

Research Horizon

ISSN: 2808-0696 (p), 2807-9531 (e)

Research Horizon

Volume: 06

Issue: 04

Year: 2026

Page: 1663-1676

Citation:

Melliana. (2026). The upcycling paradox: Dissecting rhetorical decoupling in the global leather industry's sustainability communication. *Research Horizon*, 6(4), 1663-1676.

Article History:

Received: June 29, 2026

Revised: August 3, 2026

Accepted: August 15, 2026

Online since: August 25, 2026

The Upcycling Paradox, Dissecting Rhetorical Decoupling in the Global Leather Industry's Sustainability Communication

Melliana^{1*}

¹ Department of Communication Science, Faculty of Communication, LSPR Institute of Communication and Business, Jakarta, Indonesia

* Corresponding author: Melliana (25072230095@lspr.edu)

Abstract

The leather sector faces persistent tensions over its sustainability claims. Critics associate it with livestock agriculture and chemical pollution, whereas the industry frames leather as a circular solution by upcycling agrifood byproducts into luxury materials. Viewed through the combined lenses of Paradox and Legitimacy theories, this study investigates how global leather stakeholders discursively navigate this structural tension. Adopting a qualitative, multiple-case study design of four distinct global entities, the research combines Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) and Barthesian semiotics to analyze corporate disclosures. The empirical material is supplemented by a semi-structured interview with a senior industry brand strategist to uncover the strategic intent behind these narratives. This study critically evaluates how industry stakeholders interpret and communicate structural paradoxes. Specifically, it discloses how they deploy “rhetorical upcycling” to magnify upstream waste valorization while obscuring downstream ecotoxicological processing footprints. The findings reveal that while these rhetorical strategies successfully manipulate external perception of value, they create an unsustainable decoupling of corporate image from operational realities. Consequently, this study demonstrates that corporate sustainability must transition from mere rhetorical compliance and symbolic legitimacy towards an integrated, holistic paradigm where organizations transparently articulate how they navigate inherent socio-ecological dualities within their formal disclosures.

Keywords

Barthesian Semiotics, Legitimacy Theory, Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, Paradox Theory, Rhetorical Upcycling, Sustainability Communications.

1. Introduction

Positioned at the intersection of the circular economy model and increasing criticism of environmental footprints, the genuine leather industry has emerged as the epitome of paradox theory in the modern sustainability transition era. Many contesting frameworks narrate that leather production is not only detrimental to the global climate system but also inherently incompatible with ethical animal welfare standards (Chen et al., 2023). However, the global leather industry strategically frames itself as a closed-loop production model, utilizing the rhetoric of upcycling to transform the image from a byproduct of slaughterhouses into a symbol of luxury (Omolooso et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2024). The communication strategy centers on the narratives that skins are waste from the meat and dairy sectors, which the tanning industry gathers and elevates further into a noble material.

Whereas both sides of the sustainability debate probably have the same reasonable logic, each viewpoint might be taken as a distinct interpretation of system boundaries and industry responsibility (Akkan, 2024). A definite example is depicted in where one draws the system boundaries for assessment. For instance, in the case of system boundary starts at the slaughterhouse, then raw hides are indeed recovered waste. Nevertheless, in the case of a boundary that includes livestock breeding and agricultural processes, the leather industry must take responsibility for the entire life cycle of the animal. This divergence in system boundary introduces a normative ethical dilemma regarding communicative legitimacy (Van Der Wel et al., 2025). The central research problem shifts from a simply technical boundary debate to an inquiry into selective environmental framing (Paliwoda-Matiolańska & Nakayama, 2024; Lee, 2024).

This creates a critical tension within corporate sustainability communication: does the strategic framing of an upcycling narrative function as an authentic defense of an industrial symbiosis, or does it operate as a mechanism of rhetorical obfuscation to deflect accountability from localized processing and agricultural footprints (Chen et al., 2023; Akkan, 2024). Consequently, this study problematizes how global actors navigate the ethical boundaries between legitimate transparency and strategic decoupling. To resolve this tension, organizational scholars increasingly look beyond binary definitions of greenwashing. Instead, the issue is best understood through Paradox theory, legitimacy theory, and institutional decoupling. Within contemporary research, it shows that retail and material industries operate within structural tension where commercial success and environmental preservation are inherently mismatched (Colucci & Vecchi, 2024).

