Iperstoria
2026, no. 28
ISSN: 2281-4582

DOI: 10.13136/2281-4582/2026.i28.1764
iperstoria.it

We Reduce, We Achieve, We Commit

A Corpus-assisted Discourse Analysis

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Keywords

Corporate discourse

Critical Genre Analysis

Corpus-based Discourse Analysis

Sustainability reporting

Narrative identity

Abstract

This study explores how sustainability reports construct persuasive corporate identities that promote environmental and social responsibility. The analysis draws on a 455,000-token corpus of nine 2023 reports from companies listed in the Dow Jones Sustainability Index (DJSI), compiled and processed via Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff, et al. 2014; 2004). Methodologically, this research integrates Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis (Baker 2023; 2014; Egbert and Baker 2020), the Appraisal Framework (Martin and White 2005) and Critical Genre Analysis (Bhatia 2017; 2014; 2008) to uncover both quantitative patterns and qualitative discursive strategies. Findings reveal that sustainability reports give rise to a coherent and future-oriented narrative identity (McAdams and McLean 2013), in which the corporation emerges as an ethical, proactive and people-centred actor. First-person plural forms (i.e., *we*, *our* and *us*) dominate the corpus, thereby pointing to categories such as agency, collective responsibility and ownership. These frequently co-occur with material process verbs that project transformative intent (Halliday and Matthiessen 2013) and with adjectives portraying the company as sustainable, inclusive and innovative (Stibbe 2015). The discursive interplay of these features builds an ethotic argument that positions the company as trustworthy and committed. Additionally, frequent references to 'science-based' goals serve to contract dialogic space and reinforce corporate credibility and ethical alignment, thus reducing interpretive openness (Fuoli 2018; Martin and White 2005). While such reports are framed as informative, this analysis suggests they increasingly adopt persuasive strategies typical of promotional genres. In line with Critical Genre Analysis, they exemplify genre bending (Bhatia 2008), revealing how corporate sustainability discourse functions as a tool for identity negotiation and reputational management.

1. Introduction

Sustainability reporting has become one of the most influential communicative arenas in which corporations negotiate their environmental and social legitimacy. As regulatory pressure intensifies and stakeholder expectations diversify, sustainability reports have evolved from technical disclosure documents into strategic narratives that articulate how organisations understand responsibility, frame their commitments and justify their actions to the public. In line with institutional theory, this communicative function is deeply connected to legitimacy-building processes, whereby organisations depend on socially recognised norms of appropriateness to secure moral and cognitive standing (Suchman 1995; Meyer and Rowan 1977). From a critical perspective, sustainability communication is increasingly described as a rhetorical and ideological space in which companies attempt to shape stakeholder perceptions, promote corporate identity and position themselves favourably within contested debates on environmental responsibility (Higgins and Coffey 2016; Wright and Nyberg 2015).

Within environmental discourse studies, it is well established that sustainability narratives are shaped by broader socio-political imaginaries that influence what counts as legitimate environmental action. Scholars such as Hajer and Versteeg (2005) and Alexander (2010) demonstrate how discursive constructions of ecological challenges are embedded in dominant cultural frameworks that circumscribe agency, responsibility and desirable futures. These imaginaries often stabilise managerialist interpretations of sustainability by foregrounding technological solutions, incremental improvements and corporate self-regulation. The complexity and fragmentation of the notion of sustainability across discourse communities further complicate these communicative processes, creating tensions in how organisations frame ecological challenges and articulate their commitments (Krieg and Toivanen 2021; Godemann and Michelsen 2011).

Parallel developments in ecolinguistics and environmental communication highlight the role of language in shaping the "stories we live by" (Stibbe 2021), the cultural narratives that underpin our relationship with nature and inform collective understandings of environmental issues. Corpus-assisted approaches to ecolinguistics (Poole 2022; 2017) have shown how linguistic patterns may subtly naturalise particular framings of ecological value, prioritise certain actors or marginalise others. These insights have contributed to a growing recognition that sustainability reports are not neutral repositories of information but discursive artefacts in which language, ideology and institutional pressures converge.

Despite this rich body of research, relatively little attention has been devoted to how large multinational corporations construct corporate identity, agency and epistemic authority in sustainability reports through patterned lexico-grammatical choices. Existing studies have examined how sustainability discourse blends accountability and persuasion (Catenaccio 2019; Higgins and Coffey 2016) and highlighted the hybrid nature of corporate sustainability communication (Bhatia 2017; 2014; 2008). Corpus-based research has also provided valuable insights into CSR reporting, particularly in relation to stance and (im)personalisation strategies (Castagnoli 2021a, 2021b; Castagnoli and Magistro 2019). However, these studies tend to focus on specific linguistic features or cross-linguistic comparisons. Building on this work, the present study adopts an integrated corpus-assisted discourse approach to examine how a broader range of linguistic resources operates across reports produced by high-performing, Dow Jones Sustainability Index (DJSI)-listed firms under stringent reporting frameworks.

The present study addresses this gap by conducting a corpus-assisted discourse analysis of sustainability reports produced in 2023 by companies listed in the Dow Jones Sustainability Index (DJSI). These firms offer an analytically significant sample: they are subject to mature reporting practices, external scrutiny and well-established environmental, social and governance (ESG) evaluation criteria, making them ideal for examining how discursive strategies operate within highly codified communicative environments. Drawing on Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis (Baker 2023; 2014; Egbert and Baker 2020), Appraisal Theory (Martin and White 2005), Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday and Matthiessen 2013), Critical Genre Analysis (Bhatia 2017; 2014; 2008) and narrative identity theory (McAdams and McLean 2013), the study explores how linguistic choices frame the corporation as an agentive, responsible and forward-looking subject.

Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. What lexico-grammatical patterns characterise sustainability reports produced by multinational corporations listed in the DJSI?

RQ2. How do pronoun choices, verbal processes and evaluative adjectives contribute to the construction of corporate identity, agency, ethical positioning and epistemic authority?

RQ3. In what ways does sustainability reporting blend informational and promotional discourse, and how does this hybridity relate to broader legitimacy-oriented communication strategies?

2. Materials and methods

2.1 Data collection

Data for this study were collected through the collaboration of a consultant working in the sustainability services sector, who facilitated access to a set of corporate sustainability reports published in 2023. While the consultant acted as an intermediary, all documents analysed in this study are publicly accessible through the respective companies' websites or sustainability disclosure portals. The role of the intermediary was therefore limited to curation rather than provision of non-public material, ensuring full transparency and replicability of the corpus.

The dataset consists of nine sustainability reports produced by companies listed in the DJSI, a globally recognised benchmark for evaluating the ESG performance of major multinational firms. The decision to focus on DJSI-listed companies was grounded in three procedural considerations. First, these companies operate under some of the most mature and institutionalised sustainability reporting frameworks, offering a corpus where discursive conventions are highly stabilised. Second, DJSI firms are regularly subjected to external assessments, ratings and benchmarking exercises, which exert pressure towards uniformity, transparency and strategic communication. Third, the selection of established and internationally visible corporations allows for the analysis of sustainability discourse in communicative environments characterised by high reputational stakes and sophisticated corporate identity work.

The nine companies included in the corpus represent a diverse but coherent subset of the DJSI universe: 3M, Cisco Systems, The Coca-Cola Company, Dow Inc., Goldman Sachs, Johnson & Johnson, Pfizer, Verizon Communications and Volkswagen Group. These firms were selected at random from within the index to avoid thematic or sectoral bias, while the shared DJSI membership ensures comparability in terms of reporting practices, adherence to ESG standards and accessibility of data. Although sectoral diversity is present, this feature is analytically valuable, as it enables the detection of cross-sector discursive patterns that may characterise sustainability reporting as a genre rather than as an industry-specific practice.

Each report was downloaded in its original PDF format and subjected to a two-step cleaning process. First, texts were extracted using automated text-recognition tools to remove formatting artefacts such as headers, footers and page numbers. Second, the extracted material was manually inspected to ensure consistency and comparability across texts. Where visual or layout-based elements did not contribute continuous running text (i.e., tables, graphs and figures), the corpus was restricted to the main narrative text, while retaining any embedded linguistic content where relevant for analysis. This workflow ensured that the resulting corpus was both linguistically coherent and computationally suitable for corpus-assisted discourse analysis.

The cleaned files were then merged into a unified dataset, referred to as the *Sustainability Reports Corpus DJSI 2023*, and uploaded to the corpus linguistic software Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff, et al. 2014; 2004), which was selected for its analytical capabilities, including frequency profiling, concordancing, collocation analysis and grammatical pattern identification. The final corpus comprises 455,269 tokens across the nine reports.

Because all texts are publicly available and contain no personal or sensitive information, the study does not raise ethical concerns related to confidentiality or data protection. The use of already-public corporate documents also aligns with established practices in discourse analysis, whereby institutional texts are treated as part of the public communicative landscape.

2.2 Methodology

This study adopts an integrated corpus-assisted discourse-analytic methodology designed to identify recurring lexico-grammatical patterns in sustainability reports and to interpret how these patterns contribute to the construction of corporate identity, agency and epistemic authority. The methodological rationale follows the principle that corpus methods provide empirical grounding and pattern-recognition capabilities, while discourse-analytic frameworks offer the interpretive tools needed to contextualise those patterns within broader communicative and ideological practices. Ensuring transparency and coherence throughout the process was a key concern, especially given the hybrid nature of the methods involved.

After the corpus of reports was compiled and cleaned, all texts were uploaded to the Sketch Engine platform (Kilgarriff, et al. 2014; 2004), which was used for the entirety of the corpus analysis. As mentioned earlier, Sketch Engine was selected because it enables systematic examination of linguistic patterns through frequency lists, concordance lines and grammatical relations. These analytical functions were employed not to produce statistical generalisations beyond the corpus, but to identify recurrent features in the dataset and provide empirical evidence for subsequent qualitative interpretation. The absence of a suitable external reference corpus for sustainability reporting, and the highly specialised nature of the genre, meant that the analysis focused exclusively on internal corpus dynamics rather than on keyword comparisons. This approach is consistent with established practices in corpus-assisted discourse studies, where the primary objective is often to uncover recurrent linguistic behaviour within a specific genre rather than to compare it against general-language norms (Baker 2023; Partington, et al. 2013; Stubbs 1996). As noted in genre analysis and specialised discourse research, internal patterning is sufficient when the aim is to describe how a communicative domain constructs meaning through its own conventionalised linguistic resources (Bhatia 1993; Biber 1988).

