

“YOU DON’T HAVE TIME TO THINK UP THERE. IF YOU THINK, YOU’RE DEAD” - A CORPUS-ASSISTED STUDY OF DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES TO ENGAGE READERS IN CORPORATE BLOGS

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Abstract

This study investigates recurrent language resources employed in corporate blogs to connect with readers and (to a lesser extent) express authorial positions. It is based on the premise that constructing identity and enhancing image underpins most, if not all, corporate discourse and blogs are no exception. Based on a corpus of 500 different posts (totalling 318,296 words) from the Business Process Outsourcing and Information Technology sectors, we use standard Corpus Linguistics (Partington et al. 2013) techniques (keywords, cluster analysis, concordancing) to identify linguistic features associated with the expression of engagement: reader pronouns and their co-occurrence with selected modal verbs, questions, adverbs marking shared knowledge and directives. These are then interpreted in terms of a model of textual interactions proposed in Hyland (2005). We argue that the communication found in this relatively new and underresearched genre is essentially effected one-way establishing a pseudo-dialogue, with virtually no or very low level of interactivity between blog writers and blog readers.

Keywords: corporate blogs, corporate communication, corporate discourse, corpus linguistics, engagement

1. Introduction

For all its diverse forms of expression, corporate discourse appears to possess one defining characteristic – the need to project a positive public image, not only to various stakeholders, but to the world at large. One way to ensure this entails building a relationship with the recipient of a particular corporate message. To this end, corporate discourse relies on a range of discursive resources, especially in the category of engagement (Hyland 1998, 2000). The extent to which

engagement is present may vary depending on a given genre but the overall goal of such discursive practice is to construct a relationship between the corporation (writer) and the stakeholder (e.g. client, investor, future employee).

This paper documents findings obtained in the course of an investigation into the linguistic expression of engagement in the relatively underresearched genre of corporate blogs. Engagement, understood broadly as rhetorical strategies adopted by corporations to build credibility and inspire confidence, is analysed in terms of selected and recurrent linguistic markers. Previous studies of engagement in academic discourse (e.g. Hyland 1998; 2005) and corporate discourse (Breeze 2013) point towards the recurrent use of first-person pronouns and possessives to convey the writer's presence in text. Breeze (2013) argues that 'I' tends to be avoided in corporate documents except for some personal statements such as personal testimonies and the CEO letter, while 'we' is often used to reflect the collective and institutional nature of the corporation (the body corporate). Interestingly, it is the frequent use of statements in the second person that are characteristic of certain types of corporate discourse such as advertisements and other materials used in the internal communication with employees. The co-occurrence of 'I' and 'we' has been found to have the effect of projecting an idealized 'you' to 'us' position (Breeze 2013: 60). Such practice could be viewed as an effective ploy to build and strengthen the relationship between the corporation and the stakeholder.

Inspired by these findings, we set out to investigate the quantitative distribution and the use of linguistic features commonly associated with the expression of engagement: reader pronouns and their co-occurrence with selected modal verbs, questions, adverbs marking shared knowledge and directives. The goal of the study is to contribute to our understanding of engagement practices in corporate discourse by considering a relatively new genre that has not yet received sufficient scholarly attention in the literature. We argue that linguistic features associated with engagement in corporate blogs are used primarily to elicit the reader's trust and acceptance for the messages conveyed. In addition, the frequent use of engagement signals is a strong indication of the inherently corporate nature of what appears to be a hybrid genre. Corporate blogs represent what we call hybrid genres because they heavily borrow from the genre of personal blogs while adding features typical for corporate discourse. In addition, we demonstrate that the communication found in corporate blogs is essentially effected one-way establishing a pseudo-dialogue, with virtually no or very low level of interactivity between blog writers and blog readers.

2. Corporate blogs as a new hybrid genre

The rapid emergence of various types of online communication have not only come to dominate our private lives but it has also spread into the business world. Nowadays, business organizations are increasingly making use of social media and different forms of online communication, originally associated with more

informal and personal use of language. Alongside e-mails, text messages or chats, there appeared blogs which, in the beginning, were used mainly by private individuals as a personal diary to share own experiences, memories, thoughts and emotions or describe hobby, interests, travels, etc. Over time, the potential of blogs was noticed by corporations and business organizations and this led to the emergence of a new type of blogs, namely corporate blogs. This relatively new type of computer-mediated communication has been adopted as an effective marketing tool to promote various business practices as well as to enhance corporate image and corporate identity (e.g. Sinha et al. 2011, Ahuja and Medury 2010; Efimova and Grudin 2007; Wood et al. 2006). Fieseler et al. 2009 argue that corporate blogs represent “a new form of interactive online publications that provides a platform for exchanging opinions and comments on both emerging and existing issues, [which] may prove an ideal instrument for companies to use to engage stakeholders“. Surprisingly, corporate blogs have not yet attracted sufficient scholarly attention, especially from the linguistic perspective (cf., for example, Puschmann 2010; Fieseler et al. 2009; Kelleher and Miller 2006). And yet, corporate blogs constitute an important complement of an official corporate website since, as Karr and Flannery (2010) claim, “if your Web site is your marketing brochure, then your blog is your public relations representative” because a blog is “a face and voice of your business”.

