

# THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION Insights from an analysis of CSR reports in the USA, UK and Japan

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**Abstract** – Communicating Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) topics has become a ‘must-have’ corporate practice for firms worldwide and a key component of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reporting. Most studies have been carried out from a content analysis perspective and sparse attention has been paid to how the topics are discursively constructed. This paper explores the linguistic resources adopted in CSR reports to communicate EDI to both internal and external stakeholders. The analysis was conducted on a small sample of disclosures belonging to companies operating in three different sectors: Banking, Pharmaceuticals, Personal & Household Products and Services, and headquartered in three countries: the USA, the UK and Japan. With the support of corpus linguistics tools, portions of CSR reports were examined in a selection of frequent words and their phraseology. The quantitative and qualitative analysis was intended to shed light on the main discursive and rhetorical strategies for the expression of EDI in its many forms.

**Keywords:** CSR reports; Corporate Social Responsibility; Equality; Diversity; Inclusion.

## 1. Introduction

The recent events of the Covid-19 pandemic and the wave of social movements in the late 2010s, such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, have brought renewed attention to the question of inequality and, for that matter, to equality, diversity and inclusion. Such social issues have increased in prominence in civil society but also in the business world. Growing stakeholder scrutiny on these matters and demand for morality and ethics have prompted companies to intensify their engagement in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR; Carroll 1999; Dahlsrud 2008; Lantos 2001) and in particular to (re)consider their stand on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). Thus, CSR, which is commonly understood as a company’s responsibility for its economic, environmental and social impacts, has seen EDI take on a pivotal role and become a major component of corporate performance, identity and communication (Breeze 2013). In other words,

these issues have started to gain ground as values adding to the image of a responsible company (Hon, Brunner 2000), and their communication is now considered a ‘must-have’ corporate practice.

The existing literature suggests that equality, diversity and more recently inclusion have long been investigated in the workforce from a management perspective (Maxwell *et al.* 2001; Mazzei, Ravazzani 2012; Mor Barak 2005; Oswick, Noon 2014; Roberson 2004; Thomas, Ely 1996). In particular, management research has revealed a gradual shift from equality to diversity and inclusion. Equality, which dominated the 1970s up to early 1990s, assumes that all people should be treated the same and offered equal opportunities irrespective of their race, gender and disability. In the 1990s, significant momentum was gained by diversity or the recognition of the value of differences, viewed in terms of surface level characteristics (i.e. age, ethnicity, gender, physical attributes/abilities, race and sexual orientation), and more invisible features (i.e. education, geographic location, income, marital status, military experience, parental status, religious beliefs and work experience; see Litvin 1997). Companies’ practice of diversity has been mainly driven at a utilitarian level by the economic benefits that they derive from a diverse workforce, such as increased employee creativity, productivity, and job satisfaction. However, although the business case has remained predominant, ‘the justice or fairness case’ has also emerged, which justifies diversity on moral grounds of fairness and equal opportunity. Finally, the 2000s saw a rise in popularity of inclusion, which is concerned with the processes that support employees’ participation, empowerment and contribution in organizations, and “incorporate differences into business practices and thereby help to realize the value” (Oswick, Noon 2014, p. 26).

While different organizational models to the management of EDI have been elaborated (see for example Mazzei, Ravazzani 2012), only sparse consideration has been given to the discursive manifestations of these values in corporate disclosures. Apart from few content-based and cross-cultural studies on the communication of diversity, especially on websites (Jonsen *et al.* 2021; Singh, Point 2006; Uysal 2013), limited research has been conducted on how companies linguistically and discursively construct the issues (Hofer-Bonfim *et al.* 2023; Malavasi 2023; Nocella 2023; Turnbull 2023). Set against this theoretical background, the present study sets out to examine how companies operating in three different industrial sectors and geographical areas present and celebrate their practices of equality, diversity and inclusion in CSR reports (Garzone 2014; Idowu, Towler 2004; Mahoney *et al.* 2013; Nielsen, Thomsen 2007; Williams 2008), which is one of the main channels of communication available to companies. Specifically, a sample of frequent and relevant words was analyzed in extended stretches of language to identify how EDI is conceptualized and expressed by a small selection of firms headquartered in the United States, the UK and Japan. The