The state-of-the-art literature on corporate sustainability communication classifies the upcycling narrative as an advanced mechanism of rhetorical decoupling. Within this framework, the leather industry navigates this by accepting a paradoxical identity: it is simultaneously an eco-toxicological polluter downstream and a landfill-diverting savior upstream. By magnifying the upstream environmental benefit of waste valorization through transforming a decomposing slaughterhouse byproduct into an enduring luxury material, organizations selectively build institutional legitimacy. Consequently, this narrative strategically obscures the severe downstream eco-toxicological footprint, such as chromium contamination, heavy water usage, etc., that are associated with traditional tanning operations (Wrzeńska-Jędrusiak et al., 2023).

Despite the existence of prior studies that most of the discussions have focused on technical sustainability issues such as environmental impact, supply chain efficiency, material innovation, and production processes (Arinnis et al., 2022). Whereas these contributions are valuable, limited attention has been given to the communication aspects of how the global leather industry has survived the transition, adopted sustainability, and communicated it through rhetoric and

upcycling. Thus, while the literature identifies that the “upstream waste” narrative and “downstream toxic” footprints exist, it has not deeply explored how global actors structurally reconcile these two clashing realities in their everyday corporate communications without losing institutional legitimacy.

The purpose of this study is to understand how leather industry stakeholders subjectively interpret and communicate the structural paradox. While existing literature heavily investigates the technical dimensions of leather sustainability, it leaves a significant void regarding the communicative mechanism of industry survival. This study is directed to move beyond dry metrics and explore the discursive strategies global actors have deployed in order to maintain institutional legitimacy. This research intends to uncover how corporate sustainability communication is leveraged to navigate these boundaries, revealing whether it functions as an authentic defense of industrial symbiosis or an instrument of institutional decoupling.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Core of Management Paradox

When two reasonable yet conflicting viewpoints coexist, they create a management paradox in which contradictory states persist simultaneously (Wasieleski et al., 2020). The leather industry illustrates this sustainability paradox by portraying leather as inherently circular, transforming slaughterhouse byproducts into luxury materials through a rhetoric of upcycling (UNIC, 2022). Conversely, leather production continues to face criticism for its environmental impacts, particularly the use of toxic chemicals and heavy metals such as formaldehyde, arsenic, and cyanide during tanning (Chen et al., 2023; Fatema et al., 2023). According to Paradox Theory, sustainability requires organizations to balance competing goals of economic growth, environmental protection, and social responsibility rather than resolving one at the expense of another (Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Carmine & De Marchi, 2023).

Within this context, rhetorical upcycling strategically reframes leather as a waste-rescue solution, positioning the tanning industry as an essential contributor to the circular economy by recovering over 99% of hides from the beef, sheep, and swine food chains (UNIC, 2022; Chen et al., 2023). The industry further reinforces this narrative by equating product longevity with sustainability, arguing that durable leather represents an alternative to fast fashion (Ramchandani & Coste-Maniere, 2020). Nevertheless, the paradox remains unresolved because the industry’s “byproduct” narrative excludes the upstream environmental burden of livestock production, despite evidence that livestock contributes up to 91% of leather’s carbon footprint (Omoloso et al., 2020; Akkan, 2024; Liu et al., 2025). Furthermore, O’Halloran and Tan (2022) argue that communicative meaning results from deliberate semiotic choices that simultaneously construct ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings, enabling sustainability narratives to legitimize leather production despite its inherent environmental contradictions.

2.2. Rhetoric of Balance and Symbolic Legitimacy

Khan and Khan (2025), through the perspective of legitimacy theory, dissected a symbolic legitimacy, where upcycling claims are used as a “signal of compliance” with societal norms without implementing meaningful changes to the polluting production processes. This is often criticized as greenwashing or symbolic gestures that act as tokenism that is only a superficial effort to justify the current system. It is usually done just to give the appearance of fairness or diversity, rather than actually implementing meaningful change. Dincer and Dincer (2022) posit that the widespread consumer distrust regarding the credibility of corporate social disclosures remains a major barrier. Alsaad et al. (2025) highlighted that misleading

terminology or overstated environmental claims have made audiences cynical, requiring more rigorous, verified reports to retain legitimacy.