There are many advantages of corporate blogs, which may account for their increasing popularity within the corporate world. First, they are far less formal than official corporate websites because they are written in a language that tends to avoid typical business jargon. Second, corporate blogs provide a direct and unmediated form of contact between corporations and various stakeholders (e.g. customers, clients, shareholders, retailers, vendors). Third, corporate blogs are easily accessible thanks to simple and intuitive interfaces and searchable archives. Finally, considering the financial aspect, corporate blogs generate relatively low maintenance costs in comparison with official corporate websites or other marketing tools.

From the linguistic perspective of genre theory (e.g. Bhatia 2004), corporate blogs pose an important issue regarding their generic status. As summarized in Table, corporate blogs share both features associated with corporate discourse as well as features typically found in personal blogs. It is not the aim of this contribution to explore and determine the nature of corporate blogs (this aspect will be addressed in other publications) in terms of their membership to a specific genre. At this stage, it should suffice to signal that corporate blogs represent what might be referred to as hybrid genre. According to Breeze (Breeze 2013: 136), corporate genres, especially advertising, continually borrow features from other genres to form hybrid textual artefacts, a practice quite common and widespread in corporate discourse.

Table 1. Corporate discourse features and blog features identified in corporate blogs

Corporate discourse features	Blogs features
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ corporate blogs are written by employees of a particular company who were instructed to perform such a task; ✓ readers' comments constitute a side issue which means that the readers do not participate in the process of creating corporate blogs and do not influence their shape; ✓ corporate blogs combine different types of discourses: persuasive, promotional, informative, narrative and advisory; ✓ the occurrence of linguistic expressions typical for both written and oral registers as well as formal and informal language; ✓ the use of specialized business-related terminology. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ the use of interlinks to other websites (mostly social media); ✓ informal language and message communicated directly to the recipients; ✓ references to and descriptions of the authors' personal stories and experiences; ✓ the friendly and simple layout of the blog home page; ✓ the reverse chronological order of the published posts (from the newest to the oldest ones).

In this case, such corporate practice of using the original generic form of personal blogs and adapting it to the needs and goals of corporate communication can be accounted for in terms of increased credibility in the eyes of potential recipients used to the traditional modes of corporate communication. An analogy could be here drawn between corporate blogs and advertising referred to as 'parasite discourse' by Breeze (2013: 116) who describes advertisements as "parasites in the sense that they adopt discourses and genres from other areas of life and adapt them to their own ends". In the case of personal blogs, their popularity correlating with both positive business results and an increase in positioning may be considered as motivational factors encouraging business organizations to adopt or 'usurp' certain generic features of personal blogs.

3. The corporate voice: engaging stakeholders

The concept of *engagement*, as used in this study, refers broadly and simply to interactions between writers and readers and it relies upon Hyland's (2005:178) approach, which conceptualizes engagement as "an alignment dimension where writers acknowledge and connect to others, recognizing the presence of their readers, pulling them along with their argument, focusing their attention, acknowledging their uncertainties, including them as discourse participants, and guiding them to interpretations". Even though Hyland focuses on interactions in academic discourse, his ideas seem highly relevant for our analysis, where blog writers are also at pains to represent themselves and their work as credible and trustworthy by claiming solidarity with their readers. In fact, Hyland argues that academic writing is increasingly becoming persuasive with academics using

language to acknowledge, construct and negotiate social relations. This might be construed as a radical departure from the traditional perspective of academic discourse as an objective and largely impersonal form of discourse. In that respect academic discourse seems to be following the path taken by corporate discourse. Consequently, we believe that Hyland’s model of interactions could be, to a large extent, used to examine the interpersonal dimension and interaction in our analysis.

Under Hyland’s analytical framework, key linguistic resources in writer – author interactions are divided between stance and engagement. The former refers to an attitudinal dimension and the ways writers present themselves and convey their judgements, opinions, and commitments (cf. also Conrad and Biber 2000; Biber 1999), while the latter is linked to how writers align themselves with their readers by engaging in dialogue with them. These two major discourse functions of evaluating and engaging are ubiquitous in corporate discourse and they inevitably overlap. Stance reflects the collective ‘voice’ of the professional community, i.e. corporate employees tasked with promoting and enhancing corporate image and identity by sharing their ideas and experience. The expression of stance varies in terms of its subjectivity and allowable contributions, i.e. linguistic resources and rhetorical devices are permitted within the corporate institutional context and the generic conventions of a blog. The underlying reason for writing a corporate blog is to offer a less official, more human face of a corporation. A corporate blog writer needs to recognize the need to achieve a balance between establishing their professional authority and competence and involving readers in the text (rather than putting them off). Such writer - reader interactions are the result of making complex choices combining stance-oriented (attitude markers, self-mention, boosters, hedge) and engagement-oriented resources (directions, asides, reader-mention, questions, knowledge reference). As Hyland (2005) rightly observes stance and engagement are two sides of the same coin which ensures that there is an adequate level of interpersonal dimension in the discourse.