research materials and methods are described in Section 2, while the findings obtained are presented and discussed in Sections 3 and 4.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The study is based on the *EDI-Reports-Corpus*. This is a small corpus of 2020 Sustainability Reports, Integrated Reports, and Sustainability Summaries<sup>1</sup> in their “Our people”, “Our values”, “Our Approach to Sustainability”, “Community” and “Corporate Governance” sections (see Table 1). The focus on these specific portions of disclosures is motivated by the contents being covered which are closely linked to the key concern of this paper, namely how EDI is communicated to both internal and external stakeholders. The firms were mainly identified and chosen among the most diverse and inclusive companies in international indices such as the Refinitiv D&I Index 2021.<sup>2</sup> In particular, the study examined enterprises that operate in the sectors of Banking, Pharmaceuticals, Personal & Household Products & Services, and are headquartered in three different countries: the United States, the United Kingdom and Japan. For practical reasons and also for comparative purposes, the corpus was divided into three sub-corpora, one for each country. For the North American sub-corpus (*NA-EDI-Corpus*), Goldman Sachs Group Inc., Johnson & Johnson and Procter & Gamble Co. were selected; the British sub-corpus (*UK-EDI-Corpus*) comprises Standard Chartered plc, GlaxoSmithKline plc and Unilever plc; the Japanese sub-corpus (*J-EDI-Corpus*) consists of data from Nomura Holdings Inc., Takeda Ltd and Shiseido Company Ltd.<sup>3</sup>

For the investigation of the discursive construction of equality, diversity and inclusion, the visual and non-linguistic components of texts such as images, tables and graphs (Martinec, van Leeuwen 2009; Kress, van Leeuwen 2001) were disregarded in favor of a more precise focus on language. The three collections of texts were examined in a selection of words which are both quantitatively representative of the documents studied and functional to the companies’ framing of EDI. With the support of corpus linguistics tools and the software suite *AntConc 3.5.8* (Anthony 2019), a frequency wordlist was generated for each database. Manual reading of the texts and close inspection of the top 100 most frequent words informed the selection of a sample of recurrent lexical items relevant to EDI. These words

<sup>1</sup> When CSR documents were not available, Annual Reports were considered in the analysis.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.refinitiv.com/en/financial-data/indices/diversity-and-inclusion-index> (1.1.2023).

<sup>3</sup> This is a small-sized corpus and a limited number of firms were considered as this is intended to be a pilot study, which is part of a larger project dealing with the communication of diversity and inclusion in a broader range of corporate disclosures belonging to a wider sample of companies.

were then concordanced and analyzed in their context of use, collocational patterns and phraseology (cf. Sinclair 2003, 2004). The quantitative perspective was integrated with a more qualitative approach to better detect the discursive strategies for disclosing EDI.

<i>NA-EDI-CORPUS</i> (USA): 89,510 tokens			
Goldman Sachs Group Inc.	Banking Services	Sustainability Report 2020	24,726 tokens
Johnson & Johnson	Pharmaceuticals	Health for Humanity Report 2020	34,215 tokens
Procter & Gamble Co.	Personal & Household Products & Services	Citizenship Report 2020	30,569 tokens
<i>UK-EDI-CORPUS</i> (UK): 35,757 tokens			
Standard Chartered plc	Banking Services	Sustainability Summary 2020	2,723 tokens
GlaxoSmithKline plc	Pharmaceuticals	Annual Report 2020	18,532 tokens
Unilever plc	Personal & Household Products & Services	Annual Report and Accounts 2020	14,502 tokens
<i>J-EDI-CORPUS</i> (Japan): 37,961 tokens			
Nomura Holdings Inc.	Banking Services	Nomura Report 2020	8,795
Takeda Ltd	Pharmaceuticals	Sustainability Report 2020	19,853
Shiseido Company Ltd	Personal & Household Products & Services	Sustainability Report 2020	9,313

Table 1  
Corpus structure and size.

### 3. Results

Given the focus of this paper, insights are given into the language of EDI adopted by companies in their CSR reports. The discursive and rhetorical framing of equality, diversity and inclusion is analyzed first in the US materials (Subsection 3.1.), then in the UK sub-corpus (Subsection 3.2.) and finally in the Japanese one (Subsection 3.3.).

#### 3.1. The NA-EDI-Corpus (USA)

The analysis of EDI communication by the US firms revolves around lexical items that we selected from the Word List of the NA-EDI-Corpus, based on preliminary analysis of their role in shaping the issues. Interestingly, as a preliminary result, the size of this database (see Table 1) suggests that compared to British and Japanese enterprises, North American companies

appear to present more information in their reports and describe EDI-related topics in great detail. Indeed, the total number of tokens in the US corpus is more than double the number of running words in the UK and Japanese database. As for the specific lexical items under examination, Table 2 provides a breakdown of their rankings, frequencies and normalized frequencies per thousand words (ptw).

Statistical figures show that the NA-EDI-Corpus is permeated by conspicuous references to *employee* in its singular and plural form. The inspection of these lexical items in their concordance reveals that employees are portrayed as a key focus of corporate aspirations and initiatives, which are in place or were implemented by the firms to guarantee them *all “health”, “well-being”, “growth” and “support”* (examples 1-2).

