

Critical Discourse Analysis of Corporate Environmental Reports regarding Greenwashing and the Language of Sustainability

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Abstract: Over the past years, companies have started to focus more on sustainability communication as a tool of expressing the environmental responsibility and improving the trust of the stakeholders. There is a big disparity between the corporate sustainability assertion and real environmental practice, especially through greenwashing. This paper will examine the linguistic practices used in corporate environmental reports in order to find out how sustainability is discursively produced. Based on the qualitative approach based on critical discourse analysis (especially the three-dimensional model by Fairclough), the study will consider a sample of 5-10 corporate sustainability reports of large industries. The analysis reveals some common characteristics like the use of ambiguous lexical decisions, modality and hedging, passive constructions, and positive framing, all of which lead to ambiguity and selective representation. The results indicate that corporate discourse is often more focused on image building as opposed to transparency. The paper ends with the necessity of more transparent, responsible practices of sustainability communication to decrease the difference between the discourse and the real environmental performance.

Key Words: greenwashing, critical discourse analysis, sustainability discourse, corporate communication, environmental reporting, discourse analysis.

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, the concept of sustainability has been at the center of corporate communication, and this is due to the growing sensitivity in the environment, regulatory factors, and expectations of stakeholders. Organizations in all types of industries have started releasing environmental and sustainability reports so as to show their intentions to be environmentally responsible and ethically conduct business. This upsurge in sustainability debate may be explained by the broader change in the global economy whereby drivers of transparency and accountability are currently intertwined with corporate image and success in the long term. With companies trying to adapt to the systems of the world, like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), sustainability reporting has turned into a strategic instrument of forming the perception of the population and justifying corporate practices (Mohammad et al., 2025).

However, as the sustainability communication has been intensified, so, too has been the panic over the truthfulness of corporate assertions on environmental issues. Greenwashing, or rather the deception of the stakeholders of the company in terms of the company environmental performance, has become a significant issue in the corporate discourse (Janik & Ryszko, 2025). Studies have shown that organizations exaggerate or do not report bad environmental performances, but report good ones and overvalue negative impacts, thus giving a false impression of their sustainability performance (Leonhardt & Guertler, 2025). This is not only in the context of official reports but also on the digital platform and marketing campaigns,

where sustainability stories are pre-planned to impact consumer confidence and brand image (Oppong-Tawiah & Webster, 2023; Shaikh & Khanda, 2023).

The language is an extremely significant aspect of this process since it is the key by which the corporations create and define their environmental identity. Strategic techniques to present an image of sustainability include persuasive language, including vague language, positive framing, and hedging, which enable organizations to present an impression of sustainability without necessarily making any specific promises (Almeflh & Almofleh, 2025; Kochkina et al., 2024). These forms of language use help create what has been termed a "discourse-practice gap" whereby corporate talk is vastly inconsistent with actual performance in the environment (dos Santos et al., 2025). It, therefore, follows that the analysis of the language of sustainability reporting is crucial in helping to discover the invisible processes in which greenwashing works.

Regardless of the increasing amount of literature on the topics of sustainability reporting and greenwashing, it is possible to note that there has been a significant gap in the literature that addresses the linguistic and discursive aspects of corporate communication on the environmental issue (Janik & Ryszko, 2025). Although content analysis, machine learning, and systematic reviews have been used in the past to determine the patterns of greenwashing (dos Santos et al., 2025; Moodaley & Telukdarie, 2023), more studies have not taken the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach to understand the ways in which language constructions and reproduction of those practices occur. CDA is a very robust model to examine the connection between language, power, and ideology, and thus it is especially effective in examining the corporate sustainability discourse.

To fill this gap, therefore, the current study will examine the discursive strategies used in the corporate environmental reports through a critical discourse analysis framework. In particular, it aims to define the linguistic elements that define sustainability discourses and how help to build environmental responsibility.

The research questions used in the study will be the following:

1. Which words and phrases do corporations use linguistically to describe sustainability in their environmental reports?
2. What are the discursive characteristics that suggest that there is greenwashing in corporate communication?

The answers to these questions make this research an important contribution to the better interpretation of the role of language in shaping the corporate environmental discourse and the necessity to be more transparent and accountable in sustainability reporting.

