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THE TRANSFORMATION IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION (2016-2024): FRAMING AND RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE CONFEDERATION OF BRITISH INDUSTRY (CBI)

*İŞ DÜNYASI İLETİŞİMİNDEKİ DÖNÜŞÜM (2016-2024): İNGİLİZ SANAYİ
KONFEDERASYONU'NUN (CBI) ÇERÇEVELEME VE RETORİK ANALİZİ*

Sevil ZENGİN GUPTA¹ · Gamze SAĞLAM²

¹Assistant Professor (Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Yozgat Bozok University, Yozgat, Türkiye) · ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8129-8878>

²Lecturer (Department of International Business, Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, the UK) · ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6462-9652>

Corresponding author: Sevil ZENGİN GUPTA · sevil.zengin@yobu.edu.tr/ sz18@aru.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolution of business discourse in the United Kingdom (UK) by analysing the annual reports and general meeting minutes of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) from 2016 to 2024. Using a combined framing and rhetorical analysis approach, the research investigates how the CBI constructs narratives around key economic, political, and social issues, and the linguistic strategies through which these narratives are legitimized. The framing analysis identifies recurring themes, such as risk, opportunity, innovation, and sustainability, while the rhetorical analysis explores metaphors, repetition, and persuasive appeals that reinforce these frames. The study also traces the temporal dynamics of these discourses, demonstrating how CBI's communication strategies adapt to critical events including Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic and global economic fluctuations. The findings reveal how institutional framing and rhetoric work together to shape public understanding and policy debates. This study further contributes to the literature by showing how business organizations legitimize private economic interests as if they were public goods through their rhetorical construction.

Keywords: Corporate communication, framing analysis, rhetorical strategies, business narratives, institutional legitimization

JEL Codes: D02; D73; D78; F23; M21.

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Birleşik Krallık'ta (BK) iş dünyası söyleminin evrimini incelemektedir ve 2016-2024 yılları arasında İngiliz Sanayi Konfederasyonu'nun (CBI) yıllık raporları ve genel kurul tutanakları üzerinden kapsamlı bir analiz yapmaktadır. Araştırmada çerçevelene (framing) ve retorik analizi yöntemlerinin birleşik bir yaklaşımı kullanılarak, CBI'nin ekonomik, politik ve sosyal konular etrafında nasıl anlatılar oluşturduğu ve bu anlatıların hangi dilsel stratejilerle etkili bir şekilde meşrulaştırıldığı araştırılmaktadır. Çerçeveleme analizi, risk, fırsat, yenilik, sürdürülebilirlik ve kurumsal sorumluluk gibi tekrar eden temaları belirlerken; retorik analiz, bu çerçeveleri güçlendiren metaforlar, tekrarlar ve iktina edici söylemleri ayrıntılı biçimde incelemektedir. Çalışma ayrıca bu söylemlerin zaman içindeki dinamiklerini takip ederek, CBI'nin iletişim stratejilerinin Brexit, COVID-19 pandemisi, ekonomik krizler ve küresel ekonomik dalgalar gibi kritik olaylara nasıl uyum sağladığını göstermektedir. Bulgular, kurumsal çerçevelene ve retorikin kamuoyu algısını, politika tartışmalarını ve ekonomik karar süreçlerini şekillendirmede nasıl birlikte çalıştığını açıkça ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca bu çalışma, iş dünyası örgütlerinin özel ekonomik çıkarlarını sanki kamu yararıymış gibi retorik yollarla meşrulaştırma biçimlerini göstererek mevcut literatüre önemli katkılarında bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kurumsal iletişim: çerçevelene analizi: retorik stratejiler: iş dünyası anlatıları: kurumsal meşrulaştırma

Highlights

- Business Associations
- Public Policy
- Decision Making Process

Introduction

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) has long been recognized as one of the most influential institutions representing the interests of United Kingdom (UK) businesses. Founded in 1965 through the merger of several regional employers' organizations, the CBI serves as a key intermediary between government, industry, and civil society, advocating for policies that support economic growth, innovation, and global competitiveness (CBI, 2022). The organization represents a broad spectrum of sectors, including manufacturing, services, finance, and technology, and its membership comprises both large multinational corporations and small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Grant and Marsh, 1971: 404).

Through its annual reports and general meeting communications, the CBI not only provides quantitative indicators—statistical and analytical insights on the state of the UK economy—but also articulates shared narratives about what business 'needs', 'wants', and 'contributes' to society. The CBI has played a central role in shaping debates on key economic issues, from industrial strategy and labour market reform to sustainability and technological innovation (Greenwood et al., 2002: 68). In this sense, the CBI is not merely a lobbying body, but a central producer of business discourse that helps to construct the legitimate role of firms in the UK political and socio-economic life. Its influence extends beyond policy advocacy; as a representative voice, the CBI mediates between corporate priorities and societal expectations. Consequently, its communication practices can be understood as discursive strategies that legitimize particular economic interests as socially desirable and politically viable.

The period between 2016 and 2024 represents a particularly turbulent and transformative era for the UK. The Brexit referendum in June 2016 created profound uncertainty regarding trade, regulation, and investment (Dhingra et al., 2016: 1-2), forcing businesses to face unprecedented challenges in planning and adaptation. Organizations like the CBI played a critical role in framing the implications of these shifts for the private sector. Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021) generated operational disruptions and strategic questions regarding resilience and workforce management (OECD, 2021). More recently, global energy crises and geopolitical tensions have prompted renewed discussions on sustainability and industrial strategy (Almeida et al., 2025: 3-4). As a representative institution, the CBI navigates a complex landscape of policy and societal pressures, making its communications a valuable source for understanding the evolution of business discourse in a changing national context.

