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# ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY AND THE AUTOMOTIVE SECTOR

A Critical Discourse Analysis of the  
Sustainability Reports of Volvo Cars

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## Abstract

Companies communicate the impact of their corporate activities through sustainability reports, disclosing their environmental engagement. Critical studies on sustainability reporting have highlighted that environmental reporting practices participate in the construction of the definition of environmental responsibility. This study analyses how the automotive company Volvo Cars discursively constructs its environmental commitment in its sustainability reports. Fairclough's Critical Discourse analysis was performed on three reports (2010, 2015, and 2020) to critically question the discourse surrounding the environment. The findings of this study reveal that the narratives revolve around socially constructed themes, influenced by the external cultural dimension of Sweden, the country associated with the firm. The paper concludes by presenting the main themes employed by Volvo Cars for communicating its sustainable conduct. First, "The (heterosexual) family as environmental heroes," portrayed as the primary actor in addressing the climate crisis; second, "Leveraging the Power of Swedishness" as a symbol of positive qualities; third, "Evolution in a Time of COVID-19," shifting the focus to the pandemic; and, finally, "Answering to the Capitalistic Call," highlighting the controversial inclination toward capitalistic gain. Some of these findings raise critical questions that require further examination.

## **Keywords**

automotive, critical discourse analysis, environment, organisational communication, sustainability, sustainability reporting, swedishness, Volvo Cars

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## Table of Acronyms

<b>Acronym</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CE	Circular Economy
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
COP 15	15th Conference of the Parties
CO2	Carbon Dioxide
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
GHG(s)	Greenhouse Gas(es)
GRI	Global Reporting Initiative
SGD(s)	Sustainable Development Goal(s)
TBL	Triple Bottom Line
UN	United Nations

## Introduction

The worsening of the climate crisis represents a global emergency (UNDP, 2021) widely recognised both on a governmental level and on an organisational one. The automotive sector is one of the major contributors to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and therefore it has an important impact on the climate crisis. According to studies, the transport sector's emissions are increasing (European Parliament, 2019; Stephan et al., 2019), with passenger cars emitting 72% of CO<sub>2</sub> (carbon dioxide) originating from road traffic and contributing 16% of GHG emissions (Transport Environment, 2022). In this context, the automotive industry has implemented sustainability in their corporate social reports (Sukitsch et al., 2015) and discursively engaged with climate change (Shinkle & Spencer, 2012). Previous research argued that corporate reports not only convey information about a company's sustainable conduct but also participate in constructing discourse around the environment, defying their approaches to addressing the global climate crisis (De Burgh-Woodman & King, 2013; Shinkle & Spencer, 2012). Investigating the discursive practice of corporate reports leads to the disclosure of the implicit ideologies and power relations in the societal background (Pälli & Turunen, 2014). Thus, reports participate in constructing the company's engagement in environmental issues and contribute to shaping the shared meaning of the sustainability discourse (Pälli & Turunen, 2014).

Through corporate social reporting, companies communicate their corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts and their impact on the environment and community. Anholt (2000) argued that companies often accentuate the country associated with their names in

their communication with the public. This is particularly true for the automotive industry, where car manufacturers strategically brand their identities, positioning a country in the minds of consumers (Anholt, 2000). According to Kristoffersson (2014), a symbolic idea of Sweden has been used for communicating about brands associated with the Swedish territory, leveraging on positive associations with Swedish national identity.

In this context, my study aims to critically analyse the environmental commitment of the car manufacturer Volvo Cars, investigating how the company constructs its discourse around the climate crisis. My research explores the power dynamics and choices of language in three of its corporate reports. In this work, I employed a critical discourse analysis, utilising three-dimensional discourse, a methodology introduced by the linguist Norman Fairclough (1992, 1995, 2001).

This thesis project contributes to the fields of sustainability and organisational communication by using as a case study an international company with a great impact on the country of Sweden. Thus, this research strives to investigate an unexplored area of research detected in the existing literature. In particular, the influence of Sweden in corporate reports has been under-explored, with the existing works mainly being student's theses (Benischke, 2019; Khoshnood, 2006; Lundahl & Lanzky, 2016; Lundman Kerekes & Tonvall, 2002). Thus, the importance of my study lies in consideration of the social dynamics and power relations of Swedish society as applied to the Volvo Cars case study. In particular, the concept of Sweden as a nation-brand and the power of Swedishness served as a lens for investigating Volvo Cars' response to the acceleration of climate change's effects. In fact, studies critically analysing the communication pertaining to the environmental areas of corporate social responsibility of Volvo Cars have not been produced so far.

Volvo Cars is a multinational company with its headquarters in Gothenburg, Sweden. The company was founded in 1927 in the city of Gothenburg and has been owned by the Chinese Geely Holding since 2010 (Volvo Cars, 2022). Volvo Cars have been selected for this work due to its importance both internationally and locally, due to its role and status within Sweden. Volvo Cars, in fact, had approximately 43, 000 (2018) employees spread across different continents, and it is one of the major employers in the city of Gothenburg (Gadd, 2019).

Having considered all the above, the focal point of this work revolves around how Volvo Cars have communicated its environmentally oriented choices to the public. Motivated by the need to strive to unveil the communication choices of the selected company, the following aims have been formulated:

- (1) To critically analyse how Volvo Cars discursively constructs environmental sustainability.
- (2) To determine how the role of nation-branding and Swedishness influence the construction of the discourse on corporate reports.

The paper is structured as follows. Firstly, the theoretical framework crucial for understanding the analysis is considered through an in-depth literature review. A summary of the major contributions to sustainability and sustainability reporting is provided. Then, a critique of the discourse on sustainability, focusing on the automotive sector, is presented, considering the controversial aspects of sustainability disclosure in corporate reporting. The study proceeds by commenting on concepts crucial for the understanding of this work, such as the relationships between Sweden and sustainability and Sweden as a nation-branding. The research methodology presents the elements taking part in the construction of

discourse after having recognised them. A theoretical framework of critical discourse analysis and the three dimensions of discourse introduced by Fairclough (1992, 1995, 2001) are illustrated, aiming to explore the ideologies and power relations implicit in the text. The data collected from the corporate reports are scrutinised, identifying the main narrative and attempting to give meaning to the communication choices, taking into consideration the socio-cultural background. Concluding, the findings of this research are presented, stating the final deliberations of this study and presenting advice for further research into the topic.

# Literature Review

## Sustainability & Sustainability Reporting

Sustainability is a complex concept to define. The Brundtland Report in 1987 described sustainability as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." (p. 54). Drawing from the definition of sustainability, Dyllick and Hockerts (2002) described corporate sustainability as "meeting the needs of a firm's direct and indirect stakeholders [...], without compromising its ability to meet the needs of future stakeholders as well" (p. 131). As a result, sustainability has become more critical for businesses and organisations, and their behaviour and short- and long-term goals are now linked to financial gains (Gimenez et al., 2012). In fact, Bansal (2005) described corporate sustainability as the intersection of three imperative principles: environmental integrity, social equity, and economic prosperity, asserting that without one of them, sustainable development is not attainable. Thus, the concept of the "triple bottom line" (TBL) can be detected as the framework underlying any decision connected with the societal and environmental impact on the business sphere (Elkington, 1997). Furthermore, the introduction of Agenda 2030 with the main 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations in 2015 (United Nations General Assembly, 2015) enhanced the already existing focus on acting sustainably.

Although these steps forward can be mentioned, it is essential not to forget the controversy related to the so-called Copenhagen Summit (2009). ). The 15<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Parties (COP 15) was defined as a failure due to the leaders' incapacity to carry out successful

negotiations, which led to the lack of a global agreement and did not live up to expectations (Dimitrov, 2010). Thus, reactions were created amongst organisations operating in markets strictly connected with climate policies, such as the regulations on emissions (Slack et al., 2010). According to Slack et al. (2010), a positive outcome following COP 15 could have created better resolutions on influential corporations' environmental directives.

