Organizational legitimation may be understood either as attempts to adapt to prevailing social norms and values or to manipulate the social environments by creating new audiences and new beliefs (c.f. Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Suchman, 1995). While adaptation has been widely studied, organizational researchers have given much less attention to manipulative legitimation. This is despite the fact that manipulation encompasses well-known activities such as advertising, marketing, and persuasion (Suchman, 1995). Suchman (1995, p. 591) therefore stated that manipulation “is less controllable, less common, and consequently, far less understood”, being “less a matter of management than of evangelism”.
In this article we take as starting point the assumption that manipulative legitimation indeed has some aspects of ‘evangelism’. However, we believe that it is just as common as other strategies and that it should be possible to identify. While much legitimation research has focused on how formal organizations adapt their internal structures, procedures, and outcomes to match social norms, our study draws attention to verbal communication as a legitimation instrument. Verbal messages are easy to form and convey, they are potentially powerful tools in terms of influencing perceptions, and not least, they are easy to identify and analyze.

In order to improve our understanding of verbal communication in legitimation, we have chosen to study the rhetoric of the three companies that Fortune Magazine declared as the most admired in the U.S. in 2007; General Electric (GE), Starbucks, and Toyota. Fortune partly attributed the success of these companies to their environmental strategies (Fisher, 2007), as they not only are at the forefront of implementing green practices in their business operations, but also very expressive in terms of communicating their concern for the environment. Because environmental concern is a value that currently has become widely endorsed, organizations that adopt a strong environmental focus are likely to be associated with this value and thus strengthen their organizational legitimacy. Conversely, organizations that do not convince with respect to environmental concern are more likely to attract criticism. Therefore, as confirmed by several recent writings, it is not surprising that many companies actively seek to be identified as environmentally aware by using various ‘corporate greening’ strategies (Boiral, 2007; Bowen, 2002; Prakash, 2000), defining business practices as ‘sustainable’ (Collins et al.,
2007; Ihlen, in press; Zorn & Collins, 2007), and turning strategies and organizational cultures ‘green’ (Harris & Crane, 2002; Orsato, 2006; Rivera-Camino, 2007).

The three most admired companies in the U.S. in 2007 are no exceptions. While we acknowledge the remarkable results that General Electric, Toyota, and Starbucks have achieved with respect to environmental improvements, it is their rhetoric to reinforce those actions that is analyzed in this research. Our approach reflects the view that currently seems to have become the norm, that it is not enough simply to do good; one must also communicate about one’s doings. Thus, in order to advance our understanding of organizational legitimation in general, there is a need to examine the verbal claims that are made to influence perceptions of legitimacy.

In the case of GE, Toyota, and Starbucks, the verbal efforts to persuade about their environmental concern are compiled in three publications available on their web sites, notably Delivering on Ecomagination: GE 2006 Ecomagination Report (GE, 2007), My Starbucks: Corporate Social Responsibility/Fiscal 2006 Annual Report, (Starbucks, 2007) and Embracing the Environment: The Toyota Way (Toyota, 2007). We analyze the rhetorical means that are used in these reports to come across as environmentally responsible, and discuss to what extent they imply a manipulative form of legitimation. Highlighting the specific role of rhetoric, i.e. the art of persuading others through language, our analysis builds on the three “available means of persuasion” referred to by Aristotle; ethos (a trustworthy character), logos (rational reasoning), and pathos (emotional appeal). We emphasize the role of ethos, following Aristotle’s (trans. 1991, 1.2.4) assertion that ethos is the controlling factor in persuasion. Special emphasis will be given to the construction of an ethos defined by environmental concern. This ethos can be
seen as the primary ‘evangelical’ message in which the three companies want their audiences to believe.

The first part of the article is a theoretical introduction that links the concepts of legitimacy and rhetoric. We then present the findings from our analysis of the three documents with respect to the construction of an environmental ethos, and discuss the significance of this ethos in the manipulation of legitimacy.

THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Legitimation is the process of obtaining legitimacy, or, as noted by Maurer (1971, p. 361), “the process whereby an organization justifies … its right to exist”. Legitimation is important for organizational survival and success, as legitimate organizations are perceived “not only as more worthy, but also as more meaningful, more predictable, and more trustworthy” (Suchman, 1995, p. 575). A legitimate organization has the support of its environments, resulting from a perceived congruence between the organization’s activities and the environments’ norms and values. Suchman’s definition builds on this notion by describing legitimacy as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574).

