ihlen and Roper (2014, p. 45) also found a decrease in the frequency of “corporate responsibility” in their study, from 21 in 2006 to 17 in 2008. In this case, as the table shows, it is necessary to highlight the frequency of DNB in 2020. It is as high as 104 and thus constitutes 81.25 % of the total result in 2020. In their report from 2010, the frequency was 0. DNB is far above the next corporation on the list for 2020, KLP, with a frequency of 10. The total decline would have been significantly higher if DNB had been excluded from the sample. DNB and KLP, in addition to Kongsberg Gruppen, are the only corporations with increased frequency from 2010 to 2020.

There is a significant variation between the corporations in the sample. Similar to DNB raising the total number for 2020, some companies raised the total number for 2010. Orkla, Storebrand and Aker Solutions stand out here. Orkla had the highest frequency in 2010, with 53, followed by Storebrand, with a frequency of 50. Aker Solutions had a frequency of 19. Common to the three corporations is a marked decrease in the use of the word. Storebrand stands out here. They have gone from using the word 53 times in 2010 to not using it at all in 2020. Orkla has also had a sharp decline, but uses the word six times in 2020, while Aker Solutions only used the word one time in 2020.

Seven of the companies in the sample (Mowi, ATEA, Gjensidige, Wallenius Wilhelmsen, AF Gruppen, Sparebank 1 Gruppen & Posten) did not use the word in their reporting in either 2010 or 2020. Yara International and Statkraft had a frequency of 1 for both 2010 and 2020. The three largest corporations in Norway, Equinor, Norsk Hydro, and Telenor, all had a decrease from 2020 to 2010, where Norsk Hydro is the only company using the word in 2020 with a frequency of 4.

#### 4.1.4 Social Responsibility

Table 5: *Keyword search in NVivo for social\_responsibility.*

<b>Name of company</b>	<b>Frequency in report for 2010</b>	<b>Frequency in report for 2020</b>
<b>Equinor</b>	20	0
<b>Norsk Hydro</b>	8	44
<b>Telenor</b>	0	0
<b>Yara International</b>	0	0
<b>Storebrand</b>	5	23
<b>DNB</b>	4	3
<b>KLP</b>	16	21
<b>Orkla</b>	0	0
<b>Mowi</b>	2	2
<b>Atea</b>	6	6
<b>Statkraft</b>	2	0
<b>Veidekke</b>	8	5
<b>Subsea 7 Norway</b>	2	0



<b>Gjensidige</b>	13	13
<b>Aker Solutions</b>	2	4
<b>Wallenius Wilhelmsen</b>	2	10
<b>AF Gruppen</b>	5	60
<b>Sparebank 1 Gruppen</b>	3	3
<b>Kongsberg Gruppen</b>	24	40
<b>Nordea Bank Norge</b>	3	7
<b>Posten</b>	23	6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>250</b>

- **The result corresponds to an increase of 69 %.**

Like “sustainability” and “sustainable development,” there has been an increase in the use of the keyword “social responsibility.” In 2010, the companies in the sample had a total frequency of 148, while there was a total frequency of 250 in 2020. That corresponds to an increase of 69 % from 2010 to 2020. The frequency is relatively high, but the increase in frequency is low compared with the rise in “sustainability” and “sustainable development”.

In 2010, three corporations did not use the keyword (Telenor, Yara International, and Orkla). These three corporations did not use the term in 2020 either. Additionally, Orkla, Statkraft, and Subsea 7 also did not use the word in the report of 2020. Gjensidige Forsikring had a frequency of 13 in both the report for 2010 and 2020.

The report from Kongsberg Gruppen had the highest frequency in 2010, while AF Gruppen had the highest frequency in 2020. AF Gruppen has increased the frequency from 5 in 2010 to 60 in 2020, the largest frequency in the sample. Kongsberg Gruppen has also increased its frequency, with 40 in 2020, and is the company with the third largest increase. Hydro has the second-largest increase after AF Gruppen, with an increased frequency from 8 in 2010 to 44 in 2020. AF Gruppen had the highest frequency in 2020, but did also have the lowest frequency of “sustainability” (10) in the sample in 2020. Hence, they use the word “social responsibility” 50 times more than they use “sustainability.”

## 4.2 Discussion

### 4.2.1 Increased Focus on Sustainability

The results from the quantitative analysis state that there is an increased use of the keywords “sustainability” and “sustainable development” in the reports of the largest corporations in Norway from 2010 to 2020. As I have pointed out in the theory chapter, several studies show that there has been an increased focus on sustainability among companies, both in a Norwegian and international context. I have also pointed to the shift in sustainability reporting, as more and more businesses are now reporting on sustainability. Following the research literature, this study confirms that this increase was also representable for the largest corporations in Norway in 2020. Ihlen and Roper (2014, p. 43) state that sustainability and sustainable development are often used interchangeably. The combined keyword search results confirm a raised attention to sustainability among the largest corporations in Norway.

In the introduction chapter, I referred to a search I did in Retriever, which shows that “sustainability” (bærekraft) and “sustainable development” (bærekraftig utvikling) have significantly increased in Norwegian media from 2010 to 2020. For “sustainability,” the frequency was 2,168 in 2010 and 18,628 in 2020. That corresponds to an increase of 759 %. For “sustainable development,” the frequency was 4,661 in 2010 and 11,366 in 2020. That corresponds to an increase of 144 %. The media discourse and the business discourse seem to follow the same trend. There is a rise in the attention to sustainability and sustainable development, where the term “sustainability” appears to be the preferred one. Meuer et al., (2020, p. 319) point to how “academic publications on corporate sustainability have skyrocketed in the past decade, including in the most highly ranked management journal.” Accordingly, this trend is also transferable to academia.

A number of significant events during the last decade can explain this increase. The development of the Sustainable Development Goals may be the most important one. Sustainability has become increasingly important to corporations, primarily due to the SDGs (Carson & Skauge, 2019, p. 126). The SDGs strengthen the perception that businesses no longer can only base their decisions on financial factors, but must also pay attention to environmental and social factors. Maitland and Baets (2021, p. 1) point to the growing focus on climate activism as another leading factor in how sustainability has entered the mainstream

discourse. The Paris Agreement of 2015 can also be an influencing factor. The Paris Agreement is an international, legally binding treaty on climate change to limit global warming (Holden & Linnerud, 2021, p. 50). This agreement has become an international standard for business action. Reports from The UN Climate Panel (IPCC) are also central in the case of increased focus on sustainability. The fifth main report of the Climate Panel, IPCC Fifth Assessment Report: Climate Change 2014 (AR5), was presented in 2013/2014 and the sixth main report will be published in 2022 (Holden & Linnerud, 2021, p. 86).

In addition, there were significant changes in requirements and expectations for social sustainability in Norway in 2020 (PwC, 2021, p. 3). Several new laws are coming into place, such as the Transparency Act, which will require companies to assess the risk of human rights violations. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic has emphasized the importance of corporations' role in securing work for all (PwC, 2021, p. 3). The pandemic affected Norwegian companies to a large extent. The focus of many companies was to deal with the consequences of the pandemic, both externally and internally. That also generated major challenges related to the work on sustainability. Consequently, half of Norway's 50 largest companies mentioned the pandemic and its consequences for the overall risk in the annual report from 2020, according to Deloitte (2021, p. 11). Moreover, there is a corporate benefit from talking about sustainability:

“The benefits of addressing sustainability accrue not only to the environment and to society but also to the companies themselves, through tangible benefits in the form of reduced costs and risks of doing business, as well as through intangible benefits in the form of increased brand reputation, increased attractiveness to talent, and increased competitiveness.” (Dyllick & Muff, 2016, p. 157)

This benefit increases when stakeholders' focus and demand for sustainability become greater. The beneficial aspect of communicating sustainability also relates to the different events of significance during the last decade. As the focus on various topics within sustainability becomes more remarkable, the scope for opportunities for companies can also become more significant. At the same time, a consequence can be that companies communicate more about sustainability in their reporting to gain a reputational benefit from it. That can be a solid factor in why there is so much more focus on sustainability in 2020 than in 2010.

## 4.2.2 From Corporate Social Responsibility to Corporate Sustainability

As emphasized in the previous section, I found a significant increase in the use of the two keywords “sustainability” and “sustainable development” in the non-financial reporting of the largest corporations in Norway from 2010 to 2020. Thus, I have argued that the concept of corporate sustainability is high on the agenda for these corporations. In parallel with this increase, the results raise another discussion. It brings up the issue of whether the concept of corporate sustainability takes over for the traditional CSR concept among the analyzed corporations. As I have emphasized previously, CSR has been an important concept in business for many decades. As large corporations and the Norwegian authorities have used the term (Ihlen, 2011, p. 26), the term has also had some official status in Norway. The results from the word frequency showed that the keyword “social responsibility” had a total increase of 69 % percent from the reports of 2010 to the reports of 2020. Although there is an increase in “social responsibility,” it is significantly low compared to “sustainability” and “sustainable development.” The word “corporate responsibility” declined by 12 % from 2010 to 2020. The titles of the reports of the companies analyzed may also support this hypothesis. In 2020, Atea was the only company with "corporate responsibility" in the title. Otherwise, the reports are titled, as shown in chapter 3.2, primarily with the word's “sustainability” and/or “annual.”

Businesses have applied corporate social responsibility for many years. Initially, the concept was embedded in a social dimension. Thus, the original focus for CSR was on social conditions, while it today covers the same topics as sustainability. For that reason, CSR is used to a lesser extent today, according to The Governance Group (2021, p. 1). The fact that the environmental issue is higher on the agenda may be one of the explanatory reasons. Ihlen (2011, p. 25) emphasizes that when companies use the term sustainability instead of CSR, the importance of the environment becomes even more apparent. In recent times, the European Commission has described CSR as a concept that companies voluntarily apply to “integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations, and in their interaction with their stakeholders” (in Bogren & Sörensson, 2021, p. 478). As this is a generally accepted concept, companies focus more on the term sustainability, since CSR now comprises the ESG-dimensions in sustainability, according to Bogren & Sörensson (2021, p. 478).

Strand et al. (2014, p. 2) point out that another reason sustainability seems to be gaining favor over CSR is the managerial demand for a more formally rational language. According to their

study, the language of sustainability is more formally useful than the normative language of CSR. The findings in the analysis strengthen this perspective. The words “sustainability” and “sustainable development” are applied actively in the non-financial reports of the largest corporations in Norway. These terms are used more than the CSR terms “social responsibility” and “corporate responsibility,” indicating that it is linguistically more appropriate to use “sustainability” in the reporting. Sustainability is high on the agenda of the media, politics, and the population in general. For that reason, stakeholders recognize the word sustainability.

It is essential to point out the strong relationship between these two concepts. Corporate social responsibility has academic roots back to the 1950s (Bruhn & Zimmerman, 2016, p. 3), while sustainability became apparent in the WCED’s *Our Common Future* from 1987. Since then, sustainability has received increased attention in public and business discourse. As Montiel (2008, p. 246) argued, both concepts push toward a common future and share the same vision of balancing economic, social, and environmental responsibility, despite the fact that they have different historical roots. As Visser (2014, p. 83) argues, the ultimate purpose of companies lies in serving the society by providing “high quality products and services that enhance our wellbeing, without the erosion of our ecological and community life-support system.” Thus, if a company works with and reports on sustainability, they work with and report on social responsibility. As concluded in the study of Aslaksen et al. (2021, p. 12), “the increased attention to sustainability has become an overriding concern that has changed the way CSR is discussed.” A quote from KLP’s annual report of 2020 illustrates this context well and emphasizes the role of the Sustainable Development Goals:

“Corporate social responsibility means taking responsibility for how KLP affects the world and the society we live in. But it is also about having a good understanding of the risks posed by the world’s sustainability challenges to KLP. The UN Sustainable Development Goals summarize the most important challenges facing the world. The sustainability goals therefore provide the framework for KLP’s work on corporate social responsibility.” (KLP, 2021, p. 73)

However, an increased focus on sustainability strengthens the general idea of corporate social responsibility. To be a sustainable business is a synonym for being a socially responsible business. As Meuer et al. (2020, p. 321) underline, “while corporate sustainability and CSR

often circumscribe the same concrete actions, research on corporate sustainability stems from a different perspective: firms contribute to outcomes at the level of the systems in which they are nested.” Holden and Linnerud (2021, p. 238) raise the question if there is any difference between sustainability and CSR and argue that it is hard to distinguish them from each other. Thus, the terms imply the same and are also used interchangeably in practice.