In recent years, an increasing number of companies have decided to disclose information pertaining to their conduct on social, environmental, and economic matters through the means of sustainability reports (Gillet-Monjarret & Rivière-Giordano, 2017; Heilly & Larya, 2018). Sustainability reports draw upon the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) frameworks, releasing information related to the sustainable commitment of the company based on three main blocks of modules: the 200 (Economic topics), the 300 (Environmental topics), and the 400 (Social topics) (GRI, 2016), following the triple bottom line model (Hartman & Painter-Morland, 2007). The GRI standards were founded with the aspiration of instituting a "global common language" for companies to use to release and communicate their impacts (GRI, 2022). GRI aims at "delivering the highest level of transparency for organisational impacts on the economy, the environment, and people" (GRI, 2022). Through the GRI framework, companies are encouraged to communicate their corporate conducts and therefore construct sustainability discourse on shared ground. Even though climate disclosure is of a voluntary nature (Gamerschlag et al., 2010; Verrecchia, 2001), companies might produce reports having various goals, such as pursuing environmental legitimacy (Florio & Sproviero, 2021).

As illustrated by Hilsdorf et al. (2017) and Jiang et al. (2018), SGDs also influenced businesses in the automotive industry. Corporate reporting has dramatically increased within the automotive sector due to the demanding requirements set up by regulations in the field (Stefanoni & Voltes-Dorta, 2021; Sukitsch et al., 2015; Wolff et al., 2020). Such as the economic and financial demands following the 2008 crisis that have urged the industry to comply with a systematic tracking of, amongst others, environmental performance (Stefanoni & Voltes-Dorta, 2021). Additionally, the economic load deriving from the aftermath of the ever-increasing climate situation has directed companies into the necessity of utilising benchmarks aiming to integrate sustainability into their companies' policies (Wolff et al., 2020). Social and environmental accounting aims to foster legitimacy through the disclosure of organisational conduct by means of sustainable reports (Florio & Sproviero, 2021). Therefore, the use of communication strategies in reporting participates in securing the legitimacy of the organisation's level of respectability, in accordance with societal demands (García-Sánchez et al., 2019). Moreover, sustainability reports rhetorically illustrate the organisation's engagement with the climate crisis (Pälli & Turunen, 2014; Shinkle & Spencer, 2012).

The way in which environmental issues are framed has an impact on the social dynamics and decision-making within a society (Hansen, 2011). As a result, raising public awareness about climate change benefits the commitment to finding a solution (McComas & Shanahan, 1999). Consequently, the strategies used within environmental discourse should be adapted to the type of audience, aiming to convey the question's seriousness and to prompt action (Morris et al., 2019; Shinkle & Spencer, 2012). Subsequently, sustainability reports can be

seen as communication tools aimed at conveying corporate information to the outside (Baviera-Puig et al., 2015). In fact, the implementation of CSR can be done using communication (Sukitsch et al., 2020) of different forms, including the employment of specific language, colours, graphical choices, etc. (García-Sánchez et al., 2019). According to Du et al. (2010), corporate communication, linked to CSR, should encompass different questions such as "what" and "where" to communicate and be cognizant of the relationship between the company and the stakeholders on the issues that are disclosed. In particular, the social issue enclosed in the core message of the company's report should be properly stressed in order to better acknowledge it and therefore enhance the company's credibility (Du et al., 2010). Moreover, communicating the company's positioning within the social spectrum benefits the external perception of the organisation and reinforces its reliability (Du et al., 2010).

According to Morris et al. (2019), constructing a narrative for conveying information concerning the environment is more effective than simply exhibiting scientific data. Martinez-Conde and Macknik (2017) stated that in order to create engagement, science requires you to be absorbed by emotions created by a narration. Cronon (1992) described the rhetorical use of storytelling for communicating environmental narratives. Meanwhile, Cox (2013) asserted that the categorisation of stories within main narratives attempts to "structure our understanding of the environment along certain lines rather than others" (p. 177). Moreover, storytelling engages the readers emotionally, favouring a reaction and engaging with the climate question (Morris et al., 2019), providing "wider frameworks or

guides for understanding and making sense of these facts" (Cox, 2013, p. 176).

Through CSR reports, companies communicate their social engagement and impacts on the environment and community. Hence, the way in which reports convey information related to the organisation can be analysed through the discourse and its representational meanings. In fact, discourse is intertwined with the context in which it is produced; it is a social system, historically influenced, that defines knowledge and confers meaning (Foucault, 1973). Thus, language, and therefore text, is the medium that conveys and reflects the dynamics of our society and consequently participates in constructing truths (Foucault, 1973). Drawing from Foucault's theories, Fairclough depicted a new vision of societal constructions. According to Fairclough (1989), society is interconnected with the use of language and discourse, having "an internal and dialectical relationship" (p. 23). In this instance, the term "discourse" represents "language use as a form of social practice rather than a purely individual activity or a reflex of situational variables." (Fairclough, 1992, p. 63). Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) asserted that "language is a 'machine' that generates, and as a result, constitutes, the social world" (p. 9). Admittedly, discourse reflects social constructs and manifests societal variations, serving as an indicator of social practice while also shaping it (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). As stated by Fairclough (1989), a critical study of discourse can lead to the revealing of an agenda that might have been hidden on the surface. Following this, companies use self-reporting to promulgate their "truths" and therefore produce knowledge about their conduct. Consequently, choices of languages have the function of moulding the public's ideas and therefore directing the approach and feelings towards the company's behaviour in a specific direction (Nwagbara & Belal, 2019).

## **Critiquing the Discourse of Sustainability**

Different studies have critically investigated the construction of discourse in sustainability reports (Pälli & Turunen, 2014; Zappettini & Unerman, 2016), and some have focused their attention on the automotive industry (De Burgh-Woodman & King, 2013; Florio & Sproviero, 2021; Reyes, 2013; Shinkle & Spencer, 2012). Moreover, other researchers have criticised the adoption of corporate reporting within sustainability and the way in which companies communicate their environmental choices (Batista et al., 2020; Dobers & Springett, 2010; Herrick & Pratt, 2013; Lantos, 2001).

Herrick and Pratt (2013) defined sustainability as a "wicked problem" (p. 4434) involving multiple factors (economic, social, political, etc.) and, therefore, communicating sustainability can be a demanding task. Communication, in this sense, can also be used to construct a premeditated narrative and foster acceptance. Roberts (2003) highlighted the fact that companies might use CSR solely with the aim of enhancing their reputations on account of public expectations. Shinkle and Spencer (2012) added that companies construct their discourse about sustainability in order to personify the general idea of what is sustainable by meeting the public's expectations. In the same manner, Laufer (2003) directed attention to the instances in which companies overemphasise their involvement in sustainability in order to gain consensus. Hence, falling into the category of greenwashing, spreading disinformation to increase credibility. An example of this is found in the automotive sector, with the industry recently being in the spotlight due to scandals regarding disclosing. In this regard, Florio and Sproviero (2021) pointed out that discourses are strategically constructed to foster legitimacy in the event of a scandal. The disclosure of deceitful information on organisational behaviour can be traced back to two main motives,

such as meeting the criteria of the regulatory agency in the field and preventing economic loss and legal consequences for not abiding by the environmental standards (Batista et al., 2020).

Ellis and Bastin (2011) highlighted how choices of terminology within CSR reports could be used to serve ultimate goals by representing a powerful resource. Showing that the way in which information is communicated within reports might contribute to constructing an agenda and therefore influence the policy process (Ellis & Bastin, 2011). With this in mind, there is still much dispute around the guidelines provided by the GRI. The GRI frameworks have the ultimate goal of orienting companies on how to communicate their conduct. A critique of the GRI was made by Ellis and Bastin (2011), who asserted that the languages used within CSR display a certain level of "flexibility" (p. 296), allowing organisations to select terminology based on their own corporate goals. Also, Pälli and Turunen (2014) added that corporate social reports participate in the construction of the social understanding of what CSR is by discursively engaging with sustainability.