Despite extensive research on UK economic policy and corporate governance, there remains a notable gap in longitudinal analyses of the CBI's institutional communications during periods of significant disruption. Existing studies tend to focus on short-term responses to specific events rather than tracing how messaging evolves over multiple years (Greenwood et al., 2017: 69; Scott and Davis, 2016: 17-19). Examining the CBI's reports from 2016 to 2024 provides a unique opportunity to understand how a leading business organization adapts its discourse across critical historical junctures. Guided by this gap, the study addresses the following research questions:

- How has the CBI's institutional discourse evolved in response to major political and economic disruptions between 2016 and 2024?
- In what ways do the CBI communications frame business interests as aligned with broader societal and policy goals during this period?
- How do these discursive strategies contribute to the legitimization of particular economic priorities as socially desirable and politically necessary?

Theoretically, this study advances framing and rhetoric research in three main ways. First, it extends literature predominantly focused on media and party-political communication (e.g., Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974) to the institutional discourse of a major business association, showing how business frames are recalibrated across successive crises. Second, following Franzosi and Vicari's (2018) proposal to treat rhetoric as an overarching lens for frame analysis, it conceptualises how thematic frames and persuasive strategies (ethos–logos–pathos) operate in combination. Third, by tracing the temporal evolution of frames such as risk–resilience and sustainability–net-zero, it identifies the discursive mechanisms through which business organisations legitimise private economic interests as public goods.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to analyse the evolution of business discourse in the United Kingdom using the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) annual reports and general meeting records from the period of 2016 to 2024. The selected nine-year period captures a sequence of major political and economic disruptions—most notably Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the post-pandemic energy and governance crises—that have profoundly influenced corporate priorities and institutional narratives. Theoretically, this research is grounded in the premise that institutional discourse is not merely a reflection of organizational reality but a constitutive force that shapes and legitimizes corporate responses to systemic instability. While the study draws on these theoretical frameworks to understand how language constructs institutional identity, its practical application focuses specifically on the thematic shifts within the CBI documentation during these volatile years. This distinction ensures that the analysis remains rooted in high-level sociolinguistic theory while providing a granular, evidence-based account of how the UK business leaders recalibrated their strategic messaging in real-time. The choice of this timeframe is also informed by data availability, as comprehensive and comparable the CBI documentation is accessible only for these years.

Focusing on institutional communication, the research combines framing analysis and rhetorical analysis to capture both the thematic content and the communicative (persuasive or legitimization) strategies within the CBI reports. The dataset consists of all publicly available annual reports and meeting notes published during this period, encompassing quantitative indicators—such as survey results and economic statistics—and qualitative narrative sections—such as forewords, committee discussions, strategic framing. Collectively, these materials provide a comprehensive view of the organization's stated priorities, concerns, and messaging strategies. Within this methodological context, Franzosi and Vicari (2018: 401) suggest that the rhetorical phenomenon functions as an overarching approach to examining frame analysis, offering a valuable lens for interpreting how these narratives construct meaning and convey organizational intent.

Framing analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes, interpretive frameworks, and problem definitions within the texts (Entman, 1993: 52; Goffman, 1974: 11- 19). Each document was systematically coded to capture the prevalence and evolution of five key frames: Risk/resilience, opportunity/growth, innovation/competitiveness, sustainability/net-zero, and industrial strategy/regional growth. Open coding was used to allow emergent themes to surface inductively, while axial coding grouped these themes into broader analytical categories. This approach facilitated the identification of temporal trends, revealing how the prominence of particular frames shifted over the eight-year period in response to major political and economic events, including Brexit (2016), the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021), and subsequent global energy market disruptions and governance pressures (Dhingra et al., 2016: 4; OECD, 2021). Additionally, rhetorical analysis was applied to examine how the CBI linguistically constructs and legitimizes these frames. This involved identifying metaphors, repetition, narrative structures, and appeals to logic, credibility, or

emotion, following established approaches in discourse and organizational studies (Aristotle, trans. 2007: 29–37; Charteris-Black, 2014: 54– 62; Lakoff Johnson, 1980: 19). The combined focus on framing and rhetorical strategies provides insight into how the CBI not only selects particular policy priorities but also seeks to persuade members, policymakers, and wider stakeholders of their urgency and legitimacy.

As an application of this method, the coding, analysis, and interpretation were conducted iteratively, involving multiple readings of each document to ensure analytical consistency and reliability. As such, data (reports) were organized chronologically to trace shifts in framing and rhetorical emphasis over time. Key patterns and variations were visualized in comparative matrices and summary tables, illustrating how dominant frames were sustained, recalibrated, or replaced across different phases of crisis and recovery. This integrated methodological approach offers a nuanced understanding of how a major business organization strategically communicates, responds to and adapts to socio-political and economic conditions, and seeks to shape public perception and policy discourse over an extended period. This perspective highlights how institutional communications operate not simply as knowledge dissemination but as discursive interventions that normalize particular economic priorities as socially legitimate and politically necessary.

Sample and Data

Framing and Rhetorical Analysis of CBI Annual Reports (2016–2024) and Annual General Meeting Minutes (AGM)

The dataset comprises annual reports of the CBI, Annual General Meeting (AGM) Minutes, and qualitative narrative sections (e.g. forewords, strategic framing, committee discussions, leadership addresses). Open and axial coding were used to identify five recurrent frames — Risk/Resilience, Opportunity/Growth, Innovation/Competitiveness, Sustainability/Net-zero, and Industrial strategy/Regional growth — while rhetorical analysis revealed the use of metaphors, slogans, narrative arcs, and appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos. Reports were chronologically examined to assess how discursive priorities and persuasive strategies shifted across key historical junctures by NVivo 14 Program.

