

Climate Crisis: Just Another Annual Report

An Impression Management Discourse Analysis of Organizational Decarbonization in Corporate Disclosures

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Abstract

This paper investigates the discursive strategies involved in communicating carbon targets, analysing 27 publicly available corporate reports of five major Swedish firms – Atlas Copco, Essity, H&M, Scania, & Skanska – from 2019 to 2023. This period captures the increasing adoption and standardisation of carbon emission reduction targets with respect to the disclosing firms. The analysis is framed by organizational discourse theory, applying an adjusted typology of impression management strategies (Dunne et al., 2021) to the firms' decarbonization communications. Four aggregate themes emerge from this analysis, conveying the following impressions: (1) *We are climate leaders*, (2) *We have embarked on a climate journey*, (3) *We trust the science*, and (4) *Underperformance is not our fault - We will perform in the long term*. Altogether, this study addresses the impression management research gap in carbon accounting, demonstrating the discursive strategies involved in communicating organizational climate work to stakeholders. Furthermore, these findings contribute to critical research understandings of the translational process of climate change in corporate disclosures.

Keywords Carbon Accounting, Impression Management, GHG Emissions Reporting, Discourse Analysis, Corporate Sustainability, Environmental Communication

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1. Introduction

“The increasing sophistication of climate science reinforces the catastrophic implications of ‘business as usual’ for a twenty-first-century world. [...] The worst-case scenarios paint an ‘unimaginable’ vision of large tracts of Earth rendered uninhabitable, the collapse of global food production, the acidification of the oceans, substantial sea-level rises, and storms and droughts of growing intensity – a literal hell on Earth [...] And yet how do we choose to respond? Tangible political action remains limited to rhetorical flourishes against a background of even greater fossil fuel exploitation.” (Wright & Nyberg 2015)

With the goal to mitigate the impact of global warming, the Paris Agreement (UNFCCC, 2015) was adopted, representing a historic milestone in the combat against the existential challenge of climate change. The aim of this legally binding international treaty is to limit the rise in global temperatures to within 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, a goal to be achieved through a historic reduction of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. As the climate crisis intensifies, so does the urgency for private businesses to align with the Paris Agreement by decarbonizing.

Indicative of this urgency, non-financial reporting standards have become increasingly sophisticated (Wagenhofer, 2024), and institutional and stakeholder pressures for enhanced Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) transparency have intensified (Lee & Raschke, 2023). Consequently, there has been a substantial uptick in corporate communications centered on climate work (Gulluscio et al., 2020). This increased discursive focus on the ways in which organizations engage with climate change has hence spurred a surge of research interest in carbon accounting. Carbon accounting is a distinct discipline within sustainability reporting that encompasses the disclosure, management, performance, and assurance of carbon emissions (He et al., 2022), and has thus gained prominence as a crucial field that can help companies align with broader environmental sustainability goals.

To achieve this decarbonization, corporations are increasingly engaging with external organizations like the Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi) - a carbon institution established in 2015 with the intent to help companies set emission reduction targets (Science Based Targets, 2015). The SBTi is a driving force of organizational carbon target setting through its creation of Science Based Targets (SBTs), which aim to create alignment between the Paris Agreement and the SBTi-admitted firms (Gieseckam et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the SBTi has drawn criticism from scholars like Tilsted et al. (2023), who argue that it not only wields significant

political and economic influence, but that this influence is obfuscated through its common portrayal in organizational discourses as objective and purely scientific. Accordingly, the SBTi's emphasis on techno-economic assessments is suggested to limit the scope of potential decarbonization strategies, shaping expectations for transition pathways in a specific way that benefits incumbent companies (Tilsted et al., 2023). Moreover, Tilsted et al. criticism extends to the flexibility afforded to firms in setting and meeting SBTs, a flexibility that is suggested to effectively shield the adhering firms from public scrutiny. These critiques hence underscore the importance of critical engagement with how corporations discursively navigate the political dimensions of the SBTi in their climate work.

Beyond criticism of specific carbon institutions, researchers have studied broader political dimensions of carbon accounting as a discourse within the business environment, specifically within discourse-focused analysis of organizational translations of climate change (Wright & Nyberg, 2016). In their multiple-case study, Wright & Nyberg argue that in the translation process of climate change into business operations, firms often regress over time to treat climate change as business-as-usual, i.e. mundane, comfortable concerns to be addressed through incumbent business models rather than transformative climate action. This regression, Wright & Nyberg continue, constrains the organization's ability to make meaningful environmental contributions, hence constituting a significant critique of corporate climate work. Permeating the literature on organizational environmental work in carbon accounting is thus this highlighted significance of furthering critical engagement with corporate carbon discourses.

Thereby, the grand challenge of climate change has spurred research interest into carbon accounting, while regulatory initiatives like the Paris Agreement are putting pressure on organizations to decarbonize. Hence, carbon target setting has become a predominant method for organizations to engage with climate work (Gulluscio et al., 2020; He et al., 2022; M. T. Lee & Raschke, 2023). Meanwhile, the discourses surrounding carbon target setting in corporate communications have been suggested to require additional critical engagement (Tilsted et al., 2023; Wright & Nyberg, 2016), aimed at improving the understanding of the organizational translations of climate change. In this light, the distinct lack of research within carbon accounting on the actual discourse that companies use to communicate their targets and climate initiatives garners attention. Consequently, the following questions remain to be engaged with in literature:

1. *How do companies employ discursive strategies in their corporate communications to influence perceptions of their carbon emission targets and initiatives?*
2. *What broader organizational and political implications arise from these perceptions?*

This paper sets out to explore these questions qualitatively, through an investigation of the discursive strategies involved in communicating carbon targets. To achieve this purpose, we conduct discourse analysis on the corporate disclosures of five major Swedish firms – Atlas Copco, Essity, H&M, Scania, & Skanska – using the annual and sustainability reports from 2019 to 2023. This period captures the increasing adoption and standardisation of carbon emission reduction targets, as previously signified through the popularisation of SBTs. The analysis utilises impression management theory, which is the strategic practice to craft or preserve a desired organizational image while avoiding undesirable attributes (Bolino et al., 2008). In this sense, this theory provides an exemplary fit to the purpose of understanding how organizations shape perceptions of their decarbonization work through discursive strategies. In practice, we apply an adjusted typology of impression management strategies, based on the work of Dunne et al. (2021), mapping the discursive strategies underlying the selected firms' environmental communications through analysis of corporate disclosures.