Principally, legitimacy theory posits that institutions must align their actions with societal norms and values to secure stakeholder approval and ensure the industry's survival (Akhter et al., 2023; Khan & Khan, 2025). In the leather industry, managers apply strategic legitimacy by framing leather as a naturally sustainable material that performs a “circular economy function” (Meyer et al., 2021). By highlighting that leather upcycles over 8 million tons of hides annually, waste that would otherwise release methane in landfills, brands position themselves as legitimate “sustainable luxury leaders” (Omoloso et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2023). A higher level of legitimacy is substantive legitimacy, which moves beyond rhetoric. In order to achieve it, the industry must move beyond the upcycling narrative towards Sustainability-Oriented Innovations (SOIs) that result in tangible environmental outcomes (Brun & Ciccullo, 2022). This should be supported by verification, relying on audited standards like the Leather Working Group (LWG) or ISO 14001 in order to substantiate claims and move beyond purely symbolic rhetoric (Akkan, 2024).

3. Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design combining Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) and narrative inquiry to examine how the global leather industry constructs sustainability narratives through rhetorical upcycling. The integration of these approaches enabled analysis of both institutional sustainability communication and the strategic intentions behind its production. Joy et al. (2024) explain that MCDA expands Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) by examining the interaction of multiple communication modes, including images, graphics, layout, branding, color, typography, and written language, as interconnected semiotic resources that construct meaning, ideology, and power relations. Therefore, this study explores how leather stakeholders strategically reconstruct the discourse of slaughterhouse waste into an environmentally responsible narrative through multimodal communication.

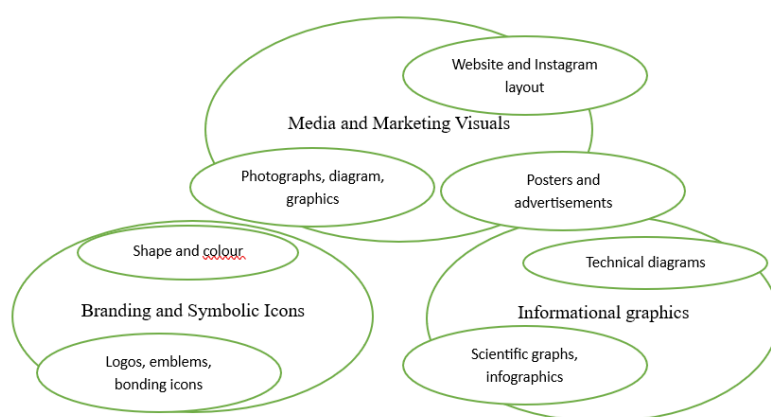


Figure 1. Discourse Topic in Conceptualization of Rhetoric Upcycling in Leather Industry

Figure 1 presents the multimodal discourse framework used in this study. Rather than treating visual elements as decorative features, the framework conceptualizes photographs, website layouts, branding, logos, colors, advertisements, technical diagrams, and infographics as interconnected semiotic resources. Together, these communication modes shape ideological meanings and sustainability narratives,

enabling the analysis of how the leather industry legitimizes rhetorical upcycling through coordinated visual and textual strategies.

The secondary data consisted of sustainability reports, official corporate websites, traceability policies, and visual communication materials published by leading global leather stakeholders, including Gruppo Mastrotto, Pasubio Group, Henan Prosper & Colomer Moda Co., Ltd., and UNIC - Italian Tanneries between 2022 and 2026. These organizations were purposively selected because they represent prominent institutions actively promoting sustainability and circular economy narratives within the international leather industry. Following O'Halloran and Tan (2022), visual resources such as photographs, color schemes, symbols, diagrams, typography, and page layouts were treated as meaningful semiotic choices that operate alongside verbal text to communicate ideological messages. The analytical procedure adopted Barthes' concepts of denotation and connotation (Suryantara et al., 2022). Each visual artifact was first examined at the denotative level to identify its literal elements before being interpreted at the connotative level to uncover the ideological meanings embedded within recurring visual and linguistic patterns. The analysis subsequently investigated how these semiotic choices collectively construct broader cultural myths that position leather production as a circular, environmentally beneficial practice while minimizing associations with industrial pollution and livestock extraction.

To strengthen the credibility of the findings, the document analysis was complemented by a semi-structured interview using a narrative inquiry approach. Creswell and Creswell (2017) described narrative inquiry as a qualitative methodology that explores participants' lived experiences and reconstructs them into coherent narratives through open-ended questioning. Accordingly, interviews were conducted using predominantly "how" and "what" questions to understand the strategic rationale behind sustainability communication and its intended influence on consumer perceptions. The primary informant was Mr. Alessio Gentilin, Asia Regional Sales Director of Mastrotto Indonesia, who was selected through purposive sampling because of his executive leadership within the leather industry and his academic background in leather technology from the United Kingdom. His combination of technical expertise and managerial experience provided valuable insights for interpreting contemporary industry discourse and triangulating the findings derived from the multimodal analysis.