The paper is structured into six primary parts, namely, Section 1 provides a background, research problem, objectives and questions, Section 2 provides discussion of the literature on the topic of greenwashing, sustainability discourse and Critical Discourse Analysis, Section 3 explains approach of qualitative CDA, data selection and analytical framework, Section 4 provides discourse analysis of corporate environmental reports and Section 5 provides interpretation of findings in terms of the broader theoretical and Section 6 summarizes key insights, highlights contributions, and suggests directions for future research.

Literature Review

Greenwashing has become a critical issue in the field of corporate communication and especially in sustainability reporting, where companies claim responsibility to the environment but give only a false impression of being so by only selective disclosure, exaggeration, and vague terminology (Janik & Ryszko, 2025). Greenwashing has over the years transformed from mere advertisement techniques to more advanced techniques incorporated in the official reports and online platforms (Oppong-Tawiah & Webster, 2023). Recent research findings pinpoint various typologies, like symbolic actions that give precedence to image other than the real environmental performance and substantive actions that are not transparent (Janik & Ryszko, 2025). Corporations in other sectors, like the mining and energy industries, tend to emphasize good environmental activities as downplay or omit other behaviors that cause environmental degradation, thus creating an incomplete sustainability story (Leonhardt & Guertler, 2025). Furthermore, the studies of corporate social media communication demonstrate that the sustainability discourse may serve as persuasive and, at the same time, false messages, similar to strategically designed fake news (Oppong-Tawiah & Webster, 2023).

Empirical evidence also indicates that greenwashing practices are worldwide and becoming more and more intricate. Corporate-situation based research across countries has revealed that there has been a centuries old disjuncture between the rhetoric and actual corporate practice of environmental concerns and the importance of critical analytical strategies to uncover these disjunctures (dos Santos et al., 2025). Moreover, systematic reviews also report that more advanced forms of sustainability communication were also caused by technological advances, including artificial intelligence, and that greenwashing became more challenging to detect (Moodaley & Telukdarie, 2023). The results highlight the fact that greenwashing is not just prevalent but also changing and in need of more linguistic and discursive analysis.

Sustainability reporting language is core in the establishment of perception of the stakeholders and corporate identity. The words which are positively loaded such as sustainable, eco-friendly and green that have positive connotations but cannot be easily defined or measured are popular among organizations (Kochkina et al., 2024). By using these lexical strategies companies can also develop the image of being environmentally responsible and, simultaneously, can make promises and be flexible about them. Vagueness, modality and positive framing are also other key features of language that have been identified. The modal verbs like “aim”, “strive” and “commit” enable the organizations to introduce intentions but not results hence causing ambiguity (Almeflh & Almofleh, 2025). In the same way, positive and propagandistic language helps in creating a positive corporate story, which tends to hide environmental issues and constraints (Kochkina et al., 2024).

Ecolinguistic and discourse-based analyses also highlight the importance of language in forming the environmental discourses and solidifying the ideological viewpoints. Corporate discourse tends to incorporate mainstream sustainability discourses and dismiss other perspectives in the context of global efforts like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Agbeleoba et al., 2025). Linguistically, in the digital realm, like in Green IT communication, language is strategically employed in order to align technological innovation with environmental responsibility and to increase corporate legitimacy (Raza et al., 2025). Comparative analysis also reveals that sustainability discourse is contextually varied in terms of cultural and institutional context and has impacts on the way environmental problems are framed and understood (Zhang & Zhang, 2024). On the same note, advertising discourse applies the use of the persuasive linguistic tactics to market environmentally friendly products but at the same time may be used to conceal the unsustainability of certain practices (Shaikh & Khanda, 2023). Altogether, these

investigations bring to light the strength of the language in the creation and propagation of sustainability discourses.

A good model of understanding the correlation between language, power and ideology in corporate sustainability communication is the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Being based on the works of such scholars as Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak, CDA stresses the fact that language is not neutral but plays an active role in forming social structures and power relations. CDA has also been applied in environmental communication to examine how companies contemplate their discourse on global sustainability agendas to increase their legitimacy and authority (Mohammad et al., 2025). It also shows the way of the persuasive linguistic strategies that impact stakeholder perceptions and strengthen corporate dominance (Almeflh & Almofleh, 2025). Using CDA and ecolinguistic methodology, scholars can unravel the more profound ideological and discursive processes underpinning sustainability reporting, which, in turn, will offer a more in-depth insight into how greenwashing has been produced and maintained with the help of language.