The result of this analysis is the distillation of four aggregate discursive themes aimed at enforcing certain impressions of the organization's climate work: (1) *We are climate leaders*, (2) *We have embarked on a climate journey*, (3) *We trust the science*, and (4) *Underperformance is not our fault - We will perform in the long term*. This identification of strategic mechanisms behind decarbonization communications contributes to existing literature by providing a nuanced understanding of how narrative techniques can influence the perceived legitimacy and effectiveness of corporate environmental actions. These findings echo previous discourse studies in carbon accounting, by scholars such as Milne et al. (2009) and Cho et al. (2012), regarding the relevance of corporate sustainability discourse projections, however through the specific context of carbon targets. By doing so, it adds a critical layer of insight into the interplay between corporate communication, stakeholder perceptions of climate work, and discursive strategies. Thus, this thesis bridges existing knowledge gaps in carbon accounting by providing nuanced, critical engagement mapping the impression management strategies used by organizations when communicating climate work, setting the stage for further research into the elucidation of the discursive strategies involved in organizational carbon communications.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sustainability Accounting

Accounting serves as a language for conveying a business's financial information and performance (Bloomfield, 2008). Unlike language standards, however, accounting standards are typically legally binding, exerting significant influence over internal and external communication strategies within organizations (Angeloni, 2016). Moreover, accounting competes with other forms of organizational performance measurement, hence being operationally relevant (Lowe & Koh, 2007). These recognitions highlight the importance of accounting as a technical discipline, shaping social and institutional imperatives within firms (Lounsbury, 2008).

As stakeholder interest in environmental, social, and governance (ESG) dimensions grows, sustainability accounting and its institutionalisation emerges as a crucial field, reflecting the material value of ESG activities to businesses (Contrafatto, 2014; Killian, 2010). Sustainability accounting involves the disclosure of non-financial information that constitute organizational performance, emphasizing the ESG impact of the reporting organization (Hörisch et al., 2020). In accordance with this development, European companies now face new non-financial reporting standards, as introduced by the European Commission and the European Financial Reporting Advisory Group (European Parliament and Council, 2022), exemplifying the increased regulatory pressure for sustainability accounting, and necessitating organizational adaptation to meet institutional demands for non-financial reporting (Giner & Luque-Vílchez, 2022). As previously established, this standardization process of sustainability accounting extends beyond accounting functions, impacting strategic business decisions and corporate communication strategies with stakeholders.

The ways in which sustainability reporting impacts strategic decisions and stakeholder communication are suggested to be multifaceted. For instance, the historical differences in perspectives on sustainability within organizational processes significantly shape the implementation of strategic sustainability initiatives today (Frost & Rooney, 2021). In this sense, integrating non-financial data into standard accounting activities broadens performance metrics for decision-making and establishes new benchmarks for communicating business strategies with stakeholders (Lee & Wu, 2014). Moreover, sustainability reporting has adopted characteristics from financial reporting, perpetuating attributes that prioritize profit-seeking

(Jollands et al., 2015). Hence, balancing financial and non-financial interests is an integral part of translating sustainability work into business strategy and in subsequent communications with stakeholders. This balance is especially evident in emerging research on environmental factors material to organizational work. In the realm of environmental sustainability reporting, there is a notable emphasis on climate change risk and mitigation as a dominant paradigm (Gulluscio et al., 2020; Solomon et al., 2011). As organizations strive to address climate change concerns and meet stakeholder expectations, carbon accounting thus plays a crucial role in quantifying environmental impacts and informing strategic decisions towards improved environmental sustainability.

2.2 Carbon Accounting

Carbon accounting has emerged as a distinct field in sustainability accounting, concerning the disclosure, management, performance, and assurance of carbon emissions (He et al., 2022). Early carbon accounting literature focused on the implementation of carbon emission trading systems at a corporate level, and in international and national contexts. The primary question concerned by carbon accounting researchers was how the valuation and volatility of different valuation systems for carbon emissions created difficulties in establishing global carbon accounting standards (Cook, 2009). The adoption of the Paris Agreement at COP-21 outlined a sizeable development at the international level by recognizing the importance of developing global systems of climate accountability to mitigate environmental risks associated with climate change (UNFCCC, 2015; Falkner, 2016). Following this shift, as climate-related risks have an increasingly salient impact on corporate assets, the academic focus has moved away from carbon allowance valuations towards carbon disclosure in practice (Solomon et al., 2011).

Carbon Disclosure

Carbon disclosure focuses on the establishment of effective and transparent regulation processes for carbon measurements and controls (Luo et al., 2013). A multitude of explanatory factors for understanding corporate carbon disclosure have been identified, including external pressures from regulatory, institutional, economic and social actors, (Alrazi et al., 2016; Bebbington et al., 2008; Freedman & Jaggi, 2005; Ott et al., 2017; Rankin et al., 2011) and firm-specific characteristics related to governance, financial performance and managerial expertise (Elsayih et al., 2018; Hollindale et al., 2019; Liesen et al., 2015; Luo & Tang, 2014; Ott et al., 2017). The quality of carbon disclosures has been another area of concern for researchers. Specifically, the issue of incomplete or otherwise inadequate technical details in

corporate carbon has been suggested to highlight the need for regulatory guidelines (Kolk et al., 2008). Finally, carbon disclosure is suggested to be achieved primarily through communicative material in the annual report and sustainability report, documentation related to corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate strategy, and through third-party channels such as participation in the Carbon Disclosure Project survey (He et al., 2022). Hence, through analysis of these documents, communication strategies employed by the firm disclosing carbon emissions can be produced, enhancing transparency.