4. Results

Companies and organizations have been disseminating "Rhetoric Upcycling" mostly through sustainability reports because these documents have evolved from voluntary public relations into high-stakes financial instruments (Kurniawati et al., 2025). As illustrated in Figure 2, a comparative analysis of the three observed channels, corporate sustainability reports exhibit the highest density of semantic elevation and agent deletion.

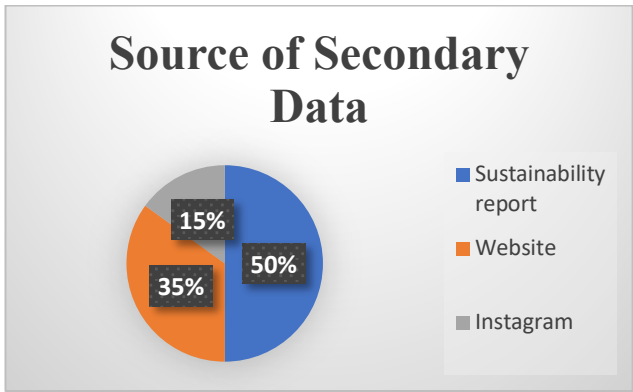


Figure 2. Distribution of Data Analyzed by Source

Figure 2 demonstrates a clear hierarchy in secondary data sourcing, where authoritative corporate-governed mediums heavily overshadow informal consumer channels. Exactly half of the data (50%) is drawn from Sustainability reports, indicating that structured, institutionalized, and likely audited publications serve as the primary data collection. This formal foundation is supplemented by a significant digital presence via general corporate websites at 35%, highlighting a substantial reliance on broader online platforms, press releases, or digital articles. Conversely, social media platforms like Instagram represent the smallest share at just 15%, suggesting that while informal visual storytelling plays a role in public communication, it is treated as a minor, secondary source compared to high-credibility, authoritative text-based assets, which together make up 85% of the total data pool.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Upcycling Rhetoric Across Four Organizations

Company/ Image	The Core Character	Denotation (Literal Elements)	Connotation (Implied Meanings)	Rhetorical Aspects & Myths
Pasubio Group Italy	The sterile high-end luxury	The use of dark green colour, statistical data of UNIDO emissions. Close-up picture of luxury car seats with diamond- quilted.	Dark green represents ecological sustainability. White seat represents cleanliness, visual sanitation, and omits the trace of blood or animal smell.	Logical Data. Waste Management Hero. To use quantitative numbers to convince customers that purchasing luxury leather is a form of proactive action to reduce 5 million tons of global greenhouse gas.
Gruppo Mastrotto Italy	Utopia of Pastoral Nature	The cows graze freely in lush green pastures and golden hills during the golden hour. While the factory is	Without factory: clean, operational, and non- destructive. Golden hour: Peaceful, the romance of pure raw material.	Emotional and Aesthetic. The Organic Circularity. To build belief through visual beauty without any statement. It creates the image that if the origin of raw

Company/ Image	The Core Character	Denotation (Literal Elements)	Connotation (Implied Meanings)	Rhetorical Aspects & Myths
		completely invisible.	Free cows: Natural animal freedom.	material is so beautiful, then the finished goods must be eco-friendly.
HP Colomer Moda China	& The Bio- Political Tech Control	Close-up picture of a clean sheep face with a smart ear tag attached in its ears, accompanied with scientific diagrams “Five freedoms”	Sheep deep eye sights: emotional attachment, animal peaceful. Ear tag: Modern science, accuracy, traceability. Diagrams: Measurable and certified management systems.	Moral Credibility. Humane slaughter and welfare. To legitimate the ethical slaughter process. It means the company is fully responsible with the physical and mental state of animals.
UNIC Organization of Italian Tanneries	- Corporate- Ecological Savior	A sharp, macro- focused photograph showing a dense heap of dry, curved, multi- coloured material strips. Text blocks identifying specific waste by-products	Aestheticization of waste: It strips waste of its negative associations, reimagines it as an attractive, pristine asset. Organic Authenticity: The earthy, muted colour palette of scraps connotes an organic connection to the soil & earth.	Natural Industrial Cycles. Capitalism and ecology are mythologized as being a perfect, unconflicted alignment.

