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Vicious and Virtuous Circles of Aspirational Talk: From Self-Persuasive to Agonistic CSR Rhetoric

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Abstract

Scholars are divided over the question of whether managerial aspirational talk that contradicts current business practices can contribute to corporate social responsibility (CSR). In this conceptual article, we explore the rhetorical dynamics of aspirational talk that either impede or foster CSR. We argue that self-persuasive CSR rhetoric, as one enactment of aspirational talk, can attract attention and scrutiny from organizational members. Continued adherence to this rhetoric, however, creates and perpetuates tensions that lead to a vicious circle of disengagement. A virtuous circle, by contrast, requires a shift towards an agonistic rhetoric that transcends tensions by re-articulating aspirations in concurrence with situated understandings of responsible corporate practice. Our arguments contribute to a better understanding of how communication becomes constitutive of CSR and address the debate on decoupling between talk and action.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, Aspirational Talk, Rhetoric, Agonism, Decoupling

Aspirational CSR claims by managers that contradict current business practices are often perceived as “cheap talk” or “greenwashing” (Bansal & Clelland, 2004; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). In addition, scholars have observed that ambiguous CSR aspirations can have detrimental effects, since they lead to unfocused practices (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Wijen, 2014) and provoke uncritical obedience, disengagement, or cynicism from organizational members (Costas & Kärreman, 2013; Humphreys & Brown, 2008).

Recent scholarship that regards communication as constitutive of CSR (Christensen, Morsing, & Thyssen, 2013, 2015a 2015b, 2017; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013) challenges this skeptical view. Scholars taking this approach argue that “aspirational talk” by management (Christensen et al., 2013; Haack & Schoeneborn, 2015) is not necessarily an expression of duplicity, but can have a positive effect on future CSR. From this perspective, voicing aspirations is often the only way for managers to address CSR visions that current practices cannot yet fulfill. Furthermore, scholars argue that ambiguous CSR aspirations have a self-persuasive effect, because they raise expectations and scrutiny (Christensen, 2016; Christensen et al., 2013) and enable organizational members to articulate their own interpretations, empowering them to explore new CSR practices (Christensen et al., 2013; Haack, Schoeneborn, & Wickert, 2012).

While researchers have found tentative empirical evidence for the positive effects of aspirational talk on future CSR practices (Haack et al., 2012; Livesey & Graham, 2007), scholars admit that little is known about the conditions under which aspirational talk either triggers these effects or “transform(s) from hope into cynicism” (Christensen et al., 2013, p. 386). Given the divergent assumptions about the impact of aspirational talk on future CSR practices, this article aims to explore the communicative dynamics through which aspirational talk either leads to disengagement or contributes to CSR.

To meet this aim, we apply a recently proposed rhetorical lens to the idea of aspirational talk (Christensen et al., 2013; Ihlen, 2015; O'Connor & Ihlen, 2018). Rhetorical scholarship focuses on the manner in which language is used in contested contexts to create audience identification and commitment. In recent years, this body of scholarship has been given growing consideration in organizational research (Bednarek, Paroutis, & Sillince, 2017; Cheney, Christensen, Conrad, & Lair, 2004; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2017). In this article, a rhetorical lens helps us to identify the various tensions that accompany the rhetorical situation (Biesecker, 1989; Burke, 1973) of aspirational talk. Furthermore, it allows us to analyze how rhetorical engagement with these tensions unfolds.

We develop a model of vicious and virtuous circles (Smith & Lewis, 2011) that describes the divergent dynamics of rhetorical engagement that either perpetuate or transcend tensions and, hence, either impede or foster CSR. We argue that visionary and ambiguous CSR rhetoric, as one form of enacting aspirational talk, is crucial to gaining attention and attracting scrutiny from organizational members. Adherence to such self-persuasive rhetoric, however, creates tensions that lead to a vicious circle of disengagement and cynicism. To work through these tensions and trigger a virtuous circle, a shift towards an agonistic rhetoric, another form of enacting aspirational talk, is necessary. Building on recent business ethics and CSR literature (Clegg, Kornberger, & Rhodes, 2007; Dawkins, 2015; Pullen & Rhodes, 2013; Rhodes & Harvey, 2012), we define agonistic rhetoric as a rhetoric that embraces situated dissent as a central driver for working through tensions, by shifting the authority relations between rhetor and audience. In contrast to a self-persuasive rhetoric by managers, an agonistic rhetoric reframes CSR visions as provisional (Foss, 2009); it strives to understand the reasons for dissent and dis-identification (Ratcliffe, 2005), and fosters the re-articulation of visions in ways that resonate with locally committed understanding of responsible corporate practice (DeLuca, 1999; Laclau & Mouffe, 1993).

The conceptual advancement of this article derives from a rhetorical lens that focuses on the rarely investigated dynamics between aspirational talk by management and the tensions arising from dissent (Christensen et al., 2017). The model of vicious and virtuous circles provides a dynamic analytic perspective that explains how rhetoric can lead to the rejection or achievement of CSR. The model curbs the expectations that arise from the self-persuasive appeal of the visionary CSR rhetoric, and shifts the emphasis towards the necessity for engaging agonistically with tensions.

Our arguments have important implications for the current debate on communication as constitutive of CSR (Christensen et al., 2013; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). We propose that the impact of aspirational talk on future CSR depends on the dynamic rhetorical capacities for voicing self-persuasive visions *and* substantially engaging with the tensions that these visions create. Furthermore, our reflections have important implications for the recent debates in the CSR literature on decoupling (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Haack & Schoeneborn, 2015). We suggest that adherence to self-persuasive rhetoric enforces decoupling, while the ability to shift towards an agonistic rhetoric contributes to the enactment of responsible corporate practice. Accordingly, we argue that transitory decoupling (Haack & Schoeneborn, 2015) is not an evolutionary phenomenon but rather emerges through contested rhetorical dynamics. We introduce agonistic rhetoric as a useful analytic concept for future research on the role of communication and tensions (Hoffmann, 2018) as drivers of meaningful engagement at the interface of business and society.

Our article is structured as follows. We first introduce the communication as constitutive view on CSR and outline the notion of aspirational talk. Second, we elaborate a rhetorical view to explicate the rhetorical situation of aspirational talk and its consequent tensions. Third, we describe different forms of rhetorical engagement with these tensions.

Finally, we elaborate our model of vicious and virtuous circles. The article closes with a discussion of our contributions and their implications for research and practice.

