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Purpose Fatigue in Modern Organizations and the Declining Credibility of Corporate Value Claims in Stakeholder-Facing Communication

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ABSTRACT

Corporate purpose has become a central language of contemporary management, yet its growing visibility does not always strengthen strategic credibility. This study develops the concept of purpose fatigue to explain how corporate value claims can lose persuasive force even when they remain formally acceptable and are not clearly deceptive. Purpose fatigue refers to a gradual decline in credibility that emerges when purpose language becomes intensive, repetitive, semantically similar across firms, and weakly supported by observable organizational action. Using a secondary-data research design, the study proposes a firm-year analysis of annual reports, sustainability reports, chief executive letters, corporate values pages, employee reviews, and business media coverage. Computational content analysis is used to assess purpose intensity, textual repetition, and semantic genericness, while employee sentiment and media tone provide stakeholder-facing indicators of strategic credibility. Purpose-action support is treated as a moderating condition that changes the meaning of value communication. Purpose language may remain credible when attached to traceable decisions, measurable commitments, or reported organizational movement, but the same language may become tiring when stakeholders find little evidence behind repeated claims. The study contributes to management research by moving the debate on corporate purpose beyond the usual opposition between authentic purpose and purpose-washing. It treats purpose as an empirical credibility claim whose strategic value depends on the relationship between communication, action, and stakeholder response.

INTRODUCTION

Corporate purpose has become one of the most visible languages of contemporary management, yet its credibility is no longer as stable as its popularity suggests. Large firms use purpose to explain why they exist, how they relate to stakeholders, and why employees should attach meaning to organizational commitments beyond wages, targets, or job descriptions. The language appears in annual reports, sustainability disclosures, CEO letters, career pages, leadership speeches, and public statements after crisis. Wider use has created a difficult managerial paradox. Purpose is expected to differentiate the organization, but its public vocabulary has become increasingly standardized. Claims about integrity, inclusion, sustainability, responsibility, and stakeholder value can sound interchangeable across firms in very different industries. As this language becomes easier to reproduce, the burden shifts from saying the right values to making those values credible under conditions that stakeholders can observe (George et al., 2023).

Management research has generally treated corporate purpose as a source of strategic coherence, employee commitment, and stakeholder trust. That view remains important, especially for firms trying to organize work around more than short-term financial metrics. Yet the optimistic reading leaves a difficult question only partly examined. Purpose may lose credibility before it becomes a scandal and before it can be classified as deception. Employees can become less responsive to value statements when promotion decisions, workloads, layoffs, or grievance practices make those statements feel remote from organizational life (Jasinenko & Steuber, 2023). Media audiences can also become less receptive when public commitments are repeated across years without concrete evidence of difficult managerial choices. Purpose continues to circulate in official documents, while its capacity to persuade weakens because stakeholders no longer treat the language as reliable evidence of organizational priorities.

Existing concepts explain part of this problem but do not fully settle it. Greenwashing and purpose-washing deal with misleading or exaggerated claims. Corporate hypocrisy captures inconsistency between talk and action, while symbolic management explains how firms use language to secure legitimacy (Kassinis et al., 2022). Organizational cynicism addresses distrust among employees who see a gap between managerial rhetoric and workplace reality. Purpose fatigue is related to these ideas, but the concept points to a quieter process. Credibility can erode through routine repetition, generic phrasing, and thin action-based support even when no single statement is obviously false. The analytical problem is not whether purpose claims are sincere, but whether repeated purpose communication still carries enough diagnostic value to help stakeholders judge what the firm will prioritize under pressure.

Purpose fatigue can be understood as a decline in strategic credibility that emerges when corporate value claims become repetitive, generic, and weakly connected to observable organizational action. Repetition concerns the temporal reuse of value language across documents and reporting cycles. Genericness concerns similarity across firms, sectors, and public-facing statements. Action gaps concern the distance between declared values and decisions that stakeholders can recognize in employment practices, governance routines, sustainability commitments, or crisis responses. Their shared effect lies in the erosion of evidentiary force. Purpose language becomes less capable of distinguishing organizational character because stakeholders hear familiar commitments without enough practical signals about how managers allocate attention, money, authority, and accountability when trade-offs become costly (Morrison & Mota, 2023).

A sharper empirical puzzle arises from the timing of purpose communication. Many firms intensified value-based messaging during periods marked by employee exhaustion, public distrust, political pressure around ESG, and heightened scrutiny of corporate social claims. More purpose communication in such conditions may strengthen credibility if stakeholders can connect the language to specific action. The same communication may deepen fatigue if the language becomes repetitive while the organization avoids the choices that would make purpose costly. This possibility complicates the usual assumption that more visible purpose is a sign of stronger alignment. Stakeholders may read increased communication as seriousness, but they may also read it as defensive narration when the words become predictable and the evidence remains thin (Jiang, 2021).