As illustrated in Table 1, it may be concluded that every strategy functions by removing the uncomfortable realities of livestock production, such as blood, odour, waste, and factories. Instead, they replace them with highly curated aesthetic alternatives. Companies like Pasubio and HP & Colomer Moda rely heavily on Logos and Ethos by using UNIDO statistics, ear tags, and certification diagrams to prove their compliance. In contrast, Gruppo Mastrotto and UNIC rely on Pathos through the use of lighting, colour psychology, and romanticized landscapes to create an instinctual sense of trust.

Across all four profiles, the overarching goal is to convince the modern consumer that industrial manufacturing and environmental preservation are not opposing forces, but rather in perfect, harmonious alignment. Harmonious alignment is reflected in the way these companies reframe the leather purchase action as no longer an indulgent, resource-heavy luxury. Instead, it is framed as a proactive investment in a system that removes 5 million tons of greenhouse gases. Industrial luxury and environmental preservation are aligned because buying the product actively supports the solution.

In all four cases, the tension between the extraction of natural resources and corporate profit is visually and rhetorically dissolved. The consumer is left with the comforting belief that the corporate machinery is operating as a saviour, rather than an exploiter of the natural world.

Table 2. Analysis of Discussed Themes, Core Discourses& Formulated Research Questions

Discussed Theme	Brief Summary of Discussion	Research questions
Rhetoric and Framing	The perception of leather has evolved alongside the maturation of the luxury goods industry. Historically, it has been integrated into the product lines of premier brands such as Hermès in the fashion business and Porsche in the automotive sector. Leather has systematically acquired an enduring association with prestige and exclusivity over the decades.	How does the global leather industry change the narration of slaughterhouse wastage into a luxury material?
	Industrial symbiosis: hides are conceptualized strictly as an unavoidable, non-allocable byproduct of the meat and dairy sectors. Consequently, leather manufacturing is framed as a critical form of waste enhancement. It is an intervention to give additional value to organic waste before it enters landfills, thereby mitigating the ecological burdens associated with decomposition.	What are the key metaphors that are used to legitimate “upcycling hides” as ecological action?
	Manufacturers basically push the “By-product” campaign to counter the “vegan leather” boom and animal rights criticisms. While the “Luxury” is campaigned mostly by high-end fashion houses, premium automotive brands, and luxury designers.	How is the dichotomy between wastage and luxury through the lens of branding communication strategy?
Perceived value by consumers	The basic principle is to leverage consumer “Moral Asset Conversion and Guilt Mitigation”. Consequently, consumers will no longer rationalize the premium price tag solely through the product itself, but they pay a premium for ethical alignment and guilt mitigation.	How does “Rhetoric Upcycling” influence consumer willingness to pay premium prices?
	Through cognitive dissonance, consumers are observed to tend to separate these two contradictory matters. They most likely view the slaughterhouse and luxury boutique as completely separate worlds that happen to share a material link.	How do consumers interpret the contradiction between the raw material supply chain with luxury finished leather products?
	A notice on how an artisan workshop setup emphasizes human touch, tools, and craftsmanship rather than raw livestock handling. Consumer interprets the product through the lens of human labour and heritage rather than agricultural extraction.	
Sustainability and Greenwashing	From the perspective of industrial ecology, the genuine leather sector operates as a primary mechanism for waste upcycling by converting a high-volume biogenic byproduct of the agrifood sector into high-value material.	How far does “Rhetoric Upcycling” reflect the practice of concrete sustainability?

Discussed Theme	Brief Summary of Discussion	Research questions
	A structural paradox defines the sustainability narrative of this industry. On one hand, its upstream sourcing represents a mechanism of biogenic waste upcycling. On the other hand, achieving true ecological legitimacy requires a paradigm shift toward radical operational transparency and the mitigation of ecotoxicological impacts within the tanning phase.	How do you think the argument of “wastage reduction” is being used to distract attention from the ecological impact of tanning activity?
Dynamics of global leather industry	From a stakeholder perspective, this is not merely a defensive posture, but a strategic effort toward legitimacy reclamation. Faced with a highly competitive market landscape where alternative materials deploy extensively, and with disruptive communication strategies, leather stakeholders are pushed to assert an authentic sustainability discourse.	How is the rhetoric of upcycling being used to compete with the popularity of alternative materials such as vegan leather?
	By conducting rigorous, objective audits of the entire supply chain, these independent third-party certification frameworks mitigate the risks of information asymmetry and greenwashing. They provide verifiable data regarding chemical management and traceability, transforming subjective corporate assertions into objectively verifiable ecological legitimacy.	What do you think the roles of third-party certification are in strengthening or even weakening this luxury green narrative?