Furthermore, another problem connected to the discourse of sustainability is the faint line separating "responsibility" and "profitability" (Dobers & Springett, 2010, p. 65). According to Zampetti and Unerman (2016), companies use the discourse of sustainability in corporate reporting to self-validate their behaviours. The discourse of sustainability is therefore employed, aiming to address the company's own profit (Zampetti & Unerman, 2016). Thus, CSR could be adopted with the ultimate goal of monetary gain, with a company embarking upon sustainable projects purely as a part of their financial plan (Lantos, 2001). Following this, CSR takes the form of "strategic CSR", striving to profit from acting sustainably (Lantos, 2001). According to Dobers and Springett (2010), there is a fine line between aspiring to

social responsibility and pursuing profit in the corporate world, whereas companies fluctuate between acting sustainably and capitalising on the sustainable discourse. Therefore, having a critical approach to sustainable discourse could lead to a better interpretation of authorial intentions (Dobers & Springett, 2010).

Furthermore, De Burgh-Woodman and King (2013) drew attention to the use of "evocative campaign(s)" (p. 145) in the construction of a specific discourse of sustainability aimed at shifting the focus away from the company's unsustainable nature. Thus, companies might use specific narratives based on the needs of the culture targeted to generate a sensitive response while not directly addressing the issue (De Burgh-Woodman & King, 2013).

### **Sweden & Sustainability**

Sweden presents a remarkable journey regarding sustainability. The debate constructed around climate change had a peak of interest in the year 1967 (Heidenblad, 2018). Following this, Sweden hosted the first world environmental convention in 1972 (UN, 2022), which led to a general intensification of environmental engagement. According to Grieger (2012), Sweden was a pioneer in environmental leadership, attempting to steer attention toward pursuing a more sustainable planet. Leduc et al. (2006) asserted that Sweden managed to maintain low emissions thanks to economic strategies, the development of advanced technologies, and a commitment to international policies. As The Ministry of the Environment of Sweden illustrated (2020), the country has a long-term commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. As a result, Sweden aspires to be a leading country by achieving zero GHG emissions by at least 2045. Notwithstanding the achievement of sustainability, some criticism has been raised on the portrayal of Sweden as a leading

example. Sweden has the reputation of being a leading country concerning the use of renewable energy sources and low carbon dioxide emissions. However, Ideland (2018) showed that this common idea of Sweden often does not mirror the actual facts, pointing out that Sweden consumes goods imported from countries which do not follow sustainable conditions, thus preserving the country's status as a green country. The Living Planet Report of 2016 (WWF, 2016) supported the claim by exhibiting data indicating that Sweden is located at the top of the world's consumers list and that such a lifestyle could not be affordable if followed worldwide. Moreover, Hysing (2014) stated that the environmental commitment of Sweden is arguable as it has the capacity to act as a frontrunner due to controversial national policy changes and for not always adhering to EU legislation. Aside from the fact that developed countries, such as Sweden, have already reached their peak in GHG emissions due to past industrialisation, allowing these countries to focus on greener economic strategies (Ritchie & Roser, 2019). Our World in Data showed the change in the level of cumulative emissions emitted worldwide from a historical perspective, indicating that the EU historically contributed to the emissions with a share of 22%. (Ritchie & Roser, 2019).

### ***Swedish Nation-branding***

Anholt (2008) defined nation-branding as "the systematic process of aligning the actions, behaviours, investments, innovations, and communications of a country around a clear strategy for achieving a strengthened competitive identity." (p. 22). The concept of nation-branding is applied, aiming to construct a certain positive image of a nation for the purpose of promoting its products to a national and international audience (Barr, 2012). Also, nation-branding allocates products on the market by making use of feelings, ideas, and images

(Kristoffersson, 2014).

Pamment and Cassinger (2018) argued that the Swedish brand could be brought back to a nationalist sentiment by enacting the qualities associated with what is considered Swedish. The concept of the "Swedish model" (p. 9) is frequently used in international contexts to refer to a great nation (de los Reyes, 2005). Various concepts are identified in connection with what Sweden represents. One example is the idea of Sweden as a family-centred country. Bengts et al. (2001, p. 107) wrote that the average Swedish person aims for the so-called "three B", meaning a home (bostad), children (barn), and a car (bil), embodying the qualities that the typical Swedish person should have according to the collective imaginary. Moreover, Hübinette and Lundström (2014) identified the discourse of whiteness as a long-established trait in the construction of what is considered Swedish.

The case study of Volvo Cars as a nation-branding has previously been investigated by other scholars (Benischke, 2019; Khoshnood, 2006; Lundahl & Lanzky, 2016; Lundman Kerekes & Tonvall, 2002).

Khoshnood (2006)'s study showed that Volvo is positively associated with Sweden, often representing a symbol of the country.

Furthermore, Lundahl and Lanzky (2016) exhibit the connection between the brand Volvo and its country of origin, Sweden. The study showed that in the American context, Volvo is associated with a positive myth of Sweden, drawing from "dreamlike and mystical imaginaries and the Swedish atmosphere and way of life" (p. 15). Similarly, Lundman Kerekes and Tonvall (2002) asserted that Volvo Cars are commonly associated with the idea of a positive Swedish lifestyle.

Additionally, Benischke (2019) asserted that the Swedish origin of Volvo is largely depicted

and stressed as a marketing strategy despite being a company under Chinese ownership due to the positive association with Sweden, in contrast to the common imaginary linked to China.

Volvo Cars describes its brand as environmentally engaged and sustainable, with the core value of sustainability added in 1972. However, Bergquist and Näsman (2021) raised criticism of the environmental commitment of Volvo Cars. Bergquist and Näsman (2021) debated the controversial journey of Volvo Cars towards sustainability, stating that part of the brand's green commitment is encouraged by external pressure. Their research argued that the company has historically encountered difficulties in addressing the outcomes of climate change (Bergquist & Näsman, 2021).

## **Summary**

To summarise, this literature review identified the major concepts that serve as a lens to address the aims of this study. Through an in-depth search of previous works relevant to addressing the aims of my project, gaps in the existing literature have been detected. Specifically, not a great number of papers have investigated the relationship between Sweden as a nation-brand and the way in which information is conveyed in corporate reports. Moreover, a lack of studies on the construction of the discourse around environmental sustainability in the communication choices of corporate reports has emerged during the reviews of the existing papers. Therefore, the purpose of this study relies on a critical analysis of the discourse of Volvo Cars in communicating their environmental commitment, trying to determine the role of Sweden as a nation-brand in the construction of its corporate reports. Volvo Cars has been identified as the case study for

conducting this project due to its being an international company and its connections with Sweden.

# Method

## Research Design

In this section, I will delineate the different phases of the development of my research. This study uses the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework introduced by Fairclough (1995) with the aim of investigating how Volvo Cars discursively construct its environmental commitment. Specifically, corporate reports are the ideal setting for investigating the relationship between language and power within, as they are the tools organisations use to stand in for their sustainable practices. Thus, different aspects of discourse will be examined. Previous researchers have chosen discourse analysis within environmental studies (Jamison, 2001; Leipold et al., 2019) due to the fact that this method unveils existing power relations. Tregidga et al. (2007) affirmed that "the text-context relationship is fundamental in the analysis of corporate reports on the environment, society, and sustainable development" in order for "researchers to gain greater insight into corporate social and environmental messages" (p. 14). Consequently, it is important to take into consideration language choices examined within a given text and how these are intertwined with societal issues, considering that discourse shapes and is shaped by society (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Following these considerations, a study of the text, context, and interconnection of the two within the discourse has been performed. Hence, the analysis was in accordance with the steps indicated by Fairclough (1992, 1995, 2001) in its three-dimensional model for CDA. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an analytical framework that finds its roots in textual and linguistic analysis. CDA encompasses different authors and methodologies. Thus, this methodology lends itself to my research topic due to the link between (environmental)

discourse, power, and ideology.

The three-dimensional model for CDA recognised by Fairclough (1992) is the approach chosen for the analysis, whereas text is described as a product and a fragment of discourse. In fact, Fairclough (1992) insisted on the social attribute of language being considered a social practice. Following this approach, the concept of the three dimensions of discourse is developed on three levels that are interrelated, namely: description (micro-level), interpretation (meso-level), and explanation (macro-level) (Fairclough, 1992).