The Communication as Constitutive View on Aspirational Talk

The conflicting demands of multiple stakeholders challenge corporations to define their social priorities and create CSR agendas through meaningful stakeholder engagement (Crane & Glozer, 2016; Scherer, Palazzo, & Seidl, 2013). CSR research, based on a rich tradition in organizational communication (Cooren, Taylor, & van Every, 2006; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009), has begun to address these challenges with a reframed concept of communication (Christensen et al., 2013, 2015a, 2015b, 2017; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013; Schultz, Castelló, & Morsing, 2013; Trittin & Schoeneborn, 2017). Instead of assuming communication to be a “conduit” of information transmission (Axley, 1984), this line of research follows the premise that communication is constitutive of organizational phenomena (Brummans, Cooren, Robichaud, Daniel, & Taylor, 2014; Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011). Accordingly, organizational roles, structures, and boundaries are not considered to be substantially given; rather, they are understood to be the effects of an incremental, ongoing, and polyphonic process of authorizing an organizational representation (Taylor & van Every, 2000).

The communication as constitutive view on CSR adopts this premise to challenge the prevailing understandings about communication in CSR research. Specifically, it rejects an instrumental understanding of communication as a “strategic tool” (van Riel & Fombrun, 2007) and criticizes the view of CSR communication as being a ceremonial source of decoupling that evinces little or obscure practical impact (Bromley & Powell, 2012). Scholars following this line of inquiry therefore argue that the prevailing CSR research over-emphasizes the ideals of communicative consistency, clarity, and consensus, and falls short of seriously engaging with the complexities of CSR (Hoffmann, 2018; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). To counterbalance this trend, the communication as constitutive view on CSR embraces the potential for change

that lies in inconsistencies, ambiguities, and dissent, and finds expression in the idea of aspirational talk.

Aspirational Talk

Aspirational talk describes the managerial articulation of CSR visions, even when those visions cannot yet be fulfilled. Scholars argue that the inconsistency between ‘what is’ and ‘what should be’ is a driving force for change, and therefore challenge the pervasive notion that consistency between talk and action in CSR is the ideal. Instead, they consider aspirational talk to be a crucial form of action in its own right, in that it often represents the only opportunity for managers to address organizational obligations that reach beyond current practices (Christensen et al., 2013).

Following Austin (1975), these scholars argue that language not only serves as a medium to describe reality, but that language has performative properties that can trigger consequent action. From this perspective, managerial talk is a genre of speech act that addresses a broader audience and rarely focuses on a mere description of what is but, rather, contains self-persuasive affirmations of how things should be (Weick, 1995). This self-persuasive appeal of aspirational talk is considered to be particularly effective in contexts of formal and public observation (Taylor & Cooren, 1997) that create exposure and expectations for living up to voiced aspirations (Christensen, 2016). Furthermore, the ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984) of aspirational talk is considered to be a crucial resource of identification with and commitment to CSR because ambiguity allows multiple interpretations by organizational members and provides a space for exploring new CSR practices (Christensen et al., 2015a, 2015b, 2017).

While scholars find tentative empirical evidence for the positive effects of aspirational talk on future corporate practices (Haack et al., 2012; Livesey & Graham, 2007), they admit that little is known about the conditions under which aspirational talk unfolds these effects (Christensen et al., 2013). Indeed, the literature on aspirational talk is ambiguous regarding the

communicative dynamics that make aspirational talk a driver of future CSR. On the one hand, the literature highlights the self-persuasive appeal of aspirational talk (Christensen, 2016); on the other hand, it emphasises engagement with related dissent (Christensen et al., 2013, 2017). In the next section, we apply a rhetorical lens to explore how the dynamics of self-persuasion and engagement with dissent unfold.

A Rhetorical Lens on Aspirational Talk

The linguistic turn in the fields of humanities and social sciences (Lash, 1990; Rorty, 1992) has led to a revival of scholarly interest in rhetoric over recent decades (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 2014). This revival parallels a shift from emphasizing a rhetor's ability to persuade a physically present audience (Aristotle, 2004) to an analytic examination of all kinds of symbolically constructed "dialectical processes that link social actors, texts and communicative situations" (Cheney et al., 2004, p. 80). As an *analytic* approach and a *practical* means of intervening in social reality, rhetorical scholarship has raised interest from critical and postmodern scholars in organizational, management, and CSR research (Cheney et al., 2004; Hartelius & Browning, 2008; O'Connor & Ihlen, 2018). A rhetorical analysis allows not only a critical investigation of the persuasive rhetoric that preserves established power constellations but it also equips the quest for alternative rhetorical forms that transcend persuasive attempts and foster social transformation (Foss et al., 2014).

In this article, we apply this dual analytic approach to aspirational talk. Concretely, we follow two analytic steps that are established in the rhetorical scholarship (Hoffman & Ford, 2009) and recent CSR literature (O'Connor & Ihlen, 2018). First, we analyze the rhetorical situation (Burke, 1973) of aspirational talk and its inherent tensions. Second, we explore different forms of rhetorical engagement with these tensions.

Tensions of Aspirational Talk

Rhetorical situations can be understood as being shaped by two competing forces that emerge around a contested issue and impact on the relationship between rhetor and audience: (i) a force of congregation and unity, and (ii) a force of segregation and opposition (Burke, 1973; Cheney, Garvin-Doxas, & Torrens, 1999). We argue that these competing forces also apply to the rhetorical situation of aspirational talk and the relationship between rhetor (i.e., manager) and audience (i.e., organizational members). We suggest that these forces present as three tensions that typically occur at the business and society interface (Hahn, Figge, Pinkse, & Preuss, 2018; Jarzabkowski, Lê, & van de Ven, 2013; Smith, Gonin, & Besharov, 2013). We now define each of these tensions and explain how they shape the rhetorical situation of aspirational talk.

Performance tensions. On a general level, performance tensions in CSR emerge due to conflicting business social logics (Smith, Besharov, Wessels, & Chertok, 2012). With aspirational talk, these tensions emerge because managers seek to transform current business practices by voicing CSR visions that include ambitious social demands (Waldman, Siegel, & Javidan, 2006). It is the voicing of these visions, however, that draws attention to the tensions between aspired CSR and deviating business practices (Burchell & Cook, 2013).

Identification tensions. Identification tensions emerge from conflicting understandings about CSR at the corporate center and periphery (Smith et al., 2013). In the case of aspirational talk, these tensions emerge because a manager, speaking from a hierarchically superior and exposed position, aims at creating identification among organizational members with aspired CSR. This attempt, however, creates dissent due to competing situated understandings of what CSR actually means (Carollo & Guerci, 2018; Sharma & Jaiswal, 2018). Hence, the attempt to create identification with aspired CSR creates tensions between a shared understanding and the local interpretations of CSR.

Organizing tensions. Organizing tensions emerge when managers at the corporate center raise ambiguous CSR visions that the periphery is expected to enact (Hahn et al., 2018).

In the case of aspirational talk, these tensions emerge when managers attempt to empower the exploration of new practices via the voicing of ambiguous CSR visions. Organizational members, however, often interpret this as a delegation of responsibility (Rodrigo & Arenas, 2008; Stohl & Cheney, 2001). In other words, the aim of organizing future CSR through the voicing of an ambiguous vision creates tensions between attempts at empowerment and perceived delegation.