Research Gap

Although much has been done on greenwashing and sustainability reporting, there is a great gap on how Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used on corporate environmental reporting. The majority of the current research is based on quantitative methods like content analysis and machine learning and provides little information about the linguistic and discursive processes of greenwashing. Despite the recognized importance of language in the process of forming sustainability discourses, not many studies explore the idea of how the given linguistic strategies formulate the false environmental statements in a systematic way. This paper fills this gap by using CDA to corporate reports and gains a better insight into how language creates sustainability discourse and leads to greenwashing practices.

Methodology

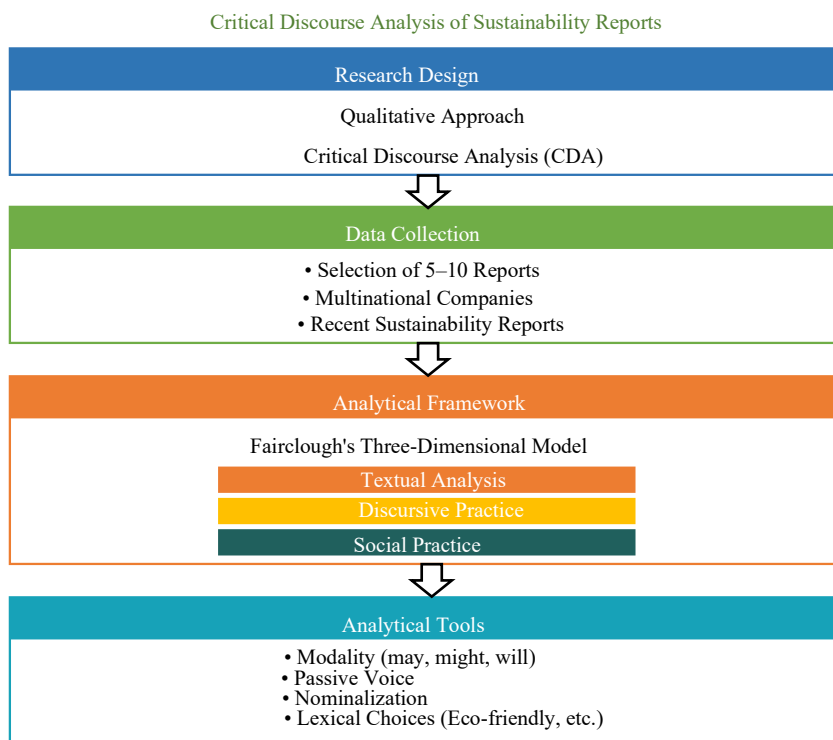


Figure 1: Methodological Framework for Critical Discourse Analysis of Corporate Sustainability Reports

Figure 1 illustrates the research methodology that was adopted by the current research; that is, it has a systematic flow from research design to results of research analysis. The research will begin with qualitative research design, which is founded on the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and then the environmental and sustainability reports of corporations will be chosen based on a prescribed list of criteria, e.g., the relevance to the industry, global representation, and the most recent one. The model goes on to apply the three-dimensional model of Fairclough (textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice) in the discussion of the construction and meanings of sustainability discourse. Lastly, the figure brings to the fore the main language tools like modality, passive voice, nominalization, and choice of words to determine the pattern of greenwashing and how corporations strategically frame the issue of environmental responsibility.

Research Design

The research paper has taken a qualitative research approach, which is based on a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), to study how environmental reports of corporations establish sustainability discourses and potentially engage in greenwashing practices. The qualitative method is suitable since the study is aimed at understanding language use, the process of meaning-making, and the positioning of ideology in texts instead of quantifying a variety of numerical variables. As a methodological and theoretical approach, CDA allows exploring in detail the role of linguistic decisions that recreate and reproduce power relations, corporate ideologies, and institutional interests inherent in the discourse of sustainability. The textual meaning component of the research is geared to discovering the latent meanings, persuasive methods, and rhetoric elements that cannot be easily discerned by the text surface.

Data Collection

This research will consist of data in the form of corporate environmental and sustainability reports of some of the multinational corporations of choice. The reason behind the selection of these reports is that official reports that are publicly available in which the organizations report on their environmental performance, sustainability goals, and corporate social responsibility initiatives. The following are selection criteria of the corpus:

1. Industry relevance, focusing on such industries that impact the environment most of all, such as energy, mining, manufacturing, and technology;
2. Global representation, making sure of the inclusion of the companies that operate in a variety of geographical and regulatory settings.
3. Recency in which preference is given to those reports that are not older than 3-5 years as a sign of the current sustainability communication practices.