Data Analysis

Dominant Policy Frames and Evolution: What CBI Says

As for risk/resilience, the CBI reports frame threats across political (Brexit), operational (pandemic, cyber), financial, and reputational dimensions. In 2016, Brexit was framed as an existential risk, with an emphasis on uncertainty and contingency planning. By 2019, focus shifted toward governance continuity and policy access, as evidenced in AGM minutes. The narrative changed again in 2020, centering on the operational and economic disruptions of COVID-19, while prioritizing crisis response and jobs-led recovery. Finally, the 2021–2024 periods saw a broadening of the risk framework to encompass institutional financial stability, board oversight, and governance reforms, specifically through explicit risk registers and material uncertainty disclosures (e.g., the 2023 auditors' notes regarding short-term borrowing). Regarding opportunity/growth, opportunity frames present crises as openings for economic, strategic, and membership gains. For instance, 2017's *Unlocking Regional Growth* report quantifies potential economic prizes, identifies four main drivers, and uses slogans like "Mind the Gap" and "Size of the Prize." 2017–2018 reports foreground the "Prosperity Agenda," with policy pillars such as skills, infrastructure, innovation, and trade. 2021's *Seize the Moment* reframes Brexit, COVID, and climate shocks as structural opportunities, linking

lobbying to measurable outcomes (£700bn GVA by 2030). 2023–2024 AGM communications emphasize policy wins (full expensing, childcare reform) as catalysts for membership renewal and public credibility.

Moreover, in the case of innovation/competitiveness, innovation frames emphasize Research and Development (R&D), technology adoption, Artificial Intelligence (AI) strategy, and data infrastructure as both reactive and proactive levers. For instance, throughout the period of 2016–2018 reports present industrial innovation as a response to uncertainty. Furthermore, the year 2021 links advocacy to policy wins (R&D funding, AI strategy, data adequacy agreements with the European Union (EU)). The year 2022 reports note investment in a new data insights system, and 2023 highlights continued policy engagement and organizational modernization. In terms of sustainability/net-zero, sustainability evolves from peripheral to central, integrating moral and economic arguments. Internal operational practice (Scope 1–3 emissions reporting, science-based targets of 50% reduction by 2030) complements external lobbying (net-zero policy, grid connectivity). 2021–2024 reports consistently present measurable environmental metrics alongside corporate responsibility narratives. With respect to industrial strategy/regional growth, policy frameworks—spanning from the 2017 *Unlocking Regional Growth* report to 2023–2024 communications—consistently position cluster development, skills, and regional investment as national priorities. Also, leadership metaphors, such as the “flywheel of prosperity”, link policy wins to cumulative, self-reinforcing growth.

Table 1 below provides a chronological overview of the five dominant frames across the CBI annual reports and AGM minutes between the period of 2016 and 2024. Illustrating how the organization strategically reorders its discursive priorities in response to shifting political and economic conditions. Risk/resilience dominates in years of acute disruption—Brexit uncertainty in 2016, pandemic shutdowns in 2020, and governance and financial instability in 2023—indicating that crises function as narrative catalysts for organizational self-legitimation. In contrast, opportunity/growth, innovation/competitiveness, and sustainability/net-zero gain prominence during periods of reconstruction (2017–2018 and 2021–2024), where the CBI reframes turbulence as a platform for policy entrepreneurship and measurable economic gains. Throughout the entire period, industrial strategy/regional growth remains consistently high, signalling its role not as a reactive frame but as a stable ideological anchor that naturalizes regional investment, skills development, and cluster-based productivity as non-negotiable components of national economic policy. Thus, the timeline demonstrates a cyclical logic: crisis amplifies risk, recovery amplifies opportunity, and industrial strategy provides continuity across both.

Table 1: The CBI Annual Reports and AGM Frames Timeline (The Period of 2016–2024)

Year	Risk/Resilience	Opportunity/Growth	Innovation/Competitiveness	Sustainability/Net-Zero	Industrial Strategy/Regional Growth
2016	High (Brexit uncertainty, operational & economic risk)	Low	Medium (response to Brexit, productivity concerns)	Low	Medium (national industrial framing)
2017	Medium (Brexit risk still present)	High (Unlocking Regional Growth, Prosperity Agenda)	Medium (policy-driven innovation)	Low	High (regional clusters, four main drivers)
2018	Medium (resilience emphasis)	High	Medium-High	Low-Medium	High
2019	Medium (governance continuity, member	Medium	Medium	Low	Medium

Year	Risk/Resilience	Opportunity/Growth	Innovation/Competitiveness	Sustainability/Net-Zero	Industrial Strategy/Regional Growth
relations)					
2020	High (COVID-19 operational/economic disruption)	Medium-High (jobs-led recovery, green recovery)	Medium	Medium (green recovery narratives)	Medium
2021	Medium (post-Brexit + pandemic)	High (Seize the Moment)	High (R&D, AI, data strategy)	High (internal and policy sustainability)	High (regional/industrial strategy)
2022	Medium-High (financial, operational)	Medium-High (investment, rebuilding capacity)	Medium-High (data system investment)	High (internal reporting, targets)	High
2023	High (financial instability, reputational repair, membership loss)	High (policy wins, membership renewal)	High	High	High (flywheel of prosperity, industrial engagement)
2024	Medium (post-crisis engagement, values-driven)	High (membership & policy influence)	High	High	High

Note.* High: dominant frame or central focus of the report/AGM; Medium: Notable frame with moderate emphasis; Low: Minor or background frame.