Carbon Management

Carbon management has been defined as the practices organizations implement to mitigate operational GHG emissions (Hartmann et al., 2013). Previous studies include both descriptive research, focusing on carbon management practices and their institutionalization, as well as research on the factors influencing carbon management (Bui & Fowler, 2019; Vesty et al., 2015). Carbon accounting can thus constitute valuable managerial tools to evaluate carbon-related performance, perform green projects and capital budgeting, enforce decarbonisation, and adapt to mitigate climate-related risks (Kumarasiri & Gunasekarage, 2017; K. H. Lee & Wu, 2014; Linnenluecke et al., 2015; Ratnatunga & Balachandran, 2009). The role of regulatory pressures may be closely interlinked with carbon management practices, as regulations that impact the economic interests of an organization, like target setting incentives for emission mitigation, have been found to enhance the usage of carbon management accounting techniques (Kumarasiri & Jubb, 2016). Emission target setting has been of especial research interest as a tool for carbon management, due to its widespread adoption (Ioannou et al., 2016).

Carbon Performance

Carbon performance concerns the efficiency, efficacy, and effectiveness of organizations at controlling carbon emissions (He et al., 2022). The reliability and comparability of GHG emission measurements can vary significantly based on the chosen estimation method, particularly regarding selected emission scopes, aggregation bases, and boundary-setting (Bowen & Wittneben, 2011; Cooper & Pearce, 2011; Milne & Grubnic, 2011; Young, 2010). Furthermore, the purpose of the carbon performance metric is context-dependent, as GHG emission can be evaluated as an absolute metric or in relation to other units of production as efficiencies, or as comparisons of how these metrics change over time (Busch & Hoffmann, 2011). In support of this conditionality, carbon performance has been found to have a non-linear relationship with a firm's financial performance (Broadstock et al., 2018). Hence, caution

should be applied when attempting to interpret and extrapolate from self-reported carbon emission data, as the complexity involved when producing carbon performance data might reduce data comparability and reliability.

Carbon Assurance

Finally, carbon assurance has emerged as a practice aimed at assessing the accuracy and reliability of GHG emission information (Simnett et al., 2009). Compared to financial auditing, carbon assurance differs in multiple aspects: its legal and regulatory basis, the degree of organisational participation, the materiality threshold, the required competencies of auditors, the accounting processes, and the users of the assurance reporting (Olson, 2010). Previous studies on carbon assurance have found that companies with legitimacy threats have a higher likelihood of obtaining carbon assurance, to indicate carbon disclosure credibility and mitigate illegitimacy risks related to GHG emissions (Datt et al., 2018). In recent years, the concept of audit quality has gained traction in carbon assurance, similarly to how it previously developed in financial accounting (DeFond & Zhang, 2014). This development coincides with the creation of multi-stakeholder carbon institutions, like the Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi), that focus on carbon target setting as a means of reliably reducing GHG emissions.

Carbon Targets

Carbon targets constitute measurable, long-term commitments for carbon policies aiming to limit the extent of climate change (Ioannou et al., 2016). Carbon target setting has emerged as an integral organizational practice, used to formulate firm-specific decarbonization strategies, with the hope of improving environmental sustainability (He et al., 2022). In this sense, carbon targets encompass an integral tool in the global response to climate change (Bui & Fowler, 2019). Science Based Targets (SBTs) denote carbon targets set in alignment with the Paris Agreement, limiting global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels by halving GHG emissions every decade, until reaching net-zero GHG emissions in 2050 (IPCC, 2022). SBTs are approved by the SBTi and have emerged as an increasingly common method for firms to engage in climate work, reflecting the increasing institutionalization of carbon accounting (Gieseckam et al., 2021).

2.3 Institutionalising Carbon Accounting

The Greenhouse Gas Protocol

Initiated in 2001 by the WBCSD and WRI, the Greenhouse Gas Protocol marked a significant step in global carbon accounting institutionalization. It aimed to establish a uniform framework for GHG measurement and management across organizations (Green, 2010). The widespread adoption of these standards was driven by the need to minimize transaction costs when exchanging organisational GHG information, potential first-mover advantages originating from being an early adopter of carbon reporting standards, and reputational considerations, as explained by Green (2010). This protocol also introduced the widely adopted GHG emission scope terminology, distinguishing between scope 1 (direct emissions), scope 2 (indirect emissions from purchased energy), and scope 3 (indirect emissions along the value chain) GHG emissions. These definitions, along with subsequent initiatives like the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP) and the SBTi, have become integral to modern corporate carbon reporting.

The CDP & SBTi

Established in 2002, the CDP has evolved into a multinational carbon disclosure platform where companies report their GHG emissions. Participating firms respond to an annual questionnaire regarding their environmental impact and mitigation efforts (CDP, 2024). In collaboration with the WRI, WWF, and UNGC, the CDP launched the SBTi in 2015 to assist companies in setting environmental targets aligned with the scientific consensus on climate change, aiming to limit global warming to 1.5°C as per the Paris Agreement (UNFCCC, 2015). The SBTi provides guidance on transitioning to net-zero emissions by 2050, including setting targets for all three emission scopes and linking executive compensation to emission-related milestones. While lauded for advancing carbon accounting standardization, the SBTi has also faced criticism for obfuscating the political aspects of the climate transition and incumbents in decarbonization efforts as mentioned in the introduction (Tilsted et al., 2023), together with wider discursive criticism of organizational climate work (Wright & Nyberg, 2016).

2.4 Discourse Analysis in Accounting

Discourse encompasses both everyday language use and broader societal examination of language, power, and society (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Within accounting, discourse analysis thus examines how accounting is systematized and used prescriptively. Much of previous discourse research in accounting has occurred within the financial accounting field (Llewellyn & Milne, 2007), providing insights into financial auditing practices, intellectual

capital management, organizational management systems and discourses in corporate annual reports (Frezatti et al., 2014; Khalifa et al., 2007). A specific example of discourse analysis in accounting is provided by Rogers et al. (2011), who analyzed the connection between the tone of earnings announcements and firms involved in disclosure-related litigation, revealing a more optimistic discourse from the sued firms. Hence, discursive analyses have had significant contributions to the financial accounting field.

In the realm of non-financial accounting, researchers have employed discourse analysis to delve into various areas, including CSR reporting and corporate climate change disclosure. Studies by Milne et al. (2009) and Solomon et al. (2011) have contributed to understandings of how companies communicate their CSR initiatives and commitments regarding climate change. Specifically, Milne et al. (2009) found that organizations respond to external sustainability pressures in corporate communications by portraying themselves as leaders in the climate field. Additionally, discourse analysis has been applied to examine crisis management strategies from different perspectives. Cooper & Slack (2015) explore crisis responses through the lens of corporate reporting practices, while Dunne et al. (2021) focus on crisis management from an auditing standpoint, demonstrating the varied applications of discourse theory within the non-financial domain.