A rather small sample size of about 5-10 reports has been believed to be sufficient, as one can carry out an in-depth analysis of the text and do it with sufficient detail. The selected reports are assumed to be a comparative corpus to unveil the general discursive patterns and variations in the sustainability framing.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework of the Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis, developed by Norman Fairclough, is used as a framework to discuss the discourse on different levels. The initial dimension is a textual analysis, which deals with the linguistic characteristics of the sustainability reports, such as vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, and rhetorical devices. This level involves the investigation of the meaning construction in relation to the usage of some words. Discursive practice is the second dimension

which examines the processes of production, distribution and consumption of text, particularly in production of corporate reports at the institutional level and how the respective reports are read by various stakeholders such as investors, regulators and the general population. The third dimension, social practice, contextualizes the discourse by using a wider framework of the socio-economic and ideological systems and examines the way the corporate sustainability discourse is realized and promotes ideologies of capitalist and environmental ideologies. The combination of all these three dimensions enables the development of a deep concept of how language works with regard to environmental reporting of corporations.

Analytical Tools

An analysis is carried out with the help of different linguistic and discursive instruments which logically are applied to the analysis of the chosen sustainability reports. Modality, passive voice, nominalization and word choice are considered the main characteristics of the language. The modal auxiliaries like “may”, “might” and “will” which are used to study modality articulate the different levels of certainty, obligatory and commitment and are more apt to represent ambiguity in corporate pledges. Passive constructions are reviewed in an attempt to find out how the responsibility is obscured or depersonalized, like in the text when it is said that the emission was cut and the one who made the action has not been mentioned. Nominalization is explored as a tactic that objectifies processes, making them abstract nouns and, as a result, less clear and less agentic in environmental practice. In addition, lexical choices (“eco-friendly, sustainable, and green”) are explored in order to understand how the positively loaded words are used to create positive corporate images. All these linguistic devices help to identify the tendencies of greenwashing and the way sustainability discourse is designed to have an effect on the perceptions and authorize corporate beliefs that green.

Analysis and Findings

In this section, critical discourse analysis (CDA) of some of the selected corporate environmental reports is given, which are founded on the use of lingo strategies in developing a narrative about sustainability and, in some respects, conceal the fact of environmental performance. The results indicate that the same trends occur throughout the data, and language is viewed as a strategic instrument of corporate image management.

Lexical Choices and Buzzwords

The popularity of certain buzzwords related to sustainability, such as "sustainable," "eco-friendly," "green," "responsible," and "environmentally conscious," are also among the most evident ones that are exposed during the analysis. These are the words that are applied in the corporate reports, and in most instances, can be used as a considerable descriptive word that explains the activities of the companies. However, on closer examination of these lexical possibilities, realize that hardly defined and lack pointing on the ground. The statements, such as "We are committed to sustainable development" or "Our business is becoming more and more environmentally friendly," lack any particular guidelines or norms based on which the stakeholders can judge the validity of such statements.

This kind of strategic ambiguity enables the companies to produce the positive image of the environment without being obliged to make certain promises. The lack of the quantifiable definitions adds the element of flexibility of interpretation at which the companies do not fare well, as appear to be environmentally responsible. In the majority of instances, such buzzwords are a marketing gimmick, rather

than an accurate image of sustainability. Consequently, lexical choices are crucial to the creation of perception and, on the other hand, restrict the transparency.

Use of Modality and Hedging

The second glaring strategy in linguistics that can be seen in the reports is that of modality and hedging. The modal verbs are commonly used in defining corporate environmental goals, which include "aiming," "seeking," "striving," "planning," and "committing." The following are some of the typical statements in the dataset: "We strive to meet an aim of reducing the emissions by increasing operational efficiency" or "The company strives to make the minimum possible impact on the environment."

Although these phrases bring a feeling of conscience and purposefulness, bring an element of uncertainty, as well. Modality will allow the corporations to make future-oriented commitments without having to be committed to some outcomes. This introduces some type of strategic ambiguity whereby the companies are perceived to be on the offensive and yet not to be at fault for the actual performance. This lack of transparency is further complemented by hedging whereby claims are watered down and a sense of responsibility to fulfill the objectives set is reduced.