However, for most formal organizations legitimacy is a chronic problem (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992). Competition and changing social norms and values represent a constant source of pressure for organizational legitimation (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). Both anticipated legitimacy problems (Elsbach et al., 1998) and occurring legitimacy crises (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Elsbach, 1994) motivate organizations to take steps to ensure their legitimacy. Large multinational corporations in particular, of which General
Electric, Toyota, and Starbucks are examples, often experience problems of establishing and maintaining legitimacy (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999). Their multinational presence not only exposes them to a wide range of norms and values that differ across countries and contexts with respect to legitimacy requirements, their subunits must also adhere to the varying expectations of the host country and the parent company at the same time. In addition, large multinational corporations may be more vulnerable to attacks from interest groups because they are more visible and well-known than local firms. This is especially true when such corporations commit actions that go against local or general norms and values. In such cases, corporations engage in legitimacy-restoring activities, for example by referring to their social and environmental importance (Bakan, 2004).

Although this line of reasoning implies a calculated or strategic approach to legitimation, many writers emphasize the cultural and cognitive aspects of legitimacy. The institutional approach to organization studies sees legitimacy as “the degree of cultural support for an organization – the extent to which the array of established cultural accounts provide explanations for its existence, functioning, and jurisdiction” (Meyer & Scott, 1983, p. 201). The definition implies that organizations are embedded in wider social environments where cultural definitions determine how they are structured and understood. They are penetrated by the environments in the sense that new practices and structures are adopted, more as a result of existing within a socially constructed reality than of deliberate attempts to manage legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Our approach draws on the strategic tradition in studies of organizational legitimacy (c.f. Elsbach, 1994; Suchman, 1995). Building on resource dependency theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), the strategic approach sees legitimacy as a resource that can
be extracted from an organization’s environments. Managers are ascribed a high degree of control over the legitimation process and are assumed to calculate rationally what types of actions instill the highest degree of legitimacy. Various such strategies have been identified: Dowling and Pfeffer (1975) differentiated between (1) adapting goals, means, and products to conform to prevailing definitions of legitimacy, (2) trying to change the social definition of legitimacy, or (3) through verbal communication, seeking to become identified with legitimate symbols and values. Ashforth and Gibbs (1990) suggested a somewhat similar approach by emphasizing the ways in which organizations may create substantive or symbolic congruence with social norms, either by *de facto* changing their goals, structures, or processes, or by portraying themselves to *appear* consistent with social values and expectations. Suchman (1995) differentiated between (1) conforming to the environments, (2) selecting an environment that grants the organization legitimacy, or (3) manipulating the environments.

Suchmans’s concept of manipulation is closely related to Dowling and Pfeffer’s strategy of becoming identified with legitimate symbols and Ashforth and Gibbs’ concept of symbolic management. According to Suchman, manipulative legitimation involves advertising, strategic communication, as well as success and performance demonstrations, which aim to produce perceptions of congruence with legitimate values and norms. This congruence may be substantive, but it is more likely to have symbolic aspects, in the sense that the emphasis is on “espousing socially acceptable goals while actually pursuing less acceptable ones” (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990, p. 180). For example, an organization may portray itself as socially and environmentally responsible, and thus
be associated with legitimate values, even if it is irresponsible and unethical in various ways.

Despite our choice to work within the strategic tradition, we will not dismiss the idea that strategic legitimation efforts are embedded in a larger symbolic universe of which “no manager can completely step outside” (Suchman, 1995, p. 585). For example, demonstrating environmental concern can be seen as a way of influencing public opinion as well as responding to institutional pressures, allowing legitimation to be both manipulation and conformity at the same time. Thus in this article we assume that rhetoric in legitimation primarily constitutes a way of manipulating perceptions, but we will also discuss to what extent manipulation may imply conformity to social norms.

**Legitimation as a verbal activity**

Verbal messages are instruments that are very easy to form. Simply by the stroke of a pen or by expressing specific words, an organization can fill its legitimation efforts to create impressions of congruence with virtually any social norm or value. Especially when there is no mechanism for verification, which is the case for environmental policy statements, corporations have a clear incentive to present themselves favorably (Ramus & Montiel, 2005).

However, in the organizational research literature, few papers have highlighted the exclusive role of verbal communication in acquiring organizational legitimacy. The symbolic dimensions are addressed by Brunsson (1989) who demonstrated how Swedish local government units decouple “talk” from action in order to establish legitimacy. Other studies have linked legitimation efforts to statements of goals or missions (Mazza, 1999; Morpew & Hartley, 2006), organizational names (Glynn & Abzug, 2002), and verbal
accounts to prevent (Elsbach et al., 1998) or repair controversial or legitimacy-threatening events (Elsbach, 1994; Elsbach & Sutton, 1992). Verbal statements can also be used to delegitimate competitors (Mohamed & Gardner, 2004) and to legitimate change within organizations (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005).

It is other research disciplines such as public relations and communications that thus far have taken the greatest interest in bridging verbal communication and organizational legitimacy. A growing number of studies focus on legitimation dynamics (Boyd, 2000; Jensen, 1997; Yoon, 2005), including studies of crisis communication (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Hearit, 1995; Massey, 2001), image, and issue management (Coombs, 1992). However, these studies have only to a minor degree focused systematically on rhetoric in relation to legitimacy. Thus, there is an apparent, yet largely unexplored relationship between rhetoric and legitimation that merits more attention.