RANK	WORD	RAW FREQ.	NORMALIZED FREQ.
25	<i>employees</i>	303	3.38
28	<i>people</i>	277	3.09
39	<i>women</i>	226	2.52
43	<i>all</i>	214	2.39
49	<i>communities</i>	181	2.02
65	<i>community</i>	140	1.56
77	<i>diverse</i>	123	1.37
84	<i>diversity</i>	119	1.32
87	<i>Black</i>	114	1.27

Table 2  
Most frequent lexical words in the NA-EDI-Corpus.

Some recurrent clusters in which *employees* occurs are *available to all \**, *ensure the safety and health of our \**, *help our \**, *training for all \**, and *provide the means for \**, where the wildcard stands for the search word.

- (1) Following the successful achievement of our health and well-being goals in 2020 (see Health for Humanity 2020 Goals Scorecard), this year, as part of our Health for Humanity 2025 Goals, *we have an innovative, first-of-its-kind commitment for Johnson & Johnson to ensure our managers across the organization realize the imperative of protecting, supporting and advancing health and well-being for all employees.* Through this new goal, we will reinforce *our commitment to protecting employee health, prioritizing employee mental health* and sustaining our focus on energy management to help *build employee resiliency.* (Johnson & Johnson)
- (2) The firm maintains *a variety of programs aimed at employees’ growth and support* throughout their careers and as they evolve into leaders:
  - Through our *Black Analyst and Associate Initiative, we seek to grow and develop Black professionals* by investing in their career development, enhancing connectivity to managers and providing access to a senior leader within their division, who serves as a coach.
  - Our *Hispanic/Latinx Analyst Initiative* supplements *Hispanic/Latinx analysts’ day-to-day experience* by fostering early and

ongoing communication with their managers, divisional leadership and peers. • The firm's *Women's Career Strategies Initiative* is a global five-month program focused on accelerating the career growth of high-performing women associates through targeted learning opportunities, goal-setting and enhanced global connectivity, with close manager engagement throughout. (Goldman Sachs)

While highlighting their support for some specific groups of employees, such as “*Black*”, “*Hispanic/Latinx*” and “*women*” (excerpt 2), what emerges is an overall favorable attitude of the US companies towards “*equality*” (example 3), “*employee engagement*” and “*an inclusive culture*” (extract 4). Indeed, employees are not simply portrayed as the target beneficiaries of the same opportunities, they are also supported, engaged and encouraged to participate in forums and surveys, and “*to take an active role*” to drive progress inside and outside the company.

- (3) In honor of International Women's Day, we hosted our fourth annual #WeSeeEqual Forum at our Cincinnati headquarters. Each year, the #WeSeeEqual Forum welcomes those with diverse perspectives and backgrounds allowing employees, P&G partners and change-makers to share their stories as part of our commitment to gender equality. The annual event was born out of P&G's aspiration to create a world free from gender bias, a world with equal representation and an equal voice for all individuals. (Procter & Gamble)
- (4) *Employee Engagement* GRI 413-1 Across our Enterprise, we encourage employees to take an active role in advancing Our Purpose to change the trajectory of health for all. We provide platforms, tools and resources to help everyone contribute at their best. Similarly, we foster an inclusive culture that embraces creativity combined with care for others, our communities and our planet. One of the platforms we use to track employee sentiment and feeling of being connected to our colleagues and our values is our biennial Our Credo Survey which, in 2020, was administered in 78 countries and made available in 36 languages. In a year of unprecedented change, the survey resulted in an all-time high for both participation rate and favorability. (Johnson & Johnson)

The discursive interplay between equality, diversity and inclusion is also confirmed by the examination of *people* and *community/communities* in their co-text or wider linguistic context. In addition to reiterating their willingness to nurture a culture of belonging where employees, *our people*, feel involved and contribute to their full potential, the North American companies were found to enumerate and showcase their commitments, partnerships and dedicated initiatives to positively impact the outside world. Corporate activities and programs benefiting *people* are often described through overall general and quite ‘evasive’ sequences that foreground the firms’ efforts to “*improve people's lives*” (see example 5), “*advance equality for all people*” (extract 6), support minority groups (as in examples 6 and 7), and eradicate “*racial and social injustice*” (excerpt 8) also exacerbated by the COVID-19

pandemic. An analysis of these statements reveals that they are often realized through juxtapositions or enumerations of general and abstract concepts that may lead readers to question whether companies' commitment to EDI is genuine.