In terms of discourse, modality is a safeguarding mechanism that allows corporations to deal with risk. By making sustainability efforts a wish and not an obligation, organizations will be able to maintain a good image even when unable to achieve the targets. The conflict between corporate language and responsibility is emphasized by using this linguistic approach that demonstrates that the language can be used to restore the equilibrium between expectation and uncertainty.

Passive Constructions

The analysis also indicates that the passive forms of constructions are mostly used in the corporate environmental reporting. Passive voice is fairly widespread in the following statements: "Emissions were reduced by 15%" or "Sustainability goals were achieved in the reporting period." These statements, though yielding good results, have the propensity to omit the agent of the act.

The impact of this exclusion on accountability can be significant. Passive constructions avoid responsibility by removing the subject of the sentence and creating an illusion of the sentence not being related to the corporation and its deeds. This rhetorical device shifts the focus from agency to outcome, emphasizing achievements with minimal concern for how were realized.

Other cases of selective use of the passive voice also aim to emphasize positive changes rather than address negative impacts. An example of this is that waste generation was reduced without having to specify what or who. This cherry-picking of passive constructions will contribute to a controlled discussion in which the corporation appears effective and caring, while the real problems of environmental management remain hidden.

Positive Framing and Image Construction

Incorporate environmental reports; always positively incorporate them to develop a positive organizational image. It is connected with the emphasis on success, innovation, and advances, and with underlining or disregarding setbacks, failures, or negative impacts. Such statements can be as follows: "We have travelled far in making sure that we are reducing our carbon footprints" or "that our sustainability initiatives are continuing to achieve good performances".

The evaluative language employed in the positive framing processes is more likely to support it, using words such as "significant," "successful," "leading," and "innovative." The result of these attributes is a story of a long-term development and sustainability leadership. However, this emphasis on success can create a distorted picture of corporations' environmental performance.

Particularly, negative information is not mentioned. Very little reporting provides detailed descriptions of failures, regulations, or target failures related to the environmental aspect. Instead, these issues are either not discussed or discussed in a downplayed manner. Such biased representation can be a sign of a broader impression management strategy, where the primary concern is to enhance corporate image rather than to provide a balanced picture of the environmental impact.

Intertextuality and Authority

Another obtrusive feature apparent in the analysis is intertextuality. There are structures, policies, and programs worldwide, such as sustainability goals, environmental policies, and international policies, among others, which are common references in corporate reports. Such sources are used to align corporate discourse with generally accepted norms, thereby boosting its credibility and legitimacy.

As an illustration of this, consider organizations that have probably prided themselves on aligning with global sustainability models or on having a role to play in the overall environmental agenda. Even though these sources create the impression of responsible actions and participation in the international arena, do not always include concrete evidence of implementation. In the majority of situations, there is no clarity or symbolism regarding how corporate activities relate to these structures.

It is an act of intertextuality, a sort of usurped power. Corporations can make themselves more credible by aligning themselves with established institutions and structures even without having to exhibit substantive compliance. The role of discourse in the legitimacy-building process is accentuated in this method, as references to external authorities serve as an alternative to more specific evidence.

Evidence of Greenwashing

The overall impact of the above-mentioned strategies in the languages gives a clear indication of greenwashing in corporate environmental reporting. The gap between what is said in the corporation's discourses and the organization's actual environmental performance may be taken as a definition of greenwashing. This is the waywardness that is exhibited in several ways.

Firstly, the stylistic aspects of language, in the form of indeterminate lexical choices and modality, evoke the illusion of a promise without responsibility that can be measured. Secondly, passive constructions are ambiguous regarding responsibility, and it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of the corporation's actions. Third, positive framing focuses on successes and conceals problems, thereby resulting in a biased representation of reality. Finally, intertextual referencing renders it more credible, without necessarily adhering substantively to the environmental guidelines.

These findings show that greenwashing is not merely a matter of false statements but a complex discursive practice inherent in corporate communication. The most important tool in this process is language, which enables organizations to craft persuasive narratives that do not necessarily describe their impacts on the environment.