Discourse analysis in the narrower realm of carbon accounting is relatively underdeveloped in literature. While some research has explored discursive strategies in sustainability reports, this analysis has primarily been conducted exclusively from the perspective of financial investors (Diouf & Boiral, 2017). Moreover, despite the emergence of carbon targets as a predominant method for businesses to practice carbon management and climate action (Gieseckam et al., 2021), especially with the widespread adoption of SBTs, there remains a significant gap in the literature concerning the discursive strategies involved in communicating these targets and initiatives to stakeholders. Hence, understanding the discourse strategies employed in the communication of carbon targets could enhance transparency in carbon reporting and provide a critical perspective for analyzing organizational climate efforts.

Thus, the following research questions remain unanswered in carbon accounting literature:

- *How do companies employ discursive strategies in their corporate communications to influence perceptions of their carbon emission targets and initiatives?*

- And in the wider context of the corporate translations of climate change: *What broader organizational and political implications arise from these influenced perceptions?*

2.5 Theoretical Framework: Impression Management

Echoing the findings of previous scholars (Cooper & Slack, 2015; Dunne et al., 2021), impression management emerges as an exemplary theory equipped to investigate the discursive strategies involved in organizational communication, helping shed light on these questions. Impression management theory concerns the processes through which an actor attempts to influence the perceptions of another actor through the regulation and control of information in interactions (Goffman, 1959; Goffman, 1967). The theory was initially conceptualized in the individual context, but the framework has since expanded to yield research centered on organizational dynamics. Impression management in the organizational context has been outlined as a strategic practice to craft or preserve a desired organizational image while avoiding undesirable attributes (Bolino et al., 2008). Furthermore, the theory has been suggested to emerge as a vital tool for shaping or revitalizing an organization's perceived legitimacy and is frequently employed by companies to highlight favorable trends rather than unfavorable ones, especially within the sustainability context (Cho et al., 2012).

In the accounting field, impression management theory has been used extensively to conduct discursive analysis of financial statements and other corporate communications, predominantly to understand damage mitigation strategies in times of organizational crises (Aerts, 2005; Patelli & Pedrini, 2014). Annual reports have been suggested to constitute corporate communications of significant credibility in the context of impression management research in financial accounting (Linsley & Kajuter, 2008). In academia, the textual content of annual reports has consequently been extensively studied through the impression management theoretical lens, in addition to visual elements (e.g. graphics and photographs) used to sway stakeholders along crafted narratives (Leung et al., 2015). Accounting reports, through the impression management lens, thus constitute not solely technical tools for reporting, but also wield significant influence as a vehicle for political, social, and economic agendas (Cooper & Slack, 2015).

In non-financial accounting, previous discursive research has found that firms with poorer ESG performance employ more optimistic language and report non-financial metrics with less precision (García-Sánchez et al., 2019). In contrast, other scholars find that optimistic language

in CEO letters is congruent with both past and future financial performance, although they also warn about the impact of impression management on this congruence (Patelli & Pedrini, 2014). From a social responsibility perspective, impression management has also been applied at an aggregate level to sustainability reports, identifying rhetorical tactics and writing styles accompanying non-financial corporate communications (Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015).

Nonetheless, in the narrower context of carbon accounting and carbon targets, there is a distinct absence of research on impression management strategies, especially considering the theory's typical application in response to crises. Applications of impression management to carbon accounting include research on rationalizations of climate change impact for a Canadian firm, focusing on its influence on regulators of carbon policy (Talbot & Boiral, 2015). Another study by the same authors analyzed the quality of climate data in sustainability reports, and consequently identified impression management strategies developed to conceal poor environmental carbon performance (Talbot & Boiral, 2018). Beyond aggregate-level carbon accounting, the role of impression management strategies in shaping discourses on carbon targets through corporate communication is thus yet to be researched.

Impression Management Strategies

Impression management strategies are discursive strategies employed in the pursuit of conveying impressions (Bolino et al., 2008). These strategies have been classified into two major categories: assertive strategies and defensive strategies. Assertive impression management strategies are proactive and attempt to enhance the organization's image in particular ways. In contrast, defensive impression management strategies are reactive and adopted in response to situations that threaten to damage perceptions of the organization. Previous literature has identified a plethora of impression management strategies (Dunne et al., 2021), including the assertive strategies of *enhancement*, *exemplification*, *ingratiation*, *selectivity*, and *self-promotion*. Similarly, multiple defensive IM strategies have been established, including *concealment*, *disassociation*, and *external attribution* (see **Appendix A** for a full list of the 18 strategies and their respective definitions compiled by Dunne et al. (2021)). These strategies offer a lens for analysing the language used by organizations, allowing the impressions conveyed by these strategic choices to be laid out. Hence, the application of impression management strategies as a theoretical lens could fill the research gap on the discursive mechanisms involved in carbon target communications.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design and Approach

The purpose of this study is to address the gap in carbon accounting literature by studying the discursive strategies applied in corporate communications to influence perceptions of carbon emission targets and initiatives. In practice, qualitative analysis of the corporate communications of five major Swedish firms; Atlas Copco, Essity, H&M, Scania, and Skanska over the five-year reporting period 2019 to 2023, was conducted. Although qualitative research in accounting has been suggested to lack support for the generalisability of quantitative methods, this view has been opposed, suggesting qualitative generalisation as a preferred means of engaging with accounting practice and discourses (Parker & Northcott, 2016). Hence, we find support in accounting literature for a qualitative approach in exploring this research question. Since the focus of this study is how reporting organizations influence audience perceptions discursively, particularly on communications of carbon targets, impression management emerges as a qualitative, language-based research approach that appropriately systematizes this analysis. In addition, previous research aiming to investigate similar questions in sustainability accounting have opted for the same theorization, providing further support for our selection of impression management theory (García-Sánchez et al., 2019; Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015; Talbot & Boiral, 2018).