**Rhetoric, ethos, and legitimation**

In order to advance our understanding of the link between verbal communication and legitimation, we have chosen to draw on the ancient concept of rhetoric. The concept is promising for our purpose because it directs our attention to the way in which verbal communication is used by specific actors to create desired beliefs and impressions. Rhetoric is the art of persuading others through the use of language or other symbolic means, and implies “the ability, in each case, to see the available means of persuasion” (Aristotle, trans. 1991, 1.2.1).

Three such means are assumed to be relevant, referred to by Aristotle as *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*. Logos involves the use of reasoning to construct logically valid arguments and may include appeals to facts, numbers, examples, and statistics. Pathos is
appeals to emotions to influence the audience, for example love, hate, fear, and identification. Ethos concerns the character of the speaker, particularly his or her trustworthiness. Considered by Aristotle as the “controlling factor in persuasion” (Aristotle, trans. 1991, 1.2.4), ethos will henceforth be given more attention than the other two modes. However, as we will demonstrate below, both logos and pathos may support ethos, reinforcing the effect of ethos on legitimacy.

Ethos refers to the character of a speaker constructed primarily through language (Baumlin, 2001). It is considered as the elements of a speech or text that present the rhetor as trustworthy. The construction of a trustworthy ethos occurs through three strategies: Demonstrating (1) practical wisdom, (2) virtue, and (3) goodwill towards the audience.

Practical wisdom (phronesis): Aristotle argued that the rhetor should show good sense, sagacity, expertise, and attempt to come across as intelligent and knowledgeable. One way of doing this is to have knowledge about the subject and in this way impress the audience. An additional means is to use scientific expressions. In general, phronesis can be strengthened indirectly by logos, i.e. by using rational reasoning, relevant examples, numbers, and logical arguments. Aristotle argued that the wisdom should be practical, that is, it should imply the right action, which is something that is “distinct from technical knowledge and that cannot be learned in the same way as technical knowledge” (Kinneavy & Warshauer, 1994, p. 179).

Virtue (arête): Aristotle also argued that the rhetor should attempt to come across as having good moral character. Good virtues included “justice, courage, self-control, liberality, magnanimity, magnificence, prudence, wisdom, and gentleness” (Smith, 2004,
Both Cicero and Aristotle pointed out that the rhetor would benefit if his/her virtues are confirmed by others (Aristotle, trans. 1991; Cicero, trans. 2001) However, since virtues are “moving targets established by the audience” (Smith, 2004, p. 7), virtues that are appreciated by one audience may not be highly ranked by another. In other words, the rhetor has to adapt to the audience and to the prevailing norms for desirable characteristics.

Goodwill (*euonia*): Rhetors should demonstrate goodwill towards their audience. Goodwill is “inoperative friendship, which when it continues and reaches the point of intimacy may become friendship proper – not the sort of friendship whose motives is utility or pleasure, for these do not arouse goodwill” (Aristotle, trans. 1996, 9.5.3). The rhetor should therefore “somehow identify with the audience, by for instance holding some of their basic aspirations, speaking their language, and if necessary sharing and affirming their prejudices” (Kinneavy & Warshauer, 1994, p. 177). This means that pathos may support ethos indirectly. The rhetor could also create goodwill by demonstrating how the needs of the audience have been taken into consideration, for example by providing explanations that make the audience convinced about his or her intentions.

Table 1: Three strategies for strengthening ethos.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phronesis</td>
<td>Wisdom</td>
<td>Demonstrating wisdom, knowledge, intelligence, expertise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arête</td>
<td>Virtue</td>
<td>Demonstrating good virtues and a good moral character: justice, courage, self-control, liberality, magnanimity,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
magnificence, prudence, wisdom, and gentleness

Euonia  Goodwill  Demonstrating goodwill towards the audience:

Identification with the audience, showing how their needs have been taken into consideration.

**From individual to organizational ethos**

The idea of organizations having a character or ethos is based on the notion that organizations in many ways are like individuals. A ‘person’ metaphor in organizational analysis has become so common that it is virtually taken for granted as a meaningful way of understanding organizations (Bromley, 2000; Czarniawska, 1997). According to Czarniawska (1997, p. 41), the tendencies to personify organizations emerge from the view that “… organizations are not really individuals, but for all practical purposes they are like individuals” (italics in original).

However, this analogy does not make the transfer of ethos from the individual to the collective level unproblematic. Organizations are not easily comparable to Aristotle’s and Cicero’s “educated, propertytied, male speaker addressing a homogeneous audience” (Cheney et al., 2004, p. 79). Organizations are constructed of many collective identities (Pratt & Foreman, 2000), and they address multiple and fragmented audiences. On the other hand, organizational character has increased in importance in terms of understanding and explaining success (Schultz et al., 2000; Wright & Goodstein, 2007). Modern organizations want the public to appreciate their human characteristics such as responsible, trustworthy, credible, open, and innovative. Organizations are attributed with human-like characteristics based on what the audience sees, hears, and perceives about them; consequently they have an incentive to influence their audiences. Organizations are
not individuals, but can be assumed to portray themselves in much the same ways as individuals do, using similar techniques, and aiming for similar effects, also when it comes to the need for legitimacy.