The stakeholder focus is narrowed to employee sentiment and media tone. Employees matter because they experience purpose through workload distribution, promotion systems, managerial responsiveness, and the treatment of voice or complaint (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2022). Media tone matters because external credibility is shaped through repeated interpretation of corporate conduct, especially when public claims about values meet news about layoffs, executive pay, environmental targets, governance disputes, or workplace controversies. Investors, consumers, and regulators remain relevant, but employee-facing and media-facing data provide a more tractable way to observe credibility as a stakeholder response rather than as an abstract reputational label. This focus also links strategic credibility to audiences that leave analyzable traces across secondary sources.

This study aims to develop and test the concept of purpose fatigue by examining whether intensive, repetitive, and generic corporate purpose language is associated with lower strategic credibility, and whether weak action-based support strengthens that association. The central objective is to move the debate on corporate purpose beyond the assumption that value communication is inherently credibility-building and beyond the narrower accusation that firms are simply washing their reputations. By treating purpose as a strategic claim whose credibility can rise, fade, or become exhausted across time, the study assesses how managerial language loses force when stakeholders cannot connect it to observable organizational choices (Bhattacharya et al., 2023).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses an archival quantitative design based entirely on secondary data. The unit of analysis is the firm-year, allowing changes in purpose communication and strategic credibility to be traced across a longitudinal window. The empirical strategy combines computational content analysis with panel regression. Purpose communication intensity is measured through the density of valueoriented terms relative to document length, while repetition is assessed through textual similarity within the same firm across consecutive years. Genericness is measured by comparing semantic similarity across firms in the same industry and reporting year, since highly interchangeable wording may weaken the distinctiveness of purpose claims. Purpose-action support is captured by identifying whether value claims are accompanied by concrete organizational references, measurable targets, reported progress, or policy-level commitments. Strategic credibility is then modeled as a function of purpose intensity, repetition, genericness, and purpose-action support, with firm fixed effects and year fixed effects included to control for stable organizational characteristics and period-specific shocks. Industry controls, firm size, profitability, leverage, and prior controversy exposure are added to reduce the risk that credibility outcomes are driven by structural differences rather than purpose communication.

Several validity checks are built into the design because purpose fatigue cannot be inferred from textual frequency alone. A subset of documents will be manually coded to assess whether the computational measures capture value claims rather than ordinary managerial language. Alternative dictionaries and embedding-based similarity measures will be used to test whether the findings depend on a single operational choice. Lagged models will examine whether purpose language in one year is associated with credibility outcomes in the following year, which helps reduce the problem of simultaneity between communication and stakeholder response. Robustness tests will also separate employee sentiment from media tone, since internal and external credibility may move differently. This design treats purpose fatigue as an observable credibility pattern across corporate texts and stakeholder-facing responses, while leaving room for later qualitative work to examine how employees or managers interpret the same pattern in daily organizational life.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Purpose Fatigue and Strategic Credibility

The first analytical result should be read through the relationship between purpose communication and strategic credibility rather than through the presence of value language in corporate documents. In the firm-year design, purpose language matters only when it can be connected to stakeholder-facing responses. A dense vocabulary of responsibility, integrity, inclusion, sustainability, or long-term value does not carry the same meaning across firms or across time. The same wording may signal commitment in one setting and routine disclosure in another, depending on whether stakeholders can link the claim to observable organizational conduct. This distinction is central to the interpretation of purpose fatigue. The analysis does not treat purpose communication as inherently beneficial or harmful. The relevant question is whether the language still helps employees and external observers infer what the firm protects and accepts responsibility for when managerial choices become costly (Ocasio et al., 2023).

Strategic credibility is treated here as the dependent outcome that connects textual measures with stakeholder response. Employee sentiment and media tone are used because they register different readings of the same corporate claims. Employee reviews capture whether value language appears believable from inside the organization, where purpose is tested through work routines, managerial responsiveness, career decisions, and the handling of complaints (Zhou et al., 2024). Media tone captures a public interpretation, where value claims are assessed against visible decisions and controversy narratives. These indicators do not exhaust the meaning of credibility, yet they prevent the analysis from treating strategic credibility as a vague reputational label. The credibility pattern becomes visible when firms intensify purpose language while stakeholder-facing responses fail to move in the same direction or become more skeptical over subsequent reporting periods.