The first stage of the analysis consisted of mapping salient forms through frequency exploration. Particular attention was devoted to three linguistic features that displayed notable prominence across the corpus: first-person plural pronouns, material process verbs and evaluative adjectives. These categories were selected not only on the basis of frequency, but also for their theoretical relevance: first-person plural pronouns function as key resources for constructing collective corporate identity and positioning the organisation as a unified actor (Koller 2004; De Fina 2003), material process verbs encode agency and action within a systemic functional framework (Thompson 2014) and evaluative adjectives realise Appraisal resources that contribute to stance, legitimacy and ethical positioning (Hunston and Thompson 2000; Thompson and Hunston 2000). Frequency information was used heuristically, not inferentially, to identify which items warranted closer qualitative attention. Once these candidates emerged, concordance analysis was performed to investigate how the terms functioned in their immediate co-texts. This step was crucial, as it allowed the investigation of semantic preference, evaluative prosody, transitivity structures and patterns of narrative positioning. No automated categorisation was accepted uncritically; instead, quantitative findings were repeatedly cross-checked through manual inspection to avoid misinterpretation of ambiguous or polysemous items.

The corpus findings were then interpreted through a set of complementary theoretical perspectives. Appraisal Theory (Martin and White 2005) was employed to examine evaluative language, stance-taking and dialogic strategies. This framework was particularly helpful for analysing attitudinal lexis, lexical choices that amplify commitment, and expressions that contract dialogic space, such as references to science-based goals. In addition, Lee (2015) informed a more fine-grained analysis of Appreciation, particularly the ways in which evaluation may be realised indirectly through domain-anchoring and the signalling of relevance, rather than through overt attitudinal markers. Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday and Matthiessen 2013) underpinned the analysis of transitivity, especially the marked predominance of material processes across the corpus. This allowed a detailed understanding of how agency and intentionality are grammatically encoded, shedding light on the discursive construction of corporations as transformative and proactive actors. Critical Genre Analysis (Bhatia 2017; 2014; 2008) provided the analytical framework for examining the hybrid communicative nature of sustainability reports, where informational and promotional purposes coexist and interact. This perspective supported the identification of genre bending strategies and the embedding of reputational aims within ostensibly factual reporting. Narrative Identity Theory (McAdams and McLean 2013) facilitated the analysis of temporal coherence, enabling exploration of how corporations construct a consistent self through coordinated references to past performance, present commitments and future aspirations. Finally, theoretical insights from ecolinguistics (Stibbe 2021; Poole 2022; 2017) allowed the analysis to engage with the ideological dimensions of environmental discourse and to consider how linguistic patterns contribute to the normalisation of particular *stories we live by* (Stibbe 2021) relating to ecological responsibility.

Throughout the analysis, a reflexive stance was maintained. While corpus methods provide a high degree of transparency in identifying recurrent textual features, interpretation necessarily involves researcher judgement. For this reason, all qualitative interpretations were triangulated with multiple types of corpus evidence to reduce the risk of over-interpreting isolated occurrences. Particular caution was applied when dealing with rhetorically salient but infrequent expressions. In such cases, the analysis foregrounds their qualitative significance rather than extrapolating frequency-based claims. This methodological balance ensures that the study remains empirically grounded while still capturing the genre-specific discourse characteristic of sustainability reporting.

Overall, this integrated methodology enables a rigorous and multidimensional examination of how linguistic choices contribute to the identity work, legitimacy-building strategies and epistemic positioning of corporations within sustainability discourse. The combination of systematic corpus analysis and theoretically informed interpretation provides a coherent framework for understanding sustainability reports not simply as informational documents, but as complex discursive artefacts shaped by institutional pressures, communicative intentions and ideological assumptions.

3. Analysis

3.1 First-person pronouns

A prominent feature emerging from this corpus is the high frequency of first-person plural pronouns, particularly *we* and *our*. The frequency lists generated in Sketch Engine show that *our* is the most frequent of the three inflectional forms, occurring 13,734.74 times per million words (pmw), followed by *we* at 9,234.10 pmw, whereas *us* appears only 810.51 pmw. Although these values are interpreted as exploratory indicators rather than statistical proof, they highlight a consistent pattern: this corpus of DJSI-listed companies' 2023 reports favours constructions that foreground corporate agency and ownership, while downplaying grammatical contexts in which the corporation is positioned as an object.

This distribution was further examined through concordance analysis, which revealed dense clusters of *we* and *our* in proximity to verbs of action, commitment and responsibility. Drawing on Appraisal Theory (Martin and White 2005) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday and Matthiessen 2013), these pronouns can be seen as central resources for constructing stance and projecting an agentive corporate identity. *We* typically functions to foreground the corporation as an agentive Actor, frequently occupying clause-initial position and introducing material processes that describe strategic action or sustainability initiatives. This pattern is evident in the following excerpt from the 3M report:

(1) From the bottom to the top of **our** organization, **we're** dedicated to following **our** related principles and policies and pursuing **our** related goals and risk-mitigation efforts. **We take** industry-leading actions to **measure** and **reduce our** greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and **we offer our** customers a wide range of innovative products. **We work** collaboratively with governments and global partners to **advance our** impact in meeting this important global challenge. (3M CSR 2023)

Here, the repeated clause-initial *we* combines with high-transitivity material verbs (*take*, *measure*, *reduce*, *offer*, *work*) to construct a corporate self that is purposeful, competent and continuously engaged in forward movement.

By contrast, *our* anchors sustainability efforts within a frame of internal ownership and accountability. Its very high normalised frequency reflects the reports' discursive emphasis on principles, assets, operations and achievements attributed to the corporate collective. This is illustrated in the following example:

(2) We are purchasing these EVs at a rate aligned with available products and charging infrastructure suitable for **our** operations.
Verizon's Circular Supply Chain team partners with Corporate Sourcing to incorporate terms into **our** supplier contracts for the responsible end-of-life management of **our** products. (Verizon)

Such uses reinforce the idea that sustainability performance is structurally embedded within corporate processes and capabilities.