METHODS

This article is based on a qualitative study of three documents created by the most admired companies in the U.S. in 2007; General Electric (2007), Starbucks (2007), and Toyota (2007). We chose to study these documents because they contain a very rich set of verbal expressions deliberately aimed at presenting the environmental focus of each company. The intended target audience is the general public, but the information is no doubt very relevant for shareholders, potential investors, government and regulatory agencies, and environmental groups. As such the documents represent an arena where the three companies allow themselves to elaborate extensively and convincingly on their environmental policies, strategies, achievements, and values, and thus where their ethos is likely to appear.

Our analysis was carried out by way of content analysis. Content analysis is a method for studying communication and making inferences by identifying specified characteristics of messages (Holsti, 1969; Krippendorff, 2004). It involves reducing a large amount of text into fewer content categories on the basis of a coding system, and may be applied to any form of communication. In our case, it is performed as a semantic analysis of verbal messages that serve as character-strengthening claims.

To ensure a reliable classification procedure, both researchers individually read through each document and made note of any claim that potentially could pertain to the companies’ character-strengthening efforts. We coded the data in a process of searching
for similar verbal claims which we subsequently grouped together, guided by coding principles that followed the three ethos-strengthening strategies: Claims that involved references to performance, expertise, skills, and technical knowledge in environmental matters were classified as promoting wisdom (*phronesis*); claims that revealed the companies as moral and righteous were classified as promoting virtue (*arete*); and finally, claims that emphasized common interests and identification were classified as promoting goodwill (*euonia*). Based on their content, we labeled the general themes of these claims (1) “We improve the world”, (2) “We clean up our own act”, and (3) “We are like you“, respectively. However, the semantic analysis of the verbal claims also revealed a fourth theme. A number of messages focused on endorsement and approval from third parties in environmental matters. To obtain a more complete picture of the ethos-strengthening claims in the texts, we included this category as a fourth claim under the label “Others approve of us”.

The four claims are not verbatim representations of any specific claim found in the three documents. Rather, by encapsulating the essence of a large number of messages that are variations of these themes, they each represent an aggregate of claims that have very similar content and thus were coded similarly by us.

Although other analyses of other data sets may yield better and different ethos-strengthening claims in the future, we believe, however, that they are not likely to be very different from ours. Nevertheless, it should be noted that our approach has limitations. The present research is a study of only three documents, and should primarily be seen as an illustration of manipulative legitimation as it appears in these three texts. The study sheds light on how the companies use rhetoric to construct a desirable impression of their
environmental efforts, and thus of how rhetoric is used intentionally to influence
perceptions of legitimacy. Our conclusions are primarily valid for the three corporations
and should not be seen as broad generalizations. Although the study may represent a step
towards a better understanding of how organizations manage their legitimacy in
environmental matters, more research is needed to establish the link between rhetoric and
organizational legitimacy in general.

CONSTRUCTING AN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHOS

“We improve the world”

The first verbal claim “we improve the world” serves primarily to promote
phronesis, i.e. to demonstrate knowledge, expertise, and wisdom. Overall, General
Electric explains itself in great detail about its activities. It states that “The world’s
environmental challenges present an opportunity for GE to do what it does best” (GE,
2007, p. 2) and highlights success stories from the U.S., Italy, Germany, Ukraine, China,
and Brazil, where GE has worked on renewable energy, carbon capture, cleaner coal
technology, water purification, lower energy consumption, and fuel efficiency. A typical
example is the description of how GE has contributed to lower CO₂ emissions in
California by installing new gas turbine systems that will “realize a CO₂ emissions
reductions of more than 270,000 tons … – the equivalent of eliminating the emissions
from 45,000 cars” (p. 13). The report also makes numerous references to the work GE
does with “world-recognized” research centers around the globe. The words
research/R&D appear 63 times in the 38-page brochure, and it is full of figures,
examples, and facts.
Toyota conveys much of the same impression in its report by claiming that its hybrid models “represent a revolution in the history of the automobile and in the development of automobile environmental technology” (Toyota, 2007, p. 1). The company points to how it seeks to “improve the environmental performance of [its] products and operations” (ibid.), and how its commitment “does not end until the vehicles have been retired from use in an eco-friendly manner” (ibid.). Like General Electric, Toyota relies on facts, numbers, examples, and rational arguments to convey the extent of its expertise. Toyota claims that their hybrid drivers have “saved over 178 million gallons of gasoline, thereby avoiding 1.6 million metric tons of CO₂ emissions to the atmosphere” (p. 2). Toyota’s report speaks warmly of the company’s technology, claiming that the “Hybrid Synergy Drive” (HSD) technology is the driving force behind its hybrid vehicles. A number of technical terms and abbreviations appear in the text, such as “HSD”, “FCHV”, “AT-PZEV”, “LEED”, “FY2006”, “ULEV”, symbolizing high-level expertise and knowledge.