Source: Own elaboration- Data derived from CBI annual and AGM reports (The period of 2016–2024) through NVivo-14.

The following observations summarize the key trends illustrated in Table 1:

- Risk frames dominate in 2016, 2020, and 2023 during Brexit, pandemic, and governance/financial crises.
- Opportunity frames peak in years with strategic recovery or policy campaigns (2017, 2018, 2021, 2023–2024).
- Innovation increases over time, reflecting a growing focus on R&D, AI, and technology adoption.
- Sustainability becomes increasingly central from 2021 onward, serving both internal accountability and external lobbying purposes.
- Industrial strategy/regional growth frames remain consistently prominent from 2017, linking national policy to local and sectoral priorities.

Rhetorical and Persuasive Strategies: How CBI Communicates

In Table 2 summaries how the five dominant frames are reinforced through distinct rhetorical strategies across major political and economic junctures. The data show that crises trigger heightened reliance on pathos and urgency-driven metaphors (e.g. Brexit, COVID-19, governance failures), whereas recovery periods foreground logos through measurable policy gains and quantified economic projections. Across all years, ethos is sustained via institutional credibility—leadership endorsements, audit approvals, and policy access—illustrating how rhetoric works to legitimize the CBI's policy claims as technocratic, necessary, and publicly beneficial.

Table 2: Temporal Trajectory (The Period of 2016-2024)

Year	Dominant Focus	Key Frames	Context/ Trigger	Rhetorical Features
2016	Brexit uncertainty	Risk	EU referendum	Ethos via member breadth, logos via economic forecasts, pathos limited
2017	Unlocking opportunity	Opportunity, Innovation, Industrial strategy	Brexit negotiations	Metaphors: <i>“Unlocking Regional Growth,”</i> slogans; ethos & logos reinforced
2018	Resilience consolidation	Innovation, Industrial strategy	Political and policy stability	Problem–solution arc; measurable achievements highlighted
2019	Governance & continuity	Risk, Industrial strategy	Leadership transitions	AGM speeches emphasize membership, strategic engagement
2020	Crisis response	Risk, Opportunity	COVID-19 pandemic	Pathos (jobs-led recovery), crisis framing, rapid operational response
2021	Strategic policy entrepreneurship	Opportunity, Innovation, Sustainability	Pandemic recovery, Brexit aftermath	Logos and quantified metrics, <i>“Seize the Moment,”</i> narrative arcs
2022	Investment & preparation	Risk, Opportunity	Post-pandemic rebuilding	Institutional recovery, financial strategy, future engagement
2023	Crisis remediation	Risk, Industrial strategy	Membership loss, governance failure	Ethos (audits, governance reviews), logos (accounts, OBR estimates), pathos (acknowledgement of members)
2024	Re-engagement & values	Opportunity, Ethos	AGM approval, policy positioning	Metaphors: <i>“Flywheel of prosperity,”</i> values framing (Courage, Brilliance, Integrity)

Source: Own elaboration- Data derived from CBI annual and AGM reports (2016–2024) through NVivo 14.

As shown in Table 2, the CBI's frame priorities over the years illustrate how the organization responds to crises and strategic opportunities. The risk/resilience frame dominates during periods of acute crisis. In 2016, Brexit uncertainty drove the emphasis on operational, economic, and political risks. While risk remained relevant in 2017–2018, opportunity- and strategy-oriented frames became more prominent. The 2019 AGM focused on governance continuity and member relations, with risk at a moderate level. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic elevated operational and economic risks once again. During 2021–2022, post-Brexit and post-pandemic risks remained moderate to high, with financial and institutional stability taking precedence. In 2023, financial instability, reputational damage, and membership losses pushed the risk frame to its peak. By the 2024 AGM, risk had receded to a moderate level, as the focus shifted to outward-facing policy engagement and values-driven communication. Furthermore, the opportunity/growth frame reflects CBI's ability to transform crises into economic and strategic opportunities. In 2016, this frame was of low prominence due to the uncertainty surrounding Brexit. By 2017, “Unlocking Regional Growth” and the “Prosperity Agenda” emphasized economic opportunities and regional development. From 2018 to 2021, opportunity remained a dominant frame, particularly in 2021 when the Seize the Moment strategy reframed crises as openings for economic gains. In 2022–2024, opportunity continued to be central, underpinning membership renewal, policy wins, and strategic investments. Regarding the innovation/competitiveness frame strengthened over time. In 2016–2017, it was of moderate importance, largely in response to Brexit and competitive pressures. From 2018 to 2021, R&D, AI, and technology strategies became increasingly prominent. In 2022–2024, organizational modernization and policy-oriented technology investments reinforced innovation as a high-priority frame. For the sustainability/net-zero frame evolved from peripheral to central. It was low-to-moderate between 2016 and 2018, with limited focus on environmental sustainability.

In 2019–2020, green recovery and sustainable economy narratives gained moderate prominence. From 2021 onward, sustainability became a high-priority frame, with the CBI positioning net-zero goals centrally in both internal operations (emissions reporting and targets) and external lobbying efforts. Lastly, the industrial strategy/regional growth frame began at a moderate level in 2016, laying the foundations for national industrial and regional development strategies. It became prominent in 2017–2018 with the *Unlocking Regional Growth* report and the *Prosperity Agenda*. Between 2019 and 2024, the frame remained consistently high, emphasizing regional development, industrial clusters, skills, and infrastructure, and was reinforced in 2023–2024 through metaphors such as the “flywheel of prosperity.” In other words, these patterns reveal that risk frames dominate in crisis, opportunity frames peak in recovery, innovation and sustainability gradually intensify, and industrial strategy provides the ideological baseline for all periods.