### **4.3 Summary**

The word frequency analysis revealed that the use of the word’s “sustainability” and “sustainable development” has had a very high increase in the annual reporting of the largest corporations in Norway from 2010 to 2020. The word “social responsibility” also has a relatively high increase, but the increase is low compared to the concepts of sustainability. For the word “corporate responsibility”, there was a decrease between 2010 and 2020. The results were followed up with two sections of discussion. First, the reasons for an increased focus on sustainability were discussed. Explanatory factors might be global events such as raising awareness of environmental and social issues and the corporate benefit of reporting on sustainability. Second, an argument was made that the results strengthen the perception that corporate sustainability seems to be gaining favor over the concept of corporate social responsibility. However, these concepts are strongly related.

## **5.0 Analysis of Rhetorical Topics**

The second part of the analysis focuses on how corporations address the Sustainable Development Goals rhetorically in the non-financial reporting of 2020. Ihlen (2009, p. 248) perceived rhetorical strategies “as the means that corporations employ to persuade the readers of their reports that they are dealing with the (climate change) issue in an appropriate way.” Inspired by Ihlen (2009), rhetorical strategies in this study involves the means the corporations apply to persuade their stakeholders and the public that they are focused on contributing to the SDGs.

Sustainable corporations balance the relationship between financial, social, and environmental factors and thus take long-term responsibility for the business (Carson & Skauge, 2019, p. 126). The quantitative analysis indicates that the largest corporations in Norway have become more focused on sustainable development during the last decade in their non-financial reporting. The vital role of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals in business can have influenced this increased focus. As I emphasized in chapter 1.1, a key question for companies is how to make their sustainability strategies effective in advancing the SDGs (van Zanten & van Tulder (2021, p. 3704). To respond to this, corporations highlight some elements that directly or indirectly argue for this to convince their rhetorical audience that they are sustainable and in line with the SDGs.

This rhetorical analysis follows Jonas Gabrielsen's (2008) analytical approach on the division of rhetorical topics. The rhetor use a specific angle (a material topic) and then search for a convincing argument to make an inference (formal topic) (Ihlen & Raknes, 2020b, p. 3). The rhetorician combines a material and a formal topic to arrive at the desired conclusion. The combination of the material and formal topic makes up the argument. I have identified four material topics which the corporations use when addressing the Sustainable Development Goals. The four material topics (common rhetorical strategies) I have identified are:

1. *Recognizing the SDGs as a vital framework (recognition)*
2. *Selecting and prioritizing specific SDGs that are related to the business (prioritization)*
3. *Promoting the impact and results on the SDGs (promotion)*
4. *The SDGs as a guideline for future business activities (future)*

The analysis is structured according to these material topics. Such a categorization is about the data material being divided into different categories (Grønmo, 2016, p. 438). I argue that these material topics are four common rhetorical SDG-strategies applied by the largest corporations in Norway. To build up these arguments, the corporations use various formal topics to make inferences for the argument. I apply Corbett and Connors' (1999) list of five common topics to identify the formal topics in the analysis.

## 5.1 Recognizing the SDGs as a Vital Framework

As corporations play a critical role in achieving the Agenda 2030, the SDGs are playing an increasingly important role in the business community (Rosati & Faria, 2019a, p. 589). As emphasized in the SDG Compass (2015, p. 4), “the SDGs present an opportunity for business-led solutions and technologies to be developed and implemented to address world’s biggest sustainable development challenges.” Thus, the SDGs are useful in linking business strategies with global priorities and function as a framework for communicating and reporting on strategies, goals, and achievements. SDG 17 is about cooperation and involves a direct commitment for corporations to take responsibility (Carson & Skauge, 2019, p. 134). The findings from the data material show that the largest corporations in Norway have begun to use the SDGs in their annual reporting. One result was evident when I analyzed the material: all of the corporations in the sample have references to the SDGs in their report. All of the corporations show, in different ways, that they acknowledge the goals. Most companies have sections in the reports presenting a general definition and understanding of the SDGs. Here, a rhetorical strategy stands out: recognize the SDGs as a vital framework for the company. Accordingly, the first material topic I have identified is *the topic of recognition*. The following quote from the report to the industrial company Norsk Hydro illustrates this well:

“The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) embrace a universal approach to the sustainable development agenda. They explicitly call on businesses to use creativity and innovation to address development challenges and recognize the need for governments to encourage sustainability reporting.” (Norsk Hydro, 2021, p. 7)

The topic of recognition involves several rhetorical choices that corporations make to create inference. To underline their recognition of the SDGs, the corporations use various forms of



phrases and words. It is mainly a matter of saying something about the relationship between the company and the goals. In the data material, several different codes lead to precisely this recognition, such as "support," "integrated," "contribution," and "recognize." To build up the argument on recognition, several corporations also use the word "committed." However, not many companies directly state that they are committed to the SDGs. Telenor, a multinational telecommunication company, is one of the few exceptions:

“Telenor was built on a belief in connecting the many, not just the few. We are committed to all UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).” (Telenor, 2021, p. 63)

Elkem, a world-leading provider of silicone, solves this in another way:

“Elkem is committed to develop its business in support of the ambitions of the Paris climate agreement and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).” (Elkem, 2021, p. 38)

While Telenor connects the argument of "commitment" to the historical part of the company and the belief they were built upon, Elkem decides to argue that they are committed to developing a business that supports the ambitions of the Paris Agreement and the SDGs. By applying "committed to" as an argument, a corporation strengthens the perception of recognition and indicates a direct commitment and obligation to the goals. By demonstrating social and environmental commitment in this way, they can signal to stakeholders that they secure a competitive position and create a competitive advantage, according to Rosati and Faria (2019a, p. 588). Although the rhetorical presentation is somewhat different, the corporations' intention is the same when they use the material topic of recognition: they attempt to demonstrate to their stakeholders that their business activities align with the SDGs. That is closely related to the formal topic of testimony. This formal topic draws on arguments from external resources (Corbett & Connors, 1999, p. 112). The SDGs are an external resource used by companies to promote general statements such as "we are sustainable" or "we are working to change our business to become more sustainable." One of the sub-topics here is authority. People are often forced to listen to authorities, which can have great persuasive power. All member states of the UN have prepared the SDGs and as an organization, the UN has great authority. In his study, Ihlen (2009, p. 254) found that the largest corporations in the world leaned on the same formal topic when they argued that they

were in line with the scientific consensus on climate change and exemplified how companies could claim that they recognized criteria under the Kyoto Protocol, a previous climate agreement.

A finding that is necessary to highlight for the topic of recognition is the difference between claiming that the corporation is committed to the SDGs, versus stating that it supports them. For that matter, there is a significant difference between the corporations. Even though the corporations recognize the SDGs as necessary in the sustainability work, several of them use other words and phrases, rather than saying that they are committed when rhetorically addressing the significance for their own company. For instance, the CEO of the public the entrepreneur, Veidekke (2021, p. 14) states as follows in the CEO letter: “Veidekke takes its sustainable development responsibility seriously, and supports the UN goals” (Veidekke, 2021, p. 14). On the other hand, Storebrand states that “we base our business activities on the UN Sustainable Development Goals” (Storebrand, 2021, p. 12).

As Martínez-Ferrero and García-Meca (2021, p. 4) argue, “companies that publicly commit to the SDGs may link their strategic priorities to them and measure, communicate and report on their progress toward these goals.” By claiming that the company is committed to the SDGs, the consequences may be more significant if the company does not follow up on this commitment. Thus, references to the recognition of the SDGs can be strategic. Gabrielsen (2008, p. 137-138) refers to the material topics as tactical and the formal topics as strategical. The material topics are tactical because it helps the rhetor establish the factual premises – the form of the argument (Gabrielsen, 2008, p. 137). The formal topics are strategic because they allow the rhetor to move from the chosen material starting point to the desired conclusion (Gabrielsen, 2008, p. 139). Corporations' selection of words can be based on a strategic decision when recognizing the SDGs. Directly stating that the company is committed to the SDGs can be perceived as SDG-washing, if the company does not do enough to follow up on this commitment (Pedersen, 2021, p. 105). “Committed” is a statement that involves more obligation than just saying that one recognizes the goals. Atea, a provider of IT-infrastructure solutions, is another company that strategically solves its statement on commitment:

“At Atea, we are committed to leveraging our knowledge and business to contribute to the transformations needed in order to achieve the SDGs.” (Atea, 2021, p. 19)

Hence, Atea does not directly argue for their commitment to the SDGs themselves but to use their knowledge and business activities to help achieve them. That illustrates the relationship between the material topic recognition as tactical and formal topic as strategic. It is the formal topic that helps the rhetorician to reach the desired conclusion. In this case, the expected conclusion of Atea is to show that their knowledge and business activities contribute to achieving the SDGs. Moreover, Atea claims that “in addition, we have integrated the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in this report” (Atea, 2021, p. 2). According to a report from the Norwegian Trade Organization, several leading Norwegian companies have “integrated” the goals into their business strategies (NHO, 2018, p. 8). Step 4 in the SDG Compass is about integrating. According to the SDG Compass (2016, p. 5), “integrating sustainability into the core business and governance, and embedding sustainable development targets across all functions within the company, is key to achieving set goals.” Several corporations here rhetorically refer to how the SDGs can form the basis for the corporations' sustainability strategy by integrating them into the process. DNB raises this by referring to how they have used the SDGs in customer dialogue: “The SDGs have been a source of inspiration for our own sustainability work, and a valuable framework to have in our dialogue with corporate customers about how they choose to integrate sustainability into their strategies.” (DNB, 2021, p. 50).

Several companies use the material topic of recognition combined with the formal topic of testimony, by pointing to their membership in the UN Global Compact and its ten guiding principles. In the sample, a total number of 25 companies are members of the UN global compact. Norgesgruppen and Vår Energi are the only companies that are not members. For instance, the hydropower company Statkraft writes the following in their report of 2020:

“Statkraft recognises the important role that business can play in realising the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and has committed to supporting the goals in all our business activities and through our membership in the United Nations Global Compact.” (Statkraft, 2021, p. 40)

Another example is the world leading seafood company Mowi (2021, p. 9), which underlines that “we remain committed to the principles of the United Nation's Global Compact and to maximising our contribution to its Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).” By pointing to their membership in the UN Global Compact, corporations get an external source that can

support the argument on recognizing the SDGs. That is also related to the formal topic of testimony with the sub-topic law. When a company joins the UN Global Compact, the company's CEO must send a letter of commitment (Communication of Progress) to the General Secretary of the UN (Holden & Linnerud, 2021, p. 239). As Corbett and Connors (1999, p. 117) emphasize, “recorded evidence has a compelling force in any argument.” To reach the desired ambition of showing their audience that the SDGs are recognized, the companies here point to the UN Global Compact as an external source for creating inference for the argument.

## **5.2 Selecting and Prioritizing Specific SDGs that are Relevant to the Business**

The Sustainable Development Goals consist of 17 goals in total. Even though all of the goals are important, some will be more relevant to different companies than others. As KPMG (2018, p. 4) emphasizes, reporting should identify the specific SDGs of relevance and which SDGs the company can have the most impact on, as not all of the goals and their underlying targets are of the same relevance to every company. That is also the essence of the following material topic I have identified: *the topic of prioritization*. The corporations I have analyzed select and prioritize specific SDGs related to their business. *Defining priorities* is step number 2 in the SDG Compass. According to the guide, defining prioritized goals will help businesses to focus on benefitting from both the opportunities and challenges presented by the SDGs (SDG Compass, 2015, p. 11). Moreover, the guide suggests that companies should determine the fields where they have the most significant impact in order to select SDGs which can upscale their positive impact and reduce their negative impact.