Starbucks has chosen a somewhat different approach to convey to its audience how it improves the world. The company does not build phronesis through its products, but rather by the way it conducts business and the way it takes on a leadership role. The company argues that the way to strengthen the relationship with stakeholders is by focusing the company’s communication on “Starbucks’ commitment and passion to improve the world and the ways in which we are demonstrating this” (Starbucks, 2007, p. 1). Examples are provided showcasing “improvement” (improve/improvement is mentioned 68 times in the 78 pages report) and that the company helps “create a more sustainable approach to high-quality coffee production”. This is done through, for
instance, paying “premium prices for premium quality coffee” (p. 8). The company claims a leadership position “in both our industry and within our global society through our participation in organizations such as the United Nations Global Compact” (p. 1), agreeing specifically with “the consensus of the scientific community that climate change could pose an enormous threat to the future of the planet” (p. 16).

Thus, the companies’ claims of improving the world support their phronesis and are reinforced through logos arguments relying on impressive examples, facts, numbers, and comparisons, highlighting the quality of products and a leadership role respectively. Readers of the reports are left with the clear impression that the three companies are cutting-edge organizations at the forefront of the environmental protection debate, with remarkable competence in matters of environmentally friendly technology and sustainable development. It could be argued that the claim “we improve the world” also denotes a virtue and thus supports arête, since improving the world makes it a better place to live for everyone. The primary message, however, is that the three companies are expert organizations that can be trusted because they know what they are doing, they have the expertise and the competence, and they back up their claims with references to results.

“We clean up our own act”

The second category of verbal claims used in the three reports can be subsumed under the heading “we clean up our own act”. This strategy implies making the audience focus on how the companies reduce their own emissions and waste and thus set a good example. By doing so, the companies demonstrate a good ethic and good virtues, thus supporting their arête.
General Electric states that “By making a public commitment and then tracking the results, GE is leading by example and demonstrating how one company can make a difference” (p. 29). Having reduced its green house gas emissions from its operations by 4% and lowered its energy consumption by 5% since 2004, GE claims that it now has “committed to reduce the intensity of its GHG emissions 30% by 2008 and improve energy efficiency 30% by the end of 2012” (ibid.). The report refers to these actions and plans as “commitments” (the term commitment/committed” appear 37 times in the document). Considering the financial risk taken by GE in these matters, and pressure from interest groups, government agencies, as well as the general public, GE demonstrates how the motivation comes from within, thereby accentuating its strength of character.

Toyota’s report refers to a number of measures the company undertakes to set a good example when it comes to reducing waste and conserving resources. Toyota explains how it achieved “zero landfill” at its manufacturing facilities in North America as a whole, and how they matched the goal of reducing land filled production waste to 10kg per vehicle in 2005, leading to a new goal of 7kg per vehicle (p. 8). The report also boasts of their recycling program that helped “recycle 88% of their waste in 2005, including more than two million pounds of paper and cardboard and one million pounds of metal”. The report explains that Toyota uses “18,000 recyclable, metal shipping containers in place of cardboard and pallets at all 14 parts distribution centers in the U.S. In FY2006, the use of returnable shipping containers … eliminated nearly seven million pounds of wood and 2.7 million pounds of cardboard” (pp. 36-37).
Starbucks states that it is in its second year of implementing a climate change mitigation strategy focused on purchasing renewable energy, reducing energy consumption, and increased collaborative action. To reduce its own green house gas emissions, it has “quadrupled [its] renewable energy purchase to equal 20 percent of the energy used in [its] U.S. and Canada company-operated stores” (p. 55). For its renewable energy purchases, Starbucks says that it “…worked through the World Resources Institute’s Green Power Market Development Group to buy 100 percent wind renewable energy certificates, offsetting 124 million pounds (56,000 metric tons) of CO₂” (p. 55).

Thus, by focusing on their commitment towards improving themselves and doing good deeds for the environment, the claims support the three companies’ arête. The companies devote large sections of their reports to advance a moral character by explaining how they try to minimize their own environmental footprint and do the good deeds that are required to fulfill this objective. They do acknowledge polluting, emitting CO₂, and producing waste, but they also explain how they act morally to improve themselves. An important prerequisite is their commitment, a term that is used continuously throughout all three reports, serving as ‘evidence’ of their strength of character. The rhetoric is supported by references to numbers and facts (logos arguments), which to some extent activates phronesis in addition to arête.