This study applies a typological approach to impression management strategies inspired by the compilation work of Dunne et al. (2021) to analyse carbon target discourse in corporate communications. A fundamental precondition for discourse analysis is that language material can be examined as evidence of phenomena beyond the singular individual or organization (Taylor, 2013). In this sense, the examination and identification of impression management strategies applied by one firm could provide evidence for the implicit emergence of broader dominant discursive strategies within carbon emission target communications, developing the view of qualitative generalisability. To ensure that our paper adheres to scientific best practices and to ensure data quality, we emphasise the vital role of reflexivity regarding our choice of methodology by providing comprehensive descriptions of our case selection, data collection and data analysis processes throughout this section.

In practice, the study was conducted as a longitudinal, multi-organizational design. The motivation behind conducting a longitudinal study was to examine and control for potential

shifts in discourse strategies over time. The recency of the selected reporting years: from 2019 to 2023, in combination with the emergence and popularization of carbon accounting initiatives during that time, particularly the SBTi (Gieseke et al., 2021), implies that firms have had to initiate or adjust carbon target communication strategies in novel ways. Consequently, by adopting a multi-organizational approach within the same national context, we gain comparable legislative and market-based preconditions over the period and can thus develop relations in discourses and impression management strategies across the surveyed organizations.

3.2 Case Selection

The selection of companies - Atlas Copco, Essity, H&M, Scania, and Skanska - was based on fulfilment of several criteria. Firstly, they are large (>100 billion SEK revenue and >10,000 employees in 2023) firms publicly listed in Sweden, significant players in their respective industries, and have substantial GHG emissions (reported absolute sum of scope 1 and 2 emissions above >50,000 tonnes CO₂ equivalents each year of the period). The fulfilment of these criteria together, encompasses strong stakeholder interests in the carbon work of these firms. Furthermore, by including companies from a diverse set of industries we aim to obtain a multifaceted understanding of existing discourse patterns regarding carbon emission targets. Secondly, every chosen company has a long (>5 year) history of sustainability reporting and has worked with GHG reduction targets over the full period. As of 2023, each company was committed to SBTi and hence aligned with broader decarbonization targets. Therefore, the selected firms have produced abundant textual data to analyse, allowing us to scrutinize a spectrum of discourses surrounding carbon emission targets and their influence on stakeholders. An overview of the selected organizations carbon emission targets follows.

Table 1: Overview of GHG Emission Reduction Targets (Scope 1 & 2)

Company	SBTi Approval Year	Reduction Target	Baseline	Path
<i>Atlas Copco</i>	2021	46% by 2030	2019	1.5 °C
<i>Essity</i>	2018	35% by 2030	2016	Well below 2 °C
<i>H&M</i>	2022	56% by 2030	2019	1.5 °C
<i>Scania</i>	2020	50% by 2025	2015	1.5 °C
<i>Skanska</i>	2021	70% by 2030	2015	1.5 °C

Source: Science Based Targets (2022)

Table 2: Overview of GHG Emission Reduction Targets (Scope 3*)

Company	SBTi Approval Year	Reduction Target	Baseline	Path
Atlas Copco	2021	28% by 2030	2019	Well below 2 °C
Essity	2018	18% by 2030	2016	Well below 2 °C
H&M	2022	56% by 2030	2019	1.5 °C
Scania	2020	20% per vehicle km by 2025	2015	Well below 2 °C
Skanska	2021	50% by 2030	2020	1.5 °C

*Scope 3 target boundaries differ between firms

Source: Science Based Targets (2022)

Table 1 and **Table 2** provide overviews of the scope 1 and 2, and scope 3 carbon emission reduction targets respectively for the selected firms. As is evident from **Table 1** and **Table 2**, all companies have committed to the SBTi within the last six years, with the majority doing so around 2021, aligning their decarbonization goals with the well-below 2°C ambition at minimum. For **Table 2**, note that the scope 3 targets differ in what scope 3 emission categories were included for calculations. For example, Skanska’s scope 3 target includes only purchased goods and services, fuel and energy-related activities, waste generated in operations, business travel, and the use of sold products (Science Based Targets, 2022). Overall, despite operating in different industries, all companies exhibit similar alignments with decarbonization paths and utilize the SBTi framework to set target for the reduction of GHG emissions.

Atlas Copco: Atlas Copco AB is a Swedish multinational industrial company that manufactures advanced machinery (Atlas Copco, 2024). Since 2003, the firm has integrated sustainability reporting into their annual reports, motivating decarbonization as a strategic priority: “[Atlas Copco is] committed to contributing to a sustainable development and to being part of the transformation to a low-carbon society.” (Atlas Copco, 2024). Beyond this explicit prioritization of decarbonizing, Atlas Copco is an especially intriguing firm to analyse from a carbon target setting perspective due to its heavy technology focus for industrial applications.

Essity: Essity AB is a global provider of hygiene and health products and services and has integrated sustainability into their annual reports since 2017 (Essity, 2024). Their company mission is: *“to break barriers to well-being for the benefit of consumers, patients, care givers, and customers across the globe. As well as for the benefit of society and the planet”* (Essity, 2024). This wider corporate purpose of having a positive environmental makes the firm a suitable subject for this decarbonization-focused study. Additionally, the strong social sustainability health focus of the firm could provide a new approach to carbon target setting discourse compared to the other firms.

H&M: H&M Group is a global fashion and design company who has published sustainability reports since 2002, the longest of any of our selected firms (H&M, 2024). Part of H&M’s corporate strategy is to *“[s]upport a circular fashion industry with net-zero climate impact”* (H&M, 2024). The fast-fashion industry, of which H&M is considered a considerable actor, has been extensively criticised for its negative environmental impact (Niinimäki et al., 2020). H&M thus emerges as an intriguing organization in terms the communication strategies involved in aligning discourses of their carbon target with their corporate strategy.

Scania: Scania Group is a global provider of transport solutions and has integrated sustainability into their annual reports since 2015 (Scania, 2024). Their corporate purpose is *“to drive the shift towards a sustainable transport system, creating a world of mobility that is better for business, society and the environment.”* (Scania, 2024). Anchoring their decarbonization strategy in creating vehicles for improved carbon efficiency in mobility, Scania could therefore provide a distinct approach to communications of carbon targets, nuancing our findings.