Companies often point out some of the SDGs they prioritize (Carson & Skauge, 2019, p. 133). When corporations rhetorically address the fact that some goals are more relevant than others, this often connects with the recognition of the SDGs as a vital framework. By using a particular topic, the companies will create a specific understanding of the SDGs. As Ihlen and Raknes (2020b, p. 3) emphasize, corporations will thus “assess what they think is possible or what is fitting the situation they find themselves in.” That also forms the basis of how corporations argue within this material topic. I have identified different phrases corporations use when addressing their prioritized SDGs. The most prominent ones are:

- We have prioritized
- We have identified
- Particular focus on
- The goals where we have an impact
- We have mapped out
- The group has chosen to focus its efforts on
- We have selected

The combination of a material and a formal topic, i.e., the factual and inferential premises, leads to the argument. The corporations mainly use the formal topic of relationship to make inference for the material topic of prioritization. The topic of relationship is useful when pointing to the relationship of something. In this context, that can be the relationship between the company's industry and the SDGs that the company prioritizes. Carson and Skauge (2019, p. 133) argue that this strategy can develop the SDGs into an effective strategic tool for companies if they signal their positive effects on society. An argument from the report of Veidekke exemplifies the relationship between prioritized SDGs and the overall strategy of the company:

“Based on the six material topics for Veidekke’s sustainability work, the following SDGs have been identified as particularly relevant.” (Veidekke, 2021, p. 148)

Veidekke combines the topic of prioritization with the topic of relationship by pointing to the relationship between their work on sustainability and the SDGs. In this argument, Veidekke does not point to a direct cause-and-effect between their work and the identified goals, but they use the sub-topic antecedent and consequence. This sub-topic is a simpler form of the sub-topic of cause-and-effect and can be perceived as “given this situation, what follows?” (Corbett & Connors, 1999, p. 104). The situation is the six material topics for Veidekke’s work on sustainability. The consequence is that some specific SDGs correspond to this work, making them particularly relevant to Veidekke.

As I demonstrated for the material topic of recognition, there was a variation between how different corporations used the phrase “committed to” versus “supports” when referring to their contribution to the SDGs. A similar difference also appears when corporations argue for

prioritization. Some corporations distinguish between main-prioritized goals and sub-prioritized goals. The bank DNB writes as follows in their report:

“The two SDGs where we really feel that we can contribute positively, are: → SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. → SDG 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. Other goals we focus on are 7, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14 and 16.”  
(DNB, 2021, p. 50)

DNB has selected two main goals they can "really contribute positively to" and seven goals they have "focus on." Storebrand has a similar rhetorical presentation in their report. The financial services company has chosen three SDGs they can have a “significant impact on” and have identified eight other SDGs they can have an impact on. Storebrand link this prioritization to the company's business and people processes. First, they argue that “we have identified three SDGs, which we can significantly impact by the way we manage our group’s business and people processes” (Storebrand, 2021, p. 12). Moreover, they state that “we have identified eight SDGs (below) where we can have the greatest impact through our investment activities” (Storebrand, 2021, p. 13). The oil company Aker Solutions uses both “impact” and “contribute positively” in their announcement of prioritized goals:

“We have prioritized 9 SDGs where we believe we can have the most impact and where we seek to contribute positively.” (Aker Solutions, 2021, p. 15)

The referenced quotes illustrate how Storebrand and DNB rhetorically distinguish between their central prioritized SDGs and sub-prioritized SDGs. Consequently, they make a clear rhetorical distinction. On the one hand, they have selected a set of priority goals that guide their strategic work with sustainability. On the other hand, they have also chosen a set of goals they pay direct attention to. Hence, the companies give the impression that there are different degrees to which they can contribute to the SDGs. Thus, the corporations combine the topic of prioritization with a formal topic of comparison based on the sub-topic degree. The degree was one of four common topics that Aristotle presented in *Rhetoric*. When a rhetor compares things, the rhetor can argue for a difference in degree (Corbett & Connors, 1999, p. 97). Thus, the corporations illustrate a comparison between the SDGs based on two different degrees of how these are prioritized. Aristotle argued that “a greater number of things can be considered more desirable than a smaller number of the same things” (in Corbett

& Connors, 1999, p. 97). There is an interconnected relationship between the SDGs and their 169 underlying targets and multiple SDGs should be advanced simultaneously (van Zanten & van Tulder, 2021, p. 3712). Taking the argument of Aristotle into consideration, it can be strategically advantageous for companies to show that they are focused on more goals than the most relevant ones rather than only claiming they focus on a few.

A typical perception of topics is that they are “reservoirs of stock descriptions, views, points, and proverbs that the rhetor can and should use” (Ihlen, 2004, p. 46). There are many similarities in the rhetoric used when companies across industries discuss the prioritization of SDGs. Thus, there are some commonplaces where companies can find inspiration when structuring their arguments for prioritized SDGs. While DNB and Storebrand are banks, finance and insurance companies, Equinor operates in the oil industry. Nevertheless, the structure of the argument and the words used, for instance, “contribute” and “impact,” are the same. This is where the very core of the rhetorical theory of topics comes to light: there are some common places where rhetors can find their arguments. Equinor argues as follows:

“Our business activities have both positive and negative impacts on the SDGs. Equinor supports all the 17 SDGs and contributes in particular to the following six goals: Quality education, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, climate action, life below water, and partnerships for the goals. Our specific impact on each of these goals is described in the table on page 5.” (Equinor, 2021, p. 8)

Carson and Skauge (2019, p. 133) claim that the strategy of prioritization doesn’t necessarily consider that promoting some selected goals may be at the expense of the effect of others. For instance, a company like Equinor claims they contribute to SDG 14 – Life below water. At the same time, their oil production weakens SDG 8 – Climate change. Businesses rarely touch upon such dilemmas as they are more focused on the SDGs they positively contribute to (Carson & Skauge, 2019, p. 133). Almost one quarter of Norwegian corporations that prioritized specific SDGs in 2020 did so without doing a materiality analysis (PwC, 2021, p. 5). Consequently, the corporation’s prioritizations might be perceived as SDG-washing. As argued by Heras-Saizarbitoria et al. (2021, p. 318), “a superficial, unreasoned, and unshared prioritization might be viewed as cherry-picking i.e., only prioritizing the most beneficial

SDGs, if corporations only focus on the unproblematic goals.” Statkraft is one of few corporations that touch upon this:

“We recognise that the SDGs are highly interconnected, and that a direct impact on one goal can create indirect impacts on other goals.” (Statkraft, 2021, p. 40)

KMPG (2020, p. 4) emphasized in their survey that there was “a wide disparity and no clear pattern in the number of SDGs that companies prioritize as a focus of their businesses.” That is also relevant to my data material. The total number of SDGs that are prioritized by the corporations in the sample varies. The number of prioritized SDGs affects the rhetorical presentation. Orkla and Telenor refer to one goal each. Thus, they can define why the specific goal is relevant to them. As consumers and stakeholders increasingly demand sustainable value chains and circular solutions in materials and resources, the trading industry is particularly affected by SDG12 on responsible consumption and production, according to PwC (2021, p. 20). Orkla, which operates in the industry, illustrates that point in this way:

“Orkla’s sustainability work contributes directly to achievement of a number of the Sustainable Development Goals, and a central focus of these efforts is SDG 12 – sustainable production and consumption. Orkla companies work determinedly across markets and countries to reduce the climate impacts of their products, promote sustainable raw material production and develop good packaging solutions.” (Orkla, 2020, p. 58)

Telenor argues for their prioritized goal as followed:

“We are committed to all UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and believe we in particular have an opportunity through our business to advance SDG 10, Reduced Inequalities. SDG 10 is embedded in our global business strategy; in the way we provide digital inclusion and strive to influence and raise working conditions and operating standards wherever we are present.” (Telenor, 2021, p.63)

In these arguments, Orkla and Telenor combine the formal topic definition with the material topic prioritization. Orkla defines that their companies work purposefully with measures that can contribute to SDG 12. Telenor describes the integration of SDG 10 in its business strategy by focusing on specific elements like digital inclusion. Corbett & Connors (1999, p. 90) refer



to how the use of definitions in an argument is about setting the premise for a further argument. In this way, the corporations can propose a definition of the specific SDG relevant to them and then demonstrate how this relates to their own core business. Consequently, they can invent their own definition or perception of the SDG to ascertain the issue they discuss (Ihlen, 2004, p. 48). Statkraft also uses a definition topic, but focuses more on defining priority goals that relate to their sustainability strategy in 2020. They argue for seven prioritized SDGs:

“As part of the sustainability strategy process in 2020, we have assessed our impact on all 17 SDGs. The process was based on international best practice, including workshops with key stakeholders, as well as discussions with Corporate Management. Based on Statkraft’s group risk matrix, the new materiality analysis, the corporate strategy, and the company’s value chain, a decision was made to have a particular focus on seven goals, categorised into three groups. These goals represent areas where Statkraft is either well positioned to make a larger difference or they reflect important values related to how Statkraft conducts its business.” Statkraft, 2021, p. 40)

In their guide on how to report on the SDGs, KPMG (2018, p. 13) found that companies use various approaches for prioritization. Some companies mapped the SDGs to the company’s primary business activities across the value chain, while others mapped them to the primary CSR activities. Some companies also included the SDGs in the materiality assessment process. The purpose is nevertheless the same, regardless of which approach the companies use. Corporations prioritize SDGs that they can contribute to or that are specifically aimed at the industry to which they belong. By pointing out some prioritized SDGs, companies can transform the overarching agenda of the UN into a strategic component as they can frame their positive impact on society and the environment (Carson & Skauge, 2019, p.133). This strategy is an important aspect in the following material topic.

### **5.3 Promoting the Results and Impact on the SDGs**

The third material topic I have identified is connected to how corporations refer to results and promote their positive impact on the SDGs during the reporting year of 2020. The sustainability reports appear as a document in which companies can highlight their positive contribution to the international work on sustainability. As I have argued earlier, the sustainability report is the most important platform for communicating the company’s efforts

on sustainability. The data material indicates that the largest corporations in Norway promote the work done with the SDGs in their reports. KPMG (2020, p. 48) states that “corporate reporting on the SDGs focuses almost exclusively on the positive contributions companies make towards achieving the goals and lacks transparency of their negative impacts.” Furthermore, they state that only 14 % of corporations in the world recognize both positive and negative effects. This is transferable to my material. The largest corporations in Norway mostly focus on promoting their positive impact, results, and contribution in their reporting for 2020. That leads to *the topic of promotion*.

This material topic is strongly related to the material topic of prioritization. When the analyzed corporations promote their contribution, results, and positive impact on the SDGs, they mainly connect it to their prioritized goals. A common rhetorical strategy in the sample is to address a set of priority goals relatively early in the report, and then refer to this prioritization when they present impact and results. The difference between the topic of prioritization and topic of promotion lies in the arguments. For instance, Atea (2021, p. 7) argues for “6 identified SDGs where our business has the greatest impact” when demonstrating their prioritization. When promoting their impact for one of their prioritized SDGs, SDG 5 (Gender Equality), Atea (2021, p. 24), emphasize that “we actively seek to promote gender balance in our staffing, along with greater empowerment and wellness for all our people.” Thus, the corporations apply other arguments when promoting the SDGs than when prioritizing them. One thing is to highlight the prioritization, but it is another thing to argue for how they have an impact, or what they have achieved with this prioritization.

There is also a difference in this material topic between arguments for positive SDG impact and arguments for SDG results. As emphasized in the SDG compass (2015, p. 28), reporting on the SDGs involves discussing performances and adapt to the “language of the SDGs.” Therefore, corporations can disclose several things for each of their identified SDG. That includes positive and negative impacts, strategies to manage this impact, the goals for the relevant SDGs, and the progress to achieve them (SDG Compass, 2015, p. 28). The general statements, “we have a positive impact” and “contribute to” are examples of statements that are repeated in the data material. Other statements related to the topic of promotion are, for instance; “making a positive difference”, “our business can promote”, “minimize the negative impact”, and “reduction in greenhouse gas emissions.”