“We are like you”

The third strategy is the verbal claim of “we are like you”, of which all three companies employ different versions. Emphasizing identification with the audience, this is a strategy that serves to promote goodwill (euonia).
General Electric does not hide the fact that it makes money on its Ecomagination program, but it also downplays the for-profit aspect of its activities considerably by highlighting a genuine concern for the environment. The company wants its audience to think that it faces the same challenges and is working towards the same goal as “ordinary” people, underscoring the shared interests between GE and its public. GE creates identification by using lines such as “When we engage diverse stakeholders we’re better able to understand our mutual challenges and identify opportunities for improvement” (p. 32, italics added). In addition, GE explains to its readers how the ecomagination strategy “is completely revolutionizing the way we collaborate with customers” (p. 5). Customers are not seen as just customers anymore, they are more or less equal partners that can and should be integrated in the development of innovative and environment-friendly products.

Toyota seeks to make the public identify with the company by signaling that it has something more than just profit on its mind. It portrays itself as a true friend of the environment as well as of its customers. For example, the headline “you can help” invites the customer to join Toyota in saving the environment. The page lists a number of steps the customer can take to drive less, consume less fuel, and in general reduce the vehicle’s impact on the environment in addition to saving money for him/herself. Thus, like General Electric, Toyota wants its customers to share a common mission by working together to save the environment. The message is reinforced when Toyota reveals how its employees – along with 90,000 other people – have volunteered their time to improve local communities and parks (p. 49).
Starbucks declares that it wants to be “your Starbucks” (p. 1). It creates identification with the reader by repeating this message in various ways (“My Starbucks”, “their Starbucks, etc.) and by stating that it is “committed to maintaining our relationships with stakeholders and gaining their input and feedback on issues of mutual importance” (p. 10). In addition, the report includes a number of stories of how some customers’ local Starbucks café is “their” Starbucks. Storytelling is a well-known branding and reputation management tool that is often used to create bonds, emotional appeal, and identification (Allan et al., 2002). In this context the underlying message is that Starbucks is not only owned by the Starbucks shareholders, it is something to which other people have developed a strong sense of belonging. The company’s desire to create identification is clearly reflected in this passage from the report:

Maybe you have a Starbucks you call your own. And because it is yours, you expect a lot from it. Customers want to feel good about the place they go and the coffee they drink. … Being their Starbucks is an honor. And also a responsibility (p. 1).

In other words, the third category of claims “we are like you” serves to make the audience identify with the companies. By emphasizing an unselfish concern for the environment, downplaying the for-profit aspects of their raison d’etre, and in general highlighting the shared interests between themselves and the audience, the three companies create bonds and show goodwill. A certain use of pathos amplifies the messages through the choice of stylistic appeals, for example when Starbucks uses storytelling, or when General Electric claims that they have “revolutionized” their way of
relating to customers. The claims thus serve to express euonia, and are to some extent backed up by pathos.

“Others approve of us”

All three companies use third party strategy to strengthen their ethos. Serving primarily to back up their virtues (arête), the strategy is prominent in all three documents. General Electric informs that it has been selected for “several credible, socially responsible investment” (SRI) indices, including the Dow Jones Sustainability Index (DJSI), KLD Global Climate 100 Index and Innovest Global “Most Sustainable Corporations in the World” Index (p. 33). It also says that the U.S. Department of Energy and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency “awarded GE Consumer & Industrial the Energy Star 2007 Partner of the Year Sustained Excellence Award for the second year in a row” (p. 35). Furthermore, the Acting Assistant Administrator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Office of Air and Radiation provides valuable evidence of approval: “Partners like GE are outstanding leaders in protecting our environment” (GE, 2007, p. 35).

Toyota proudly highlights a number of environmental awards it has won over the last years. In 2006, Toyota won the first price in the Energy Star ranking for Sustained Excellence. The preceding year, Toyota was awarded the “Partner of the Year – 2005 Leadership in Energy Management” Energy Award. Several of its sales and distribution centers won awards in 2005 from the California Integrated Waste Management Board through their Waste Reduction Awards Program. It also explains how the city of McKinney on August 29, 2006 declared “Pat Lobb Toyota of McKinney Day” in recognition of Toyota’s contribution to the greening of the city. Toyota states that “these
awards recognize efforts by our U.S. manufacturing operations to reduce energy consumption in both the plants and administrative offices (p. 3).

Starbucks devotes a whole page of its report to “external recognition” (p. 17). It highlights the fact that it was listed on no less than 13 Socially Responsible Investments indices, including the Dow Jones Sustainability North America Index, the Dow Jones Sustainability Unites States Index, and the Dow Jones Sustainability World Index. It was ranked 17th on the list of “100 Best Corporate Citizens” by Business Ethics magazine in 2006, and made Fortune’s list of “the 100 Best Companies to Work for” eight times, ranking 29th on the list in 2006. Furthermore, in its report Starbucks compiled a list of nine rankings and awards it has received from various non-profit organizations and government agencies, among them the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Starbucks was ranked sixth on EPA’s Green Power Partnership list for Starbucks’ “significant purchase of Green Power”, and the Chinese government recognized Starbucks as a “model Company for Sustainable Economic Development” (Starbucks, 2007, p. 17).