- (5) At Johnson & Johnson, inspired by Our Credo, we use our scale and resources for good, contributing to many causes around the world *to help advance health and improve people's lives through targeted initiatives providing local support, engaging employees in our communities, supporting them in cases of emergencies and donating products for a range of needs.* (Johnson & Johnson)
- (6) Recognizing the moment of urgency in our society highlighting systemic inequalities, *P&G and our brands stepped up our ongoing efforts to advance equality for all people and especially at this moment for Black and Brown Americans.* We have highlighted *the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black and Hispanic communities in America* with the films "Circumstances" and "Estamos Unidos" and have *sponsored fundraising and relief efforts to help those disproportionately affected by the pandemic. We established the P&G Take On Race fund to help fuel organizations that fight for justice, advance economic opportunity, enable greater access to education and health care and make our communities more equitable.* (Procter & Gamble)
- (7) P&G and our brands created "Can't Cancel Pride: *COVID-19 Relief Benefit for the LGBTQ+ Community*" as a *virtual relief effort to help raise visibility and funds for LGBTQ+ communities most impacted by COVID-19.* (Procter & Gamble)
- (8) There is an urgent need to take on the inequities rooted in systemic racism that *threaten health in communities of color across the United States.* That's why *Johnson & Johnson is focusing its efforts and committing \$100 million to address racial and social injustice* as the critical public health issue that it is. (Johnson & Johnson)

Remarkably, as evidenced by the extracts above, prominence is given by the US companies to their dedication to issues related to race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation. This is further testified by *women, Black, diversity* and *diverse* which stand out as frequent lexical items in the North American corpus. Companies' pledges to address gender and racial biases and to foster "*diversity*" (example 9) or *diversity* coupled with "*equity*" and "*inclusion*" (extract 10) go hand in hand with initiatives specifically targeted at *women* and *Black* people, whose "*representation*" in leadership ranks (excerpt 11) and economic empowerment (example 12) are strived for or even achieved by the firms.

- (9) *We share the goal of democratizing access to opportunities in the financial industry. We are focused on the advancement of women and all underrepresented professionals.* This takes the form of *aspirational diversity goals*, robust talent development programs and *diversity-retention initiatives.* *Diverse characteristics, including gender, ethnic background, sexual orientation and disabilities, offer an abundance of perspectives and*

*capabilities, and help to best serve our clients and stakeholders. (Goldman Sachs)*

- (10) Our mission is to make *diversity, equity and inclusion* (DEI) how we work every day. We know that *bringing together our diverse backgrounds, cultures and perspectives drives innovation to solve today's complex health problems*. We continue to challenge ourselves on what it means to prioritize DEI in every business decision we make, and we *leverage our DEI strategy, policies and programs to provide our workforce with the support and opportunities they need to help create a healthier, more equitable world*. (Johnson & Johnson)
- (11) EQUALITY AND INCLUSION In 2020, P&G *achieved equal representation of women and men among our independent Board Directors and increased multicultural representation to 25%*. Both statistics represent meaningful growth since 2015. (Procter & Gamble)
- (12) *We have long been committed to promoting inclusion, diversity and equity within our own firm, throughout our industry and in the communities where we live and work*. Last summer, in response to the recent senseless acts of racism and violence against *Black people and other minorities, we renewed this dedication*. We believe the effort needed to *truly bridge gaps in equality* is ongoing – we know there is more to be done, and we continue to aim higher. In this spirit, we *recently announced One Million Black Women, a new \$10 billion initiative focused on acknowledging, empowering and raising up an entrepreneurial engine in women and underserved communities across the US*. (Goldman Sachs)

The evidence discussed so far suggests that in their CSR reports the North American companies favor a rather holistic approach to EDI with an emphasis on the efforts they make and the programs they have developed to advance equity, equality, diversity and inclusion. A close examination of the discourses on these issues reveals that they are often realized through ‘grand’, composite and somewhat vague constructions that enumerate and magnify the companies’ goals, initiatives and activities they have in place to serve their workforce and the society at large.

### **3.2. The UK-EDI-Corpus**

Examination of EDI communication by the British companies is based on the inspection of frequent words, which are found to have a strategic role in the expression of these issues in the UK corpus. Table 3 includes the relevant lexical items in the database together with their respective rankings, raw frequencies and normalized frequencies (ptw).



RANK	WORD	RAW FREQ.	NORMALIZED FREQ.
15	<i>people</i>	210	5.87
38	<i>all</i>	90	2.51
39	<i>employees</i>	85	2.37
70	<i>culture</i>	54	1.51
94	<i>employee</i>	44	1.23

Table 3  
Most frequent lexical words in the UK-EDI-Corpus.

A preliminary analysis of the forms suggests that the UK companies recurrently resort to such signals as *people* and *employee(s)* to disclose their attitude and commitment in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion.