In sum, we argue that the rhetorical situation of aspirational talk is characterized by three main tensions. In the next section, we outline the rhetorical engagements with these tensions.

Rhetorical Engagement with Tensions

Organizational researchers, who explore the consequences of different forms of rhetorical engagement with tensions, conclude that attempts of downplaying or distracting from tensions has detrimental effects over time, but that acknowledging and engaging with tensions leads to fruitful results (Bednarek et al., 2017; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2017). Meta-theoretical approaches to organizational tensions support these findings (Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016; Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016) and propose the concept of vicious and virtuous circles as a means of exploring the effects of different forms of engagement with organizational tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011): A vicious circle is triggered by ongoing defensive reactions to emerging tensions, since the tensions reappear over time and lead to organizational inertia, cynicism, and disengagement. A virtuous circle, by contrast, emerges when tensions are acknowledged, allowing organizational members to “work through” (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008) and transcend them (Bednarek et al., 2017).

We consider these insights to be of great value for their application to the concept of aspirational talk. Building on empirical findings from recent organizational scholarship (Bednarek et al., 2017; Jarzabkowski, Sillince, & Shaw, 2010; Sillince, Jarzabkowski, & Shaw,

2012; Sillince & Mueller, 2007; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2017) and related results from research on CSR implementation (Carollo & Guerci, 2018; Castelló, Etter, & Nielsen, 2016; Costas & Kärreman, 2013; Haack et al., 2012; Scandeliu & Cohen, 2016), we model the dynamics of vicious and virtuous circles of rhetorical enactments with the tensions of aspirational talk. Empirically, forms of engagement with corporate tensions are intertwined, co-dependent, and non-linear (Bednarek et al., 2017; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). For the sake of clarity, however, our model describes the spiraling dynamics of vicious and virtuous circles in the order of the three tensions outlined above.

We argue that engagement with these tensions can be manifest in two ways: on the one hand, in a self-persuasive CSR rhetoric that is ambiguous and visionary; on the other hand, an agonistic rhetoric that regards engagement with tensions as a central driver of substantial CSR. We will show that although a self-persuasive rhetoric is crucial to raising awareness and scrutiny by organizational members, continued adherence to such rhetoric distracts rather than engages with the emerging tensions and perpetuates, them over time. To turn this vicious circle into a virtuous circle, a shift towards an agonistic rhetoric that transcends these tensions is necessary. Building on recent agonistic CSR scholarship (Clegg et al., 2007; Pullen & Rhodes, 2013; Rhodes & Harvey, 2012), we understand agonistic rhetoric as a form of rhetorical engagement that challenges the self-persuasive appeal of top down visions and instead emphasizes the importance of engaging with situated dissent and re-articulating it as drivers of substantial CSR. Based on these forms of self-persuasive and agonistic rhetoric, we describe in the next section our model of vicious and virtuous circles.

Vicious and Virtuous Circles of Aspirational Talk

In this section, we first elaborate the vicious circle and describe how aspirational talk finds expression in a self-persuasive rhetoric that perpetuates emerging tensions. We then expand on the virtuous circle that is triggered by an agonistic rhetoric that allows the transcending of these

tensions. Figure 1 provides an overview of the dynamics of vicious and virtuous circles of aspirational talk.

Insert figure 1 here

Vicious Circle of Self-Persuasive CSR Rhetoric

Classic rhetorical scholarship defines rhetoric as the persuasive use of communication in a “conscious intent to change others” (Foss, 2009, pp. 569-570). The rhetor achieves audience identification with and commitment to his or her goal through persuasive appeal and rhetorical skill (Aristotle, 2004). Aspirational talk, indeed, represents a form of self-persuasive rhetoric as it is directed at the entire corporation, including the managerial rhetor (Christensen et al., 2013). According to the literature on aspirational talk, self-persuasive effects are triggered when a manager proclaims an appealing vision that attracts attention and scrutiny and, thus, a compulsion to move (Christensen, 2016; Christensen et al., 2013). Furthermore, the inherent ambiguity of aspirational talk serves as a resource for identification and commitment by organizational members, because ambiguity allows for multiple interpretations of CSR and the exploration of viable CSR practices (Christensen et al., 2013; Guthey & Morsing, 2014). The following quote from a former industry vice-president, cited in recent literature on aspirational talk (Christensen & Schoeneborn, 2017; Ihlen, 2015), provides a good description of self-persuasive CSR rhetoric in action:

“If you dress up things a little – that is, begin to tell the company’s CSR story – it can affect, positively, how you feel and act. [...] If you are sufficiently brave or cheeky to communicate a few inches ahead of the actual state of affairs, as a CSR professional you can help to assure that reality follows suit. If visionary leaders hadn’t had the nerve to

dream and talk ahead of reality, many important innovations would not have occurred.”

(Lunheim, 2005, p. 7)

The emphasis here lies on the manager as a distinguished rhetor, who has the persuasive appeal and corporate standing to create a vague yet appealing vision. The manager thereby triggers identification and commitment through aspirational talk. This view is based on the assumption that managerial rhetoric has a transformative effect (Epstein, 2015) and that “reality follows suit” (Lunheim, 2005, p. 7). In line with the extant literature on aspirational talk (Christensen et al., 2013), we consider such self-persuasive rhetoric to be necessary to attract initial awareness and trigger open interpretation and exploration of CSR. However, in the following section, we will elaborate how adherence to this self-persuasive rhetoric perpetuates rather than transcends the emerging tensions and, hence, impedes commitment to CSR.

How adherence to visionary rhetoric perpetuates performance tensions. The literature on aspirational talk argues that publicly-proclaimed CSR visions have a self-persuasive effect on future practices (Christensen, 2016; Christensen et al., 2013). While we agree that visionary rhetoric has a self-persuasive appeal that raises awareness and creates scrutiny, we argue that this rhetoric is unable to engage with the performance tensions that arise from the contradictions between visions and current business performances.

Indeed, organizational research has shown that adherence to management visions rarely leads to desired future practices, since organizational members perceive visionary rhetoric as being inaccessible and elitist (Mantere & Vaara, 2008). In particular, visions that contradict everyday business experience provoke cynical responses and a sense of distance in employees (Laine & Vaara, 2007). Even when organizational members believe a persuasive vision, these beliefs do not present in productive ways. On the contrary, persuasive visions – particularly when voiced by charismatic managers – can create effects of “corporate cultism,” including overreliance and subservience (Tourish, 2013; Tourish & Pinnington, 2002), impeding

employees from critically challenging these visions, even when facing indisputable deviation in practice.

Recent communication-centered studies on the impact of managerial CSR claims (Costas & Kärreman, 2013; Humphreys & Brown, 2008; Iivonen & Moisander, 2014) confirm these findings. Costas and Kärreman (2013), for example, observe how managerial CSR visions tend to turn some employees into blind believers, who uncritically embrace managerial claims and ignore the deviating practice. Other employees acknowledge the noble intent of management visions but, being faced with divergent everyday practice, avoid undertaking concrete initiatives. Finally, some employees respond to the contradiction between vision and practice with cynical distance.