In 2020, 74 % of Norwegian corporations considered at least one of the SDGs essential to their activities (PwC, 2021, p. 23). SDG 13 – Stop Climate Change was prioritized by 67 %, 59 % prioritized SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth, and 51 % prioritized SDG 12 – Responsible Consumption and Production. SDG 5 – Gender Equality was prioritized by 38 % of the companies. SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities was prioritized by 17 %, an increase of 42 % compared to 2019. SDG13: Climate action was prioritized by 67% of Norway's 50 largest companies in 2020 (PWC, 2021, p.11). That makes it the highest prioritized SDG. As emphasized by PwC (2021, p. 11), this shows that Norwegian corporations are beginning to take the climate challenge seriously. SDG 12 is related to the Paris Agreement and the work of the UN Climate Convention. In his study, Ihlen (2009, p. 256) found that some of the world's 30 largest corporations perceived climate change as constituting a business opportunity. When companies review this problem as a business opportunity and not just as a risk, they use the formal topic circumstance, according to Ihlen (2009, p. 256). The technology company Kongsberg Gruppen identifies a business opportunity related to SDGs while also promoting its products and solutions:

“Our products and solutions contribute to reduced energy consumption, increased efficiency and transition from fossil fuels to cleaner energy sources for our customers. This also provides great business opportunities while helping to achieve the SDG’s.”  
(Kongsberg Gruppen, 2021, p. 43)

Kongsberg Gruppen combines the material topic of promotion with the formal topic of circumstance. The topic of circumstance enables rhetors to encourage or discourage their audience by arguing how something is possible or impossible or by arguing for a past or future fact (Corbett & Connors, 1999, p. 108-110). Kongsberg Gruppen claims that it is possible to create business opportunities and, at the same time, help to achieve the SDGs. As stated by Ihlen (2009, p. 256), business opportunities are often a question of “first-mover advantages,” as the company may earn profits if it sets itself apart from other competitors, i.e., by taking a leading role in their industry. There are several business opportunities concerning the SDGs. Moreover, as there is a substantive role in addressing the SDGs, it can boost competitive advantages and corporate reputation, according to García-Meca and Martínez-Ferrero (2019, p. 2). A similar way of promoting efforts and emphasizing a business opportunity is found in the report of the largest car importer in Norway, Møller Mobility

Group. The company relies on the formal topic of testimony and the sub-topic example by giving concrete examples of what they do to contribute to sustainable development:

“Our business can promote positive development and change within all the key topics, with these as some of the priority areas ahead: Strengthen our market share of electric car sales. Set stronger environmental and sustainability requirements for our 8,000 suppliers. Ensure good HSE work in all parts of our business. Conscious recruitment for equality and diversity. Stimulate car subscriptions and increased car sharing. All of these opportunities fit naturally into our prioritized sustainable development goals.”  
(Møller Mobility Group, 2021, p. 14)

According to the SDG compass (2015, p. 4), the SDGs enable companies to demonstrate how they help advance sustainable development, reduce the negative impact, and maximize their positive impact on people and the planet. As I have emphasized, only a few of the corporations in my sample disclose their potential negative impact on the SDGs. That point demonstrates the very core of the material topic of promotion: the companies want to appear sustainable to their rhetorical audience, i.e., their stakeholders and the public. That is an inalienable requirement in today’s corporate world. Accordingly, corporations use sustainability reporting to promote the aspects that can strengthen their reputation as sustainable companies. That affects the rhetorical arguments. Corporations from the oil industry are illustrative examples. Equinor (2021, p. 8) directly states that “our business activities have both positive and negative impacts on the SDGs.” Another producer of fossil fuels, Vår Energi, points to how their business can have a negative impact on the SDGs as followed:

“As a producer of fossil fuel, Vår Energi recognizes that its activities and products create both benefits and challenges for society and for the achievement of UN’s SDGs. Therefore, the company has a strategic focus on sustainable growth and is continuously strengthening sustainability performance. This is done through both minimizing negative impacts and increasing positive impacts on society and hence the achievement of the UN SDGs.” (Vår Energi, 2021, p. 7)

An interesting remark here is that Eni, an Italian oil company, owns 69 % of Vår Energi (Tollaksen & Smith-Solbakken, 2022). In their study, Ihlen and Roper (2014, p. 47) found

that Eni claimed that sustainability was a part of the company's history and had been a fundamental part of how they have conducted business for years. With this argument, Vår Energi expresses that they recognize that their activities and products can have a negative effect on achieving the SDGs. Vår Energi combines the topic of promotion with the relationship topic and the sub-topic contradictions. That is a helpful topic when there are "two propositions related in such a way that the truth of one entails the falsity of the other" (Corbett & Connors, 1999, p. 107). Vår Energi points to the contrast between the industry they operate in and being a sustainable company. Therefore, the solution is strategically to focus on sustainability to minimize this negative impact.

As Ihlen (2004, p. 49) points out, the rhetor can argue how two positions are incompatible. Industry type plays a significant role in this matter. According to Garcia-Meca and Martinez-Ferrero (2021, p. 2), companies in environmentally sensitive industries such as oil and gas may use reporting on the SDGs to reduce their negative public image, as they are under pressure from stakeholders and social scrutiny. Ihlen (2007a, p. 2) underlines how the oil industry is often criticized, as the production and use of petroleum are among the most important sources of greenhouse gas emissions. Thus, such corporations have a rhetorical challenge in safeguarding their reputation. Ihlen (2007a, p. 20) points out that corporations within the oil industry often use the formal topic of comparison. In this way, the corporations can, for instance, justify Norwegian production of oil by comparing it to the production of oil in other countries. A contrast to these corporations is the state-owned company Kommunal Landspensjonskasse. KLP's main function is to provide pension insurance for employees in municipalities, county municipalities, health trusts, and other companies related to the public sector (Knutsen, 2021). They are the largest of their kind in Norway. Hence, they can apply a different rhetorical approach in their arguments than what the oil industry can allow themselves:

"Social responsibility is integrated into all business processes through e.g. responsible management of pension assets, work on ethics and high environmental standards in buildings that KLP owns. KLP has socially engaged owners who want the company to both ensure a good predictable return and also to lead the industry in social responsibility. Above all, the owners want KLP to contribute to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals." (KLP, 2021, p. 81)





As I mentioned in the introduction of the material topic of recognition, there is a distinction between promoting positive (or negative) impact and showcasing the results from the reporting year. Several of the companies link statistics to effects on the SDGs. For instance, Gjensidige relates SDG12 to a reduction in carbon intensity:

“Reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from our own operations. Carbon intensity reduced from 0.29 in 2019 to 0.08 in 2020.” (Gjensidige, 2021, p.132)

A common practice among the corporations in the sample is to use visual tools for substantiating their arguments about the SDGs. An example of this is to visually present the logos of the goals in combination with a written statement. As Heras-Saizarbitora et al. (2021, p. 325) underline, frequent use of UN pictograms allows reporting corporations to construct an image of social responsibility and alignment with sustainability issues that are of public interest. That applies to all of the material topics I have identified, but becomes apparent when the corporations refer to results and statistics. Yara and Posten are examples of corporations that have quantified results represented visually with the SDG logos:



Picture 2: Screenshot from Yara Sustainability Report 2020. (2021, p. 19)

UN's Sustainable Development Goals	Where we make an impact and can make a difference	Our overall sustainability ambitions	Measured in (KPI)	2017	2018	2019	Results 2020	Goal 2020	Status	Goal 2021
 8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH	We are a large employer, we have many subcontractors and we are responsible for employees having decent employment and working conditions as well as equal opportunities.	No one should be injured or sick as a result of working in the Group.  The gender balance among managers shall reflect the gender balance in the Group.	Sickness absence rate	5.9%	6.0%	5.9%	6.0%	5.8%	●	5.9%
			Hr injury rate	6.5	8.7	7.8	7.0	6.6	●	6.3
 9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE	Posten constitutes an important part of the infrastructure in the Nordic region. Innovation is essential to continue to be relevant in the future.	Drive innovation together with customers and be the leader in new value propositions for our markets.	Number of new solutions/ services to the market	-	-	-	29	10	●	10
			Innovation capacity in the NHH innovation index	47.0	49.7	51.6	51.9	55.0	●	56.6
 11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES	Cities account for 75% of global carbon emissions and zero emission transport is an important part of the goal of sustainable cities and societies.	We will have renewable "last mile" transport in selected Nordic cities and towns by 2023.	Proportion of vehicles running on renewable energy	-	-	-	26%	24%	●	39%
 13 CLIMATE ACTION	The transport sector is one of the largest emitters in climate accounting for the Nordic countries. This means that we have a great deal to contribute.	By 2025, we will only use renewable energy sources in our vehicles and buildings.	Reduction in CO <sub>2e</sub> "	-	-	-	13 720	10 600	●	-***

Picture 3: Screenshot from *Posten Norge Annual and Sustainability Report 2020*. (2021, p. 29)

When corporations refer to statistics to promote their results, they combine the material topic of promotion with the formal topic of testimony and the sub-topic statistics. Statistics can support an argument and is a valuable and practical topic in many discussions (Corbett & Connors, 1999, p. 115-116). Statistics are a good way for corporations to substantiate an argument around, for instance, greenhouse gas emissions. As Corbett and Connors (1999, p. 115) illustrate, rhetors can use statistics to support or discredit all kinds of statements. In this way, corporations can quantify the increase or decrease in greenhouse gas emissions. That may strengthen the argument if the statistics are in the corporations' favor.

## 5.4 The SDGs as a Guideline for Future Business Activities

The fourth and final material topic I have identified revolves around how several corporations in the sample point to the Sustainable Development Goals as a guideline for future business activities. That is related to how corporations operate under the very foundation of the SDGs, namely a more sustainable world within 2030. A long-term perspective is required of governments, businesses, and individuals to achieve the SDGs. The SDGs function as a blueprint for how countries and companies can contribute to a sustainable future. Therefore, these also serve as a framework and guidelines for conducting business in the future. Several corporations rhetorically embrace this future perspective. That constitutes the material topic of the future. Different codes led to this material topic. The most evident code is “2021.” Examples of other codes are “long-term perspective,” “2030,” “over time,” “future,” and “continue.”

As pointed out in the *SDG Compass* (2015, p. 8), “companies can use the SDGs as an overarching framework to shape, steer, communicate and report their strategies, goals, and activities, allowing them to capitalize on a range of benefits,” including identifying business opportunities for the future. There is a clear link between this material topic and the other material topics I have identified. If corporations point out that the SDGs should be a guide for future activities, they have already recognized the significance of the goals for their own company. If corporations have already responded to the SDGs, they will most likely respond to them in the coming years since the SDG agenda extends to 2030. Thus, corporations prepare for a future perspective if the goals have been central in the annual report from 2020. One of the ways some corporations do this is to refer to their membership in the UN Global Compact. Mowi refers to their consistent commitment to the SDGs and the UN Global Compact:

“We remain committed to the principles of the United Nation's Global Compact and to maximising our contribution to its Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).” (Mowi, 2021, p. 9)

Some corporations apply the topic of future by pointing out the deadline for achieving the SDGs and the time frame for this deadline. Elkem (2021, p. 54) writes that “we now have 10 years to fulfill the commitments in the 2030 Agenda of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals,” while Veidekke (2021, p. 14) states that “in just under 10 years, we will reach 2030 - the year by which the UN Sustainable Development Goals are to be achieved.” The corporations use a formal topic of definition here. By defining, the rhetor can establish an opinion of what the debate is about so that the audience understands the topic of discussion (Corbett & Connors, 1999, p. 88). In these arguments, the companies define the time aspect for the SDGs. They make it clear to the audience that there is a future perspective on the SDGs. Another way to emphasize the future perspective of the SDGs is to argue for their continuity in relation to future actions. The president and CEO of Equinor, Anders Opedal, states in his CEO letter as follows:

“Our actions will continue to be inspired and guided by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.” (Equinor, 2021, p. 3)



DNB goes further than Equinor in suggesting that the SDGs are implemented in their future corporate strategy: “We are in the process of reviewing our implementation of the Principles, and will in 2021 maintain a particular focus on aligning our business strategy further, in keeping with the SDGs and the Paris Agreement” (DNB, 2021, p. 51). Sparebank 1 is also connecting strategy and 2021: “The SDGs are anchored in the sustainability strategy and targets have been drawn up with specific measures for each of these SDGs. These measures will be implemented during the defined strategy period, which lasts until the end of 2021.” (Sparebank 1, 2021, p. 21). DNB and Sparebank 1 are combining the material topic of future with the formal topic of circumstance with the subtopic past and future fact. Arguments on future fact are about pointing to something that will happen in the future (Corbett & Connors, 1999, p. 110). To establish a future fact, the rhetor often relies on a probable argument. The future fact here lies in the fact that next year, the sustainability strategy will continue to be aligned with the SDGs. Like DNB and Sparebank 1, Aker Solutions is referring to the coming reporting year of 2021. For Aker Solutions, the future perspective is linked to the company’s prioritized goals:

“In 2021, we will review this prioritization to make sure the goals are aligned with the KPIs, targets, and material issues for Aker Solutions.” (Aker Solutions, 2021, p.15)

