

## Metadiscourse in Corporate Press Releases

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**Abstract:** Companies issue press releases in an attempt to communicate news about themselves to the public and the business world. Corporate press releases thus occupy the middle ground between business discourses and newspaper articles. This study reports the distribution of metadiscourse markers in corporate press releases based on the comparison between corporate press releases corpus and business news report corpus. It is found that there are less interactive metadiscourse markers in corporate press releases mainly due to the lower normalized frequency of transitions and evidentials, and that more interactional metadiscourse markers are employed in corporate press releases, especially attitudes, self mentions and engagement markers. The results reveal that corporate press releases emphasize more on writer-reader interaction, aiming to promote the company and build positive corporate image.

### 1. Introduction

In cyberspace, the corporate website is used to present the company visually to anyone who may be interested in the company and its activities [1]. In order to give visitors a good impression, the information on the website should be well organized and the presentation should be attractive. Company profiles, product advisements, online sales, career opportunity, and customer support are the common components of most company websites. Corporate press release is the communication media between companies, the press circle and the general reading public [2]. It not only informs readers the latest news concerning the company but also influences corporate reputation. The editors may omit negative news or describe the news in a more positive attitude, thus reducing the damage to corporate image [3]. Based on this idea, corporate press releases provided via company websites has grown rapidly and the rhetorical functions employed in this genre are worth in-depth research. This study attempts to analyze the use of metadiscourse in the corporate press release posted on the official websites and find out its metadiscourse preference.

### 2. Literature Review

Metadiscourse was first introduced by Harris [4], and developed prosperously in applied linguistics with the contribution of Williams [5], Vande Kopple [6] and Crismore [7]. According to Hyland [8], “Metadiscourse is the cover term for the self-reflective expressions used to negotiate international meanings in a text, assisting the writer to express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community”. It is now commonly accepted by linguists as the method writers or speakers use to interact with their audiences through the text and it is widely applied in discourse analysis studies [9]. Previous metadiscourse studies mainly focused on academic writing, such as textbooks [10], post-graduate dissertation [11, 12], students’ essay [13, 14], and research articles [15, 16, 17, 18]. With the growth of interest, business discourses and newspaper articles become the target of metadiscourse analysis. Hyland [19] compared the metadiscourse distribution in CEO letters and director’s reports. McLaren-Hankin [20] focused on the mechanisms of hedging in “forward-looking statement” in corporate press releases and identified the lexico-grammatical forms and functions of hedging. Jensen [21] provided insights into the use of interpersonal strategies in e-mail communication between Danish Company and its business contact in Taiwan, and found that

the frequency of interpersonal strategies converged as trust established. Le [22] demonstrated the construction of active participation in editorials of French newspaper *Le Monde* through the analysis of three metadiscourse categories, evidentials, person markers and relational markers. Dafouz-Milne [23] discussed the cross-cultural and cross-linguistic metadiscourse preferences based on the comparison of opinion columns from quality newspapers in the UK and Spain, and reported variations of the distribution and composition of metadiscourse markers. All these studies contribute to the richness and diversity of metadiscourse research; however, they seem to focus on either business discourses or newspaper articles in general, paying little attention to corporate press releases, except for McLaren-Hankin's research [20]. Corporate press release is the news released by the company via its official website, in an attempt to present the company and the news reported as positively as possible. Therefore, it shows the combined characteristics of business discourse and newspaper report. Considering its important but underexplored situation, this study intends to fill the gap of metadiscourse use in corporate press releases.

### 3. Data Collection and Methodology

In order to reveal the distribution pattern of metadiscourse in corporate press releases, two corpora are built. Corpus 1 contains the corporate press release posted on the company website. 38 British and American companies listed in global *Fortune* 500 were selected and the corporate news posted in the past six months were collected. Corpus 2 contains business related news reports published during the same period on quality newspaper websites, *Washington Post*, *USA Today* and *New York Times*. It is believed that there would be differences in the use of metadiscourse between corporate press releases and business news reports since the former is edited by the company and the latter is compiled by an independent third party. All materials are downloaded and then converted to text format suitable for corpus search. The total tokens of corporate press releases and business news reports are 69,626 and 17,661 respectively. And the type-token ratios (TTR) in two corpora are 10.66 and 10.29. Although more corporate press releases are collected since they are the target of present research, their TTRs prove the comparability of these two corpora.