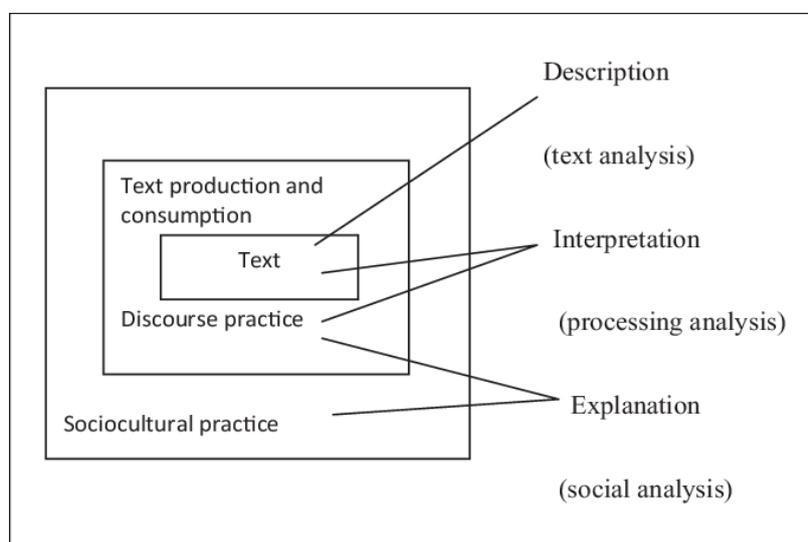


Figure 1. Fairclough's three dimensional model for critical discourse analysis. (Source: Dahl et al., 2014).

According to this theory, a text can be seen as the interpretation of a single individual who interacts with the text while immersed in a socio-cultural context. Specifically, the three stages that are outlined as follows (Fairclough, 1992):

1. *Description* which analyses the text, constituting the fragment of discourse, and it takes into consideration the textual and linguistic components (vocabulary, grammar, and textual structures);

1. *Interpretation* which sheds light on the production and consumption of the investigated fragment by analysing the interaction of the text with the discourse practice.
1. *Explanation* which considers, on a broader level, the societal background in which the text is immersed and produced.

In this study, I investigated the choice of language, the themes employed in the narration of the reports, and the socio-cultural background framing the discourse. Through a meticulous study of the three documents selected and the application of CDA, I attempted to address the aims previously indicated. This study has been carried out following different steps. Initially, a precise reading of the appointed documents was performed. Hence, a general understanding and conception of the content of the reports have been laid out. After this, the reports underwent a second reading. Subsequently, having detected the region of text representing the environmental sections and the recurring themes, a CDA has been carried out following the framework introduced by Fairclough (1992, 1995, 2001). Taking into consideration that the practice of reporting documents social reality, the reports were seen as a representation of given discourses within different contexts. Thus, through discourse analysis, we can observe the company's approach to environmental issues in three different years: 2010, 2015, and 2020. In fact, investigating the languages used in a written text is considered a successful approach in the corporate environment (Rapley, 2007).

In this work, I employed a case study on the multinational automotive company Volvo Cars, based in Gothenburg, Sweden. Yin (1994) suggested a case study application is optimal in the presence of an analysis of specimens located in an existing context and concerning

complicated questions. The data collected for the study is retrieved from three reports published by Volvo Cars with regards to sustainability, namely the "2010\11 Report with Sustainability" (38 pages), the "Sustainability Report 2015" (60 pages), and the "Annual Report 2020" (151 pages). A diachronic study was carried out as this methodology allows for detecting changes over a given period of time (Menard, 1991). Thus, a time span of 10 years was determined, with the aim of analysing relevant change during a period of time covering major events. The reports of 2010, 2015, and 2020 have been selected due to the entity of this research and the limit in time. In detail, several reasons can be identified. To begin with, a significant shift occurred in sustainability regulations during the decade 2010–2020, with a focus on the year 2015. Moreover, 2010 was selected as the starting point of my study in order to have all the reports examined published under the same ownership. 2010 marked the shift of Volvo Cars from being an affiliate of Ford Motor Company to being under Zhejiang Geely Holding (Volvo Cars, 2011). The reports chosen contain information encompassing content such as the company's performance, impact, and progress on topics related to sustainability. The denominations of the selected reports varied across all the years studied, but they all served the same purpose. Also, the length of the reports varies due to the quantity of data considered. For example, the length of the 2020 report is considerably voluminous as a consequence of the inclusion of various tables of data, for example, financial statements (pp. 60-116), sustainability scorecard (pp. 139-143), etc.. The data was taken directly from the corporate website, where the company itself disclosed the information. In recent years, the practice of disseminating reports containing details about sustainability policies has grown rapidly and established itself as a common pattern (Bonsón & Escobar, 2002; Gallego- Álvarez & Quina-Custodio, 2016; Morhardt, 2010).

The analysis of the three reports has been conducted as follows:

- (1) The PDF reports were obtained directly from the source;
- (2) The reports were initially scrutinised, paying close and thoughtful attention to the areas where environmental topics were mentioned;
- (3) The relevant section of the text has been chosen for addressing the aims;
- (4) The themes of interest were investigated, making use of CDA, underlining relevant changes in communicating information throughout the texts;
- (5) The collected data was scrutinised in light of the literature;
- (6) Conclusions were drawn based on the analysis carried out.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

The reports examined in this research are public documents provided by Volvo Cars on its corporate website. Thus, there was no violation of privacy and confidentiality. Additionally, the methodology chosen for the study, namely Critical Discourse Analysis, does not feature human participants. Hence, the study does not harm society or any individuals.

### ***Limitations***

The weaknesses of the methodology chosen for the analysis have been considered. First, CDA has its own inherited limitations identified as being an interpretative and subjective methodology (Widdowson, 1995; Wodak, 1999). Wodak (1999) stated that "each communicative event allows numerous interpretations, linked to the positions of the readers', listeners', or viewers' respective contexts and levels of information" (p. 187), highlighting the challenges that researchers might encounter in distancing themselves and their beliefs when carrying out an analysis. Likewise, Widdowson (1995) asserted that the researcher might analyse the data based on their agenda and preconceptions and therefore

present biased findings. Having considered these limitations, this research has been conducted with the sole intent of examining the asymmetrical relations of power and inequality in communicating the appointed company's environmental commitment. Thus, I have carried out the analysis, bearing in mind the ultimate scope of the project and providing evidence in order to support my claims. Moreover, I have strived to examine data "to ground [my] analysis in the interaction itself, focusing on what is relevant" (Breeze, 2011, p. 514). Also, I have carried out the analysis of the data at different moments of the drafting of my work, striving to provide confirmation of the findings (e.g., the thematics detected within the reports analysed). The utilisation of a second methodology (e.g., interviews) to assure credibility of the findings has been considered. However, due to the limited period of time appointed for the realisation of this work, the combination of multiple methods was not possible to apply. Thus, I recommend utilising methodological triangulation in future versions of this research to improve the quality of the findings.

## **Data Analysis**

This work aims to explore the use of communication strategies in disclosing information related to the environment in corporate reporting. Applying the three dimensional discourse method elaborated by Norman Fairclough, I investigated relevant discourse fragments concerning the environmental dimension of sustainability.

### ***Text***

Firstly, I will start to focus on the text level. Therefore, I will analyse the linguistic peculiarities, also defined as internal aspects, such as the semantic, grammatical, and lexical levels of chosen parts of the reports. According to Fairclough (2003), "the "internal" (...)

relations of texts are connected with their "external" relations (to other elements of social events, and to social practices and social structures) through the mediation of an "interdiscursive" analysis of the genres, discourses, and styles which they draw upon and articulate together" (p. 38). Fairclough (1995) considered the "text" in its multi-semiotic nature, including, in the definition, visual representations. The text fragments have been selected following a thoughtful reading of the three reports, considering the environment and environmental discourse. According to Fairclough (1992), text can be defined as "traces of the productive process (...) and (...) as cues in the process of interpretation" (Fairclough, 2001, p. 24).