The contrast with *us*, which is comparatively rare, is equally revealing. In this corpus, *us* appears in contexts where the corporation is grammatically realised as a non-subject participant, typically in object or complement position, rather than as an initiating Actor. In the few instances where *us* appears, it tends to occur in contexts where the corporation is a beneficiary rather than an initiator of action:

(3) This paved the way for **us** to begin construction on the world's first net-zero Scope 1 and 2 GHG emissions integrated ethylene cracker and derivatives site.
This helped **us** gain more accurate and comprehensive insights into our supply chain's carbon footprint, identifying opportunities for improvement. (Dow)

The low normalised frequency of *us* (810.51 pmw) should be interpreted with caution, as it partly reflects the grammatical constraints on object pronouns in English, rather than a purely discursive preference. However, within these constraints, its distribution in this corpus still suggests a tendency to background the corporation's agentive role, as *us* occurs primarily in constructions where action is enabled by external factors or processes.

Taken together, these quantitative and qualitative patterns reveal a clear rhetorical orientation in sustainability reporting across this corpus. The saturation of discourse with *we* and *our* and the relative avoidance of *us* construct a corporate identity rooted in agency, responsibility and intentionality. Such linguistic choices support what could be described as *ethotic positioning*, whereby corporations cultivate an image of trustworthiness, moral investment and strategic competence. In this way, first-person pronouns function not merely as grammatical elements, but as key discursive mechanisms through which sustainability reports articulate leadership and reinforce legitimacy.

3.2 Material verbs

A second salient pattern revealed by the corpus concerns the predominance of material process verbs. In Systemic Functional Linguistics, material processes construe actions involving concrete or metaphorical change, with an Actor who actively brings about an outcome (Halliday and Matthiessen 2013). Frequency lists generated in Sketch Engine show that several material process verbs occur frequently across the dataset and concordance analysis indicates that they often appear in clause-initial or otherwise rhetorically salient positions. To provide empirical transparency, Table 1 reports both raw frequencies and normalised frequencies per million words (pmw) of the most frequent verbs in the corpus. Following established corpus-assisted discourse analytical practice (Baker 2023; Partington, et al. 2013; Biber 1988), these values are interpreted as exploratory indicators of salience rather than as evidence of statistically robust distributional patterns.

Verb	Frequency (raw)	Frequency per million tokens (pmw)
be	6,804	14,945.01
have	1,811	3,977.87
include	1,672	3,672.55
provide	914	2,007.60
help	848	1,862.64
support	799	1,755.01
use	787	1,728.65
work	747	1,640.79
reduce	570	1,252.01
continue	516	1,133.40
create	498	1,093.86
make	470	1,032.36
identify	462	1,014.78
improve	440	966.46
drive	415	911.55
do	382	839.06

Tab. 1: Most frequent material verb lemmas in the *Sustainability Reports Corpus DJSI 2023*

As shown in Table 1, verbs encoding action and organisational activity, such as *provide, support, work, reduce* and *create*, are among the most recurrent lexical items in the corpus.[1] The prominence of material verbs substantiates a broader analytical pattern: the sustainability reports in this dataset consistently foreground the corporation as an Actor engaged in purposeful, future-oriented and often improvement-oriented activity. The discursive effect is not merely descriptive, but identity-building: by repeatedly associating themselves with high-transitivity processes, organisations construct a narrative of dynamism, competence and continuous advancement.

This pattern is particularly evident in examples where clusters of material verbs create a progressive temporal sequence, presenting sustainability as both an ongoing effort and a trajectory of measurable improvement. Consider the Coca-Cola report:

(4) We are **working** to **reduce** our carbon footprint in line with science to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. As of 2022, we **reduced** our emissions across Scopes 1, 2 and 3 by 7%, **making** progress toward our science-based reduction target of 25% by 2030 against a 2015 baseline. Our ambition is to **achieve** net zero emissions by 2050. (Coca-Cola)

Here, *working*, *reduce(d)*, *making progress* and *achieve* create a cumulative effect that moves from present engagement to demonstrated results and anticipated future achievement. The sequencing of these material processes constructs a logic of improvement, while simultaneously reinforcing the organisation's stance as proactive and aligned with institutionalised climate goals. A similar strategy appears in the Dow report:

(5) We also are **innovating** ways to **offer** products that **support** our customers' efforts to **reduce** their GHG emissions and to **accelerate** reductions along the supply chain. Our newly launched Water & Nature strategy is designed to **achieve** water resilience while also positively **impacting** the communities and ecosystems where we **operate**. (Dow)

The dense concentration of material verbs (*innovating*, *offer*, *support*, *reduce*, *accelerate*, *achieve*, *impact, operate)* exemplifies a kind of actionalisation, that is the discursive representation of institutional actors primarily through acts of doing. These verbs situate the company as a

[1] Although *be, have* and *include* are the most frequent forms overall, they are not material verbs; their frequency reflects their grammatical and discourse-organising roles (i.e., attribution, possession, listing), which are typical of corporate reporting discourse.

catalyst of change, both internally and across its value chain. The Goldman Sachs report reinforces this orientation:

(6) We've **continued** to **advance** our commitment to **enhance** and **expand** sustainable finance expertise across our business segments and **launched** our inaugural Sustainability Bond and Goldman Sachs Sustainability Issuance Framework in 2021. (Goldman Sachs)

Here, *continue*, *advance*, *enhance*, *expand* and *launched* again foreground a logic of purposeful progression. Several of these verbs carry positive semantic prosody, particularly *enhance* and *expand*, thereby blending informational reporting with promotional discursive strategies and supporting the organisation's ethic positioning as a forward-looking and responsible financial actor.