The interpersonal classification model of Hyland [8] was applied in the coding of metadiscourse markers. This model contains two dimensions of interaction—interactive metadiscourse guides reader through the text and interactional metadiscourse involves readers in the text. They both have five subtypes, each serving different functions in argumentation. In the category of interactive metadiscourse, transitions are used to express the relations between main clauses (e.g. furthermore, as a consequence, however); frame markers are used to sequence, label, predict and shift topic (e.g. finally, by far, would like to, return to); endophoric markers refer to information in other part of the text (e.g. in the video below); evidential markers point to the source of information (e.g. cited, mentioned); and code glosses are used to explain what have been said (e.g. that means, namely). In the category of interactional metadiscourse, hedges show the writer's openness to alternatives (e.g. likely, might); boosters express the certainty of statement (e.g. clearly, beyond doubt); attitude markers convey the writer's affective attitude (e.g. expectedly, appropriately); self mentions show the writer's explicit presence (e.g. I, the author) and engagement markers are used to address readers directly (e.g. you, should).

The items in the corpora considered to be metadiscourse markers were identified and coded manually based on the above mentioned classification model. Concordance software Antconc 3.4.4 was used to search each subtype and then the results were normalized into 1,000 words basis to enable cross-corpus comparison. SPSS 19.0 was used to conduct the Chi-square tests between the corpora.

### 4. Results

As shown in Table 1, the normalized frequencies of metadiscourse in corporate press release corpus and business news report corpus are 27.95 and 48.13 respectively, which shows significant difference ( $X^2=215.11$ ,  $p=0.000***$ ). It means that compared to business news reports, corporate

press releases use less metadiscourse markers.

The normalized frequency of interactive metadiscourse in corporate press releases is obviously lower than that in business news reports, which is mainly attributed to the lower frequency of transitions (7.94 vs. 15.06 per 1,000 words,  $X^2=84.76$ ,  $p=0.000***$ ) and evidentials (3.39 vs. 14.61 per 1,000 words,  $X^2=326.83$ ,  $p=0.000***$ ). It suggests that there are less transitions and evidentials in corporate press releases.

The normalized frequencies of interactional metadiscourse in these two corpora show no obvious difference ( $X^2=3.32$ ,  $p=0.068$ ); however, the normalized frequencies of attitude markers (1.61 vs. 0.74 per 1,000 words,  $X^2=6.76$ ,  $p=0.009**$ ), self mentions (5.34 vs. 0.11 per 1,000 words,  $X^2=86.98$ ,  $p=0.000***$ ) and engagement markers (2.27 vs. 0.06 per 1,000 words,  $X^2=36.66$ ,  $p=0.000***$ ) in corporate press releases are much higher than those in business news reports while hedges have higher frequency in the latter corpus (3.12 vs. 13.36 per 1,000 words,  $X^2=296.67$ ,  $p=0.000***$ ). It reveals that corporate press releases use more attitude markers, self mentions and engagement markers, but less hedges.

Table.1. Distribution of metadiscourse in corporate press releases and business news reports

Classification	Corpus 1 (69,626) Corporate press releases		Corpus 2 (17,661) Business news reports		Chi-square tests		
	frequency	percentage	frequency	percentage	$X^2$	$p$	
metadiscourse	27.95	100%	48.13	100%	215.11	0.000***	-
transitions	7.94	28.73%	15.06	31.29%	84.76	0.000***	-
frame markers	1.03	3.71%	1.47	3.06%	3.00	0.083	-
endophoric	0.16	0.59%	0.51	1.05%	7.60	0.006**	-
evidentials	3.39	12.26%	14.61	30.35%	326.83	0.000***	-
code glosses	1.26	4.57%	1.30	2.71%	0.08	0.783	-
interactive	13.78	49.87%	32.95	68.47%	319.85	0.000***	-
hedges	3.12	11.30%	13.36	27.76%	296.67	0.000***	-
boosters	1.52	5.49%	0.91	1.88%	3.26	0.071	+
attitude	1.61	5.81%	0.74	1.53%	6.76	0.009**	+
self mentions	5.34	19.31%	0.11	0.24%	86.98	0.000***	+
engagement	2.27	8.23%	0.06	0.12%	36.66	0.000***	+
interactional	13.86	50.13%	15.17	31.53%	3.32	0.068	-

Note: The asterisks (\*) indicate significance level, and the “+” and “-” signs on the right side indicate “overuse” and “underuse”.

When focusing on the proportion of metadiscourse markers in corporate press releases, it is found from Table 1 that nearly equal amount of interactive and interactional metadiscourse markers are employed (49.87% vs. 50.13%). Transitions, self mentions, evidentials and hedges represent relatively higher percentages among all metadiscourse markers, with transitions ranking the first and having the highest percentage (28.73%). On the contrary, in business news reports, there are more interactive metadiscourse than interactional ones (68.47% vs. 31.53%). Transitions, evidentials and hedges are the top three subtypes and their percentages are much higher than others but closed to each other (31.29%, 30.35% and 27.76%).