On the other hand, the CBI’s rhetorical strategies strategically combine slogans, metaphors, and narrative structures to translate external shocks and internal priorities into actionable frames. Campaign slogans such as “Seize the Moment” (2021), “A Year for Bifocal Lenses” (2021), and “Flywheel of Prosperity” (2023–2024) simultaneously signal urgency, dual temporal focus, and cumulative growth. Institutional credibility is reinforced through leadership endorsements, Board approvals, government access, committee participation, and audit signoffs, while reports employ financial tables, GVA estimates, emissions data, economic projections, and membership figures within a consistent problem–evidence–solution structure. Emotional appeals (pathos)—ranging from humanitarian responses to speeches and forewords—foster loyalty and morale, complemented by recurrent campaign arcs and repeated slogans that reinforce framing. Contextual problem definitions span Brexit uncertainty, pandemic disruption, and financial, reputational, and membership challenges, attributing causes to both external shocks and policy gaps while positioning government as a co-actor. Remedies encompass policy interventions, member guidance, convening functions, and sustainability commitments, with AGM minutes evidencing engagement and leadership continuity. Leadership transitions and voting outcomes are rhetorically framed to preserve stability, and AGM addresses employ metaphors such as “unlocking regional growth,” “bounce back better” and “rebuilding trust” to frame responses.

Consequently, the CBI demonstrates adaptive yet stable framing, translating member priorities into policy influence through a strategic combination of ethos, logos, and pathos. Its communications operate as hybrid texts blending advocacy, accountability, and marketing, while sustainability serves a dual function—providing operational accountability through emissions reporting and acting as a lobbying instrument for net-zero policy. The organization’s framing is dynamic, intensifying risk narratives during crises (Brexit in 2016, COVID-19 in 2020, and governance and financial turmoil in 2023) and elevating opportunity narratives during recovery phases linked to policy entrepreneurship. Over time, innovation and sustainability steadily increase in rhetorical prominence, reflecting a growing emphasis on technology, R&D, and climate action, whereas industrial strategy remains a stable ideological foundation, consistently framing regional investment, skills development, and cluster-based growth as core components of the UK’s economic agenda.

Discussion of the Findings

Framing and rhetorical choices position the CBI not simply as a representative of business interests but as a discursive authority that shapes what counts as legitimate economic strategy in the UK. By presenting risks as systemic threats requiring coordinated action, and opportunities as policy-dependent gains, the organization constructs a sense of urgency that enhances its leverage over government decision-making. Through quantification (logos), institutional credibility (ethos), and moral appeals around jobs, resilience, and climate responsibility (pathos), the CBI works to naturalize particular market-oriented priorities—regional

industrial policy, innovation-led growth, and business-led sustainability—as both socially beneficial and politically necessary. This discursive construction process operates in parallel with the political sphere. In this way, institutional communication functions as an instrument of ideological legitimization, aligning corporate agendas with the public good and reinforcing the organization's influence during periods of political and economic instability. Consequently, economic policy options that fall outside this business-centred framework are rendered less visible or politically plausible, narrowing the perceived range of viable state intervention.

Just as MPs construct Brexit as “the will of the people,” the CBI constructs industrial strategy and sustainability as “the needs of the economy”, using rhetorical framing to transform corporate interests into public imperatives. Drawing on Meyenburg's (2022) finding that epistemic modality constructs political facts as institutional realities; this research demonstrates how business associations similarly construct economic realities through strategic framing, transforming private-market objectives into seemingly public policy necessities. Ultimately, this study contributes to the theoretical understanding of discursive power by demonstrating how business associations function as ‘epistemic gatekeepers,’ empirically revealing the specific rhetorical mechanisms through which the CBI narrows the UK's economic policy horizon to align with corporate interests.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

The longitudinal analysis of the CBI's annual reports and AGM minutes from the period of 2016 to 2024 reveals a highly adaptive, yet institutionally coherent, framing strategy that reflects the organization's dual imperatives: maintaining legitimacy among members and influencing government policy. Across this period, five core frames—risk/ resilience, opportunity/ growth, innovation/ competitiveness, sustainability/ net-zero, and industrial strategy/ regional growth—serve as both interpretive lenses and rhetorical instruments, mediating the CBI's response to shifting economic, political, and social contexts.

The temporal trajectory of these frames illustrates a clear pattern of contextual sensitivity. Risk framing dominates during periods of acute disruption—Brexit in 2016, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and financial and reputational instability in 2023—underscoring the CBI's need to legitimize its interventions and reassure members. Conversely, opportunity/growth frames surge during periods of strategic recovery or policy advocacy, notably in 2017–2018, 2021, and the post-crisis years of 2022–2024. This dynamic suggests that the CBI not only reacts to crises but actively leverages them to construct a forward-looking, policy-oriented agenda. Innovation/sustainability demonstrates a cumulative, long-term trajectory. Initially peripheral or moderate, these frames gain prominence over time, reflecting both the global policy environment (e.g., climate imperatives, technological competition) and internal organizational priorities. By 2021, sustainability evolves from an ancillary concern to a central strategic narrative, effectively coupling moral responsibility with economic opportunity. Innovation similarly transitions from a reactive response to Brexit-related productivity concerns to a proactive driver of policy legitimacy, encompassing R&D, AI strategy, and organizational modernization. Finally, the industrial strategy/regional growth frame exhibits remarkable stability, providing continuity in the CBI's discourse. Its sustained prominence indicates the organization's enduring commitment to place-based economic development, regional clusters, and national competitiveness. This frame functions as a persistent anchor that connects shorter-term tactical shifts in risk and opportunity to longer-term structural objectives, enhancing institutional memory and policy coherence.