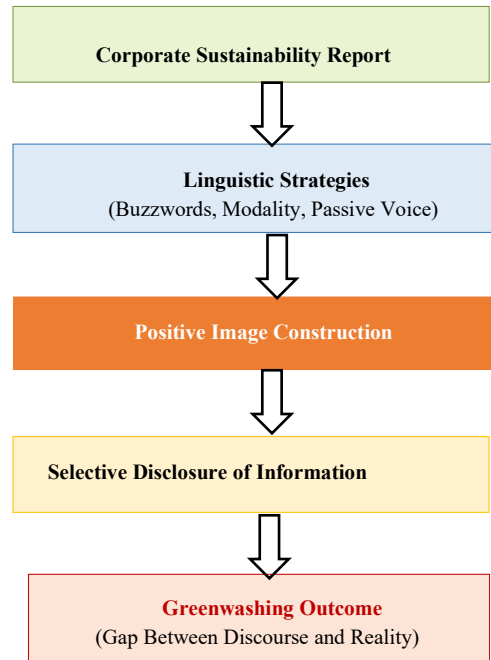


Figure 2: Discursive Mechanism of Greenwashing in Corporate Reports

Figure 2 visually presents the discursive mechanism that constructs greenwashing in corporate environmental reports. It describes a step-by-step procedure starting with creating sustainability reports, then employing specific linguistic tools such as buzzwords, modality, and the passive voice, which help create a positive image and selectively disclose information. The result is a perceived responsibility towards the environment, which may not reflect the actual practices that lead to greenwashing. In this process, Figure 2 emphasizes the role of language as the powerful tool of creating corporate discourses and the disconnection between language and reality.

Discussion

The findings of this paper directly answer the research questions by demonstrating how firms frame sustainability language and how certain discursive features can be used to signal greenwashing. The discussion shows that sustainability is not presented as a definite, quantifiable concept, but rather as an elastic, strategically positioned concept influenced by language. Lexical and modality choices such as "sustainable" or "eco-friendly," and "aim" and "strive," can enable corporations to develop a sense of environmental responsibility that is more focused on intent than on responsibility. Passive constructions and positive framing are yet another aid to this narrative, highlighting success and minimizing agency and negative revelations. These trends affirm that the corporate sustainability discourse is a form of strategic communication, in which language is used to develop a desirable environmental identity. In this respect, discourse is not only an expression of corporate practices but also a source of the perception of those practices, thereby influencing stakeholders' perceptions and their trust.

The results also suggest the importance of language as a means to conceal unsustainable practices and maintain a positive corporate image, which aligns with the previous body of literature on greenwashing and sustainability communication. The language employed, which is unclear, selective, and even allusive to world systems, implies that corporations are often guided by symbolic congruence rather than real action on the environmental front. This strengthens the position that greenwashing is firmly entrenched in discursive activities as opposed to the use of blatantly false statements. These results have generalizations.

Such a discourse can mislead stakeholders and give them a perception of sustainability, which influences the decision to purchase and brand loyalty, as perceived by consumers.

Regarding policy, the findings point to the need for more stringent policies and a cohesive reporting system to facilitate transparency and accountability in corporate communications. Finally, regarding ethical communication, the paper identifies organizations' responsibility to go beyond rhetorical strategies and adopt more truthful, measurable, and verifiable reporting practices. Overall, this discussion is a call for criticality in corporate discourse, aimed at bridging the gap between sustainability discourse and reality regarding environmental performance.

Conclusion

In this paper, a critical discourse analysis framework for sustainability in corporate environmental reporting language is discussed. The findings reveal that the strategic use of language, i.e., vague words and modality, and passive and positive framing characterizes the corporate sustainability communication. All these linguistic characteristics contribute to the creation of a positive corporate image while, at the same time, curtail transparency and accountability. The analysis supports the presence of greenwashing strategies, particularly ambiguity, selective disclosure, and the obscuring of agency. As a result, there is a lack of connection between the sustainability discourse and the company's environmental practices. This contribution to critical discourse analysis and the study of environmental communication can be seen as an in-depth analysis of how language is used as a mode of corporate image management. It highlights the importance of examining discourse as a means of expressing organizations' workings and as a process that shapes stakeholders' impressions and helps champion organizational ideologies. The study, however, also has its share of weaknesses, such as a relatively small sample area and subjectivity in the qualitative analysis of discourse. These restrictions imply that additional studies should be done to reinforce and extend the results. A quantitative or corpus-based method for analyzing more data can be proposed in future studies, and more general linguistic patterns in industries can be discovered. The distinctions in the sustainability discourse might be better understood through juxtapositional studies across various domains and even geographical areas. Overall, this paper highlights the topicality of more open, quantifiable, and ethically grounded corporate communication practices, given the need to ensure that sustainability rhetoric and sustainability reality are in harmony.

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