## 5. Discussions

Although both corporate press releases and business news reports concern the latest information and bear the responsibility of informing readers, the statistics above reveal the difference in the use and distribution of metadiscourse markers between corporate press releases and business news reports.

First, generally speaking, there are less metadiscourse markers in corporate press releases than that in business news reports. The difference could be attributed to the far more frequency of interactive metadiscourse markers, especially transitions and evidentials, in business news reports.

As shown in (1), transitions “but”, “because”, “and” connect the main sentences, which shows readers clear logical connection and ease readers’ difficulty in interpreting the text. Although less in normalized frequency compared to business news reports, transitions enjoy the highest proportion in corporate press releases. In (2), “not only...but also” emphasizes the benefits of the innovative solutions to independent pharmacists. The business news reports published by famous newspapers are written by professional journalists. Therefore, it is believed that the reports look more formal with the use of logical connectors. In addition to the formality of business news reports, objectivity and reliability are also the important features. Evidentials are used to “indicate the source of information which originates outside the current text” [24], which help to increase the credibility of the text. As shown in (3), in the news report entitled “Bourbon boom: Kentucky inventory reaches 40-year high”, different sources of outside information are mentioned, industry observer, company president, the association’s president, and the Distilled Spirits Council. Some statements are presented in direct citation and others are signaled by explicit evidential markers, which could increase the readability of the news. As for the rhetorical functions of transitions and evidential markers, they are important tools in building rational appeals, either by helping readers understand the intended meaning [8] or by demonstrating the objectivity of the report from various sources.

(1) *But* that acknowledgment rippled through the industry, Martin said, *because* ESPN has generally been seen as a safe place in the TV business: Sports are hugely popular, giving the network a top spot in the ratings, *and* sporting events are usually watched live, meaning fewer people can fast-forward through commercials.

(Corpus 2—Cracks in the cable business send media stocks tumbling)

(2) During ThoughtSpot’s opening session, AmerisourceBergen leaders highlighted solutions designed to help independent pharmacists *not only* navigate industry challenges, *but also* optimize front-end sales and create efficiencies in store operations.

(Corpus 1—AmerisourceBergen today showcased innovative solutions)

(3) “There’s an ocean of spirits resting in Kentucky right now,” *said industry observer F. Paul Pacult, editor of the newsletter Spirit Journal.*

Heaven Hill Distilleries is among the producers feeling bullish about bourbon’s prospects. The company has about 1.1 million barrels of American whiskeys—mostly bourbon—aging in its warehouses, *said company president Max L. Shapira.*

“This truly is the golden age of bourbon,” *said Eric Gregory, the association’s president.*

Exports of bourbon and Tennessee whiskey topped \$1 billion in 2014 for the second straight year, *according to the Distilled Spirits Council.*

(Corpus 2—Bourbon boom: Kentucky inventory reaches 40-year high)

Second, although there is no obvious difference in the use of interactional metadiscourse markers between corporate press releases and business news reports, the relatively higher frequency of attitudes, self mentions and engagement markers in corporate press release should be examined in details. According to Bhatia [25], the purpose of news report is to bring news to readers as accurately and dispassionately as possible. Objectivity and neutrality are achieved in news reports with least personal opinions and direct involvement of writer-reader relationship. The use of interactional metadiscourse markers, especially attitudes, self mentions and engagement markers should be avoided in news reports. However, the findings reveal that corporate press releases seem to breach the basic requirements for general news reports. As corporate news posted by the company via the official website, the press releases have the function of information sharing, company promotion and reader interaction, which makes them distinguish from news reports published by the third party newspaper. In (4), attitude marker “importantly” not only shows BP’s confidence in its projects but also emphasizes the significant contribution of the new projects. And “expected” in (5) suggests the positive attitude of Cardinal Health towards the acquisition business. In (6), as corporate news reporter, Legal and General use self mentions “we” and “our” to construct the active participation of the company, reminding readers of the corporate commitment. And with the use of self mentions in (7), Alphabet attempts to shorten the writer-reader relationship. Engagement markers could “explicitly address readers by focusing their attention or including them in the text through second

person pronoun” [24]. In (8), the reporter uses “should” to arouse readers’ attention and propose the company plan “be open to business model innovation”. In (9), the reporter addresses readers directly by second person pronoun “you”, which build the friendly image of Microsoft and help introduce the new function of Skype. From the perspective of rhetorical function, attitudes, self mentions and engagement markers all contribute greatly to affective appeals [8], showing the company reporters’ emotional investment to their readers.