Rhetorically, the CBI consistently deploys a triadic strategy of ethos, logos, and pathos to operationalize these frames. Credibility (ethos) is cultivated through repeated references to membership breadth, leadership

endorsements, board signoffs, and access to high-level government fora. Logical appeals (*logos*) are grounded in statistics, financial data, risk registers, and quantitative policy projections, lending technocratic authority to both advocacy and reporting. Affective appeals (*pathos*) are strategically deployed to humanize business action, particularly in narratives connecting corporate behaviour to societal benefit, community prosperity, or member loyalty. Metaphors such as 'Seize the Moment', 'Unlocking Regional Growth', and the 'flywheel of prosperity' crystallize abstract policy goals, translating strategic objectives into accessible and compelling imagery.

Despite this rhetorical sophistication, the analysis also reveals limitations and tensions. The persistence of risk frames during crises occasionally produces a defensive tone that may obscure transformative policy ambitions. While sustainability/innovation has risen in prominence, their operationalization varies across internal and external contexts, raising questions about consistency between policy advocacy and organizational practice. Dual audience strategies—members versus government/public—necessitate register-switching, which can introduce ambiguity regarding the organization's primary priorities. Thus, reliance on measurable outcomes strengthens *logos* appeals but risks overemphasis on quantifiable metrics at the expense of broader normative arguments.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings also clarify this study's contribution to framing and rhetoric literatures. The CBI case demonstrates that, over time, risk and opportunity frames are systematically articulated with institutional credibility (*ethos*), quantified evidence (*logos*), and moral appeals around jobs, resilience, and climate responsibility (*pathos*), indicating that frames should be analysed not only as issue definitions but as integrated persuasive packages. Moreover, the relative stability of the industrial strategy–regional growth frame across crises and recoveries helps conceptualise business associations as discursive authorities that stabilise certain economic priorities as common sense, thereby narrowing the perceived range of viable policy options. In doing so, the study brings together frame analysis (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974) and rhetorical theory (Aristotle, 2007; Charteris-Black, 2014; Franzosi & Vicari, 2018) in a longitudinal organisational setting, showing how institutional communications actively produce economic realities rather than merely reflecting them.

The findings suggest several actionable insights for the UK business and political environment:

- Crisis as an Opportunity: Policymakers and business leaders can learn from the CBI's approach of reframing crises as opportunities for structural reform. For example, integrating economic recovery, innovation incentives, and sustainability agendas during shocks can align private interests with public policy priorities.
- Strategic Framing for Policy Influence: Business associations that effectively combine quantified evidence, credibility markers, and affective appeals are better positioned to shape policy outcomes. This underscores the value of evidence-based advocacy in influencing government strategy on industrial policy, net-zero commitments, and regional development.
- Sustainability as Dual-Purpose Instrument: Sustainability framing can simultaneously enhance internal accountability and external lobbying legitimacy. UK firms and industry associations may leverage clear operational metrics and ambitious targets (as the CBI does with scope 1–3 emissions) to signal alignment with government priorities while fostering long-term competitiveness.

- Regional and Industrial Strategy Coherence: Consistent emphasis on industrial strategy and regional growth, even amid fluctuating crises, ensures policy continuity and strengthens advocacy credibility. Policymakers could benefit from sustained dialogue with associations that combine macroeconomic vision with actionable regional and sectoral interventions.
- Institutional Learning and Governance: The CBI's post-crisis rhetoric demonstrates that transparent acknowledgment of failure, followed by structured remedial action, restores trust and strengthens legitimacy. The UK businesses and associations can adopt similar governance and communication practices to maintain stakeholder confidence during turbulent periods.

As a conclusion, the CBI's communications from the period of 2016 to 2024 exemplify how major business associations employ framing and rhetoric to navigate volatility, consolidate legitimacy, and project influence over an extended temporal horizon. For scholars, policymakers, and business practitioners, this analysis highlights the importance of adaptive, evidence-based, and rhetorically sophisticated strategies that integrate economic, technological, and sustainability objectives. By observing these dynamics, the UK business ecosystem can better align corporate advocacy with broader national policy goals, strengthen public-private partnerships, and foster resilient, innovation-driven economic growth. This research demonstrates that business discourse does not merely reflect economic realities but produces them in ways that align with corporate interests.

Limitations and Future Research

This study focuses on publicly accessible the CBI reports and annual meeting notes, meaning that informal lobbying, internal negotiations, and behind-the-scenes agenda setting remain outside the scope of analysis. As the findings reflect how the organisation seeks to present itself, future work should triangulate these insights with interviews, member surveys, or internal policy documents to capture potential divergences between discourse and practice. Moreover, the single-case design limits broader generalisability. Comparative research across other the UK associations (e.g., Make UK, IoD) or international business organisations would clarify whether similar framing dynamics are shaped by sectoral interests, national institutional contexts, or global pressures. Finally, although this study identifies the evolution of discursive strategies, their policy influence is not empirically tested. Linking rhetorical shifts to measurable policy outcomes represents a promising avenue for assessing how business discourse translates into regulatory or economic change. It should be taken into account that corporate documents are, by their very nature, strategic and legitimizing.

Ethics Statement

In this study, all the rules specified to be followed within the scope of “Higher Education Institutions Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive” were complied with. None of the actions specified under the title of “Actions Contrary to Scientific Research and Publication Ethics”, which is the second part of the directive, were committed. Also in this study, all the reports and annual meeting reports derived from official webpage of CBI and those reports are open for public access.