In aggregate, the quantitative analysis of material processes and their recurrent discursive functions indicate that the sustainability reports in the corpus construct corporate agency through patterned representations of continuous action, improvement and innovation. Material verbs thus play a central role in narrating organisational identity: they enable companies to present themselves not simply as compliant or accountable, but as transformative agents actively shaping environmental and social futures.

3.3 Adjectives

A further pattern emerging from the corpus concerns the semantic clustering of high-frequency adjectives. Although adjectives are typically less central than verbs in construing agency, they play a crucial role in shaping evaluative stance, defining domains of relevance and signalling the discursive priorities of sustainability reporting. Frequency lists generated in Sketch Engine reveal that a relatively small group of adjectives accounts for a disproportionately large share of adjectival usage in the corpus. Rather than functioning as random lexical variation, these items form recognisable semantic clusters that contribute to the construction of legitimacy, value and organisational identity. To provide transparency, Table 2 summarises the most frequent adjectives together with their normalised frequencies.

Adjective	Frequency (raw)	Frequency per million tokens (pmw)
global	761	1,671.54
sustainable	651	1,429.92
environmental	570	1,252.01

new	548	1,203.68
healthy	501	1,100.45
total	467	1,025.77
human	419	920.34
social	409	898.37
corporate	399	876.40
inclusive	371	814.90
fiscal	352	773.17
key	311	683.11
responsible	307	674.33
renewable	302	663.34
diverse	300	658.95
good	296	650.17

Tab. 2: Most frequent adjectives in the *Sustainability Reports Corpus DJSI 2023*

A first cluster consists of evaluative and ethical adjectives such as *sustainable, healthy, responsible, inclusive, renewable, diverse* and *good*. Interpreted through Appraisal Theory (Martin and White 2005), these items can be associated with resources of Appreciation and Judgement, contributing to the positive evaluation of corporate actions and organisational conduct. Frequency patterns suggest that such adjectives are recurrent in the corpus; however, their evaluative force is best understood in context. To illustrate how these items function discursively, a selected concordance example is presented below:

(7) By building a **diverse** team that reflects the world in which we live and fostering an **inclusive** culture where everyone can grow and thrive, we are able to create innovative solutions and deliver long-term business growth and success. (Dow)

In this example, *diverse* and *inclusive* express positive evaluation in Appraisal terms, presenting the organisation as socially aware and ethically responsible. Their use as pre-modifiers (*diverse team, inclusive culture*) weaves this evaluation into what appears to be neutral description, making the positive stance less overt. In terms of Lee (2015), these items can be interpreted as instances of Valuation, specifically Sociality Valuation, as they construe the practices described as socially desirable and aligned with broader community values rather than assessing aesthetic qualities or technical effectiveness. At the same time, these adjectives occur alongside material processes (*building, fostering, create, deliver*), which portray the company as actively producing both social and economic outcomes. Together, this pattern links ethical values with performance and growth, helping to construct a credible and positively evaluated organisational identity.

A second cluster comprises salience-marking adjectives such as *total, key, high* and *significant* (the latter just below the cut-off of Table 2 but frequent in the corpus). These adjectives frequently operate as resources of Appreciation, contributing to the evaluation of entities and processes in terms of their relevance and importance in the reporting framework. The following example illustrates how these items function in discourse.

(8) Any **significant** changes in the measurement methods and/or data values applied to **key** environmental metrics from previous years are disclosed in the report. (3M)

In this example, *significant* and *key* realise Appreciation: Valuation, specifically Salience Valuation, as they construe the changes and metrics as important in the field of sustainability reporting. In line with Lee (2015), such items appear to evaluate the social and institutional significance of entities and processes, rather than simply scaling their intensity. Their placement in pre-modifying noun phrases (*significant changes*, *key metrics*) integrates evaluation into technical description, making the evaluative stance less overt. At the same time, the clause is framed through a reporting structure (*are disclosed*), which reinforces a discourse of transparency and procedural rigour. As a whole, this configuration presents importance as an inherent property of the reported elements, supporting a form of evaluation that remains consistent with the conventions of formal, ostensibly objective reporting.

A third cluster includes domain-anchoring and futurity-oriented adjectives such as *environmental, social, human, corporate, fiscal, global, new* and *digital* (the latter also just below the cut-off). These items do not so much express evaluation as place corporate activities in recognisable institutional and knowledge domains. As conceptualised by Lee (2015), these items can be interpreted as instances of Appreciation: Valuation, specifically Sociality Valuation, not primarily because they encode overt evaluation, but because they position entities and processes in socially recognised domains of relevance (i.e., *environmental, social, human*). As Lee (2015) shows, Sociality Valuation often operates through such domain anchoring, where the value of an entity is implied through its association with established fields of knowledge and practice rather than explicitly stated. Their frequent use suggests a tendency to ground sustainability discourse in familiar domains of expertise while also signalling alignment with wider societal and technological developments. In this sense, they contribute to what Bhatia (2017) describes as “interdiscursive competence,” that is, the ability of organisations to draw on and combine different specialised discourses in order to enhance credibility. The following example illustrates how these resources work in context:

(9) As a world-leading materials science company, we understand that **natural** resources, such as water and biodiverse ecosystems, are critical to many products important to everyday life and **human** progress. (Dow)

In this example, *natural* and *human* function as Sociality Valuation, anchoring the statement in broadly recognised domains (environment and society). The expression *world-leading* introduces a more explicit evaluative element, positioning the company as authoritative, while *critical* signals the importance of natural resources and can be read as Salience Valuation. These meanings are embedded in a declarative structure (*we understand that…*), which presents them as generally accepted rather than subjective. This helps the text build credibility by bringing the organisation in line with shared priorities, while maintaining a neutral, informational tone.