Skanska: Skanska Group is a project development and construction company who has published integrated annual and sustainability reports since 2018, starting the latest of observed firms (Skanska, 2024). Skanska describes their climate work in the following way: *“By creating and implementing transformative climate solutions, we drive our business forward and enable our customers to fulfill their sustainability goals.”* (Skanska, 2024). Skanska thus embodies the unique strategic discourses of carbon targets in the construction industry context – an industry they describe as characterised by high carbon dependency.

3.3 Data Collection

The qualitative data acquired in this study consists of textual secondary data excerpted from the respective annual reports of the five selected firms over the five-year reporting period. For H&M, the sustainability performance report was used in 2019 and 2020 to complement the annual report, due to non-integration of the sustainability report in the annual report those years. In total, data was collected from 27 corporate reports over the five-year period, from 2019 to 2023, summing up to 4106 pages. The usage of corporate disclosures as a data source was motivated by the establishment of these disclosures as important signifiers of emerging discourses in the organizational settings, particularly with respect to extra organizational communication (Taylor, 2013).

Searches in these texts were conducted using relevant keywords (e.g. “science-based”, “emission”, “carbon” and “climate”). From these searches, excerpts were collected based on fulfilment of two criteria: the text focuses on environmental sustainability and/or GHG emissions of the firm, and the text is discursively prominent. For example, this excerpt from Skanska’s annual report of 2022 was selected: *“During 2022, we continued our journey towards net-zero carbon emissions, we focused on reducing our own emissions, and made strategic decisions in planning and designing future projects in our property development business.”* (Skanska, 2023). This quote was deemed to address the GHG emissions of the firm, fulfilling the first criterion, and to contain significant discursive themes like the metaphor of climate work as a journey, fulfilling the second criterion. In total, 448 excerpts were collected.

These excerpts were then compiled in Excel, together with information on the year, the firm, the corporate disclosure, and the context they were taken from. Excerpts were then sorted by firm and by year, to provide the basis for comparisons within and across organizations, and within and across years. The collection of excerpts from all 27 corporate disclosures was completed independently before initiating data analysis, to mitigate the risk of data dredging and in accordance with best practice (Taylor, 2013).

3.4 Data Analysis

Our data analysis follows the meaning-oriented content analysis methodology developed by Dunne et. al (2021), allowing a richer investigation that highlights deeper meanings of the analysed text. The initial reading and subsequent excerpt collection was thus followed by a two-

stage coding process. The first stage of the coding process consisted of abductive analysis of the excerpts, classifying the textual passages according to emerging discursive themes. In total, eight themes were identified and used to colour-code the excerpts (for a full list of the eight initial themes, please see **Appendix A**). A single, most prominent theme was associated with each excerpt. After a time gap, this initial coding process was redone as a double-checking mechanism. Where differences in coding had occurred, for 103 excerpts in total, the data was scrutinized to establish the most appropriate themes. For example, the excerpt “*At Scania, sustainability is not something added on top of what we already do. We have always focused on lean work models, efficiency and elimination of waste and as such sustainability is built into the organisation and operations naturally.*” (Scania, 2020) was coded to the theme *Enhancing decarbonization-related capabilities* in the first round, but later coded to the theme *Projecting an image of integrity and environmental responsibility* in the second round. The second theme was settled on as most fitting due to the surrounding context, where engagement with sustainability is described by Scania as the fulfilment of a deeper purpose.

The second stage of the coding process involved mapping our initial coding to the typology of impression management strategies, hence analysing the excerpts in the context of surrounding text to identify underlying discursive strategies (see **Table 3** for the identified strategies and associated definitions). For example, the excerpts that were coded to the discursive theme of *Selective showcasing and framing of climate initiatives* was mapped to the assertive impression management strategy *Selectivity*, defined as “An organization highlights facts that portray it in the best possible light” (Dunne et al. 2021). The excerpts in the initial coding were hence considered to use showcasing and framings to produce a bright view of the organization’s climate initiatives, coinciding with the definition of *Selectivity* as provided.

Table 3: Typology of Impression Management Strategies (adjusted version of Dunne et al.’s 2021 typology, for full version with all impression management strategies, see **Appendix B**).

Assertive IM Strategy	Definition
Enhancement	An organization accentuates the desirability of a positive event for which it was at least partially responsible
Exemplification	An organization projects an image of integrity, social responsibility or moral worthiness
Ingratiation	An organization flatters an audience or expresses similar beliefs and attitudes to the audience

Selectivity	An organization highlights facts that portray it in the best possible light
Self-promotion	An organization promotes its competence, talents and capabilities
Defensive IM Strategy	Definition
Concealment	An organization downplays transgressions by giving them less prominence
Disassociation	An organization distances itself from a negative event
External attribution	An organization attributes negative outcomes to external events or chance factors

Following this two-step coding process, we abstracted our mapping to higher levels of aggregate themes, summarizing the impressions on decarbonization conveyed through these discursive strategies by the reporting firms. **Figure 1** shows an overview of this abstraction process, constituting the product of our analytical work, from initial coding of carbon discourses (see **Appendix A**), through subsequent coding using the typology of impression management strategies (Dunne et al., 2021, see **Table 3**), to the final mapping of aggregate themes.