Author Contributions (Credit)

Author 1: initiated the research idea, developed, organized, analysed and interpreted the data and wrote the manuscript. Author 2; supervised the research, structured the paper and edited the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The study has no financial or personal connections with any individual or institution. There are no conflicts of interest in this study.

Data Availability

Data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Extended Summary

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the evolution of business discourse in the United Kingdom, focusing on the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) through its annual reports and general meeting records from 2016 to 2024. The nine-year period was selected to capture a sequence of major political and economic disruptions—including Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and subsequent energy and governance crises—that have significantly influenced corporate priorities and institutional narratives. This timeframe also aligns with data availability, as comprehensive and comparable documentation from the CBI is only accessible for these years. By investigating this period, the study aims to understand how a leading business organization constructs, communicates, and legitimizes its narratives in response to shifting socio-political and economic contexts, while also considering the broader implications for policymaking and stakeholder engagement.

The research employs a combined framing and rhetorical analysis approach, which allows for an integrated examination of both thematic content and communicative strategies in the CBI texts. The dataset consists of all publicly available annual reports and meeting notes published during this period, encompassing quantitative indicators – such as survey results and economic statistics – and qualitative narrative sections – such as forewords, committee discussions, and strategic framing.. Collectively, these materials provide a comprehensive view of the organization’s stated priorities, concerns, and messaging strategies. Drawing on the work of Franzosi and Vicari (2018), the study treats rhetoric as an overarching lens through which frame analysis can be interpreted, emphasizing how language constructs meaning and conveys organizational intent.

Framing analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes, interpretive frameworks, and problem definitions across the documents (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974). Each text was systematically coded to assess the prevalence and evolution of five key frames: Risk/resilience, opportunity/growth, innovation/competitiveness, sustainability/net-zero, and industrial strategy/regional growth. Open coding enabled emergent themes to surface inductively, while axial coding grouped these themes into broader analytical categories. This methodological approach facilitated the identification of temporal trends, revealing how the prominence of particular frames shifted over time in response to major events such as Brexit (2016), the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021), and subsequent global energy market disruptions and governance pressures (Dhingra et al., 2016; OECD, 2021). The analysis also considered how interconnections between frames emerged, showing that issues such as sustainability, innovation, and regional development were often

presented as mutually reinforcing components of a broader economic vision. Also, rhetorical analysis was applied to explore how the CBI linguistically constructs and legitimizes these frames. This involved examining metaphors, repetition, narrative structures, and appeals to logic, credibility, or emotion, following established approaches in discourse and organizational studies (Aristotle, trans. 2007; Charteris-Black, 2014; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Leadership metaphors, such as the “flywheel of prosperity,” illustrate how policy successes are linked to cumulative and self-reinforcing growth. Place-based policy prescriptions complement UK-wide lobbying strategies, reflecting a dual focus on local impact and national economic outcomes. By combining framing and rhetorical analyses, the study highlights how the CBI not only selects and prioritizes particular policy areas but also actively seeks to persuade members, policymakers, and wider stakeholders of their significance and legitimacy. Furthermore, the research underscores the dynamic nature of institutional communication, revealing how discourse adapts to crises while maintaining a coherent narrative identity across time. The coding, analysis, and interpretation processes were iterative, involving multiple readings of each document to ensure consistency and reliability. Data were organized chronologically to trace shifts in framing and rhetorical emphasis over time. Key patterns and variations were visualized in comparative matrices and summary tables, demonstrating how dominant frames were sustained, recalibrated, or replaced across different phases of crisis and recovery. This approach captures both continuity and adaptation in institutional communication strategies, illustrating how the organization responds to complex socio-political and economic challenges while seeking to maintain authority and legitimacy.

Predominantly, this integrated methodological framework offers a nuanced understanding of the strategic communication practices of a major business organization over an extended period. The findings reveal that institutional communications function not merely as the dissemination of information but as discursive interventions that shape public understanding and normalize specific economic priorities as socially and politically legitimate. By examining both the content and rhetorical construction of the CBI texts, the study contributes to literature on business discourse, organizational communication, and policy framing, demonstrating how corporate institutions navigate uncertainty, influence policy debates, and legitimize their agendas in the public sphere.

Genişletilmiş Özeti

Bu çalışma, Birleşik Krallık'ta iş dünyası söyleminin evrimini incelemek amacıyla nitel bir araştırma tasarımlı benimsemektedir ve odağını 2016–2024 yılları arasındaki Britanya Sanayi Konfederasyonu (CBI) yıllık raporları ve genel kurul kayıtları üzerine koymaktadır. Seçilen dokuz yıllık dönem, Brexit, COVID-19 pandemisi ve sonrasında enerji ve yönetim krizleri gibi önemli siyasi ve ekonomik kesintileri kapsamaktadır; bu olaylar kurumsal öncelikleri ve kurumsal anıtları önemli ölçüde etkilemiştir. Bu zaman dilimi aynı zamanda veri erişilebilirliği ile de uyumludur, çünkü CBI'ye ait kapsamlı ve karşılaştırılabilir belgeler yalnızca bu yıllar için mevcuttur. Bu dönemin incelenmesi, onde gelen bir iş örgütünün, değişen sosyo-politik ve ekonomik bağrlamlara yanıt olarak anıtlarını nasıl oluşturduğunu, ürettiğini ve meşrulaştırdığını anlamayı amaçlamaktadır.