Table 2 summarizes the major themes emerging from the multimodal discourse analysis and narrative inquiry, together with the corresponding research questions formulated from each theme. Ultimately, the global leather industry’s survival in the modern luxury market depends on a sophisticated linguistic and visual transformation that converts the reality of slaughterhouse waste into an upscale narrative of ecological necessity. By deploying rhetorical upcycling, stakeholders strategically leverage consumer cognitive dissonance, effectively severing the conceptual link between agricultural extraction and luxury consumption through narratives emphasizing heritage, craftsmanship, and data-driven sustainability.

Nevertheless, the findings also reveal a profound structural paradox. While framing hides as non-allocable byproducts enables brands to position luxury leather as a form of waste valorization, this narrative frequently diverts attention from the environmental impacts associated with the chemical tanning process. As alternative materials continue to gain market share, the industry’s claim to environmental stewardship remains vulnerable to accusations of greenwashing unless its sustainability rhetoric is supported by radical operational transparency, measurable environmental performance, and independently verified third-party certification.

5. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the global leather industry constructs a consistent sustainability narrative through what this study conceptualizes as rhetorical upcycling, whereby animal hides are reframed from slaughterhouse waste into environmentally valuable luxury materials. Across all analyzed organizations, multimodal communication strategically removes visual references to slaughterhouses, industrial pollution, and chemical-intensive tanning processes,

replacing them with pastoral landscapes, traceability systems, circular economy diagrams, and luxury craftsmanship. This finding supports the application of Paradox Theory, which argues that organizations facing contradictory stakeholder demands frequently seek to accommodate rather than resolve competing expectations (Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Carmine & De Marchi, 2023). Instead of denying their dependence on livestock production, leather companies transform this dependency into evidence of circular bioeconomy, presenting leather manufacturing as an environmental service that prevents organic waste from entering landfills.

The paradox identified in this research closely resembles the sustainability paradox described by Wasieleski et al. (2020), where firms simultaneously pursue economic profitability and environmental legitimacy despite the inherent tensions between these objectives. While previous studies primarily examined this paradox from operational or managerial perspectives, the present findings reveal that the paradox is also constructed rhetorically through discourse, visual symbolism, and branding. The industry's communication no longer focuses solely on leather quality but increasingly emphasizes waste recovery, traceability, biodiversity, and carbon reduction, thereby redefining luxury consumption as an environmentally responsible act.

From the perspective of Legitimacy Theory, the results further indicate that sustainability reporting functions as a strategic legitimacy mechanism rather than merely an information disclosure tool. Sustainability reports constituted the dominant communication source because they provide institutional authority through quantitative environmental indicators, certification systems, and standardized disclosures. This finding is consistent with Omoloso et al. (2020), who argued that sustainability disclosure has become central to maintaining stakeholder confidence within the leather industry, and with Akhter et al. (2023) and Khan and Khan (2025), who emphasized that environmental disclosure strengthens organizational legitimacy under increasing climate-related scrutiny.

The multimodal findings also extend existing discourse analysis literature. O'Halloran and Tan (2022) argued that visual elements function as ideological signs rather than decorative components, while Joy et al. (2024) emphasized that MCDA enables researchers to uncover meanings produced through the interaction of text and imagery. Consistent with Barthesian semiotics, the analyzed reports transform ordinary signs, including green color palettes, grazing cattle, luxury interiors, scientific diagrams, and organized leather scraps, into broader cultural myths portraying leather production as naturally harmonious with ecological sustainability.

Nevertheless, the findings also expose important limitations in this dominant discourse. Although companies strongly emphasize waste valorization and traceability, environmental concerns surrounding tanning chemicals, wastewater treatment, and toxic emissions receive comparatively limited visual and rhetorical attention. This observation aligns with Chen et al. (2023), Fatema et al. (2023), and Wang et al. (2024), who argued that the environmental sustainability of leather depends not only on utilizing animal by-products but also on improving downstream processing technologies. Consequently, the industry's rhetorical upcycling narrative may strengthen legitimacy in the short term. However, its long-term credibility will ultimately depend on transparent reporting, measurable environmental performance, and independently verified sustainability practices, rather than persuasive communication alone.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the global leather industry strategically employs rhetorical upcycling to reconcile the sustainability paradox between industrial symbiosis and environmental criticism. Through multimodal communication,

leather stakeholders consistently reframe slaughterhouse byproducts as valuable circular resources, positioning leather production as an environmentally beneficial practice rather than a resource-intensive luxury industry. Sustainability reports, corporate websites, and official policy documents constitute the primary communication channels, highlighting the industry's reliance on institutionalized discourse to strengthen ecological legitimacy.