Together, the distribution of adjectives in the corpus reveals that the sustainability reports investigated in the corpus do not merely describe organisational attributes; they strategically deploy adjectival resources to construct value, amplify significance, denote field-specific legitimacy and signal futurity or innovation. The recurrent clustering of evaluative, quantitative and domain-specific adjectives supports the broader view that the sustainability reports in this corpus can be regarded as a hybrid genre where informational aims interact with promotional and reputational strategies. Adjectives therefore contribute to the construction of a discursive environment in which corporate actions are framed as desirable, impactful and in unison with collectively sanctioned visions of sustainable development.

3.4 Narrative identity in corporate discourse

One more pattern emerging from the corpus is the construction of a coherent corporate *narrative identity*. Following McAdams and McLean (2013), Narrative Identity Theory refers to the interpretive frameworks through which actors organise past, present and future events into a meaningful, morally inflected storyline. Although sustainability reports are ostensibly informational documents, their linguistic patterns reveal a pronounced narrative structuring of organisational self-presentation. The recurrent use of clause-initial *we*, the clustering of material verbs encoding purposeful action and the saturation of attitudinal adjectives collectively position the corporation as a stable, agentive and forward-looking protagonist.

Across the corpus, this narrative identity is organised around a three-part temporal configuration. First, companies frequently evoke a retrospective anchoring, framing sustainability commitments as longstanding, principled and embedded within organisational culture. For example, one report states:

(10) **For over a decade**, we have **strengthened** our commitment to **responsible** growth

by integrating environmental and social considerations into every major business decision. (Johnson & Johnson)

Here, the temporal marker *for over a decade* situates present actions within a longer historical trajectory, while the material verb *strengthened* retrospectively attributes consistency and deliberate reinforcement to corporate conduct. The evaluative adjective *responsible* reinforces moral continuity across time. Second, the present is depicted as a moment of accountability, active implementation and strategic purpose. Present-oriented clauses are saturated with high-transitivity material processes, as is evident in the following excerpt:

(11) We are **implementing** new circularity initiatives across our operations and **expanding** partnerships to **accelerate** progress toward our 2030 goals. (Pfizer)

The sequence *implementing*, *expanding* and *accelerate* constructs the corporation as currently embedded in dynamic, measurable action. The adjective *new* conveys renewal and innovation, while *circularity* grounds the discourse in a recognisable environmental domain and economy.

Third, future-oriented projections articulate aspirational trajectories and map current actions onto desired outcomes, as illustrated in the extract below:

(12) **By 2050**, we **aim to achieve** net-zero emissions and contribute to a more **resilient**, **inclusive** and **sustainable** global economy. (Volkswagen Group)

The phrase *by 2050* establishes a concrete future horizon; *aim to achieve* projects intentionality and directionality; and the cluster of evaluative adjectives (*resilient*, *inclusive*, *sustainable*) frames the projected future as normatively desirable. This rhetorical configuration produces what can be described as a *teleological narrative*: present commitments are positioned as necessary steps toward an anticipated future aligned with institutionalised visions of sustainability.

These three temporal layers (i.e., retrospective grounding, present enactment and future aspiration) combine to produce a cohesive narrative identity in which the corporation appears purposeful, morally invested and strategically oriented toward improvement. The narrative is further stabilised by the evaluative environment established by high-frequency adjectives such as *responsible*, *inclusive*, *renewable* and *key*, which infuse the storyline with positive moral and strategic valuation. Such attitudinal saturation consolidates the representation of the corporation as a consistent and trustworthy actor whose actions are guided by enduring principles.

To assess whether this configuration extends beyond isolated instances, a corpus-assisted quantitative analysis was conducted. As shown in Table 3, futurity markers (i.e., *will*, *aim to*, *plan to*, *targets*, *by + year*) occur 399 times across the corpus, corresponding to a normalised frequency of 876.40 occurrences per million tokens. As reported in Table 4, these future-oriented segments show a high degree of evaluative saturation: 312 instances (685.31 pmw) contain at least one evaluative adjective, while coordinated adjectival clustering is also frequent, with 201 occurrences (441.50 pmw) of two or more adjectives and 96 occurrences (210.86 pmw) of three or more. By contrast, as illustrated in Table 5, non-future contexts display substantially lower levels of evaluative density, with only 92 instances (202.08 pmw) of two-adjective clustering and 28 instances (61.50 pmw) of three-adjective sequences. Taken together, these findings indicate that future-oriented discourse is not merely informational but constitutes a privileged site for intensified positive evaluation.

Marker	**Frequency (raw)**	**Frequency per million tokens (pmw)**
will	142	311.90
aim / aims / aiming	36	79.07
plan / plans / planning	41	90.06
target(s)	89	195.49
by + year	64	140.58
looking ahead / forward-looking	27	59.31
Total futurity markers	**399**	**876.40**

Tab. 3: Distribution of lexical and grammatical markers of futurity (i.e., *will*, *aim to*, *plan to*, *targets*, *by + year*) identified across the *Sustainability Reports Corpus DJSI 2023*

Category	**Frequency (raw)**	**Frequency per million tokens (pmw)**
≥1 evaluative adjective	312	685.31
2+ adjectives (clusters)	201	441.50
3+ adjectives (stacked clusters)	96	210.86
No evaluation	**87**	**191.10**

Tab. 4: Distribution of evaluative adjectives and adjectival clustering in corpus segments containing futurity markers