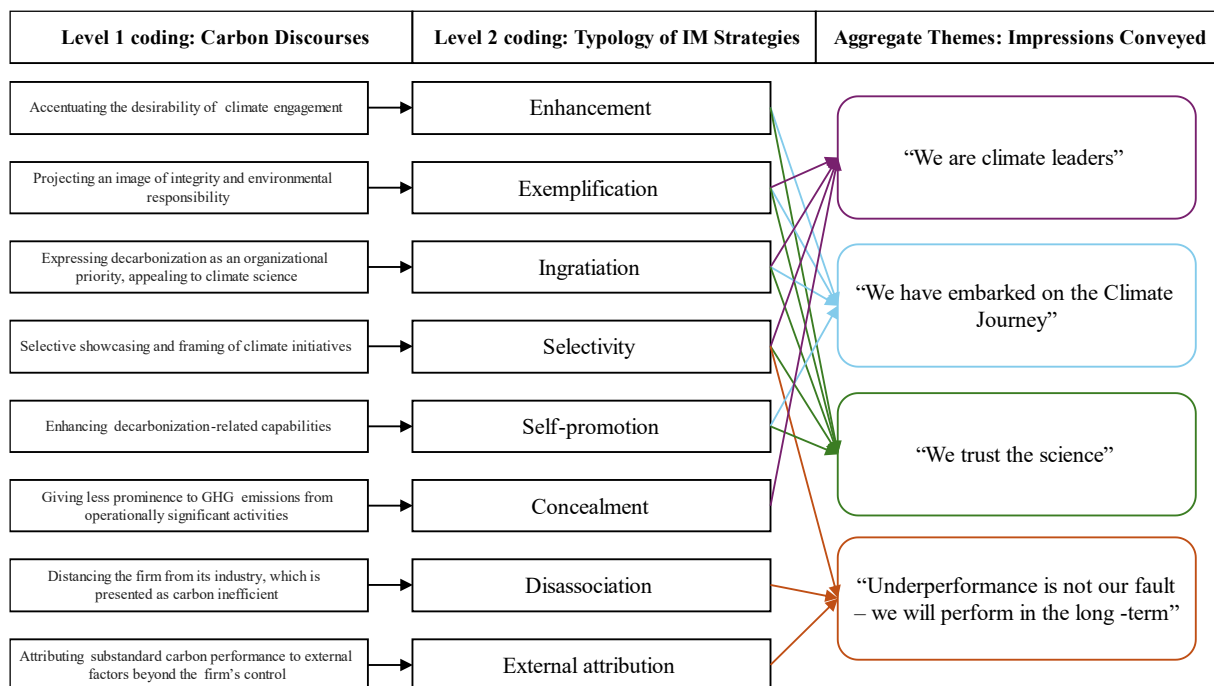


Figure 1: Impression management strategies employed by firms to convey climate impressions.

3.5 Delimitations

This study is delimited in scope in three major ways, aiming to abridge our approach to effectively explore our research question. Firstly, the data used to extrapolate discourses in this study are solely textual, hence excluding visual elements like pictures and graphs. While we

recognize the discursive characteristics of non-textual elements, this delimitation is motivated to prevent double counting (i.e. capturing the same impression management behaviour twice, once in text and once outside), echoing the delimitation of Cooper & Slack (2015). Secondly, our selection of data sources is delimited to corporate disclosures, as deemed appropriate according to Taylor's (2013) recognition of these reports as exemplary documents for discourse analysis in the extra organizational context. Finally, our research interest is focused on the communication of GHG emission targets and scopes, and hence specifically delimited to carbon-related environmental sustainability.

4. Empirical Analysis

In this section, we analyse the carbon targeting excerpts from the annual reports of the selected firms to reveal underlying impression management strategies and illustrate how these strategies convey aggregate perception-shaping themes. Firstly, we explore the discursive techniques involved in positioning the reporting firm as leaders in climate work. Secondly, we introduce the journey metaphor in the context of climate work, identifying its characteristics and the impression management strategies that uphold this discourse. Thirdly, we investigate the discourse of trusting the science in the context of carbon targeting communications. Fourthly, and finally, the ways in which firms explain underperformance in their decarbonization work, are laid out together with the prevalent usage of the future as a source of carbon target realisation.

The analysis will be conducted multi-organizationally - meaning that the focus will be on the employment of impression management strategies with specific firms as indicative examples for aggregate themes. Although a general trend towards increasing technical sophistication in GHG targets was observed for all firms over the time period, especially from the year each firm adopted SBTs, these differences in adoption years were found to not extensively change discursive strategies of carbon reduction targets. Firm-specific differences were similarly prominent at a technical level, for example in what business areas are prioritised in decarbonization and industry-specific contexts, but these differences waned at the discourse level. Rather, a strong degree of similarity in the conveying of climate communications was identified, motivating a standardised approach to exploring the discourses of carbon targets in a cross-organizational fashion.

In summary, by employing the adjusted typology of impression management strategies, as initially compiled by Dunne et al. (2021), we analyse the corporate disclosures of the chosen firms spanning the five-year period, from 2019 to 2023. Our primary research inquiry, how companies employ discursive strategies in their corporate communications to shape perceptions of their carbon emission targets and efforts, will help guide the uncovering of prevalent impression management strategies and the discernment of discursive trends in GHG emission targets articulations.

4.1 Positioning and Leadership

Proactive stance

Positioning and leadership refer to the aggregate theme of firms conveying the impression that they are climate leaders, transforming their industry through carbon efficiency. By positioning, a permeating theme of firms describing themselves as taking a proactive stance with regards to climate change emerges. For example, Essity's 2021 annual report asserts, *"As a global company in hygiene and health, Essity plays a leading role in driving change to reduce the company's climate impact."* (Essity, 2022). Similarly, in Scania's annual report of 2019, the firm declares that: *"As a large player in this industry, we at Scania have taken a clear stance and decided that we want to take a leading role in driving the shift towards a sustainable transport system."* (Scania, 2020). These two excerpts show how Essity and Scania position themselves as spearheading climate work in their respective industries, applying the *exemplification* impression management strategy to achieve the image of proactive climate leadership. There is a slight difference in these excerpts, as Essity claims to already be a climate leader, while Scania claims the aspiration to become one. Nonetheless, two years later in Scania's annual report of 2021, they seem to have achieved their aspiration: *"We continue to push and challenge other stakeholders to follow our lead because we know that we cannot achieve this change alone."* (Skanska, 2022). These examples illustrate the common theme of how companies strategically use *exemplification* in their portrayal of themselves as industry leaders and drivers of change. This trend is reinforced by companies' linguistic choices when describing commitments to carbon projects and targets. Phrases like "innovation" and "leadership" are commonly used with regards to climate work, indicating a proactive stance. The employment of *exemplification* to project an image of integrity and social responsibility with regards to climate work is thus prevalent.