Araştırma, çerçevelene ve retorik analizi yöntemlerini bir arada kullanmaktadır; bu yaklaşım, hem tematik içeriği hem de CBI metinlerindeki iletişimsel stratejileri bütüncül olarak incelemeye imkân tanımaktadır. Veri seti, çalışma döneminde yayımlanan tüm kamuya açık yıllık raporlar ve genel kurul tutanaklarını kapsamaktadır; bu belgeler hem anket sonuçları ve ekonomik istatistikler gibi nicel göstergeleri hem de önsözler, komite tartışmaları ve stratejik çerçevelene gibi nitel anlatı bölümlerini içermektedir. Bu materyaller, örgütün belirttiği öncelikleri, kaygıları ve mesajlaşma stratejilerini kapsamlı biçimde ortaya koymaktadır. Franzosi ve Vicari

(2018) çalışmasına dayanarak, araştırma retoriği, çerçeveleme analizini yorumlamak için genel bir mercek olarak ele almakta ve dilin anlamı nasıl inşa ettiğini ve örgütsel niyeti nasıl iletliğini vurgulamaktadır.

Çerçeveleme analizi, belgelerdeki tekrar eden temaları, yorumlayıcı çerçeveleri ve sorun tanımlarını belirlemek için gerçekleştirmiştir (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974). Her bir belge sistematik olarak kodlanmış ve beş temel çerçevenin yaygınlığı ile evrimi değerlendirilmiştir: Risk/D=dayanıklılık, fırsat/büyüme, yenilik/rekabetçilik, sürdürülebilirlik/net-sıfır ve sanayi stratejisi/bölgesel büyümeye. Açık kodlama, ortaya çıkan temaların indüktif olarak belirlenmesine olanak tanırken, eksen kodlama bu temaları daha geniş analitik kategoriler altında toplamak için kullanılmıştır. Bu yaklaşım, belirli çerçevelerin öneminin zaman içinde nasıl değiştiğini ve Brexit (2016), COVID-19 pandemisi (2020–2021) ve sonrasında küresel enerji piyasası kesintileri ile yönetişim baskalarına yanıt olarak nasıl evrildiğini ortaya koymuştur (Dhingra vd., 2016; OECD, 2021). Analiz ayrıca çerçeveler arasındaki etkileşimleri de göz önünde bulundurmuş ve sürdürülebilirlik, yenilik ve bölgesel kalkınma gibi konuların genellikle daha geniş bir ekonomik vizyonun birbirini güçlendiren bileşenleri olarak sunulduğunu göstermiştir. Ayrıca retorik analizi, CBI'nin bu çerçeveleri dil aracılığıyla nasıl inşa ettiğini ve meşrulaştırdığını incelemek için uygulanmıştır. Analiz, metaforlar, tekrar, anlatı yapıları ve mantık, güvenilirlik veya duyguya dayalı ikna yöntemlerini içermektedir (Aristoteles, çev. 2007; Charteris-Black, 2014; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). "Refahın çarkı" metaforu, politika başarılarının kümülatif ve kendini güçlendiren büyümeye ile nasıl ilişkilendirildiğini göstermektedir. Yerel odaklı politika önerileri, Birleşik Krallık genelindeki lobcılık stratejilerini tamamlamakta ve hem yerel etkiyi hem de ulusal ekonomik sonuçları hedefleyen çift yönlü bir yaklaşımı yansımaktadır. Çerçeveleme ve retorik analizinin birleştirilmesi, CBI'nin yalnızca belirli politika alanlarını seçip önceliklendirmekle kalmayıp, aynı zamanda üyeleri, politika yapıcıları ve daha geniş paydaşları bu önceliklerin önemi ve meşruiyeti konusunda ikna etmeye çalıştığını ortaya koymaktadır. Araştırma ayrıca, kurumsal iletişim dinamik doğasını vurgulamakta ve krizlere yanıt verirken tutarlı bir anlatı kimliğinin nasıl korunduğunu göstermektedir. Kodlama, analiz ve yorumlama süreçleri iteratif olarak yürütülmüş; her belge birden fazla kez okunarak tutarlılık ve güvenilirlik sağlanmıştır. Veriler kronolojik olarak düzenlenmiş ve çerçeveleme ile retorik vurgulardaki değişimler zaman içinde izlenmiştir. Karşılaştırmalı matrisler ve özet tablolar kullanılarak, hâkim çerçevelerin farklı kriz ve toparlanma evrelerinde nasıl korunduğu, yeniden kalibre edildiği veya değiştirildiği görselleştirilmiştir. Bu yaklaşım, kurumsal iletişim stratejilerindeki hem sürekliliği hem de adaptasyonu ortaya koymakta ve örgütün karmaşık sosyo-politik ve ekonomik koşullara yanıt verirken otorite ve meşruiyetini nasıl sürdürdüğünü göstermektedir.

Ağırlıklı olarak, bu bütünlük metodolojik çerçeveye, büyük bir iş örgütünün stratejik iletişim uygulamalarını uzun bir dönem boyunca kapsamlı bir şekilde anlamaya olanak tanımaktadır. Bulgular, kurumsal iletişimın yalnızca bilgi aktarımı değil, aynı zamanda söylemsel müdahaleler olarak işlev gördüğünü ve belirli ekonomik önceliklerin sosyal ve politik olarak meşru hale getirilmesini sağladığını göstermektedir. CBI metinlerinin içerik ve retorik yapısının birlikte incelenmesi, iş dünyası söylemi, örgütsel iletişim ve politika çerçeveleme literatürüne katkı sağlamaktadır. Çalışma ayrıca, kurumsal anlatılar, retorik stratejiler ve sosyo-politik bağamlar arasındaki etkileşimi incelemenin önemini vurgulamakta ve hem akademisyenler hem de politika yapıcılar ve iş liderleri için stratejik iletişim süreçlerinin anlaşılmasına dair değerli bilgiler sunmaktadır.