A more in-depth examination of these forms in their concordance shows that the firms put both *people's* and *employees' "development"* (example 13), "*wellbeing*" (extract 14), health (excerpt 15) and safety at the heart of what they do. The insistence on these issues can be gleaned from stretches of language where *people* in general and more specifically, employees, *our people*, are the receivers of the actions performed by the companies, like *help, reach, support, improve* and *protect*.

- (13) *People development We want our people to keep developing throughout their career. Every employee has the opportunity to discuss and agree a development plan with their manager. In 2020, 93,718 employees accessed training resources through our internal development portal. During the year, we redesigned and rolled out a new virtual First Line Leader training programme. We provide targeted development for leaders at all stages of their careers. (GlaxoSmithKline)*
- (14) *A fairer and more inclusive world Our business relies on the millions of people who work in our value chain – including farmers, factory workers, small shop owners, waste recyclers and others. We can only create widescale change by giving people opportunities to improve their livelihoods. So we work to improve people's health, confidence and wellbeing; to create opportunities for all; and to respect and promote human rights. (Unilever)*
- (15) *Our commitment is to partner to improve disease prevention, awareness and access to healthcare services for 12 million people by 2025 In 2020, we exceeded this target, reaching 13.9 million people through our partnerships. (GlaxoSmithKline)*

Descriptions of the manifold activities to develop the workforce (example 13), improve people's life (extracts 14 and 15) and protect them against Covid-19 are intertwined with more general declarations of support for diversity and inclusion (excerpts 16 and 17).

- (16) In addition, as a company that has respect for people at its core and takes pride in providing access to our medicines, vaccines and consumer products to all, *we have an opportunity and an obligation to build an inclusive culture*

*internally and to be a force for good in improving diversity and inclusion in society. In 2020 we focused on building a more inclusive culture, including inclusion training for all employees alongside our work to evolve our policies, processes and practices. We also set new aspirational targets for gender and for race and ethnicity (see page 37). (GlaxoSmithKline)*

- (17) Open to all Making Unilever a completely *inclusive place* to work will make us a stronger, better business. *Our priority is to ensure that the diversity of our people reflects the societies in which we live and work. So we take a holistic approach – making sure people feel welcome and are treated fairly at Unilever, regardless of their race, gender, gender identity, age, sexual orientation, religion or experience and recognising the importance of self-identification, given the broad circumstances under which discrimination can happen. This year, the Black Lives Matter movement shone a light on racial discrimination and social injustice, and we strengthened our focus on race, alongside gender, disability and LGBTQI+.* (Unilever)

Notably, *people* and *employee(s)* were found to be embedded in textual sequences that highlight the centrality of inclusion and diversity in the workplace and in the outside world. As shown by examples (16) through (19), emphasis is laid on the ambitious goals of creating an inclusive and diverse society, and providing an organizational climate where employees are welcomed and feel equally treated “*regardless of their race, gender, gender identity, age, sexual orientation, religion or experience*” (see example 17).

- (18) We believe that *inclusion and diversity (I&D) leads to business success by unleashing the enormous potential of all our people* and strengthening our ability to respond to the differing needs of our patients and consumers. At the heart of our I&D agenda lies *our fundamental commitment to equity in our employment practices. To support this, and create an inclusive workplace, all employees participate in an annual training programme, we facilitate inclusion dialogues, and we invest in our leadership programmes to ensure all leaders understand their responsibilities.* (GlaxoSmithKline)
- (19) While there is more to do on gender balance, our efforts are being recognised. *We’re proud to have won a prestigious Catalyst Award for our initiatives to create a gender-balanced and inclusive culture that breaks down stereotypes. We were also listed in Bloomberg’s 2020 Gender-Equality Index. As part of our Framework for Fair Compensation, we are committed to pay a living wage to all our direct employees. [...] We want to make sure that people’s experience of Unilever is fair for everyone and that we’re fully including members of LGBTQI+ communities.* (Unilever)

‘High-minded’ (example 18) and evidence-based (extract 19) claims about equality, equity and an “*inclusive culture*” (excerpts 19 and 20) merge with descriptions of diversity that revolve around references to some minority groups who are supported by the companies or are fairly represented in the organization. Worthy of mention are “*LGBTQI+ communities*” (example 19), *young people*, people with disabilities (example 21) and “*ethnically diverse employees*” (example 22).