Anyone familiar with the concept of stance or evaluation will recognize the fundamental difficulty of identifying specific units of analysis, due to their inherent fuzziness and context-sensitive nature (cf. for example Goźdz-Roszkowski & Hunston 2015). The same applies to engagement and the multitude of ways in which both stance and engagement could be expressed in actual texts. In addition, such evaluations could be implied rather than expressly stated in reliance on the community inner understandings and raising questions regarding its intelligibility to the outsider. This study thus draws upon existing research which has identified most common linguistic forms associated with engagement. These include the second person pronoun ‘you’ and the possessive ‘your’ as the clearest way of acknowledging the reader’s presence as well as the inclusive ‘we’. Interpersonality, subjectivity and involvement are manifested through the high frequency of first and second person pronouns. Moreover, the use these pronouns is also associated with “chattier and lighter style” (Haigh 2009: 8-9). It is widely acknowledged that first person pronouns reflect authorial identity (e.g.

Rahimivand & Kuhl 2014); a higher degree of subjectivity (e.g. Lyons 1982; Scheibman 2002) and interpersonality, that is they mark the ways in which writers project themselves and their audience in the discourse (cf. e.g. Hyland 2005; Breeze 2010). As shown in Biber et al (1999), in contemporary English those pronoun forms are in fact far more common in conversation than in other registers.

4. Data and Methodology

The data for the study comes from the Corporate Blog Corpus (CBC) compiled by one of the authors. The fields of Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) and Information Technology (IT) were chosen since in recent years these have been identified as two of the fastest developing areas of business. In addition, new technology, digitalization and the use of online communication are key to BPO and IT companies, which use them on a daily basis. It can be reasonably expected that corporate blogs should belong to the preferred forms of communication with various groups of stakeholders.

The analysis of the lists of the top BPO and IT companies¹, enable one to choose ten of them, namely, Accenture, Capgemini, Fujitsu, Genpact, Hewlett Packard, IBM, Infosys, Microsoft, Tata Consultancy Services and Wipro. The main factors determining the choice of these companies are a well-designed website and up to date blogs which each of the companies has run since at least 2013.

As Table 2 shows, the Corporate Blog Corpus consists of 500 blog posts. More specifically, 50 posts from each corporation were randomly sampled, including posts from the period between 2013 and 2016. The total number of words in the compiled corpus amounts to 318,296. As can be seen, the size of the data for each of the companies is comparable, which was deemed essential in obtaining a fair and balanced distribution of the linguistic features in question.

Table 2. The composition of the Corporate Blog Corpus (Fronczak 2019)

BPO/IT company	# of Blog Posts	# of Words
Accenture	50	32,848
Capgemini	50	31,474
Fujitsu	50	29,774
Genpact	50	32,619
Hewlett Packard	50	31,619
IBM	50	31,329

¹ Ten BPO and IT companies were chosen from the list of Global Top 30 Service Outsourcing Corporations (http://www.apceo.us/Html/top10_hero/164058158.html); the list of top Business Process Outsourcing Companies (<http://www.ranker.com/list/business-process-outsourcing-companies/reference>) and *Fortune* Global 500 list (<http://fortune.com/global500/list/>)

Infosys	50	32,855
Microsoft	50	32,486
Tata Consultancy Services	50	31,751
Wipro	50	31,541
TOTAL CORPUS	500	318,296

To conduct the statistical analyses, the programmes “Wmatrix3”² and “WordSmith 4.0”³ were used. These two programs are similar computational tools enabling the processing of large amounts of data, the generation of frequency lists (e.g. keywords list containing words with their frequency) and the investigation of concordancing (concordance lines enable an analysis of a particular keyword in a broader context). Additionally, both programmes need a reference corpus in order to conduct statistical analyses of the provided data. In the study, the Corporate Blog Corpus was compared with BNC Sampler Written Informative as the reference corpus. It needs to be stressed that “Wmatrix4” was used interchangeably with “WordSmith 4.0” at different stages of the analysis depending on the type of study conducted. “Wmatrix4” was used to generate frequency lists of keywords and of parts of speech, while “WordSmith 4.0” was used to check the most frequent collocates of the selected linguistic markers as well as their distribution across the Corporate Blog Corpus.