(4) *Importantly*, these new projects, with their lower development costs and higher margins, also further improve BP’s resilience to the price environment.

(Corpus 1—Two more BP projects begin production)

(5) Integration efforts are off to a successful start and it is *expected* that all integration work and transitions will be completed over the next 18 months.

(Corpus 1—Cardinal Health completes acquisition of Medtronic's patient recovery business)

(6) *We* believe *our* long term capital can deliver significant housing, health and wellbeing benefits for those in later life.

(Corpus 1—Legal and General enters the retirement housing sector)

(7) To help more advertisers take advantage of these benefits, *we*’ll be focusing *our* efforts and moving all AdWords app install campaigns to UAC later this year.

(Corpus 1—Alphabet: Propel your mobile app growth with Universal App Campaigns)

(8) As the market for independent pharmacies gets increasingly competitive, pharmacies increasingly *should* be open to business model innovation to survive.

(Corpus 1—McKesson: Better business for independent pharmacies through clinical programs)

(9) The app also contains currency options, so if *you*’re sending funds from the US, for example, to someone in Europe, *you* can choose to send the money in euros.

(Corpus 1—Microsoft: Skype now lets you send money to friends and family)

Third, the comparison of metadiscourse proportion between two corpora indicates that corporate press releases and business news reports both employ relatively more transitions, evidentials and hedges, and that self mentions are used more frequently in corporate press releases alone. Transitions help create textual cohesion, evidentials emphasize the independent viewpoints, and self mentions reinforce the news reporters’ position on the matter [22, 26], which have been discussed above. As for hedges, they are often used to mitigate certainty or commitment, ranking the top one of interactional metadiscourse markers in business news reports and second only to self mentions in corporate press releases. In (10), “likely” shows the possibility of higher proportion of telemedicine services offered to patients in the future. And “largely” in (11) suggests that higher volumes and lower costs are the main reasons, rather than the only reason, leading to the \$235 million improvement. In (12), two hedges “more than” and “nearly” help avoid the error in statistics and make the figure more accountable. Both corporate press releases and business news reports use hedges to build the honest, modest, reliable and cautious image of reporters, achieving credibility and affective appeals simultaneously.

(10) A number of surveys now estimate that the percentage of provider organizations offering telemedicine services to patients has crossed the 50 percent threshold and *likely* is even higher.

(Corpus 1—McKesson: The evolution of the telemedicine market)

(11) The \$235 million improvement from the prior quarter was *largely* driven by higher volumes and lower costs due to reduced turnaround activity.

(Corpus 1—Phillips 66 reports second-quarter earnings of \$550 million)

(12) The cracks in the cable business showed Friday as Cablevision Systems, a large service provider around New York City, said it lost *more than* 130,000 cable subscribers in the most recent quarter compared with the same period last year, a drop of *nearly* 5 percent.

(Corpus 2—Cracks in the cable business send media stocks tumbling)

## 6. Conclusion

Corporate press releases are the primary methods for company owners to inform customers, employees, investors and visitors the latest news, great performance and other important activities of

the company, and at the same time, the company can convey their confidence and expectation of future development directly and subtly. Different from the business news reports published by independent third-party, corporate press releases are written and posted by the company. Therefore, they show distinguished features in the use and distribution of metadiscourse. Based on the comparison, it is concluded that corporate press releases use almost equal amount of interactive and interactional metadiscourse markers since they aim to share information, promote the company and interact with readers. In interactive metadiscourse, transitions and evidentials are used most frequently. Transitions enhance the logical connection of the news while evidentials increase the neutrality of the report. They both function rhetorically to create rational appeals. In interactional metadiscourse, self mentions and hedges show relatively higher proportions in corporate press releases while self mentions are rarely employed in business news reports. In addition to self mentions, engagement markers and attitude markers also reveal significantly higher normalized frequency in corporate press releases, which suggests that writer-reader interaction is highly valued in corporate press releases and these interactional metadiscourse markers contribute to the affective appeals of the news, arousing the emotional feelings of readers and constructing the company's direct participation. Hedges usually perform dual rhetorical functions, affective appeals and credibility appeals, leaving readers the impression that the company is honest, serious, and reliable. To sum up, as a special news report genre, corporate press releases have their preferences in metadiscourse selection, with transitions, self mentions, evidentials and hedges being used more frequently to achieve rhetorical functions.

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