The connection between purpose communication and credibility should not be reduced to a simple linear assumption. At moderate levels, value language may still help clarify organizational identity, especially when reports link purpose claims to decisions that stakeholders can verify. A different pattern is expected once higher intensity coincides with repetitive wording and weak action-based support. In that condition, added communication can raise the burden of proof. Employees and media audiences may ask more of a firm that speaks more about purpose, because the language invites evaluation of whether managerial choices bear any cost (Simons et al., 2022). A firm that repeatedly claims to value employee well-being after visible workforce reductions or unresolved labor disputes may face a credibility penalty that cannot be repaired by additional purpose language alone. The point is not that such claims are always false, but that repetition without fresh evidence makes belief more difficult to sustain.

Temporal movement matters because purpose fatigue is unlikely to appear in a single document. A one-year report can sound generic because of sectoral convention or reporting templates. Fatigue becomes more plausible when the same firm reuses similar value formulations across reporting cycles while employee sentiment or media tone weakens. Repetition is relevant here because it allows the study to distinguish stability from stagnation. Stability supports credibility when it travels with sustained action-based references, measurable commitments, or reported progress. Stagnation appears when the firm keeps the language stable but removes the organizational substance that would make continuity meaningful. Longitudinal similarity is not treated as a defect by itself. Its meaning depends on whether the text remains connected to decisions that stakeholders can identify beyond the report (Gartenberg & Serafeim, 2023).

The analysis also requires a comparative reading across firms. Genericness matters because purpose communication loses strategic value when many firms adopt almost identical moral vocabulary. A values statement may sound appropriate and still fail to distinguish the organization from others in the same industry. Semantic similarity across firms can capture this problem more precisely than a manual impression of boilerplate language. When value claims converge across firms, stakeholders have less reason to treat those claims as firm-specific signals. Media audiences may interpret them as standard corporate positioning, while employees may read them as recruitment language that says little about their own workplace. Genericness weakens credibility through informational thinning. The statement remains positive and professionally written, but offers fewer clues about the priorities that separate one firm from another (Koçak & Puranam, 2024).

Purpose-action support is the condition that decides whether intensity and repetition become credible or tiring. Textual analysis alone cannot settle whether a firm’s purpose is believable, because frequency may reflect seriousness as well as impression management. For that reason, the model links value claims to action-based references, including measurable targets, reported progress, policy changes, governance commitments, or specific organizational decisions that allow stakeholders to see how purpose enters managerial practice (Bochkay et al., 2023). A purpose statement attached to a workforce policy, a verified emissions target, or a changed grievance procedure carries a different evidentiary weight from a statement that remains abstract across multiple reports. The action-support measure is not designed to judge moral sincerity. Its function is narrower. It assesses whether the language gives stakeholders enough material basis to treat purpose as more than an approved corporate vocabulary.

Causal direction remains a serious concern in this type of analysis. Firms may increase purpose communication because credibility has already weakened, which would make heavy value language a response to distrust rather than its cause. The lagged model in the research design addresses part of this problem by linking purpose language in one year to employee sentiment and media tone in the following year. This approach cannot eliminate all endogeneity, but it forces the interpretation to be more disciplined (Christensen et al., 2022). A purpose fatigue pattern becomes more plausible when repetitive or generic value language precedes weaker credibility indicators, especially after firm and year fixed effects are included. If weaker credibility precedes the rise in purpose communication, the interpretation should shift toward defensive communication rather than fatigue produced by overused value language.

The internal and external indicators may not move together. Employee sentiment can decline while media tone remains favorable, particularly when the tensions around purpose are embedded in daily work and have not become publicly visible. Media tone can also turn skeptical before employees express stronger negativity, especially when a firm’s public values become attached to a high-profile controversy (Henisz, 2023). This divergence is analytically useful rather than inconvenient. Purpose fatigue is not assumed to be a uniform stakeholder reaction. The analysis reads credibility as layered across audiences, with employee-facing and media-facing responses offering different evidence of whether purpose language retains persuasive value. A strong empirical result would be one in which high purpose intensity becomes credible only when accompanied by action support, while repetition and genericness weaken that credibility under thin evidence conditions (Tafuro & Piccaluga, 2026).

2. Repetition, Genericness, and the Declining Informational Value of Purpose Language

The textual analysis should not be read as a search for value words alone. A firm can use more purpose-related language without producing a richer account of what its values mean in practice. The more important pattern lies in whether the text adds information that stakeholders can use to distinguish organizational priorities across time and across firms. In the firm-year design, purpose intensity is only the starting point. Dense value language becomes analytically meaningful when it is examined alongside textual reuse within the same firm and semantic convergence across firms. This shift prevents the analysis from treating corporate purpose as a matter of quantity. More language does not necessarily mean more credibility, since added words can increase visibility while leaving the evidentiary content of purpose almost unchanged (Qian & Sun, 2021).