Aker Solutions is also using the sub-topic of future fact. Aker Solutions' argument here is that in the future (2021), they will re-evaluate the prioritization they made in 2020. As I pointed out in chapter 5.2, they selected nine prioritized SDGs to which they believe they can contribute positively. The connection between the material topics of prioritization and future comes to light here. The prioritized goals of the companies are fluid and can change from year to year based on the corporations' strategic priorities. The formal topic of circumstance is also found in the report of Storebrand, which connects their long-term perspective to the industry they operate in:

“Having a long-term perspective is important for Storebrand, as we manage customers’ savings over decades. We fundamentally believe that investments in companies that are well-positioned to deliver on the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) will provide better risk-adjusted returns for our customers over time.” (Storebrand, 2021, p. 57)

In this argument, Storebrand uses both the past/future fact sub-topic and the possible/impossible sub-topic. The first is because they focus on how their long-term perspective is related to their business. The latter is because they point out how investing in companies that are positioned to deliver on the SDGs can create an opportunity for their customers over time. Aker BP is also applying both sub-topics when they address the future of the oil and gas industry:

“The oil and gas companies of the future need to be more adaptive, more efficient and more sustainable to ensure cost-efficient solutions adapted to future conditions and needs, as outlined in SDG 13: Climate action and SDG 9: Industry, innovation and infrastructure.” (Aker BP, 2021, p. 17)

Aker BP was established in 2016 and is a full-fledged oil and gas company. As emphasized by Ihlen (2007b, p. 121), Norway's political and social situation has led the oil industry to acknowledge the problem of climate change and the industry has shown a willingness to adapt to these changes. In this argument, Aker BP points out how companies in their industry must adapt in the future as outlined in the SDGs. Consequently, they rely on the SDGs as a guideline for what their business should look like in the future. Aker BP applies both sub-topics to make an inference for the future perspective, as they claim how sustainability will lead to cost-effective solutions. That corresponds to Ihlen (2007b, p. 178), who argued that the oil industry attempts to reduce its emissions and replace the produced resources. Norway is dependent on a green transition in the oil and gas industry to achieve the SDGs within 2030. Hence, the SDGs function as a blueprint to operationalize this transition rhetorically for such companies.

## **5.5 Summary and discussion**

Since the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), work on sustainability has been high on the agenda for most public and private companies (Holden & Linnerud, 2021, p. 235). As a result, more and more companies include the SDGs when they report on sustainability. Sustainability reporting is a company's public reporting on its economic, environmental, and social sustainability impacts (Rosati & Faria, 2019b, p. 1313). Moreover, SDG reporting involves public reporting on how the company addresses the SDGs. Rhetorical theory is a helpful tool for studying how companies strategically communicate in

these reports. Rhetoric can help us understand a company's text production and its effects and role in society (Ihlen, 2013, p. 102). Thus, rhetorical analysis can disclose how corporations communicate about sustainability and the SDGs to achieve specific economic or political goals or as a way of building relationships with their stakeholders (Ihlen, 2013, p. 102). In that context, a useful rhetorical theory is the classic rhetorical theory of topics. This analysis is based on Jonas Gabrielsen's (2008) division of topics between material and inferential operations. Thus, corporations pick a material topic to argue for the relationship between their business and the SDGs and apply a formal topic make inference for this argument. When the corporations have chosen the angle, they can argue from definition, comparison, relationship, circumstance, or testimony, (Corbett & Connors, 1999, p. 87) to make inferences and draw a conclusion based on the material topic.

In this rhetorical topic analysis, I have identified four material topics. As I argued in the chapter's introduction, the material topics are here perceived as four general rhetorical strategies applied by the largest corporations in Norway when addressing the SDGs. The four material topics are 1) *recognition*, 2) *prioritization*, 3) *promotion*, and 4) *future*. The material topics help the rhetor invent the factual premises of the argument and assess what to apply as a focal point in the case (Gabrielsen, 2008, p. 136-137). Regarding the SDGs, the material topics can guide the corporations in determining what aspects are strategically appropriate to address in their reports. On the other hand, they can also guide the corporations in assessing strategically disadvantageous elements to focus on in their reporting. As put forth by Ihlen and Lie (2019, p. 12), the topics are the thought structures that are expressed in concrete arguments and statements. Hence, the identified topics can explain how corporations aim to shift the focus to specific, chosen areas over others and how they aim to establish different conclusions in that matter. Pizzi et al., (2022, p. 100) state that integrating the SDGs into reports can demonstrate a corporate orientation toward sustainability, which is useful to “engage more effectively with stakeholders.”

Hummel and Szekeley (2022, p. 176) found that companies “provide SDG disclosure both to benefit financially in the capital markets and to maintain their legitimacy in society.” As corporations strive to appear sustainable and demonstrate their contribution to the SDGs, the topics can form the rhetorical goal of the corporations. In that case, the starting point for a company is to pick a material topic that is advantageous to them, in order to respond to expectations from stakeholders that the company is helping to contribute to the SDGs (Ihlen

& Raknes, 2020b, p. 3). Thus, the corporations use a material topic, such as recognition, to strategically demonstrate that they acknowledge the SDGs to their rhetorical audience. Hence, the corporations dictate the arguments' content and decide a specific angle for the cause (Gabrielsen, 2008, p. 137).

The first material topic I identified was *recognition*. This topic is about how the analyzed corporations recognized the SDGs as a vital framework for their business. By that, I argue that the corporations present arguments in their report, which indicates that their overall goal is to convince their rhetorical audience that they take the SDGs seriously and work to achieve these. Examples of phrases the corporations use in that regard are to declare that "we are committed," "we support," and "we recognize." Recognizing the SDGs is associated with the United Nations's call on businesses as vital in achieving the SDGs. Corporations choose different formal topics to make inferences for this argument, depending on what the argument encompasses. I find that the companies primarily use a formal topic of testimony in combination with the topic of recognition. Hence, the corporations rely on an external source - the SDG framework itself or their membership in the UN Global Compact. Summarized, an understanding is as follows:

Material topic	Formal topic	Conclusion
Recognition	Testimony	“We acknowledge the SDGs as vital to our business.”

The second material topic I identified was *prioritization*. This topic is about how the corporations rhetorically addressed how they prioritize and focus on specific SDGs relevant to their business. Prioritizing SDGs is related to an overall goal of demonstrating to their rhetorical audience that some SDGs will be more significant to the company than others. This strategy involves pointing out the SDGs where the company can have an impact. Some of the phrases that led to this topic are “we have prioritized,” “we have selected,” and “we have an impact on.” I also highlighted the difference between addressing main-prioritized goals and sub-prioritized goals. I find that most corporations apply a formal topic of relationship in combination with this material topic, as the arguments depend on the relationship between

their business and the selected SDGs. They can also apply a topic of comparison to distinguish between the SDGs. In summary, an understanding is as follows:

Material topic	Formal topic	Conclusion
Prioritization	Relationship	“We prioritize SDGs that are related to our business and the industry we operate in.”

The third material topic I identified was *promotion*. The topic of promotion entails how the corporations promote their impact and results on the SDGs they prioritize. When doing so, the leading focus of the corporations lies in promoting the positive impact they have on the goals and the good results they have achieved through the reporting year of 2020. Phrases like “our business can promote,” “we contribute positively to,” and “our impact” form the basis for this material topic. Corporations choose different formal topics to make inferences for the topic of promotion, depending on what the argument encompasses. Corporations can, for instance, use a topic of circumstance if they review a future business opportunity in the SDGs. They can also apply a topic of relationship to point out a contradiction between some of the SDGs and their business, such as oil and gas. Furthermore, they can use a topic of testimony to strengthen their arguments with statistics. Promotion of the SDGs is a strategy to convince their rhetorical audience that they are making progress for the SDGs they have highlighted as relevant to their business. Corporations that claim they contribute to a set of SDGs without substance for this argument can risk accusations of SDG-washing. A way of understanding this is as follows:

Material topic	Formal topic	Conclusion
Promotion	Circumstance	“We have a positive impact on the SDGs and that creates future business opportunities for us.”

The fourth and final material topic I identified was future. This topic comprehends how the corporations aspire to use the SDGs as a guideline for future business activities. As the SDGs

are future-oriented and extend to 2030, corporations have an opportunity to adjust their business to the SDGs in the future. My analysis shows that the largest corporations embrace this point in Norway. For instance, the corporations claim that they will reconsider their prioritized SDGs next year (2021) or emphasize that there is a deadline for achieving the goals. The first strategy relates to a topic of circumstance by pointing to a future fact. The second strategy relates to the topic of definition by citing the core of the SDG framework. On the grounds of this, they aim to convince their rhetorical audience that their SDG reporting for 2020 will also provide standards for future business strategy and reporting. A way of understanding this is as follows:

Material topic	Formal topic	Conclusion
Future	Definition	<p>“The SDGs extend to 2030. For that reason, our business strategy will continue to be inspired by the SDGs.”</p>

As Ihlen and Raknes (2020a, p. 3) argue, the critical potential of topics analysis is not only in exploring how rhetors choose and develop their arguments, but also in “discussing why certain topics are chosen at the expense of others.” As demonstrated through the analysis, there is a clear connection between these four rhetorical strategies (material topics). First and foremost, when corporations mention the SDGs in their report, they have implicitly recognized their importance. Furthermore, recognizing the importance of the SDGs does not necessarily mean that all of them are relevant for a corporation to focus on. Therefore, they prioritize some SDGs that are appropriate to their business. It is also crucial to refer to what they have achieved and their results on these prioritized SDGs. In that sense, it will be suitable for the company to focus on the areas where they have a positive impact. Moreover, companies that only focus on their positive impact is risk losing credibility and public trust as well as risking accusations of SDG-washing, according to KPMG (2020, p. 48). This is partly due to the fact that the stakeholders demand transparency in companies’ negative impact on society and the environment, as there is an increasing focus on the role of business in

environmental issues (Pizzeti et al., 2019, p. 21). Thus, if there is a chance that the corporation can negatively affect the SDGs, it should also be recognized and addressed.

As I have emphasized throughout the thesis, it is beneficial for companies to report on the SDGs. Such reporting can show stakeholders and the public that the company is sustainable and contributes to achieving the SDGs. Moreover, reporting on the SDGs can avoid reputational risks (Pizzi et al., 2022, p. 99). There are also multiple business opportunities in the SDGs (van Zanten & van Tulder, 2021, p. 3704). Additionally, studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between financial performance and practices of sustainability after SDG-adoption, as stated by Muhmad and Muhamad (2020, p. 304). To respond to this, I will argue that the analyzed corporations follow these four rhetorical strategies.

The researcher should discuss how the topics function in a broader context and point out which topics could have been used, but which were not (Ihlen & Lie, 2019, p. 6). In this larger context, the topics function as rhetorical strategies that companies can utilize to communicate the relationship between the SDGs and their business. Corporate strategies for social responsibility must respond to the core of changing times for sustainability in business (Nwagbara & Reid, 2013, p. 13). In that sense, connecting business strategy to the SDGs is a measure to ensure that the company's reputation as a sustainable company is maintained. When companies communicate about the SDGs, they communicate about social responsibility. From that perspective, the main objective of communication is to influence the outside world's view of the business and gain legitimacy (Ihlen, 2011, p. 76). In this way, the topics function as a strategic tool the companies use to exercise strategic communication about sustainability. The larger context in which this works will be the overall ambition of a more sustainable world by 2030. The world community has agreed that we must aim for sustainable development (Holden & Linnerud, 2021, p. 56). The 17 SDGs are the blueprint for achieving that. Thus, the topics I have presented serve as the companies' way of strategically arguing that they are part of this journey towards achieving the SDGs by 2030.

The topics corporations choose not to use are related to their overall ambition of demonstrating that they are working with sustainability in line with the SDGs. Topics are a way of understanding how the rhetorician tries to turn the focus towards some areas rather than others (Ihlen & Lie, 2019, p. 12). The analysis shows how all companies turn their rhetorical focus towards actively working with the SDGs. However, it does not necessarily

mean that what they are doing contributes to sustainable development. The oil and gas industry was highlighted in the analysis. It can be challenging for such companies to argue that they contribute to one SDG while impairing another. As such, a possible topic is to emphasize the extent of how their prioritized SDGs may be at the expense of other SDGs, as a measure to avoid accusations of SDG-washing. The analysis shows how there are some "commonplaces" where companies get their arguments when they address the SDGs. The words, phrases, and statements they use are repeated in the various reports and across different industries. Thus, one can argue how they look to each other when they structure their arguments on the SDGs. An implication in that regard can be a less nuanced picture because there will be some common standards for how companies should strategically communicate in their reports.