Thus, we argue that the self-persuasive appeal of visionary rhetoric may well be crucial to creating initial awareness and scrutiny but that adherence to this rhetoric is likely to provoke uncritical belief or cynical distance, perpetuating the performance tensions between envisioned CSR and deviating business practices.

How adherence to ambiguous rhetoric perpetuates identification tensions. A second central assumption in the literature on aspirational talk is that the ambiguity of CSR visions provides a fruitful source for employee identification, because ambiguity allows for multiple interpretations (Christensen et al., 2013; Guthey & Morsing, 2014). This assumption follows the management literature that proposes that ambiguity is a vital way of achieving collective identification and action (Eisenberg, 1984). Eisenberg (1984) argues that ambiguity allows organizational members to identify with a broadly shared goal while maintaining situated interpretations.

Recent organizational scholarship, however, challenges this idea of ambiguity as a rhetorical resource for identification. This literature notes that a persistent and persuasive use of ambiguity not only creates a false perception of unity (Paul & Strbiak, 1997), but also

systematically privileges the managerial rhetor, who exploits ambiguity to accomplish an aspired goal while marginalizing contradictory audience perspectives and demands (Ceccarelli, 1998; DeLuca, 1999). Furthermore, longitudinal research on the effects of ambiguity in organizations indicates that adherence to ambiguous rhetoric has injurious effects (Sillince et al., 2012; Jarzabkowski et al., 2010): either by triggering resistant and clandestine local practices that focus on their situated demands and neglect the overall corporate agenda (Sillince et al., 2012); or by resulting in fairly abstract and non-binding compromises that have little practical impact (Jarzabkowski et al., 2010). These insights are echoed in a recent comparative study on the use of strategic ambiguity in stakeholder-centered CSR communication (Scandellius & Cohen, 2016). This study reveals that ambiguous CSR claims are useful for attracting attention to a corporate vision. However, ambiguous CSR claims, without translation into tangible and situated objectives of concrete enactment, do not lead to substantial identification and engagement by employees.

Thus, with regard to aspirational talk, we argue that ambiguous CSR visions are crucial for enabling organizational members to develop their own interpretations of future CSR. However, adherence to ambiguous rhetoric will rarely lead to broad-based identification with an overall CSR agenda because the tensions between a unified understanding of CSR and the peripheral contradictory interpretations will remain unaddressed, and perpetuate over time.

How adherence to empowerment rhetoric perpetuates organizing tensions. A third assumption in the literature is that ambiguous aspirational talk empowers employees to explore new practices that lead to future CSR (Christensen et al., 2015a, 2015b). However, recent literature on the empowering effect of ambiguous goals challenges this assumption (Denis, Dompierre, Langley, & Rouleau, 2011; Sillince & Mueller, 2007).

According to this literature, ambiguous goals can theoretically provide a basis for non-binding explorative attempts, but in actuality they often prevent the establishment of committed

practices. This limitation occurs because ambiguous goals can become a source of self-protection for managers, because ambiguity helps managers to deny responsibility and distance themselves when their goals appear likely to fail (Paul & Strbiak, 1997). Similarly, ambiguous goals result in weak commitments from organizational members because although managerial voicing of ambiguous goals can be interpreted as empowerment, it is also likely to be perceived as a subtle form of delegating responsibility (Davenport & Leitch, 2005; Sillince et al., 2012). Hence, organizational members show a tendency to flexibly claim or deny responsibility, depending on whether the aspired goal is perceived to be succeeding or failing (Sillince & Mueller, 2007). Stohl and Cheney's (2001) critical work on organizational empowerment and participation supports this argument. The authors show that ambiguous power relations, and opaque expectations between management and employees, lead to vicious communicative dynamics, as managerial attempts to empower employees often provoke in employees contradictory perceptions of exploitation and delegation of responsibility.

We therefore argue that the empowerment rhetoric can trigger an initial exploration of responsible practices by organizational members. Continued adherence to this rhetoric, however, impedes commitment to these practices since such rhetoric perpetuates tensions between managerial attempts at empowerment and employees' perceptions of responsibility delegation.

In sum, we propose that adherence to a self-persuasive rhetoric leads over time to a vicious circle that perpetuates emerging tensions and, hence, fails to contribute to CSR. In the next section, we introduce an alternative way of enacting aspirational talk that places the emphasis on engaging with tensions, thereby triggering a virtuous circle that leads to committed CSR. This form of aspirational talk is agonistic rhetoric.

Virtuous Circle of Agonistic CSR Rhetoric

In contrast to a self-persuasive rhetoric, an agonistic rhetoric embraces as the central drivers of change the emerging tensions of a rhetorical situation (Epstein, 2015). Accordingly, agonistic rhetoric shifts the focus from the persuasive appeal of the rhetor to that of engagement with audience dissent. While recent literature on aspirational talk (Christensen et al., 2015a, 2017) highlights engagement with dissent as a crucial source of CSR, it does not elaborate how the tensions between managerial aspirations and employee dissent can be addressed. In the following we unfold how agonistic rhetoric works through these tensions in a virtuous circle.

We base the concept of agonistic rhetoric on a line of recent literature on critical business ethics and CSR that focuses on situated dissent (Mouffe, 2005, 2009, 2013) as a central driver of responsible business practice (Clegg et al., 2007; Dawkins, 2015; Pullen & Rhodes, 2013, 2013; Rhodes & Harvey, 2012). The concept of agonism harks back to ancient political rhetoric and reflects the belief that the ideal of democracy depends on constant renewal derived from rhetorical competition between authority and civic dissent (Kalyvas, 2009). Postmodern agonistic reasoning has adapted this ideal and transferred it to the pluralistic state of contemporary society that is characterized by power asymmetries and hegemonic attempts to suppress difference and disagreement (Mouffe, 2013). This stream of research challenges the pervasive political idea of deliberative consensus formation as exclusionary, and instead promotes a radically pluralistic understanding of democracy (Mouffe, 2009). It emphasizes the relevance of creating a discursive space, wherein antagonistic and cynical relations between the powerful and the subjugated are rhetorically transformed into “relation(s) between adversaries” (Mouffe, 2005, p. 50). Such adversaries are understood as opponents “with whom we share common allegiance to the democratic principles of ‘liberty and equality for all’ while disagreeing about their interpretation” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 7). An agonistic rhetoric, hence, essentially builds on rhetorical practices that scrutinize, de-construct, and re-articulate a hegemonic discourse by fostering pluralistic and situated dissent (DeLuca, 1999).