The obtained frequency lists as well as selected concordancing lines were analysed with regard to the pre-defined linguistic markers of engagement and stance. These markers included: personal pronouns, modal auxiliaries, modal adverbs and imperatives. First, a frequency list of keywords was generated based on the following criteria: log-likelihood cut-off point higher than or equal to 15,13 ($p < 0,0001$; 99,99% confidence level) and focus mainly on the keywords which are overused⁴ in the Corporate Blog Corpus. The ‘keyness’ analysis consisted of two steps. The first one was carried out automatically and it enabled one to generate the keyword list by the use of specialised tools for corpus analysis and comparison, whereas the second one was based on the manual examination of words generated from the program. In this stage, the concordances of selected keywords provided the relevant co-texts and their scrutiny resulted in determining the discourse function of an analysed keyword.

Second, the frequency list of part of speech was generated based on the same criteria as applied in the case of keywords. The attention was paid to two key POS categories: “VV0” (LL value of 3336,83; 1st position on a list of POS), which includes a base form of verbs and imperatives, and “RR” (LL value of 165,45; 17th position on a list of POS), which includes adverbs. In order to identify

² This program for corpus analysis and comparison was developed by Paul Rayson in the REVERE project at Lancaster University (available at <http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/wmatrix/>).

³ This program for corpus analysis and comparison was developed by Mike Scott at the University of Liverpool and released in 1996 (available at <https://lexically.net/wordsmith/>).

⁴ Keywords which are used statistically more frequently in the target corpus (here the CBC) in comparison with reference corpus (here BNC Sampler Written Informative).

directives and modal adverbs relevant to the further discussion, the concordance lines of the words included in these two POS categories were also examined.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Personal pronouns: reader pronouns

The keyword analysis reveals that certain personal pronouns are commonly employed by corporate blogs authors. Table 3 shows pronouns which have been found within the one hundred most salient keywords. Interestingly, it is ‘you’ followed by ‘your’ that turn out to be unusually frequent in corporate blogs. This corroborates our initial assumption that engagement is marked using this typical reader pronoun. However, it is surprising to find that ‘I’ is not among the salient keywords in blogs. Instead, it is the first person plural ‘we’ and the possessive ‘our’ that are statistically salient in corporate blogs.

Table 3. Personal pronouns as keywords

Item	O1	%1	O2	%2	LL	LogRatio
8. you	1567	0.52	1154	0.15 +	973.02	1.74
13.he	148	0.05	2566	0.34 -	965.25	-85.77
15.his	124	0.04	2278	0.31 -	881.93	-86.57
23.your	945	0.31	643	0.09 +	643.99	262.65
36.our	1071	0.35	977	0.13 +	493.44	170.50
72.we	1603	0.53	2155	0.29 +	324.53	83.55

At the same time, Table 3 also shows that 3rd person singular pronouns are underrepresented in corporate blogs, which is indicative of their marginal role in this type of corporate communication.

This quantitative trend is confirmed if we turn to consider the absolute frequencies of pronouns shown in Figure 1. The large frequency of occurrence of ‘we’ is somewhat surprising in view of the personal nature of blogs, where ‘I’ would appear to be the obvious choice to express the corporate authorial voice. Instead, the first person singular pronoun occurs considerably less frequently than ‘we’, with a frequency even lower than that of ‘they’. This suggests that blog writers tend to speak on behalf of their institutions asserting their authority by referring to body corporate rather than projecting their own selves.

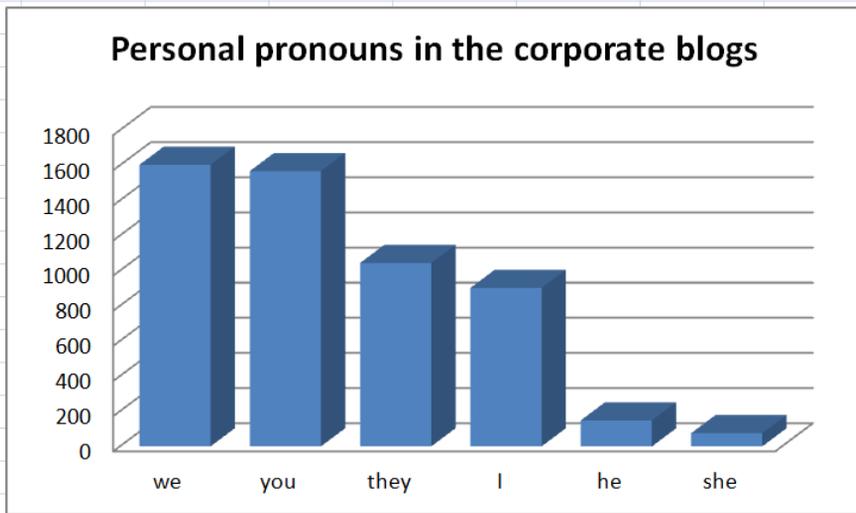


Figure 1. Absolute frequencies of personal pronouns used in CBC

While ‘he’ or ‘she’ are used sparingly and they are clearly underused in corporate blogs, the third person plural form ‘they’ is relatively frequent. The concordance analysis shows that ‘they’ is typically employed to refer to a range of entities in the corporate environment such as *businesses, business organization, companies, consumers, customers, clients, stakeholders, retailers, staff members, business managers, business leaders*, etc. These entities remain in professional relationship with the blog readers. As the examples below illustrate, blog writers tend to refer anaphorically to them when providing advice on how their reader should handle various issues, usually related to some aspects of customer service:

(1) *This may sound obvious, but you need to know your customer before they come into the store, and you need to take care of them while they are in the store.* (Fujitsu)

(2) *Since you are tracking customers as they migrate through lifecycle phases over time, these solutions are uniquely suited for targeting individuals who fall below the averages for the time and the number of sessions it takes to progress to the next milestone.* (IBM)

(3) *Let’s assume that you need to hire an external consultant. Typically, they would have their own laptop. How do you make sure that they can access only the information they need?* (Fujitsu)

Worth noting is that all these examples also contain direct references to blog readers by means of ‘you’. As we shall see throughout this paper, a high-degree of pseudo-personalization is one of the recurring and potentially defining features found in corporate blogs. In addition, as can be seen in Example 3, posing a question can add to the impression of the writer engaging in a dialogue.

If both ‘we’ and ‘I’ are found in blogs, albeit with drastically different frequencies, the question emerges whether there are also differences concerning their use in text. We address this question by analysing their most frequent

collocates. The analysis included all co-occurring items with the minimum frequency of 5 and it has revealed that there is in fact considerable overlap between their collocates. For example, both ‘I’ and ‘we’ are commonly found with mental verbs (Biber et al 1999) such as *believe, think, know, see, want*, etc. These are used to express the writer’s stance:

(4) *However, I believe that while Technology is helping us big time in scaling up and aiding in global distribution, it is also in some way, dehumanizing transactions.* (Infosys)

(5) *Here at Microsoft, we think we’re the best bet for customers because we alone provide a consistent, enterprise-grade platform that is hybrid by design, and one that is based on our experience delivering more than 200 cloud services to billions of people.* (Microsoft)

(6) *We know from experience that small and medium-sized enterprises in particular appreciate having a partner who is on an equal footing.* (Fujitsu)

These examples indicate that conveying opinion is inextricably linked to ‘impression management’ (Baron and Byrne 2000). This is particularly salient in (5), where the writer stresses his or her identification with the corporate locality (*here at Microsoft*) and expresses a shared opinion on behalf of the entire organization, while, at the same time, engaging in positive self-description (*consistent, more than 200 cloud services to billions of people*).

Surprisingly, both ‘I’ and ‘we’ are used with a very restricted set of communication verbs (*talk, speak, discuss* and *write*) as one could expect to find more references in the blogs to various communication activities. The pronoun ‘we’ tends to be found with more ‘activity verbs’, such as *work, launch, help, operate*, than ‘I’, which has only one (*start*). Interestingly, there are many instances where ‘I’ and ‘we’ are found in the same sentence as in Example (7).

(7) *I’ve been with Genpact since its formation in 1997, and I could not be more proud of how far we’ve come in this short period of time, especially how we have generated \$22 billion of impact for our clients since 2006! I welcome you to join us on this exciting journey!* (Genpact) (emphasis added)

This example shows that blogs often contain a testimony to make the company look more approachable and attractive in the eyes of potential recruits. Such testimonies usually contain first-person accounts of life within the company (Breeze 2013). In this example, the writer clearly identifies themselves with the company and its achievements by emphasizing the duration of his or her collaboration with the company. The personal expression of extremely positive evaluation is augmented by providing a specific reference to the profit obtained by the company. But the switch from ‘I’ to ‘we’ may also signal solidarity with the reader, a sense of unity and inclusivity. Example 8 shows that, apart from the use of the ‘journey’ metaphor, the blog writer emphasizes the shared experience by posing a question allegedly relevant for both the writer and the reader:

(8) *Such discussions are valuable as part of the overall journey, but I strongly believe that we should focus instead on asking fundamental questions such as: “Why are my customers dissatisfied?”* (Genpact)

(9) *When we realized that we needed to change the delivery date, I called the store where we’d made the purchase.* (IBM)

In excerpt (9), the writer shares their experience by providing a more detailed insight into the professional practice.