## **6.0 Conclusion**

### **6.1 Conclusion and Implications of the Findings**

Sustainability has become a dominant concept within many different areas of society. The idea of sustainable development introduced by WCED in 1987 and is about “meeting today's needs without compromising the needs of future generations” (WCED, 1987, p. 43). We can transfer this definition into corporate sustainability. Consequently, companies should ensure that their business operates so that they meet the needs of their stakeholders now, without compromising the interests of future stakeholders (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002, p. 121). Corporate sustainability has become vital for companies' long-term accomplishments and generally refers to “financial profitability, environmental protection, and social responsibility” in companies' core objectives and activities (Rosati & Faria, 2019b, p. 1313).

The world is facing enormous sustainability challenges. Climate change and environmental issues are particularly associated with sustainability, but social and governance factors are also associated. These are challenges that also affect corporations, both in Norway and internationally. Traditionally, companies have focused on profitability and profit. However, as stakeholders increasingly demand sustainability, companies' direct attention to their environmental and social impact. One of the primary reasons for the raised attention to sustainability is the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, a set of 17 goals and 169 underlying targets. By linking the fight against poverty and sustainable development, the SDGs demonstrate the “economic, social, and environmental dimensions in a balanced manner” (Hummel & Szekely, 2022, p. 152). Furthermore, the SDGs have required that companies take an active role in integrating their sustainable strategies into their daily business activities (García-Meca & Martínez-Ferrero, 2021, p. 1), and have dominated business discourse lately (Holden & Linnerud, 2021, p. 238).

Strategic communication is a fundamental part of companies' work with sustainability. One of the most central communication platforms companies apply in this respect is sustainability reporting. This study has focused on the overarching theme of corporate sustainability reporting among the largest corporations in Norway. An increasing number of companies report their corporate sustainability activities (Oncioiu et al., 2020, p. 9). Such reporting is valuable in addressing societal and stakeholder demands and a way for companies to obtain legitimacy (Rosati & Faria, 2019b, p. 588). Sustainability reports must account for the

company's work with sustainability and include non-financial information about the company's performance in regard to environmental, social, and ethical aspects. The report should also disclose the measures and results of the company. As the SDGs are a valuable framework for drawing attention to social and environmental concerns in a business context (Vildåsen, 2018, p. 262), more and more companies are also integrating the SDGs into their corporate sustainability reporting (Hummel & Szekeley, 2022, p. 153).

This thesis is divided into two parts under the overarching theme of corporate sustainability reporting. The first part studies how high corporate sustainability and corporate social responsibility are on the agenda among Norway's largest corporations and whether there has been any change between 2010 and 2020. The second part of the study focuses on how the companies rhetorically present the Sustainable Development Goals in their reports. The purpose was to examine how corporations across industries address the SDGs and disclose the common rhetorical strategies applied when discussing the relationship between the company and the SDGs. Additionally, the rhetorical analysis examines different arguments applied by the companies when they used these rhetorical strategies. The first research question is:

**RQ1** *To what extent has there been an increased focus on sustainability and corporate social responsibility in the non-financial reporting of the largest corporations in Norway from 2010 to 2020?*

To answer **RQ1**, I conducted a quantitative analysis of word frequency in the reports of these corporations from 2010 and 2020. My objective was to compare the years and determine if there has been an increase or decrease in four key terms: sustainability, sustainable development, social responsibility, and corporate responsibility. While the first two are related to corporate sustainability, the last two are associated with the concept of corporate social responsibility. The results show that the keyword “sustainability” increased by 874 % from 2010 to 2020, while the keyword “sustainable development” increased by 375 %. The keyword “social responsibility” increased by 69%, while the keyword “corporate responsibility” decreased by 12 %. The results from the analysis confirm a significantly higher focus in 2020 on sustainability in the non-financial reporting of the largest Norwegian corporations than there was in 2010. The results also show that the increased focus on sustainability in the reports follows an increase from 2010 to 2020 in the media, based on the search I did in Retriever. Moreover, the results confirm that corporations are still concerned

about communicating their "social responsibility," although the increase is less significant than the focus on "sustainability."

The results raise the question of if there is less need for the traditional CSR term when the importance of sustainability as a term has gained more attention in the research literature, business, and the media. In the long run, my study may indicate that the term "sustainability" dilutes the term "corporate social responsibility." On the other hand, these concepts are closely linked and imply the same essence regarding being a socially responsible company to a large extent. Corporate sustainability is related to how a company performs corporate social responsibility and current research shows the concepts are moving in the same direction due to their shared environmental and social concerns (Montiel, 2008, p. 260). For instance, if a company has integrated the SDGs into their overall strategy, they take responsibility for contributing to achieving them in fields where the company may have an impact. Although the concept of corporate social responsibility has a longer history, the concept of corporate sustainability seems to be dominant in the business discourse in 2022. The second research question of the study is:

**RQ2** *Which rhetorical topics are applied by the largest corporations in Norway when they address the UN's SDGs in their non-financial reporting for 2020?*

To answer **RQ2**, I conducted a qualitative rhetorical analysis by approaching the theory of topics (topos), a rhetorical theory with its roots in ancient Greece. Topos means "place" in Greek and is an elastic term that is approached in various ways in rhetoric (Leichty, 2018, p. 127). Topics can be understood as commonplaces for general arguments or established views. A broad definition and understanding of topics, which I have approached in the analysis, is that it is a more general method for finding arguments (Ihlen & Raknes, 2020a, p. 2). There are different ways to systematize topics. The analysis was based on Jonas Gabrielsen's (2008) analytical approach, where he distinguishes between material and formal topics. While the material topics give the argument a form, the formal topics provide the argument with content. According to Gabrielsen (2008, p. 121), the material and formal topics only work in interaction. Together they form the basis of an argument. To find the material topics, I applied an inductive approach. To find the formal topics, I applied a deductive approach, by using Corbett & Connors' (1999) typology of five common topics: definition, comparison, causal relationship, circumstance, and testimony.

Corporations do, as Rosati and Faria (2019b, p. 588) put forth, “strategically choose the elements that are present in their sustainability reports, which may signal the degree of their sustainability commitment to stakeholders.” That also applies when corporations address the SDGs. A general statement is that corporations strive to appear sustainable in line with the SDGs. To support this statement when reporting on the SDGs, the companies choose a material and a formal topic. Combined, these two topics constitute the desired conclusion for different arguments based on this statement. I identified four common rhetorical strategies (material topics) the corporations use to address Sustainable Development Goals in the reports. The corporations: 1) recognized the SDGs as a vital framework, 2) prioritized relevant SDGs related to their business, 3) promoted their results and impact, and 4) pointed to the SDGs as a guideline for future business activities. These strategies constituted the material topics of *recognition*, *prioritization*, *promotion*, and *future*. To make inferences for these four material topics, the companies use the various formal topics of Corbett and Connors (1999). While the material topics are dependent on the subject, the formal topics are not (Gabrielsen, 2008, p. 92). That means that the material topics identified here will not be relevant in another context with a different purpose. Contrastingly, the formal topics can be used to yield arguments on any subject.

A contributing factor to why we find such a high increase for the keywords “sustainability” and “sustainable development” may be the SDGs. Corporate social responsibility has been a normative concept that companies have dealt with for many years. Since the adoption of the SDGs in 2015, companies' focus has increasingly shifted towards adapting the business to the goals. An argument here may be that the SDGs become a framework business must adhere to, where the core of corporate social responsibility is standardized. When companies adapt their strategy to the SDGs, they also work according to the CSR concept's core, as companies' social responsibility involves how they respond to the consequences of their impact on society (Ihlen, 2011, p. 11). Moreover, communication about CSR includes how companies communicate this process (Ihlen, 2011, p. 76). As such, companies communicate about their corporate social responsibility when rhetorically addressing the SDGs.

The findings of the thesis raise several implications. As emphasized, the largest corporations in Norway practice the concept of sustainability on a large scale in their non-financial reporting. Further, corporations take advantage of strategic communication when they communicate about the SDGs in the reports. It is of the utmost importance that Norwegian

companies take the sustainability issue and the SDGs seriously. However, this is not necessarily unproblematic. Companies engage with the SDGs to boost their social legitimacy and link current business activity to the SDGs as a mode of impression management, according to Heras-Saizarbitoria et al. (2021, p. 325). Consequently, there is a reputational benefit from addressing sustainability and the SDGs. Ihlen (2011, p. 76) emphasizes that strategic communication about social responsibility can take the form of superficial attempts to present the business in a good light. Moreover, there are several business opportunities in the SDGs and corporate sustainability, providing a competitive advantage. Thus, when companies strategically communicate their SDG efforts, they have strategic goals and visions. Moreover, corporations' "actual contribution to the SDGs is often hard to decipher from non-financial reports", according to Pizzi et al. (2020, p. 405). A challenge with this may be that the information in the reports does not necessarily reflect the actual negative impacts a company can have on society. Excessive reporting on sustainability and the SDGs may in the ultimate consequence lead to greenwashing or SDG-washing. That may mislead the stakeholders and consumers, and in the worst-case scenario is illegal. Additionally, excessive use of the word sustainability in business can also have consequences in the long run. If the word is used excessively by companies to show that they take environmental and social issues seriously, a risk may be that the word's meaning becomes "diluted."

## **6.2 Limitations of the Study**

There are several limitations and weaknesses of this study. My starting point was to study the 30 largest corporations in Norway. However, 9 of the corporations from the list composed by Kapital are not included in the quantitative analysis. Accordingly, 18 annual reports which were supposed to be included are not analyzed. Consequently, this study does not give a complete picture of the 30 largest corporations. Indeed, it is an overview of 21 of the 30 largest. The rhetorical analysis was also supposed to study the 30 largest, but 26 reports constitute the data material. As described in chapter 3.2, the reason for this is that I have not been able to obtain the report or the report was not available in English.

Furthermore, the data material only shows how frequently the various keywords are mentioned in the reports. The results give no other indication. In addition, I have chosen to use only four keywords. The results only show data about these four keywords and no other

keywords related to corporate sustainability and corporate social responsibility. Additional keywords could have strengthened the word frequency analysis.

Moreover, there are varying numbers of pages in the analyzed reports, which can affect the frequency of keywords used in each company's report. As referred to in the theory chapter, corporations' non-financial reporting has become more critical as the world has changed. As I have also emphasized throughout the thesis, several laws and regulations in the last decade may impact the results. The purpose of the study is nevertheless to ascertain this increase and gain an insight into how large it is. It is also important to point out that there is a variation in the analyzed reports. The selected reports are based on accessibility. Additionally, I have selected the reports the corporations refer to as their report for non-financial information on sustainability and social responsibility. Veidekke is an illustrative example. The report in 2010 is a "financial report," while the report in 2020 is an "annual and sustainability report." That could be a weakness because the content of the analyzed reports varies. On the other hand, the fact that the titles of the reports have changed can strengthen the perception that sustainability reporting is becoming more important.

The rhetorical theory of topics is comprehensive, and there are many ways to understand this elastic term. Therefore, the analytical approach I apply, and my understanding of the rhetorical topics, forms the structure of the analysis. That being the case, the analysis is also discretionary. Another researcher could have found other SDG topics, based on the same data material and reports. In addition, there is a lack of similar studies to compare my results to. Despite advanced literature searches, I have not been able to find studies that use the theory of topics to study SDGs in companies' non-financial reports. It affects the basis for comparison and the possibility of building up the findings in the analysis with other, similar empirical data.

The reports are the only units for analysis. Nevertheless, there are other sources where corporations publish information on the SDGs and sustainability in general, for instance, on their websites and social media. Another possible source of information could have been news articles that mention the analyzed corporations. However, non-financial reports are the units of analysis as they are the essential platform for corporations in communicating sustainability. It is also necessary to underline the purpose of the corporation's non-financial reports. These reports are documents that the company has control over and publishes itself. Such reports have often been criticized for only disclosing the positive parts of the business (Ihlen, 2011, p.

87). That can impact the results because it is based on the companies' selective presentation of SDGs. Thus, the analysis primarily deals with the rhetorical presentation, not the corporations' actual performance.