Recent critical management literature applies agonistic reasoning to the study of business ethics (Clegg et al., 2007), stakeholder engagement (Dawkins, 2015), and responsible management practice (Rhodes & Harvey, 2012). This body of literature challenges the pervasive belief that managerial visions will shape what employees identify and perform as responsible practice. Scholars argue that such thinking leads to a reproduction of hegemonic management discourses and inhibits substantial transformation. Alternatively, these scholars propose that managers who are interested in CSR should foster a state of agonistic pluralism that invites organizational members and other stakeholders to voice dissenting, yet equally legitimate, perspectives (e.g., Rhodes & Harvey, 2012). Such a state contributes to the situated grounding of responsible practices and prevents ill-informed obedience, cynical disengagement, or escalating conflict.

Applied to the idea of aspirational talk, an agonistic rhetoric does not expect a good CSR practice to be “one that is pre-determined” but rather to be one “that might arise from [...] dissensus, most especially dissensus over what constitutes the ‘good.’ It is here that the difference, resistance and critique are at the heart of ethics” (Rhodes & Harvey, 2012, p. 56). Building on this understanding, in the following sections, we model a virtuous circle of aspirational talk. We will describe how this virtuous circle is enacted by ongoing rhetorical engagement with dissent, which allows organizations to work through and transcend emerging tensions.

To elaborate on agonistic engagement with these tensions, we draw on three approaches from postmodern rhetorical scholarship: first, an invitational rhetoric (Foss, 2009; Foss & Foss, 2012) that reframes initial CSR visions as merely provisional; second, a listening rhetoric (Ratcliffe, 2005) that strives for an understanding of the reasons for situated dissent; and, third, a re-articulation rhetoric (Biesecker, 1989; Laclau & Mouffe, 1993) that shifts authority from the managerial vision to a local understanding of responsible business practices.

How a shift towards invitational rhetoric transcends performance tensions. For the first loop of the vicious circle, we have argued that adherence to a self-persuasive visionary rhetoric perpetuates performance tensions. Here we explain how an invitational rhetoric (Foss, 2009; Foss & Foss, 2012) works through the tensions between envisioned CSR and deviating current performance.

Consistent with agonistic reasoning (Mouffe, 2013), invitational rhetoric starts from the premise of a contested rhetorical situation. To substantially engage with audience dissent, the rhetor needs to overcome the urge to adopt a persuasive stance and instead adopt the position whereby a “vision represents an initial, tentative commitment to [the rhetor’s own] perspective – always one subject to revision as a result of the rhetor’s interaction with the audience” (Foss, 2009, p. 570). Invitational rhetoric therefore implies a shift in the rhetor’s position from that of persuasive rhetoric to a rhetoric that presents the rhetor’s vision as provisional, being open for revision when encountering audience dissent.

Recent research on rhetorical engagement with organizational tensions illustrates how the shift from a persuasive visionary rhetoric towards invitational rhetoric occurs (Laine & Vaara, 2007; Mantere & Suominen, 2010; Mantere & Vaara, 2008). This literature argues that this shift is typically initiated by skeptical organizational members who, when faced with an evident contradiction in current business performance, will voice their discontent (Laine & Vaara, 2007; Mantere & Suominen, 2010). Only when senior management acknowledges this dissent and presents the initial vision as being open to revision, will disengagement by cynical staff members be avoided and further involvement achieved (Mantere & Vaara, 2008).

Insights from communication-centered studies on the implementation of managerial CSR visions support this perspective (Castelló et al., 2016; Haack et al., 2012). Castelló and colleagues (2016), for example, observe how a managerial vision about meaningful CSR engagement on social media risks failure because it conflicts with established engagement

procedures with stakeholders, leading to broad skepticism. Things change when top management acknowledges the shortcomings of the initial vision and presents it as being open for revision by the organizational members who are operatively in charge of social media and are therefore aware of the contradictions with current practice.

Applying this to the concept of aspirational talk, we argue that working through performance tensions between envisioned CSR and deviating business practices requires a shift from a self-persuasive visionary rhetoric to an agonistic invitational rhetoric. Invitational rhetoric acknowledges and responds to dissent, addressing deviating practices by reframing initial visions as provisional and open to revision. However merely reframing a vision as revisable does not of itself lead to substantial CSR if the understanding of CSR remains ambiguous. The second loop of a virtuous circle addresses this crucial issue.

How a shift towards listening rhetoric transcends identification tensions. For the second vicious loop, we have argued that adherence to rhetorical ambiguity perpetuates identification tensions. Thus we argue that a shift towards a listening rhetoric (Ratcliffe, 1999, 2005) is necessary to engage and transcend the tensions between an aspired joint understanding of CSR and opposing situated interpretations.

The idea of listening rhetoric explicitly challenges the prevailing idea of exploiting ambiguity as a persuasive means of creating joint identification (Denis et al., 2011). Listening rhetoric does not aim at convincing or marginalizing dissenting voices but rather seeks to understand the underlying convictions and demands of audience dissent. In this way, listening rhetoric helps the rhetor to challenge their own convictions and beliefs, and overcome their shortcomings and stereotypes regarding the convictions and beliefs of the audience (Ratcliffe, 2005). Listening rhetoric, hence, echoes a second central premise of agonistic pluralism (Mouffe, 2005). While an invitational rhetoric puts the rhetor's own perspective at disposition, the listening rhetor seeks to understand the reasons for any fundamentally dissenting

perspectives in order to challenge his or her own perspective. For aspirational talk, shifting to a listening rhetoric entails not only opening up to dissenting interpretations of the initial CSR vision, but, more fundamentally, to encompassing dissent about what CSR means to others.

Recent organizational literature supports such a shift towards listening rhetoric as being central for coming to terms with ambiguous and contested organizational goals (Bednarek et al., 2017; Jarzabkowski et al., 2010; Sillince et al., 2012). This literature indicates that senior management engagement with the reasons for dissent is vital to overcoming and counter-steering disengaged and clandestine behavior by organizational members. These studies set out to engage with the situated concerns about – and refusal of – managerial ideas, because through explicating dissenting perspectives and convictions, managers and organizational members can gain insight into the reasons for fundamental differences and seek alternatives that allow organizations to attribute “narrow and specific meanings to a strategically ambiguous goal” (Jarzabkowski et al., 2010).

Communication centered research on CSR implementation (Carollo & Guerci, 2018; Castelló et al., 2016; Haack et al., 2012) illustrates how listening rhetoric can work through the identification tensions between ambiguous visions and deviating situated understandings of CSR. This research argues that the concretization of an ambiguous CSR vision depends on an in-depth engagement with the reservations and concerns of skeptical organizational members, such as “internal activists” (Carollo & Guerci, 2018; Haack et al., 2012). Internal activists typically hold a critical stance towards the ambiguous CSR visions of managers, and advocate for more tangible and substantial forms of responsible conduct. To turn ambiguous visions into a more substantial and concrete understanding of CSR, managers need to listen to fundamental concerns and engage with the reasons for advocating alternative interpretations of responsible practice.