Despite these efforts, the findings reveal a persistent structural paradox. While narratives emphasizing waste valorization, traceability, and product longevity enhance stakeholder legitimacy, they often divert attention from the downstream environmental impacts of chemical tanning. Consequently, persuasive sustainability communication alone is insufficient to establish authentic environmental stewardship. Long-term legitimacy depends on transparent lifecycle reporting, effective chemical management, and independently verified third-party certifications.

This study extends Paradox Theory by demonstrating that sustainability paradoxes are negotiated not only through managerial practices but also through multimodal discourse. It also contributes to Legitimacy Theory by illustrating how visual and textual communication functions as a strategic mechanism for maintaining organizational legitimacy in contested sustainability contexts. The findings encourage leather companies to complement persuasive narratives with measurable environmental evidence and greater operational transparency to mitigate greenwashing concerns. This study is limited by its focus on a small number of global leather organizations and a single expert interview, which may not fully represent the diversity of industry perspectives. Future research should include broader stakeholder groups, cross-country comparisons, and quantitative investigations examining how rhetorical upcycling influences consumer trust, willingness to pay, and perceptions of environmental legitimacy.

References

- Akhter, F., Hossain, M. R., Elrehail, H., Rehman, S. U., & Almansour, B. (2023). Environmental disclosures and corporate attributes, from the lens of legitimacy theory: a longitudinal analysis on a developing country. *European Journal of Management and Business Economics*, 32(3), 342-369. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1108/EJMBE-01-2021-0008>.
- Akkan, S. (2024). *Evaluating the sustainability of vegan leather as an eco-friendly and ethical alternative to animal-derived leather*. Bavaria: Technical University of Munich (Doctoral dissertation).
- Alsaad, Y. M., Ali, F. A., Jasim, B. E. A., Jawad, A. M., & Waleed, G. (2025). The evolution of environmental marketing strategies in the age of climate awareness. *Environment and Social Psychology*, 10(12), 104-126. <https://doi.org/10.59429/esp.v10i12.3980>.
- Arinnis, N. M., Cahyaningratri, C., & Priyotomo, P. (2022). The effectiveness of csr implementation in the upstream supply chain of mining industry: a stakeholders' perspective. *Research Horizon*, 2(6), 568-586. <https://doi.org/10.54518/rh.2.6.2022.83>.
- Brun, A., & Ciccullo, F. (2022). Factors affecting sustainability-oriented innovation in the leather supply chain. *Strategic Change*, 31(3), 305-321. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jsc.2500>.
- Carmine, S., & De Marchi, V. (2023). Reviewing paradox theory in corporate sustainability toward a systems perspective. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 184(1), 139-158. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-022-05112-2>.
- Chen, X., Xu, L., Ren, Z., Jia, F., & Yu, Y. (2023). Sustainable supply chain management in the leather industry: a systematic literature review. *International Journal of Logistics Research and Applications*, 26(12), 1663-1703. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13675567.2022.2104233>.
- Colucci, M., & Vecchi, A. (2024). Tackling climate change with end-of-life circular fashion practices. Remade in Italy with amore. *British Journal of Management*, 35(3), 1157-1179. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.12806>.

- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. London: Sage Publications.
- Cunha, M. P. E., & Putnam, L. L. (2019). Paradox theory and the paradox of success. *Strategic Organization*, 17(1), 95-106. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1476127017739536>.
- Dincer, B., & Dincer, C. (2022). Sustainable communication; perceived motivation and nature of the commitment. *Sustainability*, 14(5), 97-113. <https://dx.doi.org/10.3390/su14159783>.
- Fatema, K., Sarker, M. R., Akhtar, K., Begum, A., & Islam, S. (2023). Environmental sustainability: A challenge for leather industry. *Leather & Footwear Journal/Revista de Pielarie Incaltaminte*, 23(3), 146-158. <https://dx.doi.org/10.24264/lfj.23.3.6>.
- Gruppo Mastrotto. (2026). *Traceability and animal welfare policy: A sustainable strategy for the leather supply chain*. Retrieved on January 24, 2026, from <https://www.mastrotto.com/en/sustainability-journey/traceability>.
- Henan Prosper & Colomer Moda Co., Ltd. (2025). *Sustainability program*. Retrieved on January 26, 2026, from <https://www.prosper.com.cn/loop>.
- Joy, P., Hammond, B., Hammond, C., Bonardi, O., Wassef, K., & Ferlatte, O. (2024). Pulling at all threads: Reflections on using multimodal critical discourse analysis within arts based health research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 6(3), 104-118. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10497323241307893>.
- Khan, N. U., & Khan, M. H. (2025). "Soft" climate change exposure and firm performance across countries: legitimacy theory perspective. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 34(7), 8554-8570. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.70029>.
- Kurniawati, E., Budiyo, Raharjo, I. B. (2025). Sustainability reporting: Framing theory and rhetoric theory perspective. *International Journal of Accounting*, 6(4), 102-118. <https://doi.org/10.14419/nmyz3j97>.
- Lee, Y. C. (2024). Framing effects on sustainable behavior. *Sustainable Development*, 32(5), 5705-5718. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.2988>.
- Liu, J., Fan, B., Lai, J., Kassas, B., Ropicki, A. (2025). Shaping consumer perceptions of sustainable practices in livestock production through effective communication design. *Agribusiness*, 5(3), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1002/agr.70010>.
- Meyer, M., Dietrich, S., Schulz, H., & Mondschein, A. (2021). Comparison of the technical performance of leather, artificial leather, and trendy alternatives. *Coatings*, 11(2), 226-238. <https://doi.org/10.3390/coatings11020226>.
- O'Halloran, K. L., & Tan, S. (2022). *Discourse analysis and semiotics. Semiotic movements* (Bloomsbury Semiotics 4). Paris: Bloomsbury Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350139435.ch-11>.
- Omoloso, O., Wise, W., Mortimer, K., Jraisat, L., & Omoloso, S. (2020). Corporate sustainability disclosure: a leather industry perspective. *Emerging Science Journal*, 4(1), 1-11. <http://dx.doi.org/10.28991/esj-2020-01209>.
- Paliwoda-Matiolańska, A., & Nakayama, A. (2024). Sustainability strategic framing in corporate communication: Contextual semantics of Twitter in the energy sector. *El Profesional de la Información*, 33(3), 104-120. <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2024.0304>.
- Pasubio Group. (2024). *Pasubio sustainability report 2024*. Retrieved on January 27, 2026, from https://www.pasubio.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/PASUBIO_Sustainability_Report_2024_Final.pdf.
- Ramchandani, M., & Coste-Maniere, I. (2020). Leather in the age of sustainability: A norm or merely a cherry on top?. In *Leather and Footwear Sustainability: Manufacturing, Supply Chain, and Product Level Issues* (pp. 11-22). Singapore: Springer Singapore.
- Suryantara, I. G. D., Santika, I. D. A. D. M., & Pratiwi, D. P. E. (2022). A semiotic analysis in Victoria Secret product advertisements. *Elysian Journal: English Literature, Linguistics and Translation Studies*, 2(4), 80-89. <https://doi.org/10.36733/elysian.v2i4.4408>.
- UNIC – Italian Tanneries. (2022). *Sustainability report of the Italian tanning industry*. UNIC Bilancio di Sostenibilità. Retrieved on January 24, 2026, from <https://sustainability.unic.it/en/archive/>.
- Van Der Wel, K., Van De Mortel, M., Van De Grift, L., & Akerboom, S. (2025). How to make stakeholder participation work? Constructing legitimacy in environmental policymaking. *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, 27(2), 166-181. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2024.2443392>.

- Wang, Y. N., Zhang, Y., & Wang, Z. (2024). Biodegradability of leather: a crucial indicator to evaluate sustainability of leather. *Collagen and Leather*, 6(1), 12-24. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1186/s42825-024-00151-z>.
- Wasioleski, D., Waddock, S., & Shrivastava, P. (2020). *Management and the sustainability paradox: Reconnecting the human chain*. London: Routledge.
- Wrzesińska-Jędrusiak, E., Czarnecki, M., Kazimierski, P., Bandrów, P., & Szufa, S. (2023). The circular economy in the management of waste from leather processing. *Energies*, 16(1), 564-576. <https://dx.doi.org/10.3390/en16010564>.

Acknowledgment

We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of individuals who supported the completion of this article.

Funding Information

This research did not receive any funding.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval and Originality Statement

Ethical approval was obtained for this study. The manuscript represents original work and has not been previously published, nor is it under consideration by another journal.

Data Disclosure Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.



Copyright: © 2026 by the authors.

This work is licensed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>).