The main elements observed within the three reports are:

**Nominalisation.** Within the three reports, different instances of nominalisation can be found. Nominalisation is a grammatical structure used for defying "the process or result of forming a noun or noun phrase from a clause or a verb" (Merriam-Webster, 2022). An instance of nominalisation is the term "sustainability" itself, which has its origin in the verb "to sustain". The use of nominalisation facilitates the writing due to the fact that it avoids stating a clear responsibility, distancing the author from the text.

**Persuasive Wording.** The persuasive wording strategy employs specific designated words with the goal of constructing meanings as ideological beliefs reside in messages and their depiction (Fairclough, 1995), and thereafter they generate engagement. Perloff (2010) defined persuasive language as "a symbolic process in which communicators try to convince other people to change their attitudes or behaviours regarding an issue through the transmission of a message in an atmosphere of free choice" (p. 12). Furthermore, using persuasive language helps convey a specific representation of adherence to the norms

accepted by society in the organisation's conduct and strategy (Higgins & Walker, 2012). As a result, lexical choice in corporate reporting enables changes at the end-user's socio-cultural level (Higgins & Walker, 2012), bestowing the social action of a meaning (Fairclough, 1992). Moreover, through the concept of foregrounding, specific words acquire relevant consideration, which influences the reader in a certain direction (Leech & Short, 2007). Foregrounding is a linguistic process involving a "motivated deviation" aiming to highlight a particular meaning in the text (Leech & Short, 2007).

### ***Discursive Practice***

The second step of the three-dimensional method of Fairclough is discursive practice analysis. Discursive analysis represents the link between the text and the context, unravelling how the text is produced and interpreted. Following this, it is fundamental to consider the intertwined nature of discourse as the product of text, processes, and social conditions (Fairclough, 2001).

**Intertextuality.** Intertextuality represents the process of bringing external texts into the text being analysed (Fairclough, 1992), aiming to exert an influential power over the audience (Feng & Wignell, 2011). Intertextuality can serve the scope of connecting a text to the background in which it is immersed, taking advantage of consolidated knowledge.

Throughout the reports, different instances of intertextuality have been found, such as references to the SDGs, Brundtald's report, the concept of the Triple Bottom Line, etc.

### ***Sociocultural Practice***

In the third and last level of analysis, the examination proceeded to investigate the sociocultural level. The sociocultural sphere contemplates "discourse as part of a social

process, as a social practice, showing how it is determined by social structures and what reproductive effects discourses can cumulatively have on those structures, sustaining them or changing them" (Fairclough, 1989, p. 163). Thus, the concepts of ideology and power determine sociocultural practice. Fairclough (1995) defines ideology as "meaning in the service of power." (p. 14). Ideologies are strictly linked with language as discursive practices "are ideologically invested in so far as they incorporate significations which contribute to sustaining or restructuring power relations" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 91). Power relations are defined by Fairclough (2001) as "relations of struggle [that] occur between groupings of various sorts" (p. 34). Moreover, power regulates a specific text's production, distribution, and consumption within a particular social context (Fairclough, 1995). Power relations exist in connection with language and, as stated by Fairclough (2001), can be recognised *in* discourse and *behind* discourse. Hence, language is both shaped by and participates in building power constructs in society. Furthermore, the socio-historical and cultural contexts in which the discourse is immersed participate in outlining the discourse itself.

## Analysis

In this section, I will present the findings of my analysis. Hence, I will discuss the possible interpretations of discursive practices and strategic choices identified in the reports that are relevant to address my research goals. I will start by giving a general introduction of my findings and, subsequently, I will unravel the main strategies used by the company in the three reports with the aim of narrating their involvement with the environmental question. Thus, I will locate them within their socio-cultural background, giving a possible interpretation.

Firstly, importance should be given to the GRI initiative and its positioning within the analysed documents. In all three reports, Volvo Cars stated their compliance with the GRI initiative, with the intent of "fostering conditions for increased clarity in the company's sustainability efforts and sustainability reporting" (Volvo Cars, 2010, p. 22). The GRI framework was employed within all three reports; therefore, the topics related to the environmental questions analysed in my study follow the GRI 300. Thus, the reports reflect the element of intertextuality depicted by Norman Fairclough (1992), shaping meaning through reference to the generally accepted categories of the GRI initiative. Furthermore, the GRI framework reproduces a discourse of power, strengthening the organisation's conduct through adhering to widely recognised guidelines (Fairclough, 1989).

Four major themes of critique have been observed within the three reports.

McComas and Shanahan (1999) pointed out how environmental facts are portrayed as stories to narrate in order to attract the public's attention. Following this, Martinez-Conde and Macknik (2017) explained how stories prompt emotional reactions, and therefore, using narratives linked to emotional experiences can trigger the reader. Therefore, the three reports present a main focus on the narrative, produced by the image created by the themes, constituting a backbone throughout and around which the information is built and conveyed. A main focus of narration has been pointed out for each report. In the Chief Executive Officer (CEO)'s comments, the company's approach is communicated, creating a narrative and framing the company's voice. In fact, they are seen as the central section of a report, constituting ideologies and executing power through the CEO's leadership position (Craig & Amernic, 2004). In all three documents, the focus of attention is first introduced in the CEO's comment where they are presented. In the first two reports (2010 and 2015), the main narrative corresponds to a project, which is also presented separately further into the document (e.g. "One Tonne Life" & "Omtanke"), whereas in the last report (2020), the focus is concentrated on the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Cox (2013) claimed that companies might use social projects aiming to improve their social approval and, therefore, their perception of the firm. Also, minor but recurring themes have been identified. Specifically, these motives reflect the key values of the company. I will introduce the minor themes parallel to the majors as they are constructed around the main narrative.

## “The (Heterosexual) Family as Environmental Heroes”

The theme of “family” is a recurring image observed within the three reports. In the report of 2010, the main narrative topic has its focal point in the concept of "family". The category of family is portrayed in different sections of the report, mainly in connection with the project named "One Tonne Life" and the cooperation with the energy company Vattenfall. In this instance, a visual representation of a family is seen for the first time in contrast with the other two reports considered in the analysis. To clarify, the reports of 2015 (figure 3) and 2020 (figure 4) both showcase pictures portraying a family interacting with a Volvo product on their covers, whereas the 2010's displays only a car being charged (figure 2).

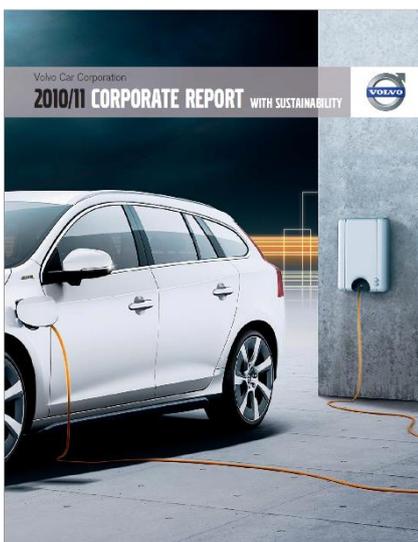


Figure 2. Report of 2010. (Source: Volvo Cars, 2011, p. 1)



Figure 3. Report of 2015. (Source: Volvo Cars, 2016, p. 1)



Figure 4. Report of 2020. (Source: Volvo Cars, 2021, p. 1)

In the report of 2010, the "One Tonne Life" project is firstly introduced in the CEO's comment and presented as a "pioneering project" (Year 2010, p. 3) that has its centre of interest in reducing emissions on a family-scale.