- (20) We continued to progress towards *an inclusive culture*. In 2020, we secured a place in the top 100 organisations in the Bloomberg Gender Equality Index and ranked as a Diversity Leader in the Financial Times report on Diversity and Inclusion in Europe. (Standard Chartered)
- (21) Between 2003 and 2020, we raised \$104.2 million through fundraising and Group matching and reached more than 250 million people through Seeing is Believing, our global initiative to tackle avoidable blindness. *We continued our support for the eye health sector through the development of the Vision Catalyst Fund and by supporting people with visual impairments through Futuremakers*. (Standard Chartered)
- (22) *To support our aspirations and our commitment to equality of representation we are focused on recruiting and developing diverse talent*. This includes: setting appropriate and ambitious targets for ethnically diverse candidates for our early talent programmes in the US and UK; launching a new global development programme, Accelerating Difference, for ethnically diverse employees; and, for our most senior roles, we are also introducing a policy that requires a diverse shortlist of qualified candidates, including ethnically diverse representation (as defined appropriately by country). (GlaxoSmithKline)

All the considerations put forth so far seem to demonstrate that the UK firms’ promotion and communication of EDI ‘reverberate’ with repeated and somewhat general references to good practices, value-related statements and numerical evidence, which, on the whole, prove the companies’ recognition of the importance of people’s equality, heterogeneity and inclusion both in the workplace and in communities at large.

### 3.3. The J-EDI-Corpus (JAPAN)

For the analysis of how EDI meanings are expressed by the Japanese companies in the J-EDI-Corpus, the lexical items listed in Table 4 were taken into account.

RANK	WORD	RAW FREQ.	NORMALIZED FREQ.
23	<i>employees</i>	144	3.79
30	<i>people</i>	124	3.26
50	<i>all</i>	84	2.21
53	<i>human</i>	79	2.08
69	<i>society</i>	67	1.76
72	<i>social</i>	64	1.68
83	<i>rights</i>	58	1.52
100	<i>women</i>	50	1.31

Table 4  
Most frequent lexical words in the J-EDI-Corpus.

The examination of *employees* in its surrounding lexical context reveals the tendency of Japanese enterprises to emphasize the manifold opportunities

they aim to create for their workforce's "health" (example 23), "safety" (extract 24), "self-development" and "training" (excerpt 25).

- (23) In July 2016, Nomura Group adopted the NOMURA Health & Productivity Declaration Statement as part of the Group's efforts led by the Group Chief Health Officer (CHO) *to maintain and improve the health of employees*. In addition, since 2017, Nomura has launched the "Nomura Work Style Innovation" initiative, which comprises "Work Style Reform" and "Health & Productivity Management," and *has been developing an environment that enables diverse employees to demonstrate their talents and play active roles*. In this regard, we have developed and internally announced guidelines with quantitative targets. (Nomura)
- (24) The pandemic has brought a complete shift in how we work and collaborate. How has Takeda ensured your people's safety and minimal disruption at work? *The safety of our employees comes first*. With approximately 50,000 people across about 80 countries, there has been no one-size-fits-all response to *how we support our colleagues and their families, as well as the patients and health care practitioners* who are at the core of our purpose at Takeda. (Takeda)
- (25) In addition, *we offered a variety of self-development initiatives* to employees in Japan, including: *online business skills training* (219 employees participated); *leadership training for future female leaders* (24 executive candidates participated); *short training videos* covering topics such as presentations and project management; and *virtual tours of the corporate museum* aimed at new employees. As a result of our efforts, Shiseido Group employees spent an average of 26 hours on *education and training* in 2020. (Shiseido)

The statements around the words *employees* and *colleagues*<sup>4</sup> evoke the firms' support for *all employees'* "development" (example 26) and the creation of a collaborative working environment in which they can thrive, leverage their abilities and feel included. A sense of "unity", participation and cooperation (examples 27 to 29) seems to be prominent in the documents analyzed.

- (26) *We encourage the personal development and self-growth of all employees by providing individual support to help them advance their career*. In preparation for the introduction of a job-based personnel system, our global headquarters worked with its major affiliates in Japan to define the specialized knowledge and skills required by each position. (Shiseido)
- (27) *As employees, we might come from different countries and have diverse backgrounds, but we all carry the same pocketbook. This creates a sense of unity among the Shiseido family*, and serves as a source of knowledge and inspiration for every one of us. (Shiseido)
- (28) *Nomura organizes various forums for direct dialogue between management and employees* around the world. *Town hall meetings and employees gatherings are held regularly* in each region to provide opportunities for

<sup>4</sup> *Colleagues* (59 occurrences) is used in Takeda's Sustainability Report as a synonym for *employees* and as such it was considered in the study.

senior management to share the firm's vision, strategy, and philosophy, and *for employees to engage in active dialogue with senior management with the aim of deepening mutual understanding.* [...] From FY2020/21, *Nomura Group will further enhance its dialogue with employees* by measuring their awareness of the Nomura Group Code of Conduct, including their views on ESG and diversity. (Nomura)

- (29) *We strive to have a workforce as diverse as the patients we serve. We are committed to embracing differences, exploring possibilities and developing our colleagues. Our success depends on an inclusive environment where all colleagues are welcomed, empowered and inspired to use their unique voices and talents.* This is how we'll find innovative approaches to serve our patients, customers and communities. (Takeda)

In addition to the emphasis on inclusion and equal opportunities, general references to diversity (example 29) were found in the sub-corpus, together with more specific mentions of minority groups. These include expressions featuring “*women*”, “*female employees*” (example 30), and *people with disabilities* or illnesses.