The first textual tension appears when purpose communication expands faster than its organizational detail. Reports can devote more space to purpose, values, and responsibility while still leaving stakeholders with a thin sense of how those commitments shape managerial decisions. Such density matters because it raises the expectation that the firm has something concrete to say. A document that repeatedly invokes values but gives little indication of changed practices or resource commitments creates a different textual condition from one in which purpose language is embedded in verifiable organizational movement. The measure of purpose intensity therefore needs to be interpreted with care. High intensity is not treated as a defect, but as a condition that increases the burden on the firm to supply language with enough practical content (Fiandrino & Tonelli, 2021).

Within-firm repetition provides the longitudinal part of the problem. A purpose statement that remains stable over several years can signal continuity, especially where the organization has a clear strategic identity and uses similar language to sustain that identity through changing market conditions. Yet repeated wording becomes less persuasive when it survives across reporting cycles without any meaningful alteration in the evidence attached to it. The firm appears to preserve its values, but the text may reveal maintenance rather than renewal (Sasaki et al., 2023). Longitudinal similarity in this analysis is therefore not judged by style alone. Its significance depends on whether repeated language travels with concrete references that refresh its meaning for employees and external observers who encounter the same claims year after year.

Cross-firm genericness creates a different kind of credibility pressure. Firms often use similar vocabulary because reporting standards, investor expectations, and professional communication norms make certain terms difficult to avoid. Similarity can also arise from legitimate sectoral concerns, since firms facing comparable risks may speak in a comparable managerial vocabulary. The difficulty begins when purpose language becomes so interchangeable that the identity of the firm is almost incidental to the statement. Semantic similarity is useful because it can detect this field-level convergence without relying only on the researcher's impression that a sentence sounds like boilerplate. The issue is not polished language itself. The issue is a loss of firm-specific information, where value statements look acceptable but no longer help readers infer what makes one organization's priorities different from another's.

The distinction between repetition and genericness is central to the empirical interpretation. Repetition concerns whether a firm reuses its own purpose language over time. Genericness concerns whether that language resembles the language of other firms in the same reporting environment. These mechanisms can overlap, although they do not have to move together. A firm can maintain stable values over time while preserving a distinctive strategic voice, and another can revise its wording each year while remaining trapped in the same industry vocabulary. Keeping the measures separate helps the model avoid a blunt accusation that similarity is always empty communication. The more defensible argument is that similarity becomes damaging when it reduces the informational value of purpose claims and when stakeholder-facing responses move in a skeptical direction (Besharov & Mitzinneck, 2023).

This point is important for the panel analysis. Purpose intensity, repetition, and genericness are treated as predictors whose meaning depends on their relationship with employee sentiment and media tone across firm-years. If purpose intensity is associated with stronger credibility only when repetition and genericness remain low, the findings would support the view that value language has diminishing returns once it becomes less distinctive. If high repetition or high genericness is followed by weaker sentiment or more skeptical media tone, especially after firm and year effects are included, the pattern would be more consistent with purpose fatigue than with ordinary consistency in corporate reporting.

The interpretation remains cautious because weak credibility could also push firms to increase purpose communication defensively, which is why lagged specifications are needed (Durand & Huynh, 2024).

Measurement validity becomes a substantive issue rather than a technical appendix. Semantic similarity can overstate genericness if it captures regulatory language or sector-specific terminology that firms are expected to use. Dictionary-based intensity can also overstate purpose communication if ordinary managerial terms are counted without attention to their sentence-level use. For that reason, the computational measures need manual validation on a subset of documents and robustness checks using alternative dictionaries or embedding models. These checks matter because the argument depends on separating meaningful purpose claims from routine reporting language. Without that separation, the analysis risks mistaking compliance vocabulary for purpose fatigue, which would weaken both the empirical model and the conceptual claim (Chua et al., 2024).

The revised interpretation avoids turning textual similarity into a moral judgment about firms. Organizations operate under pressures that favor comparability, standardized disclosure, and careful wording. A certain amount of repeated and shared language is part of contemporary reporting practice (Kadir, 2026a). Purpose fatigue becomes plausible only when textual density, reuse, and semantic convergence align with weaker stakeholder-facing credibility and limited action-based support. This is why the textual analysis cannot stand apart from the outcome measures (Galeotti et al., 2025). Purpose language loses informational value when stakeholders receive more communication but gain less evidence about how the firm makes decisions under pressure. The text becomes less useful as a signal, not because it is poorly written, but because it stops reducing uncertainty about the organization.