What can the average Swedish family do to meet the UN's climate goals? Can a family's emissions of greenhouse gases be reduced from the Swedish average of 7–8 tonnes per person annually to a more sustainable level of about one tonne? In January 2011, Volvo Cars and several business partners launched a six-month project to help a Swedish family try to lead a climate-neutral life. (Year 2010, p. 8)

The concept of family can be examined through different lenses. To begin with, it can be observed considering the concept of intergenerational equity, which implies "human community as a partnership among all generations" (Summers & Smith, 2014, p. 719). Thus, in accordance with Volvo Cars, the view of suitability stated was based on the definition outlined by Brundtland (1987) of meeting "the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (p. 8), which can be described as a sign of intertextuality (Fairclough, 1992). Using a direct quotation from the widely recognised Brundtland Report (1987), the company is creating meaning through another text, referencing the message conveyed. Following this, the "One Tonne Life" can be interpreted as an outcome of the commitment to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions expressed in the Kyoto Protocol's first commitment period (2008–2012). As shown by the report Sweden's Sixth National Communication on Climate Change by the Ministry of the Environment Sweden, under the 2008–12 timeframe, Sweden aimed to reduce the level of greenhouse gases by using economic tools and implementing the production of renewable energy (2014). Moreover, the language choice of naming the project "One Tonne Life" has an unequivocal correlation to environmental topics thanks to the use of the word "tonne," which refers to the discourse of climate change and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Hence, highlighting how these language choices reflect the terminologies commonly used in other fields (e.g., climate

change) following the concept of interdiscursivity that implies a relation within different discourses (1992).

However, one can argue that the "family" category might have suggested a different interpretation. The image of "family" can be scrutinised through the lens of queer theory and, in particular, Edelman's (1998) concept of heteronormative reproductive futurism.

Thus, in this sense, the concept of "family" has a heterosexual connotation that implies the children's vision of a bridge from the past to the future. In this sense, children represent a political discourse in which every decision is made with the intent of saving our children's futures. Thus, the implications of not focusing on the status quo and postponing our



*Figure 5. Report of 2010. (Source: Volvo Cars, 2011, p. 9)*

intervention for a condition that is yet to come (Edelman, 1998). Moreover, Ideland (2018) presented the so-called "eco-certified child", explaining how children, in the sustainable discourse, are encumbered with the aim of saving our planet and therefore used as a political tool. Additionally, the vision of a traditional family is represented by the use of a picture portraying the "ordinary family" (Year 2010, p. 8) spending time together, consuming a meal in their Swedish-designed villa in Hässelby Villastad, outside Stockholm (figure 5). Moreover, The concept of family is strictly connected with the general

representation of Sweden as a family oriented country (Bengts et al., 2001). On a closer

examination of the picture used, it is possible to mention the reproduction of heteronormative forces with a white, hetero, and suburban family sitting together at a table consuming a meal. According to Edelman (1998), this narrative depicts queers as hazardous, menacing the symbolic and moral order and conveying the role of children as political tools. Also, Hübnette and Lundström (2014) stated that the trait of being white had been historically employed as an attribute of Swedishness. Furthermore, in the statement previously indicated, it is worthwhile to take a look at the quote "help a Swedish family". Different interpretations can be discussed. Firstly, one can argue that the centre of the action is allocated to the family, and therefore, the company is shifting responsibility onto the family, as per the regular citizens, and consequently, failing to work on their intent to be actively accountable. Attention should be given to the fact that the report suggests that the average family should take upon themselves accountability for the emissions derived from the use of vehicles. Following this, it is the family that is located at the centre of the action rather than the company itself, which should be responsible for working to reduce emissions of their products. An instance of this can be seen in:

Living green is a matter of planning – as well as bargaining and compromising in terms of what is important. If the family decides to travel north to the mountains on their Easter vacation, their plans for a more distant summer vacation destination may have to take a lower priority. (Year 2010, p. 8)

In this quotation, it is possible to notice word choices such as "planning", "bargaining", "compromising", and "low priority" that suggest that the "average Swedish family" in their narrative has to make choices, weighing the benefits derived from their alternatives themselves, in order to reduce their emissions. The abovementioned text displays how the

family has to analyse their decisions and settle on where to spend their free time in order to live a sustainable life, renouncing their holiday plans. As a result, the solution lies more in the family's decisions than in the company's environmental strategy. The image of the heroic heterosexual family is used as the main narrative, serving as a symbolic representation of being sustainable with the goal of "alluding to sustainability without having to commit to what it should entail". (De Burgh-Woodman & King, 2013, p. 162). At the same time, Du et al. (2010) demonstrated that actively involving the consumer in the CSR report's initiatives helps to build mutual trust through addressing a common need of the targeted public and serving corporate goals. Thus, the average family is embodied in reducing emissions owing to the project "One Tonne Life". Also, direct quotations from Malin Persson, Manager of Safety & Environment Communication, intensified the idea of a union working in the same direction for a shared goal. The first example is "This is an ordinary family willing to move in the right environmental direction" (Year 2010, p. 8), demonstrating that change is within everyone's reach, or as it is stated in the report itself, "how people can lead sustainable lifestyles with a reasonable effort" (Year 2010, p. 8). The second example is shown in Persson's statement:

We haven't lived on one tonne of CO<sub>2</sub> in Sweden since 1948. (...) The general perception is that we could meet the one-tonne challenge in about 100 years from now. Our project, however, is changing that perspective and we are taking a giant step into the future, at Volvo Cars. (Year 2010, p. 8)

Where the personal pronoun "we" indicates the population as a whole, the possessive pronoun "our" shows a sense of belonging to the same cause. Thus, it aims to establish a connection with the reader, their actions, and their effects on society. Furthermore, one of

Volvo Cars' core values is caring about people, which reinforces the image of Volvo Cars as being close to the "average Swedish family".

### **“Leveraging the Power of Swedishness”**

Swedishness indicates what is traditionally and historically associated with Sweden and is created by a self-image constructed by a general vision of what a group or culture represents (Kristoffersson, 2014). Ideland (2018) remarked that the image of a Swede is defined by the representation of the "global citizen who tries to improve the world with reason, empathy, tolerance, and engagement" (p. 87). Passing on the Swedish attributes to Volvo Cars could possibly be beneficial for the company itself. Following this, Du et al. (2010) explained the importance of strengthening corporate identity in CSR reports in order to establish long lasting stakeholder relationships. In fact, the Volvo brand is largely associated with Sweden, and it has a long tradition of being considered safe and having high-quality products (Stylidis et al., 2020). Observing the aforementioned picture, it is possible to notice, at the centre, a potential average family, as it might be depicted following the concept of Swedishness. It is a heterosexual family composed of a mother, a father, a son, and a daughter, with straight blonde hair. The visual representation of what is Swedish is accomplished by blonde straight-haired individuals and is shared by other Swedish brands and products such as Kalles Kaviar (Werner et al., 2014; Wigerfelt, 2012). Ideland (2018) illustrated the general description of "the desirable citizen" who lives an "eco-certified" life and therefore acts sustainably as "optimistic and positive, full of self-confidence, and last but not least: Swedish (in the Swedish context). And white." (p. 132). Following this, Ideland (2018) explained the association created in Swedish society of the good and sustainable citizens with a specific identity constructed by a certain background, economic situation, and societal position.



*Figure 6. Report of 2015. (Source: Volvo Cars, 2016, p. 1)*



*Figure 7. Report of 2020. (Source: Volvo Cars, 2021, p. 1)*

Importance should be given to the gradual change in the representation of the Swedish family in the report of 2015 (figure 6) and 2020 (figure 7). In the last two reports, the family is portrayed as more ethnically diverse and inclusive, leaving behind the blonde haired narrative. In the report of 2020, despite a change in representation, the concept of Swedishness is still conveyed by the actors selected for the roles of the parents. This was achieved with two recognised actors playing the leading role, with the “dad” being famous internationally and therefore living up to the Ideland (2018)’s description of the “desirable citizen” due to the actors “economic potential, their voice and position in society” (p. 132). This strategy follows the concept of celebrity endorsement, which implies that the usage of a well-known person featured in an advertisement adds value to a brand (Bergkvist et al., 2016). Returning to the picture of the 2010 report, the family portrayed is located in a kitchen with the symbolic meaning of evoking the domestic sphere and therefore passing on a welcoming and comforting feeling. In this instance, symbolic language was employed, relying on the presuppositions and common ground shared by the author and the reader to convey the truth (Fairclough, 1995). Furthermore, the idea of Swedishness as a brand

identity and marketing strategy can be read in the light of the Swedish visual culture explained by Werner et al. (2014) and successfully applied by other international companies such as IKEA (Kristoffersson, 2014). Following this, national identity is reinforced in the concept of "Scandinavian luxury" and "Scandinavian design", mentioned several times throughout the three reports, with a de-escalating intensity from the first to the last report, where the concept is only briefly mentioned. In the reports of 2010, the concept of Scandinavian luxury is defined as "understanding people and offering products that centre on their requirements" while being explained as the "cornerstone" of the company (Year 2010, p. 11). Also, in the 2015 report, in the section dedicated to corporate strategy, the concept of Scandinavian design is accompanied by the phrase "We make you feel special" (Year 2015, p. 6). Werner (2012) analysed the concept of Swedishness in the context of the perception of Volvo in America, highlighting the importance of the feeling evoked by the brand in the company's strategy. Admitley, Styliadis et al. (2020) stated the automotive industry focuses on conveying positive messages regarding their products for what they call "quality and value". In fact, the Volvo brand is perceived to be a premium in the markets outside Sweden, and this can be traced back to the manner in which "Scandinavian design" is communicated and accommodated by the customers and how the Swede is perceived (Styliadis et al., 2020).