In sum, we argue that a shift from an ambiguous visionary rhetoric towards an agonistic listening rhetoric is crucial for transcending the identification tensions that arise between ambiguous CSR visions and deviating situated understandings of responsible practice. However, in order to achieve commitment to such practices, another agonistic shift is necessary, which we address in the last loop of the virtuous circle.

How a shift to re-articulation rhetoric transcends organizing tensions. In the third vicious loop, we argue that ambiguity provides a fragile rhetorical basis for committed practices, because the underlying power asymmetries and responsibilities remain unclear and, as a result, deniable. For the third virtuous circle, we argue that a shift towards an agonistic re-articulation rhetoric is necessary to transcend these organizing tensions.

Biesecker (1989) introduces to rhetorical scholarship the concept of articulation to question the essentialist conception of rhetor and audience as stable entities. Instead, Biesecker emphasizes that the rhetorical act of articulation creates a difference in the status quo, thereby providing an opportunity for re-negotiating the mutual understanding of and relations between rhetor and audience. The focus, thus, shifts from a “logic of influence” to “a logic of articulation [...] of provisional identities and the construction of contingent relations that obtain between them” (Biesecker, 1989, p. 126). Agonistic reasoning (DeLuca, 1999; Laclau & Mouffe, 1993; Mouffe, 2013) allows for a further elaboration on Biesecker’s perspective. Agonistic reasoning addresses articulation as an opportunity to transform hegemonic discourses and relations. This transformation is possible because audience dissent not only holds the rhetorical potential to re-articulate a concrete issue but, more fundamentally, it also challenges the power relation between rhetor and audience, and allows the establishment of “a more progressive one thanks to a process of re-articulation of new and old elements into a different configuration of power” (Mouffe, 2008).

Applied to the concept of aspirational talk, such a rhetoric holds the potential to re-articulate relational asymmetries between manager and organizational members, which is crucial to working through and transcending organizing tensions. This transcendence is achieved when agonistic engagement with dissent leads to an inversion of the power relation between a managerial rhetor and the organizational audience. The focus, then, is no longer on the question of whether an ambiguous vision empowers organizational members or represents an act of delegation. Rather, the focus is now on the organizational members, who empower and commit *themselves* to practices that emerge from the re-articulation of a managerial vision in ways that correspond with their situated understanding of responsible practice.

While such an agonistic shift – from top-down empowerment to self-empowerment – might seem radical, recent organizational literature identifies it as the central driver of employee commitment under contested conditions (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2017). Under contested conditions, commitment does not follow a logic of common sense-making but, instead, depends on the ongoing rhetorical “expansion, combination, and reframing” (Tsoukas, 2009, p. 941) of an initial managerial vision until it meets situated perspectives and demands. Hence, from an agonistic perspective, committed CSR practices have little to do with “living up” to initial visions but, rather, involve a re-articulation of these visions that lead to a shift of authority from managerial CSR visions to the situated understanding of responsible practice. This insight is echoed in a study by Haack et al. (2012) that is frequently cited as an empirical reference point for aspirational talk (Christensen et al., 2013, 2017; Christensen & Schoeneborn, 2017). This study shows that “creeping commitment” to CSR has little to do with corporate alignment with an initial managerial vision. On the contrary, the study reveals that a fundamental revision of the initial top management vision and a shift of authority to dissenting employees, who re-articulate and substantiate this vision, present the main driver of committed CSR.

In sum, our model suggests that three rhetorical shifts are necessary for working through performance, identification and organizing tensions in order to achieve committed CSR. First, a shift from a visionary rhetoric towards an invitational rhetoric reframes the managerial visions as merely provisional and open for revision by organizational members, who address the contradictions between the vision and current business performance; second, a shift from ambiguous rhetoric towards listening rhetoric seeks to understand the reasons for any dissenting interpretations, thereby contributing to a concretization of envisioned CSR; third, a shift from empowerment rhetoric towards re-articulation rhetoric transfers authority from the rhetor to the audience, hence, contributing to committed practices that resonate with situated understandings of CSR.

Discussion

In this article, we have engaged with the idea of aspirational talk by managers as a driver of future CSR. We have elaborated a conceptual framework that explains how different forms of enacting this talk either impede or foster CSR. We have applied a rhetorical lens that has allowed us to identify the central tensions arising from the rhetorical situation of aspirational talk. We have mooted a self-persuasive visionary rhetoric and a dissent-focused agonistic rhetoric as two possible enactments of aspirational talk to deal with these tensions. We have argued that a self-persuasive rhetoric is necessary to create awareness, allow multiple interpretations, and draw scrutiny. We have proposed, however, that adherence to such rhetoric has detrimental effects on future CSR because it leaves emerging tensions. We have argued that a shift towards an agonistic rhetoric that engages with these tensions is crucial to achieve committed CSR.

We have elaborated upon these arguments by developing a model of vicious and virtuous circles of aspirational talk. A vicious circle emerges when managers insist on adhering to the self-persuasive appeal of ambiguous CSR visions that impede engagement with

emerging tensions and perpetuate them. A virtuous circle, by contrast, depends on a shift towards rhetorical engagement with corporate dissent that addresses tensions by means of invitational, listening, and re-articulation rhetoric. These forms of agonistic rhetoric allow to work through tensions by reframing the initial visions as provisional, by engaging with the reasons for dissent, and finally by re-articulating the initial visions in ways that correspond with the situated understandings of responsible practices.

These reflections shed light on different forms of rhetorical enactment of aspirational talk and their temporal effects. Furthermore, our article proposes an alternative angle by which communication can be viewed as constitutive of CSR, and offers insight into the debate about the (de)coupling of talk and action in CSR.

Implications for the Debate on Aspirational Talk

Our article addresses the literature on aspirational talk and its call for a better understanding of the communicative conditions that lead to CSR (Christensen et al., 2013). This literature, while emphasizing the self-persuasive capacities of aspirational talk (Christensen, 2016) also presents engagement with dissent as a driver of future CSR (Christensen et al., 2017). Applying a rhetorical lens, we have been able to more closely investigate the temporal effects of these two enactments of aspirational talk. Our rhetorical lens has revealed that self-persuasive visionary rhetoric is crucial to raising awareness and scrutiny. However, a self-persuasive rhetoric has limited impact in engaging with the tensions that arise from aspirational talk. We argue that a shift towards an agonistic rhetoric is necessary to work through and transcend these tensions. Based on these reflections, we caution against holding too high expectations for the self-persuasive appeal of managerial visions as drivers of future CSR. Rather, we argue that dynamic rhetorical competencies are required to achieve commitment to CSR in that a self-persuasive rhetoric helps to raise attention and an agonistic rhetoric helps to work through the tensions that arise from these visions.

Our proposition for a shift from a self-persuasive to an agonistic rhetoric follows the emerging arguments that substantial CSR cannot be imposed or delegated from above but needs to be grounded in the struggles with local convictions about what constitutes responsible practices (Rhodes & Harvey, 2012). We have supported this proposition with recent research on rhetorical engagement with organizational tensions (Bednarek et al., 2017; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2017) and with studies on CSR implementation (Castelló et al., 2016; Costas & Kärreman, 2013; Haack et al., 2012).