Thus, by making known their endorsement, recognition, and awards from third parties, the three companies are able to focus the audience’s attention to their commitment and good virtues, and by doing so, enhance their arête. The third party claims also involve logos arguments, backing up the companies’ phronesis. Technical terms are used, as well as references to efficiency and results. The main impression from the data, however, is that the companies are endorsed and awarded not primarily because of their results, but because they are “model companies, “outstanding” leaders, and in generally possess the virtues and moral behavior that merit this approval.
In sum, each claim is linked to one specific ethos-strengthening strategy and is supported indirectly by either logos or pathos (cf. table 2). With the exception of the third claim “we are like you”, the claims invoke one additional ethos-strengthening strategy as well; either arête or phronesis.

This pairing of claims with ethos-strengthening strategies not only concurs with Aristotle’s recommendations for strengthening ethos. It also serves to qualify the companies’ ethos within an area that has come to be highly regarded in our time. The character that is constructed in the texts is that of a highly environmentally responsible and concerned organization. It is a corporate character that has wisdom, competence, and the desired understanding of environmental problems as well as solutions. It has virtues and does good moral deeds, and demonstrates goodwill towards its stakeholders and customers. It displays all the characteristics that are necessary for being perceived as trustworthy in environmental matters – hence the term environmental ethos.

Table 2: Claims for constructing an environmental ethos

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Claims</th>
<th>Phronesis</th>
<th>Arête</th>
<th>Euonia</th>
<th>Supported by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We improve the world</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>(x)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Logos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We clean up our own act</td>
<td>(x)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>Logos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are like you</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Pathos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others approve of us</td>
<td>(x)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>Logos</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
GREEN LEGITIMATION AS MANIPULATION

Manipulative legitimation implies that an organization deliberately influences the perceptions of itself held by its audience through persuasion, marketing, or advertising (Suchman, 1995). Instead of adapting its formal structures or outputs to prevailing social norms, the logic of manipulation is to change the audience’s perceptions directly through verbal communication.

To what extent can the four verbal claims found in the three documents be understood as manipulative legitimation? Although the claims are not declared orally, we have seen various means of persuasion being used in the texts. The companies do not just merely report what has been done and what will be done in a ‘neutral’ manner. The use of rhetorical means specifically reveals intentions of influencing the audience. The companies rely on a combination of ethos, logos, and pathos strategies, using phronesis, arête, and euonia to strengthen ethos, while logos and pathos function as rhetorical support. In the texts, the companies have complete control over what kind of cues about their characteristics and values are given. A strong environmental ethos appears, demonstrating that the companies base their activities not only on ‘doing’ green, but more importantly, on ‘being’ green, possessing corporate characteristics and values that they know are appreciated by an increasingly environmentally aware audience.

From a legitimation perspective, the purpose of this rhetoric is straightforward: to persuade the audience and gain acceptance for the belief that the companies act in accordance with widely held social norms of environmental concern. These efforts may be referred to as ‘green’ legitimation. As long as the audience is convinced of the companies’ environmental concern, the companies will be seen as legitimate
organizations, and their existence justified. In this connection manipulative legitimation can be compared to a mission of ‘spreading the word’, and as such it reflects the ‘evangelical’ aspect of manipulative legitimation, which according to Suchman (1995, p. 592) “over time … helps to build a winning coalition of believers”.

An interesting aspect of the companies’ legitimation efforts is the one-sided focus on their good actions, deeds, and virtues. Aspects of their activities that would weaken their environmental ethos are, for obvious reasons, omitted. For example, they do not draw attention to non-environmental activities for which they have been criticized by various writers and environmental groups. Apart from admitting to pollute, the three reports do not talk about actions such as lobbying against stricter environmental regulations (Toyota), contaminating air and water (General Electric), or accusations of ‘greenwashing’ (Starbucks). This decoupling of actions and communication confirms the close link between manipulative legitimation and Ashforth and Gibbs’ (1990) concept of symbolic legitimation. In order to acquire and maintain legitimacy it is necessary to communicate as if one’s actions are consistent with prevailing social norms. The reports are made for one important purpose; to establish the three companies as responsible and environmentally aware organizations. To give out a consistent impression of a responsible environmental ethos is therefore of great importance. However, this decoupling does not necessarily mean that manipulative legitimation is bad or dishonest. The three companies are not using rhetoric in these texts to make unsupported claims. While it is true that they have all been criticized by environmental groups, it is also true that they invest heavily in concrete measures to improve the environment. The positive rhetoric can therefore be seen as a way of reinforcing these actions, which may be one of
the reasons why these companies ended up as the most admired companies in the U.S. in 2007 in the first place.