### ***Omtanke***

The second report, covering the year 2015, has its main focus on the project called "Omtanke". The project was introduced in the CEO's comment, and it is linked with the company's commitments regarding sustainability; "it summarises Volvo Cars' approach to sustainability" (Year 2015, p. 4). To begin with, I will discuss the naming choice. As it is

explained by the company itself, "Omtanke" is a Swedish word with the meaning of



Figure 8. Report of 2015. (Source: Volvo Cars, 2016, pp. 28-29)

"consideration" or "care" (Year 2015, p. 4). As previously said, the project is named with a word selected from the Swedish language, even though Volvo Cars is an international company, under Chinese ownership, with English as a corporate language. Also, an image of a woman portraying the Swedish traits previously

described (figure 8) accompanies the introduction of "Omtanke", reinforcing the idea of Swedishness (Year 2015, pp. 28-29).

Also, in the CEO's comment, the name of the project is communicated with the following sentence: "The programme has been christened "Omtanke" (Year 2015, p. 4). The word "christened" carries a particular connotation, being associated with religious practices such as the Christian initiation of baptism. The use of the word "christened" might suggest an idea of sacredness, consequently bestowing credibility on the project. According to Teck Hui (2008), CSR reporting can be seen as a "philanthropic act" (p. 460) aimed at enhancing the liability of the company. Also, the wording choice of "christened" could indicate a selected target audience of people belonging to the Christian world. As a practice, discourse shapes and it is shaped by a specific social order (Fairclough, 1992), and consequently, the usage of a word conveying such a connotative meaning might construct a certain representation transmitted by the company.

Moreover, in the project's presentation, the 17 sustainable development goals are mentioned, quoting "we believe that some of the issues Omtanke covers contribute toward

specific SDGs" (Year 2015, p. 31), reproducing a general knowledge within the text (Fairclough, 1992). As argued by Hilsdorf et al. (2017), the automotive industry has greatly incorporated the SDGs related to the environmental sphere into its strategy. Further, Omtanke outlined nine objectives connected with sustainability and presented them in the following pages of the report, with the link to the specific SDG indicated on the right bottom through visual representation (Volvo Cars, 2015, p. 31).

### **"Evolution in a Time of Covid-19"**

The third and last report has its main narrative built upon the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Thus, the discourse on the environment assumed a secondary position, positioning the pandemic topic under the spotlight. Consequently, in the report of 2020, Volvo Cars failed to address its commitment to being environmentally responsible, showing a change in environmental discourse. This change of narrative could have represented a fruitful moment for addressing the gravity of the climate crisis, given that a pandemic can be seen as an outcome of environmental degradation. Hence, the report of 2020 could have remarked upon their willingness to take action on their commitment to environmental issues promptly. However, the COVID-19 narrative depicted in the 2020 reports revolves mostly around the preparedness of Volvo Cars to address the unexpected crisis. This choice can be explained as an attempt to address the socially constructed expectations of the public (Shinkle & Spencer, 2012).

The CEO's comments started with: "2020 has undoubtedly been a year of challenges. The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on people, societies and businesses globally" (Year 2020, p. 6). The ongoing pandemic of COVID-19 has had several implications for different spheres of society, including the consequences that negatively impacted the

automotive industry. Volvo Cars stated that the current situation had a toll on the market, on the risk of production suspension and for the overall situation of the employees (Volvo Cars, 2020). Following this, different strategies have been implemented to cope with the new circumstances, as indicated in the CEO's comment (2020). Also, the pandemic is addressed in the CEO's comments and throughout the report, where the response to the critical situation is unfolded within different sections.

The overall report of 2020 presents a different configuration compared to the ones previously analysed. It is possible to notice that the centre of attention shifted to the pandemic and its effects on the business and corporate spheres in this last report. Thus, the discourse on the environment fades into the background.

We do not exist in a vacuum. Our industry is undergoing a shift as technology, consumer preferences and trends are changing, and 2020 reminded us of the fragility of life on our planet. To remain successful as a company, we must evolve and find new business opportunities that provide an answer to the questions of today. (Year 2020, p. 14)

The above text is retrieved from the section where the highlights of the report are presented. In the previous two reports (2010 and 2015), the sections were dedicated to the introductions of the two main thematics ("One Tonne Life" and "Omtanke"). Thus, it reveals the significant switch in communication strategy during the drafting of the 2020 report, choosing to present the health crisis as a primary issue. The lexical choices of "evolve" and "provide an answer", presented in the section provided above, display the willingness of the company to take care of its employees and customers during this situation of "shift", "fragility," and "display itself as a protector" (Jindřichovská & Eckert, 2022). Further in the

report, other examples can be seen in "mitigate," "dealing with," "mitigating the impact" (Year 2020, p. 39), and "unfortunate interruption" (Year 2020, p. 40), all terms addressing the role that the company has decided to perform. Mandl and Reis (2022) argued that different wording choices have distinct effects on the public concerning communication in health crises. Also, they identified patterns of language used during the pandemic based on the context in which they operate, the narrative they want to create, and the business's direction (Mandl & Reis, 2022).

It is clear that the company has decided to focus its attention on the ongoing pandemic and that this discourse has taken the lead in depicting the environmental question in the 2020 report. As a consequence, information related to the environment plays a secondary role in the report. According to Jindřichovská and Eckert (2022), corporations used the coronavirus pandemic as a strategy to show their resiliency during these challenging times, demonstrating the ability to provide for the community, therefore, adopting it as a tool for empowering the company. In this manner, attention was drawn to the response to the health crisis and taken away from addressing impelling environmental issues. Instead, the company claimed that they "must evolve and find new business opportunities that provide an answer to the questions of today" (Year 2020, p. 14), rather than concentrating on dealing with the environmental questions, in order to address the "fragility of life on our planet" (Year 2020, p. 14), which is strictly connected with CO2 emissions and the automotive industry, they emphasised the COVID-19 response.

### **“Answering to the Capitalistic Call”**

A minor but consolidated theme has been identified within the three reports. This topic covers areas close to the core values of the company and is interconnected with the sector

in which it operates.

First of all, the reports are gravitating around the economic sphere. Wolff et al. (2020) suggest that, within the automotive industry, attention to the environment has increased following the financial crisis of 2008. Stefanoni and Voltes-Dorta (2021) called attention to the fact that one of the aftermaths of the financial crisis was intensifying pressure related to sustainability. An instance of this can be seen in the greater attention given to the environment, as shown by the remarkable reduction in emissions after the year 2008 (Volvo Cars, 2012, p. 3).