- (30) Then, in the 1990s, we introduced *efforts to help women* keep working regardless of life events, such as raising children. *We have continued to support our female employees ever since.* [...] Building on our heritage of *empowering women in Japan and around the world*, we also collaborate with organizations *to give vulnerable girls STEM* (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) *education opportunities.* (Shiseido)

Notably, issues regarding *women* are addressed by the Asian companies in their CSR reports, which are pervaded by phraseological units comprising “*support our female employees*”, “*help*” and “*empower women*” (extracts 30 and 31). These sequences are manifest indicators of the firms' concern about gender equality both inside and outside the organization (example 31).

- (31) Over the years, *Shiseido has launched several initiatives to empower women and address global gender issues.* Working closely with our brands and regional headquarters, *we support the education of socially disadvantaged women and girls* around the world to enable them to be more self-reliant. (Shiseido)

In addition to signals pointing to ‘center stage’ taken by the promotion of women's rights, a variety of expressions insist on the firms' commitment to improving people's lives as a key objective to pursue. This emerges patently from statements which showcase the efforts made to support and create “*better health for people*” (example 32) and instill respect regardless of individuals' backgrounds or differences (excerpt 33).

- (32) Research and development (R&D) is fundamental to our culture and an element of our strategic roadmap that drives innovation at Takeda. For almost

240 years, we've focused on delivering Better health for people, brighter future for the world, setting and adhering to a high bar for innovation, sourcing innovation through partnerships and managing the pipeline dynamically through key data readouts, especially to address critical unmet patient needs. (Takeda)

- (33) For Society: *Realize a society filled with respect and empowerment through the power of beauty Shiseido embraces diversity in beauty to inspire people around the world. By celebrating its many values, we aim to realize a society where people accept and respect each other as individuals, regardless of backgrounds or differences.* (Shiseido)

Similar emphasis on respect can be recognized in 'idealistic' discourses surrounding *society* and *social*. Corpus insights into the use of these two words show that they are mostly employed within sequences that highlight the corporate efforts to promote "*a society of diversity and inclusion*" (excerpt 34). Some formulae featuring the search words are, for example, *advance a society that embraces diversity through respect, realize a society filled with respect and empowerment, support a society where people feel empowered, confident and free to be themselves, address "social challenges/justice"* (examples 35 and 36) and *solve social issues* (extract 37).

- (34) The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented effect on society and has forced many people to question their beliefs and re-examine the way they live. In particular, it has had significant consequences for groups who were already exposed, such as highly vulnerable women. Going forward, *we strive to promote a broader range of social values. By offering various avenues of education, we aim to move away from monoculture, stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination to nurture a society of diversity and inclusion.* (Shiseido)
- (35) The Nomura Group Code of Conduct sets out 19 *specific guidelines for our actions according to our three major stakeholders: our clients, our people, and society*, from the perspective of how we view them in light of the three values of entrepreneurial leadership, teamwork and integrity. In addition to legal compliance as well as general professional and *social ethics, these guidelines cover all aspects of our activities, including the fundamental view on client services, personnel development, diversity and inclusion, respect for human rights, and our stance on addressing social challenges.* (Nomura)
- (36) How does the recent focus on *addressing social justice and equality issues* affect Takeda's approach? Marcello: It's helped to accelerate our progress as we recognize that we have a lot of room for growth in many areas and locations. We're operating at multiple levels — globally *we're establishing a Diversity, Equity & Inclusion team to support companywide initiatives.* Regionally, locally and at the functional level, we will continue with the efforts in place, working closely with our TRGs. (Takeda)
- (37) As part of our activities *to help solve social issues, Shiseido Americas also supported LGBTQ organizations, and Shiseido Japan co-sponsored online seminars* in cooperation with local governments for mothers raising children during the pandemic. (Shiseido)

Finally, the significant presence of *human rights* in the sub-corpus signals that respect for human rights is another cornerstone of these companies'

culture and an integral part of their activities. This is conveyed through lexical bundles including “*respecting human rights*” (see example 38) and “*prevent or mitigate human rights issues*” (extract 39).