With a clear focus on communication – more specifically, rhetoric communication – this article has explored the effects of different forms of engagement with CSR related tensions. We acknowledge, however, that the underlying capabilities and psychological factors of individuals, including reflexive thinking skills and a degree of tolerance for personal discomfort, have a strong impact on how, and whether, actors engage with CSR tensions (Smith et al., 2012). Furthermore, contextual factors, such as a plurality of tensions or resource scarcity, can impact organizational capacity for engaging with tensions at the business and society interface (Schad et al., 2016). While we have focused on rhetorical conditions that trigger either a vicious or virtuous circle of aspirational talk, we encourage future research to investigate their interrelation with such individual and contextual factors.

Implications for the Debate on Communication as Constitutive for CSR

A communication as constitutive view challenges the prevailing understanding of CSR talk as “cheap” and morally questionable where this talk deviates from current business practices (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). In contrast, by building on speech act theory, scholars emphasize aspirational talk as being a central driver of CSR (Christensen et al., 2013). In applying a rhetorical lens, we are able to offer a more nuanced understanding of the binary view of aspirational talk as being either hollow or impactful, depending on how it is rhetorically enacted over time. We argue that an immediate effect (“words as actions”) cannot be assumed in

situations where talk contradicts action (Epstein, 2015). Rather, we draw attention to the temporal effects of the different forms of rhetorical enactment of aspirational talk. This analytic approach shows that the established reading of aspirational talk as (self-)persuasive rhetoric presents a vital trigger for audience attention and scrutiny, while proving to be unable to engage with tensions and dissent. Hence, we recommend placing stronger emphasis on agonistic rhetoric, which, as a less intuitive enactment of aspirational talk, acknowledges these tensions and allows an organization to transcend them over time.

Furthermore, our rhetorical lens provides a more cautious approach to the supposedly positive effects of ambiguity as a means of identifying and committing to future CSR (Castelló, Morsing, & Schultz, 2013; Christensen et al., 2013, 2015a; Schultz et al., 2013). Based on rhetorical (Ceccarelli, 1998) and organizational literature (Jarzabkowski et al., 2010; Sillince et al., 2012; Sillince & Mueller, 2007), we argue that the rhetorical use of ambiguity, particularly when negotiating the meaning and implementation of CSR, can provide a useful initial step for attracting the attention of multiple voices. However, we argue that adherence to ambiguity impedes meaningful identification and commitment. Rather, we argue that ambiguous rhetoric has to give way to agonistic listening and re-articulation rhetorics, which allow engagement with dissent and lead to ambiguous CSR visions being substantiated in accordance with situated understandings of responsible practice.

Our findings, therefore, reveal similarities to the idea of “licence to critique” recently introduced by the scholars of aspirational talk (Christensen et al., 2017). This managerial philosophy encourages engagement with employee critique and dissent about CSR related issues through institutionalized settings (Christensen et al., 2017). Our model of vicious and virtuous circles can inform this approach in significant ways. First, it integrates the underlying assumptions about the self-persuasive appeal of CSR visions *and* the dissent regarding these visions as constitutive of future CSR. Our model reveals that achievement of future CSR

through aspirational talk requires a temporal interplay between two interrelated rhetorical capacities: the voicing of self-persuasive CSR visions *and* agonistic engagement with the tensions that arise from them. Second, by explicating the concrete tensions that arise from managerial CSR claims, we provide a deeper understanding of the complex drivers of dissent when negotiating CSR. Our reflections show that this dissent is not limited to the evident tensions between aspired CSR and deviating corporate practices, but, more fundamentally, encompasses tension over the very meaning of CSR and the question of who is authorized to define it. This leads us to another contribution of this article. Our approach highlights that managerial “licence to critique” will likely trigger identification and organizing tensions. On the one hand, empowerment rhetoric can easily lead to employee perceptions of delegation and exploitation, which need to be addressed. On the other hand, applying a “licence to critique” to an isolated topic of CSR may turn out to be equally challenging where there is no deeper negotiation about the underlying authority relations that define whose understanding of CSR prevails.

Implications for the Debate on Decoupling in CSR

The debate on decoupling in CSR consists of two major camps. There is an overall position of skepticism that questions the impact of CSR communication on business conduct, whether this be because such communication is merely symbolic (policy-practice-decoupling) or because CSR communication triggers practices that remain obscure with regard to aspirational goals and social impact (means-ends-decoupling) (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Wijen, 2014). A communicative as constitutive view of CSR challenges these forms of decoupling and suggests that decoupling be seen as “transitory”, whereby practices eventually align with initial aspirations (Haack et al., 2012; Haack & Schoeneborn, 2015). Our model of vicious and virtuous circles contributes to this debate.

The vicious circle of aspirational CSR rhetoric adds another explanation to recent literature on policy-practice-decoupling. We argue that such decoupling is not necessarily an effect of managerial ceremonialism (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015), resource preservation (Wickert, Scherer, & Spence, 2016), or institutional incompatibility (Brunsson, 2003). Instead, we show that policy-practice decoupling can also be a consequence of the adherence to the self-persuasive appeal of managerial CSR visions and an inability to substantially engage with the dissent provoked by these visions. In other words, policy-practice decoupling is not necessarily the result of a lack of managerial conviction and investment, but quite the contrary, results from its over-abundance.

Furthermore, our model of vicious and virtuous circles can inform a more recent debate on means-ends decoupling (Bromley & Powell, 2012), which stresses that many CSR claims do find implementation in practice, but that their effects do not correspond with initial aspirations. Our model – and the underlying premise that rhetorical engagement with tensions does not develop in a linear and planned fashion, but rather in circular and contested ways (Bednarek et al., 2017; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013) – proposes a more positive interpretation of this form of decoupling. We consider that CSR that deviates from the initial aspirations but presents in situated and committed practices to be a welcome development, even if the means and ends may, to a certain extent, be decoupled.

This leads us to the last scenario of decoupling as a transitory state (Haack et al., 2012). Based on our model of vicious and virtuous circles, we suggest a dynamic and contested understanding of the relationship between talk and action, rather than the linear and evolutionary understanding suggested by the notion of “transition”. In this regard, we believe, the decoupling literature can substantially benefit from the insights of recent CSR literature that focuses on tensions, contradictions, and paradoxes (Hahn et al., 2018; Hoffmann, 2018; Scherer et al., 2013). This literature allows researchers to go beyond linear either-or-thinking

and helps to generate a better understanding of the reverse, selective, and circular dynamics (Brunsson, 2003; Pache & Santos, 2013; Winkler, Etter, & Wehmeier, 2017) that can capture (de-)coupling dynamics in a contested domain such as CSR.