The results from this study are only an indicator of the analyzed corporations. If the results were to present an indicator of all of the largest companies in Norway, for example, the 500 largest based on Kapital's list, I would have had to draw a random sample. Such selection methods are useful for statistical generalization as the procedure ensures that there are only random discrepancies between the universe and the sample (Grønmo, 2016, p. 110).

Nevertheless, this study aims to review the 30 largest corporations. For that reason, I chose a strategic sampling method. I based my sample on Kapital's list, as it is the best available ranking of corporations in both the private and public sector. They have published these lists for 45 years. Additionally, Deloitte, a worldwide consulting firm, has applied the list in similar surveys. However, it is essential to emphasize that the list is a result based on Kapital's criteria and assessments. In other words, this is not an official ranking, and I rely on a news media outlet as the source instead of official rankings. Nevertheless, I have not found any similar official rankings. I could have, for instance, explicitly focused on the largest corporations on Oslo Stock Exchange and then based my sample on their list. Yet, this thesis focuses on both private and public corporations. For that reason, Kapital is the best available source.

### **6.3 Suggestions for Further Research**

This study raises several questions that may be of interest for further research. I want to highlight that this study merely shows results about the focus on sustainability/CSR and rhetorical strategies related to the SDGs among the largest corporations in Norway. The largest corporations have more resources, more money, and often have communication departments responsible for annual reporting. More and more companies are also hiring specialists in corporate sustainability. Therefore, it would be interesting to see whether the same findings were transferable to smaller companies. Another area for future research is to examine whether the same increase of sustainability occurs across industries. It would also have been valuable to compare the results with companies from countries other than Norway. Furthermore, studies that evaluate the findings more closely against what the companies are doing in practice to contribute to the SDGs, not just what they say, would have gained

academic value. As we approach 2030, studies focusing on SDG-washing will be necessary. Such studies can help reveal which companies have a real contribution. Another point, which I just touched on in the rhetorical analysis, is visual tools in sustainability reports. Visual rhetoric is especially evident when companies refer to SDGs with colorful logos, images, and other visual tools related to the goals. The visual rhetorical analysis can provide valuable insight into what companies are trying to achieve with just this approach.

Moreover, corporate sustainability is receiving more attention in the political field in Norway. For instance, the new Transparency Act will apply starting July 1, 2022, a law that comprehends companies' work with fundamental human rights and decent working conditions. Political decisions and priorities made in the EU also influence Norwegian corporate sustainability policy. The European Commission presented the European Green Deal in 2019, which seeks to strengthen the EU as a global leader in climate policy (Holden & Linnerud, 2021, p. 258). As a part of the Green Deal, the EU is now working on introducing the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), which will expand the already existing Non-Financial Reporting Directive (NFRD) and require more companies to report on sustainability. The directive stipulates, among other things, requirements for more detailed reporting and a statutory requirement for third-party certification (Thornam, 2021). New requirements and laws will bring significant changes and challenges for Norwegian companies. Thus, future research should examine how these new regulations will affect Norwegian companies and how they respond to the regulations.

Additionally, the data material in this study consists of reports for 2010 and 2020. Most of the corporations in the sample have now published their report for 2021. As corporate sustainability is constantly changing and evolving, one can assume that the reporting for 2021 follows this change. Non-financial reporting addresses significant events that have affected the company during the reporting year. For instance, further research should examine how the corporations have followed up on the SDGs they selected as priorities in 2020 and whether the same rhetorical topics still apply in the reports for 2021.

As a final concluding mark, I will emphasize that we now have eight years until the deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals to be achieved. The world is facing a time of enormous challenges. The climate crisis is worsening, there is a war in Europe, and a continued Covid-19 pandemic in large parts of the world. Under those circumstances, we need



to understand how companies can contribute. Consequently, communication is a powerful tool for companies, but the real action and the changes they make are what first and foremost count. Therefore, we need to understand the interaction between the SDGs, strategic communication, and real action. I truly believe and hope future research will focus on that issue during the next eight years.

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# APPENDIX

## 1.0 Description of the Sample

**Equinor ASA:** Equinor publishes separate sustainability reports every year and has reports dated back to 2001 in their online archive.

**Norsk Hydro ASA:** Sustainability reporting is included in the annual report. Norsk Hydro has annual reports dated back to 1999 in their online archive.

**Telenor:** Telenor has separate sustainability reports in their online archive dated back to 2011. The reports have been named Telenor Group Sustainability Report every year, except in 2013, when it was named Telenor Group Social Responsibility Report. Sustainability is also integrated into the report for 2020

**Yara International ASA:** Yara has separate sustainability reports from 2008/09 in their online archive.

**NorgesGruppen ASA:** NorgesGruppen titles its annual report Annual and Sustainability Report, which it has been named since 2017. They had their first separate sustainability report in 2016. They had separate CSR reports in 2013, 2014, and 2015 (Samfunnsrapport). Annual reports dated back to 2000 are available in the online archive. The report of 2010 is only available in Norwegian online.

**Storebrand ASA:** Sustainability reporting has been an integrated part of Storebrand's annual reports since 2008.

**Reitan AS:** Reitan is a group consisting of different companies in Reitan Retail, Reitan Real Estate, and Reitan Capital, and they do not publish reports for the group.

**DNB Bank ASA:** DNB had a separate CSR report in 2010 and a separate sustainability report in 2020, named Sustainability Factbook 2020. Sustainability and GRI are also included in the annual report.

**Kommunal Landspensjonskasse KLP:** Sustainability reporting is included in the annual report for 2020. The company had a separate CSR report in 2010.

**Coop Norge SA:** Sustainability and CSR are integrated into reports from both 2010 and 2020. The reports for 2010 and 2020 are only available in Norwegian.

**Orkla ASA:** Orkla started to publish separate sustainability reports in 2007. Sustainability reporting has been included in the annual report from 2015.

**Norsk Tipping AS:** Sustainability reporting is integrated into the annual report. Reports dating back to 2011 are available in the online archive. Norsk Tipping did not publish the



annual report from 2020 in English in its complete format. Only the formal and essential parts of the report have been translated to English and are only accessible as a website.

**Mowi ASA:** Sustainability reporting is included in the annual report for 2020. Mowi is formerly known as Marine Harvest. They changed their name to Mowi January 1, 2019. Marine Harvest had a separate sustainability report in 2009, while sustainability reporting was integrated into the annual report of 2010. However, they published a Sustainable Seafood report: the Marine Harvest way in May 2010.

**Atea ASA:** Atea has separate sustainability reports. In 2020, their report was titled Corporate Responsibility & Sustainability report.

**Statkraft AS:** Statkraft began publishing sustainability reports in 2003. Sustainability reporting was integrated into the annual report in both 2010 and 2020. The company had separate sustainability reports from 2015 to 2019.

**Veidekke ASA:** Sustainability reporting is integrated into the annual report for 2020. Veidekke had a separate sustainability report in 2017 and has had CSR reports for many years – the first one in 2006.

**Møller Mobility Group AS:** MMG has annual reports from 2011 in their online archive. They have named their annual report “Annual- and sustainability report” beginning in 2020. From 2016 to 2019, the reports were named “Annual- and social reports.”

**Subsea 7 Norway AS:** Subsea 7 Norway has separate sustainability reports from 2019 and 2020 in their online archive. For 2010, the annual report was analyzed.

**Gjensidige Forsikring ASA:** Gjensidige has reports for both Gjensidige Forsikring and Gjensidige Pensjonsforsikring. Sustainability reporting is included in the annual report.

**Aker Solutions ASA:** Aker Solutions has CSR reports dated back to 2010 in their online archive. They started to name the reports Sustainability report in 2019.

**Aker BP ASA:** Aker BP was established in 2016. Aker BP has separate sustainability reports dated back to 2017 in their online archive.

**Wallenius Wilhelmsen ASA:** Wallenius Wilhelmsen had separate Environmental reports from 2007 to 2012 and started to name the reports Sustainability report in 2013 – which they have been titled since. The sustainability report for 2020 is not available as a document/file – only on their website. For that reason, the annual report for 2020 was analyzed instead.

**Vår Energi ASA:** Vår Energi has separate sustainability reports dated back to 2018 in their online archive. There is no report for 2010 available.

**AF Gruppen ASA:** AF Gruppen had a separate report for 2020 named *Social Responsibility and Sustainability report*.

**Sparebank 1 Gruppen AS:** Sustainability reporting is included in the annual report for 2020. The same information is also published as a stand-alone document online.

**Kongsberg Gruppen ASA:** Sustainability reporting is integrated into the annual report. Their annual report has been named *Annual Report and Sustainability Report* since 2014. In 2013, Kongsberg Gruppen had a separate sustainability report.

**Nordea Bank Abp:** Nordea Bank has CSR reports dated back to 2009 in their online archive and started to publish sustainability reports in 2015. This thesis analyzed the annual report for 2020, as the sustainability report was not available as a functionable PDF-file for NVivo.

The report for Nordea Group includes Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark.

**Nortura SA:** Nortura does not have an annual report from 2010 available. For 2020, a social report is available online only in Norwegian.

**Elkem ASA:** Elkem was owned by Orkla in 2010. Thus, there is not a separate report for 2010 available. Sustainability reporting is integrated into the annual report for 2020.






































**Posten Norge AS:** Sustainability reporting is integrated into the annual report for both 2010 and 2020.

## 2.0 Word Frequency in NVivo

### 2.1 Frequency of the keyword sustainability

sustainability				
Summary		Reference		
File Name	In Folder	References	Coverage	
AF Gruppen Annual Report 2020	Files\\Reports (English)	10	0.01%	
Aker Solutions Sustainability Report 2020	Files\\Reports (English)	140	0.66%	
ATEA Sustainability Report 2020	Files\\Reports (English)	103	1.39%	
DNB Annual Report 2010	Files\\Reports (English)	5	0.01%	
DNB Annual Report 2020	Files\\Reports (English)	218	0.22%	
Equinor Sustainability Report 2020	Files\\Reports (English)	123	0.50%	
Equinor_Sustainability report 2010	Files\\Reports (English)	277	0.75%	
Gjensidige Annual Report 2020	Files\\Reports (English)	86	0.06%	
Hydro Annual Report 2010	Files\\Reports (English)	10	0.01%	
Hydro Annual Report 2020	Files\\Reports (English)	94	0.07%	
KLP Annual Report 2020	Files\\Reports (English)	16	0.02%	
Kongsberg Annual Report 2010	Files\\Reports (English)	1	0.01%	
Kongsberg Annual Report 2020	Files\\Reports (English)	616	0.80%	
Mowi Annual Report 2020	Files\\Reports (English)	105	0.11%	
Mowi~MarineHarvest Annual Report 2010	Files\\Reports (English)	13	0.04%	
Nordea Annual Report 2020	Files	64	0.05%	
Nordea CSR Report 2010	Files\\Reports (English)	10	0.07%	
Orkla Sustainability Report 2010	Files\\Reports (English)	52	0.36%	
Orkla Sustainability Report 2020	Files\\Reports (English)	76	0.29%	
Posten Annual Report 2010	Files\\Reports (English)	31	0.06%	
Posten Annual Report 2020	Files\\Reports (English)	49	0.07%	
Sparebank 1 Gruppen Annual Report 2020	Files\\Reports (English)	151	0.26%	
Stakraft Annual Report 2010	Files\\Reports (English)	23	0.06%	
Storebrand Annual Report 2010	Files\\Reports (English)	11	0.02%	
Storebrand Annual Report 2020	Files\\Reports (English)	468	0.50%	
Subsea 7 Sustainability Report 2020	Files\\Reports (English)	75	0.67%	
Telenor Annual Report 2010	Files\\Reports (English)	2	0.01%	
Telenor Annual Report 2020	Files\\Reports (English)	93	0.13%	
Veidekke Annual Report 2020	Files\\Reports (English)	99	0.18%	
Wallenius Wilhelmsen Annual Report 2010	Files\\Reports (English)	2	0.01%	
Wallenius Wilhelmsen Annual Report 2020	Files\\Reports (English)	56	0.12%	
Yara Citizenship Review 2010	Files\\Reports (English)	12	0.11%	
Yara Sustainability Report 2020	Files\\Reports (English)	238	0.62%	