3. Purpose-Action Support and the Conditions of Credible Purpose

Purpose-action support gives the textual findings their substantive test. Dense, repeated, or semantically similar purpose language does not become fatigue by itself, because corporate texts are shaped by reporting conventions and by the need to maintain a stable public identity (Aguilera, 2023). The credibility problem appears when value claims remain visible while the organization gives stakeholders little evidence that those claims affect managerial choice. In the firm-year model, action support is treated as a moderating condition rather than a separate reputational attribute. Its role is to change the meaning of purpose intensity, repetition, and genericness. The same level of purpose communication can be read as credible commitment under strong action support, or as tiring corporate narration when the text expands without enough organizational proof.

Action support is coded from public documents through references that connect purpose claims with measurable commitments, reported movement, policy change, governance responsibility, or resource allocation. These references are not taken as proof of sincerity. A firm can narrate action selectively, and public documents often present organizational conduct in the most favorable available terms. The measure is used more narrowly as an indicator of evidentiary anchoring. A values claim gains more empirical weight when the report links it to a decision that creates consequences for management, binds the firm to a target, or gives stakeholders a basis for checking whether the claim travels beyond communication. Without that anchoring, purpose remains linguistically visible but analytically light (Huang et al., 2024).

Purpose intensity may carry positive credibility value when action support is high, because more communication is accompanied by more verifiable organizational substance. Under weak action support, the same intensity can become costly because repeated value claims raise expectations that the firm then struggles to satisfy. Repetition follows a similar pattern. Stable wording can preserve strategic identity when the reports attach the repeated claim to cumulative progress, but it can look like textual recycling when the evidence surrounding the claim stays thin. Genericness becomes more damaging under the same condition, since interchangeable language gives employees and media audiences fewer firm-specific cues for judging whether purpose shapes actual managerial priorities.

Employee sentiment and media tone are needed because action support cannot validate itself. Internal reviews may question purpose even when reports describe value-linked initiatives, particularly where employees experience the organization through work pressure, promotion routines, and managerial response to complaint. Media tone may also remain skeptical when corporate evidence appears selective, late, or shaped by controversy management. These responses are imperfect traces. Employee review platforms may overrepresent dissatisfaction, while media coverage can be influenced by firm visibility and prior controversy exposure. The model therefore reads them as stakeholder-facing indicators rather than as complete representations of organizational reality, with controls used to reduce the risk that credibility is being mistaken for size, sectoral exposure, or newsworthiness.

Causal interpretation remains delicate. A firm may add action language because credibility has already declined, especially after public criticism or weakening employee morale. In that case, stronger purpose-action support would be part of a repair attempt rather than a prior condition that protects credibility. Lagged specifications help separate these readings by examining whether action-supported purpose claims precede later changes in employee sentiment or media tone (Kadir, 2026b). A pattern in which stronger action support appears before more favorable stakeholder-facing responses gives the credibility interpretation more force. A pattern in which action language rises only after negative sentiment or skeptical coverage would point toward defensive reconstruction, and that possibility keeps the analysis from treating corporate disclosure as a transparent record of managerial intent.

Purpose-action support also sharpens the boundary of purpose fatigue. Without this moderator, the concept risks becoming a broad complaint about polished corporate language. The stronger claim is more limited. Fatigue becomes empirically plausible when purpose language grows more intensive, more repeated, or more semantically similar while the evidence attached to that language remains weak and stakeholder-facing credibility declines. The key issue is not the existence of a gap in an abstract moral sense. The issue is whether stakeholders receive enough organizational evidence to treat purpose as a credible signal about what managers are prepared to protect, finance, or change under constraint. Where that evidence remains thin, additional communication may increase exposure to doubt.

CONCLUSION

Corporate purpose still matters in modern organizations, but its value cannot be assumed from the amount of attention it receives in corporate communication. This study argues that purpose becomes fragile when firms speak about values more often than they provide evidence that those values shape managerial choices. Purpose fatigue describes a slower loss of credibility, where familiar value language remains present in reports and public statements but gradually becomes less useful for employees and external audiences in judging what the organization will actually do under pressure. This reading keeps the concept close to strategic management rather than to a general complaint about corporate rhetoric.

The density and recurrence of purpose language, together with its similarity across firms, become meaningful when read beside employee sentiment, media tone, and evidence of organizational action. For managers, the implication is straightforward. Values gain credibility when they are attached to decisions that carry consequences, while repeated statements without visible support can make purpose sound routine. Future research can refine this argument by testing the model in specific sectors or institutional settings where expectations about corporate values, disclosure, and stakeholder trust develop in different ways.

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