Ultimately, we believe that the literature on transitory decoupling can benefit from an understanding of transition as being shaped by political and contested dynamics. Critical, and especially agonistic, literature on CSR (Dawkins, 2015; Rhodes & Harvey, 2012) may provide a useful reference for future research on our central proposition: namely, that a shift from self-persuasive to agonistic rhetoric is necessary in order for aspirational talk to become constitutive of CSR.

Practical Contributions and Limitations

Our analysis of the communicative dynamics that make aspirational talk a driver of CSR provides important insights for practitioners. First, we have shown that aspirational talk by managers about CSR provokes various tensions and a degree of employee dissent. We have identified these tensions arising between (i) envisioned CSR and deviating corporate practices (performance tensions), (ii) an aspired common understanding of CSR by management and opposing situated interpretations (identification tensions), and (iii) the contradictory perceptions of empowerment and delegation when it comes to enacting CSR visions (organizing tensions). Accordingly, our framework helps managers to become aware of and identify these tensions and related dissent.

Second, our article cautions managers against having too high expectations of the self-persuasive appeal of visionary CSR rhetoric. We argue that although visions are necessary for triggering audience attention and awareness, adherence to visionary rhetoric impedes substantial CSR practices. This insight leads to our third and most important managerial implication. We have proposed that major CSR practices are achieved when managers acknowledge the provisional state of their initial CSR vision (invitational rhetoric); seek to

understand the reasons for employee critique and dis-identification in order to challenge and concretize ambiguous visions (listening rhetoric); and, ultimately, allow the reframing of the initial vision to incorporate locally committed CSR practices (re-articulation rhetoric).

While the proposed model of vicious and virtuous circles is largely conceptual, it is grounded in empirical research on organizational rhetoric and CSR implementation. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that it is primarily a heuristic device and therefore cannot cover all possible empirical scenarios of rhetorical engagement with CSR aspirations. Recent longitudinal empirical research shows (Bednarek et al., 2017; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2017) that the dynamics of rhetorical engagement with tensions are typically more intertwined and convoluted than our model can capture. Hence, we invite further empirical research to explore in more detail the rhetorical dynamics that unfold around managerial CSR visions and related tensions. Empirical investigation of these dynamics will help to better understand and refine the three central propositions of this article. First, the proposition that ambiguous CSR visions lose their persuasive appeal over time, triggering detrimental effects. Further investigation to identify the tipping point where self-persuasive CSR rhetoric starts to fail and needs to be replaced by agonistic rhetoric is crucial. Second, future research might study in more depth how the agonistic re-articulation of managerial CSR visions and power relations substantiate committed practices. Here, investigation of the challenges and limitations of ongoing agonism in everyday corporate practice is imperative. Finally, there is great potential for learning more about the demanding rhetorical capacities of managers and employees related to our third proposition, which is that both the visions that attract attention and agonistic engagement with the tensions that arise from the visions are necessary to make aspirational talk a driver of CSR.

Appendix

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Vicious circle of self-persuasive CSR rhetoric

Virtuous circle of agonistic CSR rhetoric

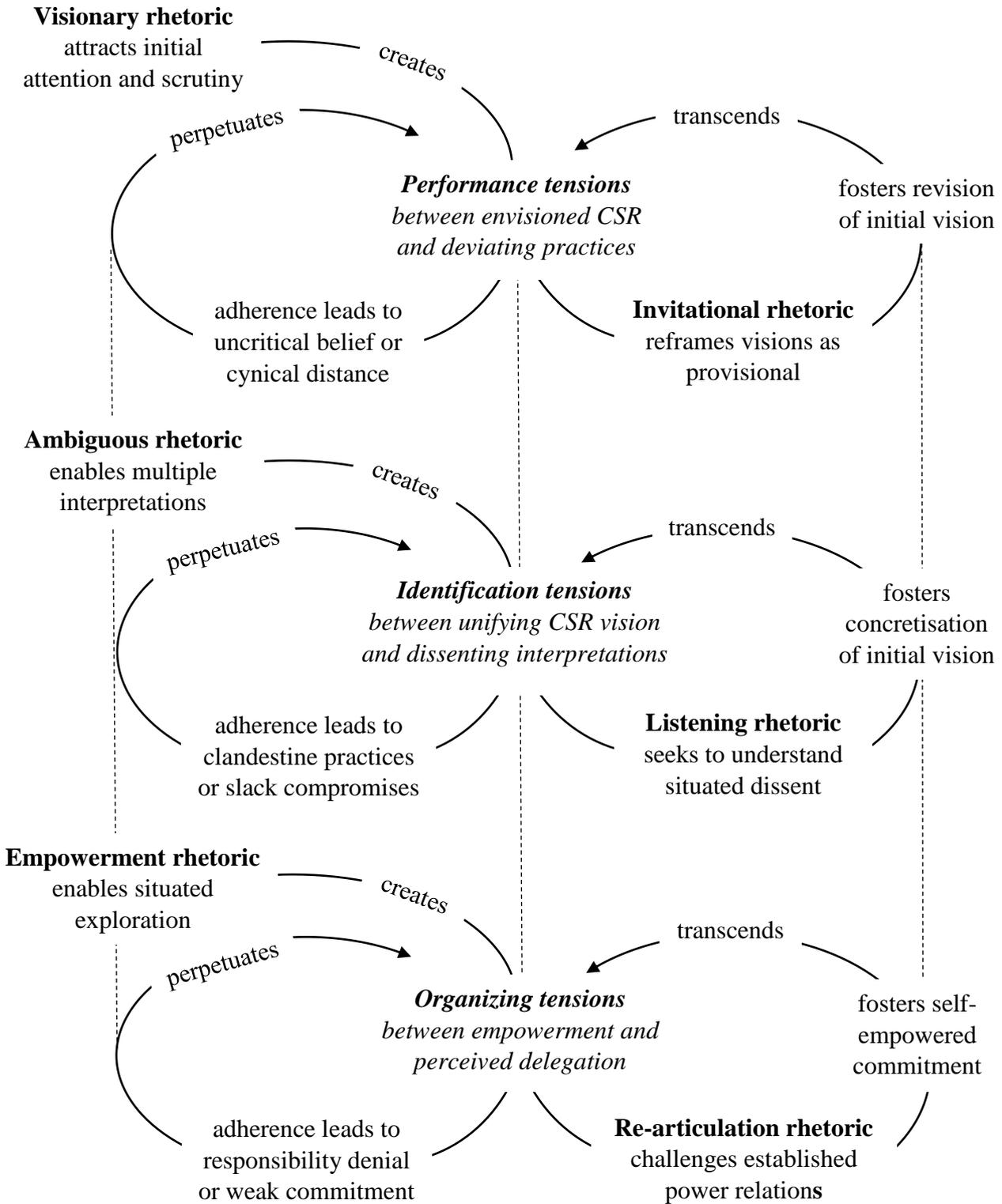


Figure 1: Vicious and Virtuous Circles of Aspirational Talk