- (38) Human rights Much of our supply chain resides in emerging markets where worker protections are often not very robust. *Respecting human rights, including the rights of workers, is one of our greatest responsibilities*, given our scale and potential influence. Our Supplier Code of Conduct outlines our commitment and expectations for suppliers on modern slavery practices, including child labor, forced and bonded labor, and human trafficking. *We also strengthened our Supply Chain Human Rights and Labor initiatives* through various policies and position statements [...] (Takeda)
- (39) *We have established a human rights due diligence process to help us promptly identify potential human rights issues*. In 2020, in order to prevent or mitigate human rights issues, we took steps to identify and assess the visible and potential impact of our activities. These efforts included: *Identification of human rights issues* In cooperation with external human rights experts, and by referencing international codes on human rights, standards on non-financial disclosures, and the Corporate Human Rights Benchmark (CHRB), *we have developed a list of human rights issues to be considered*. This list includes modern slavery issues, such as forced labor and child labor, as well as a wide range of human rights issues, such as freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining, and discrimination. (Shiseido)

Considering the examples above, it seems safe to claim that special emphasis is devoted to communicating the firms’ motivation for employee betterment and inclusion, and their whole-hearted support for a better society. General and quite vague statements about the companies’ engagement with commendable social values are accompanied by descriptions of the activities they perform to ‘put these values into practice’.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusions

The study of the three sub-corpora substantiates the claim that the communication and practice of EDI has become an important business imperative and a core value in CSR communication. All the companies selected, irrespective of the sector and geography in which they operate, were found to dedicate sections of their CSR reports to the discussion of these issues. In compliance with CSR reporting standards, and national and international laws on labor and human rights, equal opportunities and anti-discrimination, the firms under examination turn out to report on their equality, diversity and inclusion goals and performance. However, as evidenced by the size of the three sub-corpora, longer sections appear in the US companies’ CSR reports that provide information on EDI themes. This is counterbalanced by more concise disclosures by the British and Japanese firms that appear to devote less space to the discussion of the same topics.

In particular, the quantitative and qualitative examination of a sample of recurrent words in the three collections of documents has revealed that a range of standard and rather formulaic constructions were deployed by the firms to promote EDI and to project an image of themselves as reliable and responsible corporate citizens. Similar expressions were, for example, used by the three groups of companies to stress their efforts to *improve the health of employees/people*, *help/support employees/people*, *support/support for women*, and *engage people/employees*. Specifically, the companies under investigation were found to describe the equal opportunities offered to the *employees* or *our people* and more in general to *people* irrespective of their visible and invisible differences (see for example extracts 1, 6, 13, 14, 26 and 32). The insistence on *safety* and *health* can, however, be attributed to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the companies' contribution to limiting its devastating impact on people worldwide. In addition to similar emphasis on equal opportunities, the value of inclusion seems to pervade the reports analyzed (see for instance excerpts 4, 10, 16, 18, 23 and 29). All the companies appear indeed to base their EDI communication on inclusion or integration statements, which reflect the growing popularity of inclusion in the management and organizational literature. Finally, importance is also given to diversity and minority groups (see for example extracts 17, 22, 30 and 33). Remarkably, as a consequence of social and historical developments, the North American firms appear to espouse a greater focus on diversity, namely the value of heterogeneity and differences in organizations and in the outside world. This is evidenced by the centrality attributed by US enterprises to *women*, *diverse*, *diversity* and *Black* (see examples 2 and 9).

Overall, however, the co-existence of discourses on equality, diversity and inclusion, moral and ethical considerations, as well as utilitarian arguments, reflect a rather comprehensive approach to EDI that is shared by the US, UK and Japanese companies. From a more linguistic perspective, it proved to be common among the firms under consideration to resort to phraseologies that combine general declarations laying emphasis on the value of EDI, goal-related statements outlining promising courses of action to take, and passages describing the activities implemented to foster these values in the organization and society at large. Nevertheless, preliminary results hint to a greater focus on initiatives and programs in the US companies' communication that seems to be replaced by a stronger orientation to performance, and values as well as commitments in the British and Japanese firms' disclosures, respectively. Finally, although not specifically discussed in this paper, the analysis has revealed that EDI discourse is often realized through composite and 'elusive' constructions and juxtapositions of abstract concepts, which makes communication susceptible to vagueness and opacity, and may jeopardize readers' trust in the company's claims. Thus,



transparency (Ball 2009; Rawlins 2009; Stacks *et al.* 2013; Schnackenberg, Tomlinson 2016) appears to be a relevant issue worth analyzing in future studies. It can be hoped that further research – e.g. exploring strategies for transparency vs. vagueness and opacity, increasing the number of companies and CSR reports, including other sectors and geographies – will contribute to a more complete analysis of EDI communication and practice.

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