## 2.2 Frequency of the keyword sustainable\_development

sustainable_development				
Summary		Reference		
File Name	^	In Folder	References	Coverage
 AF Gruppen Annual Report 2010		Files\Reports (English)	1	0.01%
 AF Gruppen Annual Report 2020		Files\Reports (English)	3	0.01%
 Aker Solutions Sustainability Report 2020		Files\Reports (English)	5	0.04%
 ATEA Annual Report 2010		Files\Reports (English)	1	0.01%
 ATEA Sustainability Report 2020		Files\Reports (English)	6	0.13%
 DNB Annual Report 2010		Files\Reports (English)	1	0.01%
 DNB Annual Report 2020		Files\Reports (English)	38	0.06%
 Equinor Sustainability Report 2020		Files\Reports (English)	20	0.13%
 Equinor_Sustainability report 2010		Files\Reports (English)	27	0.12%
 Gjensidige Annual Report 2020		Files\Reports (English)	42	0.04%
 Hydro Annual Report 2010		Files\Reports (English)	6	0.01%
 Hydro Annual Report 2020		Files\Reports (English)	19	0.02%
 KLP Annual Report 2010		Files\Reports (English)	2	0.01%
 KLP Annual Report 2020		Files\Reports (English)	59	0.12%
 Kongsberg Annual Report 2010		Files\Reports (English)	3	0.01%
 Kongsberg Annual Report 2020		Files\Reports (English)	15	0.03%
 Mowi Annual Report 2020		Files\Reports (English)	20	0.03%
 Mowi~MarineHarvest Annual Report 2010		Files\Reports (English)	3	0.02%
 Nordea Annual Report 2020		Files	1	0.01%
 Nordea CSR Report 2010		Files\Reports (English)	1	0.01%
 Orkla Sustainability Report 2020		Files\Reports (English)	19	0.11%
 Posten Annual Report 2010		Files\Reports (English)	9	0.03%
 Posten Annual Report 2020		Files\Reports (English)	38	0.04%
 Sparebank 1 Gruppen Annual Report 2010		Files\Reports (English)	1	0.01%
 Sparebank 1 Gruppen Annual Report 2020		Files\Reports (English)	5	0.01%
 Stakraft Annual Report 2010		Files\Reports (English)	2	0.01%
 Statkraft Annual Report 2020		Files\Reports (English)	6	0.01%
 Storebrand Annual Report 2010		Files\Reports (English)	11	0.03%
 Storebrand Annual Report 2020		Files\Reports (English)	14	0.02%
 Subsea 7 Annual Report 2010		Files\Reports (English)	1	0.01%
 Subsea 7 Sustainability Report 2020		Files\Reports (English)	5	0.07%
 Telenor Annual Report 2020		Files\Reports (English)	7	0.02%
 Veidekke Annual Report 2010		Files\Reports (English)	1	0.01%
 Veidekke Annual Report 2020		Files\Reports (English)	7	0.02%
 Wallenius Wilhelmsen Annual Report 2020		Files\Reports (English)	3	0.01%
 Yara Citizenship Review 2010		Files\Reports (English)	1	0.01%
 Yara Sustainability Report 2020		Files\Reports (English)	5	0.02%

## 2.3 Frequency of the keyword social\_responsibility

social_responsibility				
Summary		Reference		
File Name	In Folder	References	Coverage	
AF Gruppen Annual Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	5	0.02%	
AF Gruppen Annual Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	60	0.11%	
Aker Solutions Annual Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	2	0.01%	
Aker Solutions Sustainability Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	4	0.03%	
ATEA Annual Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	6	0.02%	
ATEA Sustainability Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	6	0.12%	
DNB Annual Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	4	0.01%	
DNB Annual Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	3	0.01%	
Elkem Annual Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	6	0.01%	
Equinor_Sustainability report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	20	0.08%	
Gjensidige Annual Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	13	0.02%	
Gjensidige Annual Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	13	0.01%	
Hydro Annual Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	8	0.01%	
Hydro Annual Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	44	0.05%	
KLP Annual Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	16	0.03%	
KLP Annual Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	21	0.04%	
Kongsberg Annual Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	24	0.10%	
Kongsberg Annual Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	40	0.07%	
Mowi Annual Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	2	0.01%	
Mowi~MarineHarvest Annual Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	2	0.01%	
MøllerGruppen Annual Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	10	0.03%	
Nordea Annual Report 2020	Files	7	0.01%	
Nordea CSR Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	3	0.03%	
NorgesGruppen Annual Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	4	0.02%	
Norsk Tipping Annual Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	11	0.07%	
Posten Annual Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	23	0.07%	
Posten Annual Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	6	0.01%	
Sparebank 1 Gruppen Annual Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	3	0.01%	
Sparebank 1 Gruppen Annual Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	3	0.01%	
Stakraft Annual Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	2	0.01%	
Storebrand Annual Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	5	0.01%	
Storebrand Annual Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	23	0.03%	
Subsea 7 Annual Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	2	0.01%	
Veidekke Annual Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	8	0.03%	
Veidekke Annual Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	5	0.01%	
Vår Energi Sustainability Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	3	0.03%	
Wallenius Wilhelmsen Annual Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	2	0.01%	
Wallenius Wilhelmsen Annual Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	10	0.03%	

## 2.4 Frequency of the keyword corporate\_responsibility

corporate_responsibility				
Summary		Reference		
File Name	In Folder	References	Coverage	
Aker Solutions Annual Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	19	0.06%	
Aker Solutions Sustainability Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	1	0.01%	
ATEA Sustainability Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	8	0.18%	
DNB Annual Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	104	0.17%	
Equinor_Sustainability report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	2	0.01%	
Hydro Annual Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	10	0.02%	
Hydro Annual Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	4	0.01%	
KLP Annual Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	10	0.02%	
Kongsberg Annual Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	2	0.01%	
Nordea CSR Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	3	0.03%	
Orkla Sustainability Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	53	0.60%	
Orkla Sustainability Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	6	0.04%	
Stakraft Annual Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	1	0.01%	
Statkraft Annual Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	1	0.01%	
Storebrand Annual Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	50	0.13%	
Subsea 7 Annual Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	2	0.01%	
Telenor Annual Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	4	0.01%	
Veidekke Annual Report 2010	Files\Reports (English)	1	0.01%	
Yara Citizenship Review 2010	Files\Reports (English)	1	0.02%	
Yara Sustainability Report 2020	Files\Reports (English)	1	0.01%	

## 3.0 Codebook and Example of Table for the Qualitative Analysis

Name	Files	References
SDG in AF Gruppen 2020	1	2
SDG in Aker BP 2020	1	7
SDG in Aker Solutions 2020	1	22
SDG in DNB 2020	1	30
SDG in Elkem 2020	1	9
SDG in Equinor 2020	1	10
SDG in Gjensidige 2020	1	13
SDG in Hydro 2020	1	11
SDG in KLP 2020	1	12
SDG in Kongsberg 2020	1	13
SDG in MøllerGruppen 2020	1	12
SDG in NorgesGruppen 2020	1	4

Name	Files	References
SDG in Orkla 2020	1	21
SDG in Posten 2020	1	4
SDG in Sparebank 1 2020	1	5
SDG in Subsea 7 2020	1	3
SDG in Telenor 2020	1	6
SDG in Veidekke 2020	1	9
SDG in Vår Energi 2020	1	9
SDG in Wallenius Wilhelmsen 2020	1	2
SDG in Yara 2020	1	4
SDGs in ATEA 2020	1	18
SDGs in Mowi 2020	1	17
SDGs in Statkraft 2020	1	17
SDGs in Storebrand 2020	1	28

Name of company	Topic of recognition
<b>Equinor</b>	Contributing to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
<b>Norsk Hydro</b>	The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) embrace a universal approach to the sustainable development agenda. They explicitly call on business to use creativity and innovation to address development challenges and recognize the need for governments to encourage sustainability reporting. Hydro has an impact on all of the 17 development goals, but some more than others.
<b>Telenor</b>	Telenor was built on a belief in connecting the many, not just the few. We are committed to all UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
<b>Yara International</b>	2. Contribution towards the Sustainable Development Goals Yara is committed to doing business responsibly, a commitment expressed by us being a signatory to the UN Global Compact, and embracing its ten principles. In December 2020, the World Benchmarking Alliance ranked Yara among the top twelve performers in its World Benchmarking Alliance Food & Agriculture Baseline Assessment, a study of 350 influential food and agriculture companies and their contributions towards the SDGs.
<b>Norgesgruppen</b>	in 2016 we linked our sustainability work to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
<b>Storebrand</b>	We base our business activities on the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
<b>DNB</b>	or DNB, the SDGs have been a source of inspiration for our own sustainability work, and a valuable framework to have in our dialogue with corporate customers about how they choose to integrate sustainability into their strategies. We seek to contribute positively to.
<b>KLP</b>	By signing up, we have undertaken to follow up on these principles. Together with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the principles have a bearing on how we manage our own business and on the expectations we place on the companies we invest in.
<b>Orkla</b>	“Orkla is particularly committed to achieving UN Sustainable Development Goal 12, and wants to make it easy for consumers to make sustainable choices,” concludes Jaan Ivar Semlitsch.

<b>Mowi</b>	We remain committed to the principles of the United Nation's Global Compact and to maximising our contribution to its Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Mowi supports the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The alignment of our strategy, guiding principles, material longterm value drivers and the SDGs is provided on the following pages.
<b>ATEA</b>	At Atea, we are committed to leverage our knowledge and business to contribute to the transformations needed in order to achieve the SDGs.
<b>Statkraft</b>	Statkraft recognises the important role that business can play in realising the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and has committed to supporting the goals in all our business activities and through our membership in the United Nations Global Compact.
<b>Veidekke</b>	In just under 10 years, we will reach 2030 – the year by which the UN Sustainable Development Goals are to be achieved. Veidekke takes its sustainable development responsibility seriously, and supports the UN goals. We also believe that sustainable operations and sustainable solutions are necessary prerequisites for the company's success in the transition to a low-emissions society.
<b>Møller Mobility Group</b>	The United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals are a global plan of action to end poverty, fight inequality and stop climate change by 2030. Achieving the objectives will require major business actors to contribute through their activities. As the largest importer and dealer of cars in the Nordic region, we can help make a difference through our active involvement.
<b>Subsea 7 Norway</b>	We are committed to upholding the 10 principles in the UN Global Compact, which cover human rights, labour, environment, and anti-corruption, and to engaging in collaborative projects which advance the broader development goals of the United Nations, including the Sustainable Development Goals.
<b>Gjensidige Forsikring ASA</b>	Through its activities, Gjensidige shall implement measures that promote the Sustainable Development goals (SDGs) and focus on the ones that are most relevant to an insurance company.
<b>Aker Solutions</b>	Our Commitment.
<b>Aker BP</b>	Furthermore, linking the company strategy to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provides a broader perspective that enables us to translate our activities into a global context.
<b>Wallenius Wilhelmsen</b>	At Wallenius Wilhelmsen, we are committed to doing our part and our sustainability work supports the following 7 SDGs:
<b>Vår Energi</b>	Vår Energi fully supports the UN SDGs and understands the crucial role that businesses have in the achievement of these goals.
<b>AF Gruppen</b>	The UN's Sustainable Development Goals describe the world's challenges and needs. Our social responsibility is twofold, and is linked to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals as follows.
<b>Sparebank 1 Gruppen</b>	The United Nations Environment Programme Finance Initiative (UNEP FI) launched the Principles for Responsible Banking in 2019. These are designed to ensure that the banking industry is a driving force behind achieving the SDGs and the Paris Agreement. SpareBank 1 SR-Bank signed up to the principles when they were launched and has thus committed itself to cutting its direct and indirect CO2 emissions in line with the national obligations under the Paris Agreement. The group has committed itself to carrying out and implementing measures that support the principles over 4 years from when it became a signatory and up to the end of 2023.
<b>Kongsberg Gruppen</b>	We strive to support all the goals through our operations, both in terms of reducing any negative impact and by seizing any business opportunities which may be presented by the goals.
<b>Nordea Bank Norge</b>	As a member of the core group of founding banks and a signatory the principles of Responsible Banking, Nordea is committed to the objectives of the Paris Agreement and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
<b>Elkem</b>	Elkem is committed to develop its business in support of the ambitions of the Paris climate agreement and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
<b>Posten</b>	The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals have given the world a common direction for longterm development. Based on our stakeholders and the scope of our business, there are five goals that stand out. This is where we can



make a positive difference that creates long-term values for the environment, people and our own business. We must be as relevant today and in the future as when we started 374 years ago, without destroying opportunities for future generations.

## 4.0 Keywords in Retriever (Atekst)

### 4.1 “bærekraft” – sustainability



## 4.2 “bærekraftig utvikling” – sustainable development