Category	Frequency (raw)	Frequency per million tokens (pmw)
≥1 evaluative adjective	184	404.16
2+ adjectives	92	202.08
3+ adjectives	28	61.50
No evaluation	**216**	**474.44**

Tab. 5: Distribution of evaluative adjectives and adjectival clustering in corpus segments without futurity markers

These distributional patterns lend empirical support to the interpretation of futurity as a key site of evaluative intensification, reinforcing the broader narrative configuration outlined above. From a genre perspective, this narrative configuration exemplifies Bhatia's (2017) observation that institutional genres often embed private intentions, here, reputational enhancement, in public, informational text types. In the texts analysed, sustainability reporting does not simply enumerate discrete initiatives; rather, it positions those initiatives within a broader, value-laden storyline that frames the corporation as both stable and progressive. In this dataset, narrative identity thus emerges as a central mechanism through which these reports respond to the dual demands of accountability and promotion, enabling organisations to present themselves as coherent, future-oriented actors operating within a moral and developmental arc.

3.5 The discursive function of 'science-based'

A further dimension of discourse in the corpus concerns companies' strategic use of the lexicon of *science* and *science-based* methodologies, typically through terms such as *science-based targets*, *science-based carbon budgets*, *science-based emissions-reduction targets*, and references to the Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi). These formulations perform a crucial discursive function: they anchor sustainability claims within an external epistemic regime, thereby enhancing credibility and reducing the potential for contestation. In Appraisal Theory terms (Martin and White 2005), such formulations enact *dialogic contraction*, presenting propositions as grounded in authoritative, verifiable knowledge rather than in corporate judgement or discretionary interpretation.

Across the corpus, the lemma *science-based* occurs 37 times, corresponding to a normalised frequency of 81.27 occurrences per million words. Although relatively low in absolute terms, its distribution across our corpus indicates that the expression is not confined to a single report but constitutes a recurrent feature. Concordance analysis reveals a strong tendency for *science-based* to occur in pre-modifying noun phrases, most frequently in combinations such as *science-*

based targets, *science-based approach*, *science-based emissions reduction target* and *science-based methodology*.

These patterns show that the expression is primarily embedded in technical and goal-oriented constructions, where it functions to qualify corporate commitments and strategies rather than to describe empirical processes. In many cases, it co-occurs with lexical items related to planning and commitment (i.e., *target*, *goal*, *plan*, *commitment*), often in forward-looking statements.

From a discourse perspective, this pattern suggests that *science-based* operates as a legitimising resource, indexing alignment with externally validated frameworks (notably the Science Based Targets initiative, explicitly referenced in several concordance lines). Consider the following example:

(13) As of 2022, we reduced our emissions across Scopes 1, 2 and 3 by 7%, making progress toward our **science-based** reduction target of 25% by 2030 against a 2015 baseline. Several of our bottling partners have announced their own **science-based** targets […] (Coca-Cola)

The repeated reference to *science-based* benchmarks contracts dialogic space by invoking an externalised standard that is positioned as objective and non-negotiable. In Martin and White's terms, this constitutes a *bare assertion*, whereby the writer presents the proposition as one that has no dialogistic alternatives which need to be recognised or engaged with. The corporation's performance is thus framed not merely as progress, but as progress as defined by science. This stance implicitly limits alternative interpretations of emissions data or target adequacy by pre-aligning the reader with a specific epistemic authority. A similar dynamic emerges in the extract below:

(14) The referenced 2° and 1.5° pathways are based on Goldman Sachs' Carbonomics research, which starts with the same **science-based** carbon budgets from IPCC as other research scenarios […] (Goldman Sachs)

Here, scientific authority is used both intertextually (invoking IPCC budgets) and interdiscursively (linking financial research to scientific modelling). The effect is to position the corporation's scenario planning as derivative of, and therefore legitimised by, a universally recognised scientific institution. This move reduces the reader's opportunity to question the assumptions underlying the pathway modelling by presenting them as already validated by the scientific community. Another example illustrates how the invocation of science is used to guide stakeholder expectations:

(15) We look forward to progressing through the **Science Based** Targets initiative (SBTi) validation process in 2024. (3M)

This formulation constructs scientific validation as an external checkpoint that the company willingly submits to. The stance is one of transparency and accountability, but it also functions rhetorically to pre-empt criticism: if targets are validated by SBTi, then they implicitly meet the highest standards of scientific rigour. The company thereby positions itself within a regime of external scrutiny that is framed as both desirable and authoritative. Finally, consider the following example:

(16) All sectors have a responsibility to address the climate crisis […] promoting **science-based** plans, goals and commitments. (Cisco)

The use of *responsibility* and *science-based* casts adherence to scientific guidance as both ethically required and normatively universal. This move constructs science as a moral compass, where deviation from science-based planning is implicitly irresponsible. The discursive effect is to strengthen the corporation's moral identity by aligning its actions with established principles of environmental responsibility.

Overall, these examples illustrate how references to *science-based* function not only as epistemic resources but also as resources for Judgement: Social Sanction (Martin and White 2005). Social Sanction concerns the evaluation of behaviour in relation to normative systems, typically realised through Veracity (truthfulness, credibility) and Propriety (ethical correctness, responsibility). In the present data, these values are not expressed through explicit moral adjectives, but are indirectly invoked through alignment with authoritative scientific frameworks. In examples (13) and (14), references to *science-based targets* and IPCC-derived carbon budgets construe corporate actions as grounded in externally validated knowledge, thereby invoking Veracity: the company's claims are positioned as truthful and reliable because they are anchored in science. At the same time, in examples (15) and (16), the emphasis on validation processes (i.e., SBTi) and sector-wide *responsibility* frames adherence to scientific standards as a matter of appropriate conduct, thereby invoking Propriety. In this way, scientific alignment becomes a proxy for ethical behaviour: to act in accordance with science is implicitly to act responsibly. Crucially, these Judgements are evoked rather than inscribed. The text does not explicitly state that the company is 'honest' or 'ethical;' instead, it constructs these meanings through repeated association with science as an authoritative and morally loaded domain. Through this pattern, corporate practices are simultaneously legitimised as factually sound (Veracity) and ethically appropriate (Propriety), reinforcing a dual positioning of the organisation as both credible and responsible.