Following Volvo Cars' report, the GRI framework, the concept of the triple bottom line, and Brundtdal's definition of sustainability, it is easy to understand the interdependent relationship between the environment and the economic level. For instance, the first report of 2010 outlined:

Following a number of years during which the climate question topped the political and media agenda, interest in the issue faded over the course of 2010. This is not to suggest that the issue has become less urgent, on the contrary. But the widespread disappointment after the Copenhagen Climate Conference, combined with the debate surrounding the UN's climate panel and the repercussions of the financial crisis, meant that the climate issue gained less media coverage than previously. However, the year ended in success at the Cancún Climate Change Conference. As a result, there is still potential to reach an agreement covering the majority of global emissions at next year's summit meeting in South Africa. (Year 2010, p. 6)

In the quoted text, it is possible to notice how the financial situation has undermined the environment's attention. In fact, the financial crisis had an impact not only on the

automotive industry globally but also on the Swedish level, culminating with the acquisition of Volvo Cars by Geely Holding (Balcet et al., 2012). Different references have been recognised in connection with the United Nations SDGs, such as the conferences held in Copenhagen, Cancún and South Africa. Also, the text fragment above indicated the socio-cultural implications of the communication and choices of language, structuring the discourse in a certain direction (Fairclough, 1995). In the report of 2015, with the "Omtanke", the relationship with the economy is clear as the project displays its values as "the core of our business and of our approach to sustainability" (Year 2015, p. 29). Moreover, the concept of circular economy (CE) summarises the meeting point between the economy, and the environment and it is central in the reports, as shown in the report of 2020:

Another area of attention is the circular economy, a philosophy that aims to reduce waste and keep products and materials in use for a longer period. We are actively pursuing more sustainable materials in our cars, together with selected suppliers, while we have a clear plan for dealing with electric car batteries after their first use inside a car to minimise their impact on the environment. (Year 2020, p. 40)

The concept of CE has been in the spotlight for its ambiguity in recent years (Corvellec et al., 2022; Kirchherr et al., 2018; Murray et al., 2017). In spite of the fact that the circular economy considers the concept of optimising resource use and aims to forestall waste, it has its roots in consumption and capitalism. Thus, different questions can be raised. Murray et al. (2017) discuss the blurred connection between the economy and the environment, investigating how CE could lead to a more sustainable environment. On the other hand, Corvellec et al. (2022) defined CE as a "hypothetico-normative (but self-serving) utopia" (p.

429), pointing out the lack of clarity that is attributed to the term. In particular, the concept of CE is constructed on inaccurate notions that do not consider the limitations of the resources used in the process (Corvellec et al., 2022). Also, the implementation of such a model is, at present, purely ideal, lacking a defined plan of action (Kirchherr et al., 2018). Moreover, CE reproduces the dynamics of power as a tool used to induce the consumer to follow a fixed pattern in order to make a change and act more sustainably (Fuchs et al., 2016), despite the foundation upon which it is built being feeble.

## Conclusions

The aim of this study was to critically examine the construction of environmental discourse in the reports on sustainability issued by Volvo Cars in the years of 2010, 2015, and 2020. Considering the significant steps made in relation to the environmental questions and climate change along with the increasing attention to sustainability over the last decade, industries have adopted a green approach to their business and, therefore, within their corporate communication. Du et al. (2010) argued that CSR reports commonly feature different societal issues and that this commitment is articulated through choices of communication. The narration of environmental themes might lead to emotional involvement and therefore be strategically employed to create engagement. De Burgh-Woodman and King (2013) claimed that the use of symbolic imagery involves the readers, shifting the focus away from the company's environmental agenda to the narrative employed.

Through an investigation of the language strategies and the socio-cultural and historical background, the three-dimensional method by Fairclough (1992, 1995, 2001) served as the lens of analysis. Thanks to the nature of this methodology, it was possible to explore the reproduction of power relations within language, considering the interconnection of text, discourse, and social practices (Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 1995, 2001). Hence, the results show that Volvo Cars' approach to communication within the reports has adapted to the context surrounding the firm. Also, the discourses observed in the reports mirror and are influenced

by the structure of Swedish society and the self-representation and nation-branding of Sweden as synonyms for positive traits (Pamment & Cassinger, 2018), such as green (Grieger, 2012) and good quality (Stylidis et al., 2020). Thus, the idea of Sweden has been employed as part of a marketing strategy by different brands (Kristoffersson, 2014). The attention given to the environmental sphere within the reports has experienced rapid growth, in accordance with the worsening of the climatic situation worldwide and the increased engagement of Swedish society in climate issues (Heidenblad, 2018).

Environmental choices and approaches are aligned with the goals set by the UN and the Ministry of the Environment of Sweden on the matter of reducing global emissions, and they are directly mentioned within the reports. The study also showed how external circumstances such as the financial crisis and COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the disclosure of corporate information. Hence, validating the assumption of Fairclough (1995) that "constant and often dramatic change affects many domains of social life" and might "historicize" the information during "particular historical conditions" (p. 19). Moving forward, it is expected that information-delivery will evolve in parallel with societal dynamics, adapting to new business and public needs. The study reveals that the image of Sweden and its favourable reputation are often stories constructed on a commonly accepted myth (Hysing, 2014; Hübinette & Lundström, 2014; Ideland, 2018).

This study has shown that Volvo Cars discursively address four analysis themes within the three reports. The themes have been identified in: (1) "The (heterosexual) family as environmental heroes"; (2) "Leveraging the power of Swedishness"; (3) "Evolution in a time of Covid-19" and (4) "Answering to the capitalistic call".

(1) The representation of the average family is a recurring theme detected in all three

reports. The image of “family” can bring different connotations. First of all, the concept of family is portrayed as the main actor in reducing GHG emissions. Thus, the symbolisation of the average family represents a shift in responsibility from the company, which elides their environmental commitments. Additionally, the concept of family represents the common imaginary of Sweden as a family-oriented country, which is considered a distinguishing characteristic of the average Swede, and thus it recreates the idea of what it is to be Swedish. Moreover, it symbolises the idea of "care"; thus, the family personifies one of Volvo Cars’ core values.

(2) The concept of Swedishness is an underlying narrative acting as a guarantor of the company’s commitment to sustainability, relying on the association of Sweden with positive beliefs, e.g., being an environmental frontrunner. Hence, revolving around the notion of Sweden using the nation-branding strategy.

(3) The COVID-19 theme is presented as a narrative to divert the attention of the readers from the sustainable agenda. Also, focusing on the prompt organisational response helps convey the idea of a careful company due to the fact that the outbreak of the pandemic has had a huge impact on the industry, which suffered on different levels.

(4) The discourse around environmental commitment is often presented in relation to the economic domain. The automotive industry is strictly connected to the concept of profitability, which highlights the complicated relationship with responsibility.

In summary, this research presented a tentative response to the under-examined field of Sweden as a nation-brand in constructing environmental sustainability. The study on the

automotive company Volvo Cars exhibited an example of how the concept of Sweden is applied in communicating sustainable choices.

## **Limitations**

Due to the entity of my final project, a limited number of reports have been appointed for the study. Future research could consider each of the reports published in the time span of 2010-2020, having a more accurate picture of the changes that have occurred in the way of communicating Volvo Cars' environmental engagement. Moreover, owing to time constraints, the methodology selected has been limited to the CDA by Fairclough without considering employing interviews, which might have been beneficial for understanding and interpreting communication strategies.

## **Contribution and Further Studies**

This project contributes to previous research debating the importance of communication strategies in corporate reporting (Du et al., 2010; Sukitsch et al., 2020) and Swedish nation-branding (Kristoffersson, 2014; Pamment & Cassinger, 2018). Also, it remarks upon the discussion that society has an impact on the way of conveying information (Hansen, A. 2011). Moreover, it partially adds to the relatively new field of research affected by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic and its effects on corporate reporting (Mata et al., 2021).

A recommendation for future studies would be to consider a more elevated number of reports within the company, with the intent to follow the variation yearly. Furthermore, the research could be implemented with interviews of individuals working at the analysed company, giving an inside view of the communication strategies employed. In addition, a

comparison with other multinational companies within the same territory, such as Volvo Group and Volvo Truck, might also be beneficial.

### **Practical Implications**

Based on the findings previously presented, this study suggests the following practical implications. By giving particular consideration to inclusivity and representation in CSR reporting, practitioners can better communicate the company's conduct while raising equality in the way information is presented. Also, considering the aggravation of the climate crisis and the increasing significance of the environmental question, practitioners can direct their efforts primarily towards the environmental sphere and the commitment of the company to acknowledge their responsibility.

Thus, practitioners can raise the quality of their reports, contributing to straightening their bond and impact in the community. This study can represent a valuable input for the drafting of future reports, enhancing their dedication to CSR.

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