Clearly, in many blog posts, writers overuse ‘you’ to evoke a sense of immediacy and catch the reader’s attention (emphasis added):

(10) ***You** don’t have time to think up there. If **you** think, **you**’re dead.* (HP) (emphasis added)

These examples illustrate the innately dialogic nature of many blog posts, where writers tend to involve their readers in the text by anticipating their problems, expectations or needs. It can be assumed that such an imaginary dialogue serves the purpose of creating and maintaining a kind of bond between the author representing a corporation and their readers. Also, the frequent repetition of the personal pronoun *you* underlines the immediacy of the quasi-dialogue. This indicates that the authors of corporate blogs attempt to provide their readers with a more personal level of communication by the frequent use of first and second person pronouns which are associated with “chattier and lighter style” (Haigh 2009: 8-9).

5.1.1. Personal pronouns and questions

Questions represent the most obvious strategy of dialogic involvement. The large occurrence of ‘you’, documented in Table 3 and Figure 1 above, can be accounted for by considering its use in direct questions. Such questions involve readers in the text by asking bluntly for their opinion as in (11). Moreover, the authors of corporate blogs aim to engage their readers’ attention and provoke them to think, as in (11):

(11) *It seems companies have more faith in ancient wisdom of Confucius who said, “Consistency is the virtue of fools (and wise people change their minds as they grow wiser)”. Would you agree?* (Wipro)

They tend to employ metaphoric and value-laden language as in 12, 13 and 14 (emphasis added):

(12) *What are you doing to **break the shackles of** the mere Cost Arbitrage model?* (Genpact)

(13) *Have you ever tried to **unfriend** someone in real life?* (Wipro)

(14) *What would you do if your 10-day-old baby **suffered a stroke**?* (Microsoft)

These questions aim at eliciting an emotive response from the readers by emphasizing some aspect of their personal life: losing a friend or coping with a life-threatening situation affecting their child.

Less provoking are questions which refer to the reader's knowledge and/or his or her needs:

(15) *Do you think you can tell the difference between real antivirus software and scareware?* (Microsoft)

(16) *Will you get the level of service you need? How available and reliable will it be? Will you truly save money? Or, if you're choosing a service purely on price, will you have to make tradeoffs in another area?* (HP)

It seems that such questions are seldom genuine questions seeking answers but they function as yet another covert way of promoting corporate products or services. In fact, some of them finish with a direct appeal to participate in an event:

(17) *Are you interested in one of these topics and would you like to attend our next Social Media Round Table?* (Accenture)

5.1.2. Personal pronouns and modality

The collocational analysis of 'I', 'we' and 'you' has revealed that there is a strong co-occurrence between these personal pronouns and the modal verbs of 'can' and 'could'. In addition, 'can' (but not 'could') has been identified as unusually frequent in comparison with the reference corpus. It ranks as twenty-second most frequent keyword. The frequencies provided in Table 4 suggest that blog writers engage with their readers by projecting their abilities and highlighting their skills.

(18) *Since I am one of the Experts it would be my particular pleasure to welcome **you** to the community because I am sure that **you can** come up with a lot of creative and innovative ideas (...).* (Fujitsu) (emphasis added)

(19) *If someone were to tell you that you could do it almost 4 times faster, with 11 times lesser number of clicks and without writing any commands... you would shrug your shoulders and mock them for being an unrealistic optimist.* (Wipro)

In (18) the author of this blog post asserts his or her professional authority as an expert but at the same time, the reader is invited to join this professional community. This is achieved by means of direct address (*you*) and the extremely flattering evaluation of the reader's potential, i.e. he or she is capable of *creative and innovative ideas*. Example (19) is slightly different but also quite representative of the tendency to demonstrate to the readers the potential benefits of what the readers' companies have to offer. Characteristically, this is done by means of an imaginary dialogue with the blog writer anticipating their readers' reaction.

Table 4. Frequencies (raw) of co-occurrence between the personal pronouns and modal verbs

Modal Verb (Frequency)	I	We	You
can (1642)	20	87	191
could (313)	14	13	26
may (271)	2	9	18
might (124)	-	-	21

In Example 20, ‘we’ is used in conjunction with ‘can’ to create a bond with the reader which consists in a joint action to address an environmental issue of reducing waste:

(20) *So **we can** evidently cope with another billion people on the planet if **we can** only stop wasting so much.* (Tata Consultancy Services) (emphasis added)

As it invariably occurs in corporate discourse, the purpose of this message is twofold: encourage the reader to participate and, at the same time, enhance the corporate image of the company as environmentally-friendly. The clear preference for using ‘we’ rather than ‘I’ with ‘can/could’ could be attributed to the possibility of maintaining the illusion of a two-way communication. This is evidently lacking when the singular pronoun is used. Still, ‘I’ is obviously the easiest way to exploit the personal dimension by narrating and sharing stories related to professional experience:

(21) *But, I couldn’t help but think how much more positive my experience with that florist would have been had they been able to provide me with the order, shipment, and delivery status that so many consumers have ranked as important. And, now, I can appreciate why from personal experience! (IBM)*

The modal verb ‘may’ occurs much less frequently and whenever it does, it is used with ‘you’. Empathizing with their readers appears to lie behind many instances when ‘you’ co-occurs with ‘may’.