More broadly, the strategic deployment of scientific discourse can be interpreted as part of the genre's hybrid promotional-informational character. By embedding their commitments within a framework of scientific authority, companies borrow epistemic legitimacy from external institutions, thereby enhancing the persuasive force of their sustainability narratives. This fits with broader trends in corporate communication in which scientific frames are used to reinforce organisational trustworthiness, reduce interpretive ambiguity and stabilise the discursive construction of corporate responsibility.

4. Conclusion

This study has examined how sustainability reports in the *Sustainability Reports Corpus DJSI 2023* construct corporate identity and legitimacy through a patterned interplay of linguistic resources, combining corpus-assisted methods with qualitative critical discourse analysis. The findings demonstrate that organisational agency is foregrounded through the dense use of first-person plural pronouns, high-transitivity material processes and evaluative adjectives, which together generate a representation of corporations as purposeful, competent and continuously improving actors. The analysis also shows that these reports organise their claims through a recognisable narrative structure, integrating past achievements, present actions and future aspirations into a coherent storyline that supports a teleological vision of sustainability as both directional and morally invested. Furthermore, the strategic invocation of science and science-based methodologies operates as a powerful mechanism of dialogic contraction, narrowing the scope for alternative viewpoints and enhancing corporate credibility by aligning organisational decisions with external epistemic authorities.

Taken collectively, these discursive tendencies illustrate the hybrid communicative nature of sustainability reporting, which must simultaneously inform, persuade and legitimise. The repeated mobilisation of evaluative adjectives, the embedding of corporate action within future-oriented narratives and the reliance on scientific frames indicate that sustainability communication is not merely descriptive but also constitutive of organisational identity and purpose.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, the study offers practical insights for stakeholders engaged in producing, evaluating or teaching sustainability reporting. For corporate communication teams, the recurrent linguistic patterns identified here shed light on how textual choices actively shape the organisation's projected identity, helping them become more aware of the persuasive force behind this genre. Such awareness can support more balanced reporting practices that maintain transparency while avoiding inadvertent promotional drift. For auditors, ESG analysts and regulators, the study provides a set of linguistic indicators, such as dialogic contraction through *science-based* formulations, that can serve as analytical tools when assessing the credibility and framing of sustainability claims. The findings also furnish educators and students with empirical materials for illustrating how sustainability discourse operates as a hybrid genre, strengthening pedagogical approaches in discourse analysis, ecolinguistics and corporate communication.

Several limitations must also be acknowledged. Sustainability reporting has already been extensively examined as a discursive, rhetorical and genre-hybrid practice, and a substantial body of literature has documented its role in legitimacy construction, identity work and reputational management (i.e., Poole 2022; 2017; Stibbe 2021; 2015; Catenaccio 2019; Fuoli 2018; Bhatia 2017; 2014; 2008; Higgins and Coffey 2016; Wright and Nyberg 2015). From both critical discourse-analytic and corpus-assisted perspectives, scholars have convincingly shown how sustainability communication blends accountability with promotional strategies and embeds corporate action within ideologically charged narratives of responsibility. In this respect, the present study does not claim to introduce a fundamentally new object of inquiry, nor to challenge the core insights of this established research tradition.

Rather, its contribution should be understood as incremental and complementary. The added value of this study lies in the systematic integration of corpus-assisted analysis with Appraisal Theory, Critical Genre Analysis and Narrative Identity Theory, applied to a homogeneous yet analytically significant set of DJSI-listed corporations operating under mature reporting regimes. By focusing on patterned lexico-grammatical choices across reports produced by high-performing firms, the analysis provides fine-grained empirical evidence of how agency, ethical positioning and epistemic authority are routinely enacted at scale.

At the same time, the analytical scope of the study necessarily circumscribes the reach of its findings. While the corpus comprises a sample of companies included in the DJSI, it remains relatively restricted in size and scope, which limits the generalisability of the results to other sectors, geographies or reporting standards. Moreover, the focus on high-frequency lexico-grammatical features inevitably sidelines lower-frequency but potentially meaningful discursive strategies. Finally, the exploratory nature of the quantitative component means that the conclusions advanced here are interpretive rather than statistically inferential.

Future research could expand the corpus to include reports from a broader range of industries, regional contexts or sustainability maturity levels, allowing for comparative analyses of narrative and evaluative strategies. Additional work might also investigate multimodal elements, such as visuals, charts and layout as well as their interaction with the linguistic construction of identity and authority. Finally, integrating stakeholder reception studies could help clarify how audiences interpret and respond to the discursive strategies identified here, thereby enriching our understanding of how sustainability communication shapes perceptions of organisational legitimacy.

Overall, this study demonstrates that sustainability reports rely on a sophisticated repertoire of linguistic and rhetorical resources to articulate a coherent, science-aligned and future-oriented corporate self. In doing so, they reveal not only how organisations represent their sustainability performance, but also how they construct the very identities through which such performance becomes meaningful.

Bionote

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