The findings also shed light on the adaptive aspects of manipulation – which is somewhat of a paradox in itself. The manipulative efforts are not the more radical form of manipulation described by Dowling and Pfeffer (1975) as a way of altering the social definition of legitimacy. The verbal claims are designed to gain acceptance for a particular belief, not to change social norms and values. But it is not just any belief that is targeted: precisely because environmental concern has become a very significant social norm, the verbal claims foster the belief that the three companies’ ethos is defined by environmental concern. The companies do not seek to alter social norms, rather they seek to become identified with legitimate norms and values. As a result, we suggest that manipulation of perceptions of legitimacy through rhetoric includes elements of adaptation. This form of manipulation draws on prevailing cultural norms, values, and expectations in order to obtain a maximum impact on the audience. The findings imply that formal organizations exist in a larger cultural setting that both represents an opportunity and a constraint with respect to effective legitimation. The opportunity is represented by the direction that the cultural setting of values and norms gives for the content of an organization’s legitimation efforts; it provides guidance for designing culturally congruent claims. However at the same time, the legitimation efforts are constrained by the same cultural setting in the sense that an organization is not free to move beyond the range of legitimate values and norms when designing its strategy. Verbal claims that are designed to influence perceptions must themselves be influenced by prevailing social norms. We therefore concur with Suchman’s (1995, p. 577) middle
course between the strategic and the institutional approach in that organizations “can and do formulate strategies for fostering legitimating perceptions” within a socially constructed system of cultural beliefs, but that these beliefs also imposes constraints on them.

CONCLUSION

An important objective of this article has been to connect the concept of rhetoric to legitimation in order to obtain a better understanding of the strategic manipulation of legitimacy. Our study has illustrated that organizational legitimation may be understood as a verbal activity where rhetorical means of persuasion play a significant part. Above all, the findings highlight the importance of ethos in organizational legitimation. The combination of a corporate character with knowledge, virtues, and goodwill in the context of environmental concern points to a responsible and trustworthy environmental ethos that is designed to impress stakeholders. The study thus highlights the importance of combining insights from both the strategic and the institutional approach to legitimacy. The use of persuasive verbal claims in legitimation is consistent with strategic manipulation, although aspects of adaptation are necessary to demonstrate congruence with social norms and values. However, actual behavior and actions need not be fully consistent with these norms. Manipulative legitimation is therefore both a symbolic activity (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990) and a way of becoming identified, through communication, with norms and values that already are taken for granted as legitimate (c.f. Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). Thus, organizational legitimation should not be seen only as a passive process of adapting formal structures, processes, and outputs to a socially...
constructed reality. It is also a strategic process that involves manipulation of external perceptions through verbal messages that build on a range of rhetorical means.

These findings suggest a number of directions for future research. First, they highlight the need to explore the general magnitude of rhetoric in green legitimation. Because we lack studies that make both the theoretical and empirical connection between legitimation, rhetoric, and environmental concern, we currently can say very little about how and why manipulative legitimation occurs. In order to move toward a more general theory of manipulative legitimation, it is necessary to acquire data from different types of organizations, from different sectors, and preferably from different geographical regions, as well as from organizations with a varying degree of environmental focus. Future research should therefore examine the extent to which green legitimation varies from one industry to the other, from public to private organizations, and from the beginning of the organizational life cycle to the end. It should also examine whether green legitimation is more relevant when confronted with legitimacy threats, i.e. when repairing legitimacy, or if it is more relevant when trying to acquire or maintain legitimacy. Second, in line with these arguments, there is a need to focus on the effects of the verbal strategies. An important question that remains unaddressed in this article is whether manipulative legitimation in environmental matters has the desired effects on legitimacy, or if it is just a fashion; something one does because everyone else does it. If it is a fashion, the research implication is that we should expect to see similar legitimation efforts made by many different organizations. Green legitimation would then be a standard response regardless of the nature of the context, in much the same way as an organizational myth (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). If it is an instrument, it is important to investigate what type of
situation instigates green legitimation efforts and whether they have a positive effect on organizational legitimacy. The results from this study point to several similarities in the claims; however, more research is needed to conclude in a more general direction.

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For example, Bakan (2004) provided a list of 41 legal breaches between 1990 and 2001 committed by GE for which it was sentenced or ordered to clean up and pay. The cases included, among others, repeated cases of PCB contamination of soil and water, dumping of chemicals, and contamination of ground water, with fines ranging from a few hundred thousand dollars to $147 million. As for Toyota, The New York Times claimed that the tested hybrid car models did not provide any tangible mileage benefits (Sabatini, 2005). BlueWater – a division of Friends of the Earth – revealed that Toyota was lobbying against stricter environmental regulations that were intended to set a higher fuel mileage standard (BlueWater, undated). For Starbucks, a recent critique has been that its concern for the environment and its corporate social responsibility activities are just “greenwashing” (Kendall et al., 2007). The Green Life, a nonprofit organization, named Starbucks as one of the “Ten Worst Greenwashers of 2003” (Johnson, 2004).