(22) *Many of you **may** have gone through this journey or are even going through it now.* (Genpact) (emphasis added)

Lastly, the combination of ‘you’ and ‘may’ is used to plot scenarios in which the reader is projected as an ideal user for the preferred or recommended way in which the company products should be applied.

(23) *After you start organizing your data with Access 2013 Web apps, you may find yourself wishing to visualize or summarize it. For example, imagine you are tracking your deal pipeline in Access, including when you expect to get paid and how much.* (Microsoft)

In addition, we identified several modal adverbs such as *maybe* (30 hits), *perhaps* (42 hits) and *probably* (30 hits) co-occurring with ‘you’ or ‘your’ as illustrated in Examples 24 – 26 (with emphasis added).

(24) ***Maybe your** company is not as far along the maturity curve in technology and procurement operations.* (Infosys)

(25) ***Perhaps you** recognize that sensation: coming out of a conversation somewhat dissatisfied, only having made 23 out of your intended 25 talking points.* (Accenture)

(26) *At the same time as you are doing a massive amount of changes the normal operation with releases and incidents have to work as normal. To not have rigid processes and work routines in place will make you slowly grind to a painful halt in the project and **probably you** will have a lot of escalations and unhappy people.* (Capgemini)

It appears that these adverbs play an important role in the blog writer’s overall strategy for dialogic expansion (Martin 2000; White 2003) whereby alternative positions are construed as possible and perhaps even encouraged. More specifically, Here we can notice an invitation to think, to consider a different option since the authors of corporate blogs engage and invite their readers to consider certain issues. These examples also indicate that the authors of corporate blogs address their recipients directly which, as a result, tightens the relationship and brings conversation on a more personal level.

5.2. Directives

The central importance of ‘you’ and ‘your’ can also be seen in their link to directives which, as Hyland (2005: 187) points out, “instruct the reader to perform an action or to see things in a way determined by the writer”. These are signalled mainly by the presence of imperative forms. As mentioned in the section on Data and Methodology, the part-of-speech category of verbs (base forms) and imperatives ranks as first, making the use of imperatives one of the most characteristic features of corporate blogs. Table 5 below lists the most frequent imperative forms.

Table 5. Most frequent verbs found in the imperative forms with raw frequencies

Item	Frequency
read	30
see	26
think	24
imagine	22
learn	19
take	18
get	18

build	14
consider	14
check out	12
stay	8
look at	7
start	6
follow	5

The analysis of these verbs has corroborated the relevance of the taxonomy proposed in Hyland. Indeed, some of the functions identified in academic prose are similar to those identified in our study. First, there are verbs which are used to carry out textual acts. These include *read, see, learn, check out, look at, follow,* and *stay*. This is the largest category, where the imperative forms are used to engage readers in textual activities:

(27) *See case studies of the American and Danish Red Cross Societies’ adoption of Office 365.* (Microsoft)

(28) *Read more about how Fujitsu can support you in getting prepared for the future.* (Fujitsu)

In both (27) and (28), readers are referred to other parts of the text or another text related to the blog post they are reading. The former, most ‘academic’ example refers readers to external sources and it serves to increase the credibility of a claim made in the blog post concerning the practicality of the promoted software. The latter also brings assurance of the company’s positive role in bringing benefits to the reader.

Just as in the case of academic discourse, blog readers are directed to follow a line of reasoning or to understand a particular point or an argument. This signals the presence of cognitive acts. The verbs ‘think’ and ‘imagine’ are two most frequent ones found in this category which leads the readers through the argumentation to the writer’s claims.

(29) *Imagine two buildings; one which is hidden somewhere in a remote village and another which is kept right in the middle of a busy city.* (Microsoft)

(30) *Think of the following example: a family vacationing at a tropical resort updates their social profiles with comments of a fabulous vacation to be viewed by their friends & peers.* (Capgemini)

(31) *Consider these facts: Oracle is reporting a steadily declining on-premises software license revenue while clocking a double digit growth in their cloud business.* (Wipro)

Another category includes verbs which signal physical acts. This category seems to be marked by strong advisory and instructive concerns. Readers are instructed how they must act to achieve the expected or desired benefits:

(32) *Get global communications right the first time: Use the best tools for collaboration so that you don't need to stay on lengthy calls to painfully discuss the shape of a drawing on a power point page.* (Genpact)

(33) *Build new skills internally to improve efficiency, agility and responsiveness. CMOs need talent that can create consistent, multichannel experiences that meet customers' needs, expectations and demands for relevance.* (Accenture)

The forcefulness of such guidance may increase with the use of certain modal verbs. The verb 'need' is a case in point:

(34) *This may sound obvious, but **you need** to know your customer before they come into the store, and **you need** to take care of them while they are in the store.* (Fujitsu)

The same effect is achieved through the co-occurrence of 'you' and 'must'.

(35) *To take advantage of this free offer, you must upgrade to Windows 10 within one year of availability.* (Fujitsu)

What seems to distinguish the use of directives in corporate blogs is the underlying goal of enhancing corporate image through product branding. In addition, in some cases, the directives are clearly linked to the metalanguage of social media:

(36) *Stay tuned to this six-part blog to learn more about all our proposal phase winners.* (HP)

(37) *Follow us on Instagram to hear her story and meet more people like her.* (Microsoft)

These examples are not only another manifestation of the quasi-dialogic nature of the corporate blogs but they also signal clear instructive and advisory concerns present in this type of corporate discourse.

5.3. Appeals to shared knowledge

Yet another discursive strategy aimed at eliciting a sense of shared professional understanding involves appealing to shared knowledge (cf. Hyland 2005). Our analysis shows that there are specific linguistic markers used in order to encourage readers to recognize a given proposition as accepted and shared within the professional community. Among such markers, one can identify "clearly" (45 occurrences) and "of course" (49 occurrences):

(38) *In general, isn't it better to try and implement something that is practical, rather than aim for the ideal which is **clearly** unworkable in the current conditions?* (Wipro)

(39) *This is **clearly** a huge step toward fully effective DCIM and a truly integrated data center.* (Hewlett Packard)

(40) *While technology is, of course, hugely important in a digitized world, the objectives under which IT operates play a part too.* (Hewlett Packard)

Relying on shared knowledge assumes the role of tacit understanding which positions the reader in a manner that suits the blog writer’s professional goals. In other words, this seems to be a classic way of constructing the stakeholder according to the specific needs and expectations of a company.

Our final examples point to the frequent occurrence of expressions with ‘let us/let’s’ (29 occurrences: 18 occurrences of “let’s” and 11 occurrences of “let us”) which also serve the purpose of creating the sense of solidarity and understanding:

(41) *Let us assume that an authorized person who needs access to the medical details of the patients should not have access to some of the other information; but at the same time will have access to selective information to enable identification of the individuals in the database.* (TCS)

(42) *So find those butterflies and let’s talk about what their wing flapping might mean to us!* (Wipro)

6. Conclusions

Our claim has been that constructing identity and image underpins most, if not all, corporate discourse and blogs are no exception. More specifically, we have argued that blog writers contribute to the generation of corporate identity by exploiting certain linguistic features with a view to creating and maintaining a bond with their readers. Ephemeral and superficial though this type of relation might seem, blog readers are encouraged to engage with a particular company, its products and services at a given point in time. Thanks to the mediation of a blog writer, the corporation is no longer perceived as faceless and anonymous. Rather, corporate blogs provide a vehicle for a certain dose of ‘human touch’, whereby professional, and sometimes even personal experiences are shared and a sense of belonging to a specific community of practice is instilled.

In this study, we investigated a range of pre-defined linguistic features commonly associated with the discursive practice of engaging readers. The analysis has revealed the central importance of the personal pronoun ‘you’ and ‘your’ to create the illusion of dialogue and interactivity. This illusion is augmented through a range of other features such as directives, references to shared knowledge and questions. If interactivity implies some kind of reciprocity (cf. Breeze 2013: 149), then blogs are hardly interactive. Our findings pose something of a paradox. On the one hand, blog posts are replete with linguistic features prompting readers to respond, but on the other, readers cannot have any control over the blogs content and they are unable to provide any feedback. Due to technical constraints, readers are not afforded the opportunity to respond to a blog post or to leave a comment (Fronczak 2019). Consequently, statements such

as the one below should be considered in purely rhetorical terms rather than a genuine appeal for response or feedback:

I would love to hear how many layers of tinfoil your data center has protecting it, so either drop me a line or just telepathically let me know. (HP)

In addition, the extremely common occurrence of ‘we’ suggests that blog in the generic sense is used by corporate members merely for strategic purposes. Corporate blogs usurp the features of a personal blog but they ultimately serve as a vehicle for promoting the body corporate. Engagement features and the ensuing dialogic expansion are intended to create the impression of inclusiveness, professional solidarity and to promote a positive image.

There are also obvious limitations with the kind of corpus approach we have adopted. A corpus-based analysis which relies on pre-defined linguistic markers is unable to provide information about other ways of expressing engagement which may potentially occur in this type of writing. A more detailed, qualitative approach would be necessary to complement the type of analysis undertaken here. Also, our analysis did not take into account possible intra-textual variation. There are studies which investigate the macrostructure of blogs and the implication for our research is that engagement features could be distributed unevenly across different parts of blogs.

We hope to have demonstrated that engagement lies at the core of corporate writing as blog writers use it to establish their credibility and build their ethos. The findings presented here offer a plausible description of interactions which appear to define the relatively recent and still underresearched genre.

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