Several other underlying impression management strategies were found to guide companies' discourses of decarbonization ambitions. Firstly, through statements like "*We seize opportunities and manage risks through our sustainability strategy*" (H&M, 2022) from H&M's 2021 annual report, and "*At Skanska, we take a holistic approach to designing and building with fewer emissions, incorporating resource efficiency, circularity, renewable energy, electrification, and digitalization*" (Skanska, 2024) from Skanska's 2023 annual report, a trend of *ingratiation* emerges. This impression management strategy is utilised to reassure readers of the companies' commitment to addressing the climate crisis, aligning with beliefs that emphasise the importance of environmental sustainability. Hence, H&M and Skanska assure their stakeholders through *ingratiation* that they are proactively positioned to manage climate challenges. Additionally, the companies employ *exemplification* to reinforce their image as industry leaders in climate work, emphasising responsibilities to manage risks and take holistic approaches. Thus, through these impression management strategies, the companies aim to project a positive and proactive stance on environmental sustainability, enhancing their reputation and credibility among stakeholders.

The companies' positioning of themselves as proactive sustainability leaders emerged as immensely pervasive. For instance, in the following excerpts H&M asserts their role as a driving force of decarbonization: "*The H&M group accepts responsibility for its part in this and is determined to drive the transition to a fossil-free economy*" (H&M, 2020a), and "*We have set ambitious sustainability goals, which to the greatest possible extent are based on latest science, best practice and knowledge*" (H&M, 2023). These statements strengthen the positioning of companies as leaders of the journey towards net-zero, once again employing *exemplification* to align sustainability with an image of moral responsibility and *ingratiation* to emphasise the scientific support for their climate work. Similar formulations aimed at putting the disclosing firm at the forefront of decarbonization were found in all surveyed disclosures. We have hence observed the widespread adoption of assertive impression management strategies, *ingratiation* and *exemplification* in particular, to discursively position the communicating corporation as a major climate leader in their respective field. Through these discursive mechanisms, this proactive stance on climate change thus enhances the perceived credibility and authority of the firm in addressing environmental challenges, reinforcing an image of commitment to sustainability and creating moral alignment with stakeholder expectations regarding climate innovation.

Magnifying Small Projects

To delve deeper into how companies showcase their innovative capabilities, the tendency of companies to amplify the significance of smaller projects is now explored. In Atlas Copco's 2020 annual report, the firm describes ways in which they decarbonise: *"Atlas Copco undertakes a range of activities to reduce CO2 emissions from energy in operations and transport of goods, such as installing solar panels, buying renewable electricity and avoiding air freight."* (Atlas Copco, 2021). While initiatives like transitioning to renewable energy and selecting carbon-efficient methods of travel can reduce GHG emissions, the report fails to provide the specific impact of these efforts on absolute GHG emissions. Similar general formulations regarding the climate work of the firms were common, for instance in Skanska's annual report of 2019, describing the usage of solar panels in their residential building BoKlok without providing actual calculations on the consequential carbon impact: *"In 2019, BoKlok began equipping all of its new apartment projects in Sweden with solar panels, which will help people reduce their energy costs and carbon emissions"* (Skanska, 2020). These excerpts indicate the usage of the assertive impression management strategy of *selectivity*. By giving prominence to general decarbonization initiatives in their corporate disclosures, the operationally significant GHG emissions are downplayed. This *selectivity* strategy hence allows companies to maintain a positive narrative by implying proactive decision-making, strengthening impact of previously described assertive strategies, even when the extent and impact of the featured climate initiatives remains elusive. By spotlighting small projects and magnifying their importance, attention is diverted from the climate impact of actual operations, highlighting the transitory and innovative capabilities of the firm while enhancing the image of climate leadership.

An additional illustration of this tendency to magnify projects is evident in this statement from Essity's 2020 annual report: *"During 2021, we are starting the production of tissue from wheat straw at our facility in Mannheim, Germany. It is a good example of ground-breaking production that generates a significantly lower climate impact while retaining quality."* (Essity, 2021). In this excerpt, emphasis is placed on future initiatives and their perceived impact, yet concrete measurements of their actual contribution to GHG emissions are notably absent. Furthermore, this *concealment* of current emissions highlights a common discursive strategy of accentuating the significance of upcoming projects without providing quantitative data on their effectiveness in reducing emissions. Hence, this discourse aligns stakeholders' expectations of

companies to demonstrate proactive measures against climate change, overshadowing the lack of transparency regarding the environmental benefits.

In contrast, some firms provide specific data on emissions reduction for certain projects. For instance, Skanska's 2023 annual report describes the environmental benefits of constructing the roof in an airport with wood rather than conventional materials, stating that: "*carbon was reduced by 3,900 metric tons compared with calculations for an all-steel structure*" (Skanska, 2024). In this case, the provided technical details help provide necessary quantifiable data for stakeholders to determine the initiative's climate impact. However, similar showcases that provide specific carbon calculations often lack context regarding the project's overall GHG emissions. For example, critical details such as baseline emissions or the proportion of total emissions reduced by this initiative was omitted. This omission contrasts with Skanska's previous practices, as seen in their 2022 annual report showcasing the Gottorps Hage project, where replacing concrete with slag "*reduc[ed] carbon emissions by 34 percent*" (Skanska, 2023) for the entire project. Hence, *selective* presentations of data can enable companies to highlight their efforts in reducing GHG emissions without offering a comprehensive understanding of the overall impact on their scopes. As a result, organisations are applying strategic *selectivity* discursively to create an impression of proactive engagement with emission reduction initiatives, while sidestepping comparisons to the broader organisational carbon impact.

4.2 The Climate Journey

The journey metaphor of sustainability in business practices has previously been critically researched and found to manufacture an appearance of sustainability engagement, while paradoxically reinforcing unsustainable business-as-usual (Milne et al., 2006). Echoing the findings of Milne et al. (2006), we explore the journey metaphor of sustainability from a climate work perspective, motivated by the persistent usage of the "journey" term across the selected firms during the time frame. In this subsection, we will thus analyse the discourse of climate work as a journey, its characteristics, and explore the impression management strategies involved in sustaining this narrative.

Climate Work as a Journey

In H&M's sustainability report from 2019, the early steps in their decarbonization journey is exemplified by the decoupling of financial growth from emissions growth: *"Our total scope 3 CO₂e emissions were 17,622 kilotonnes. This is a 4% increase from 2018, indicating that we have begun our journey to decouple growth of these emissions from our financial growth (6%)."*^{*} (H&M, 2020b). This climate journey is suggested to have continued to develop, and to have expanded to include several focal areas in their business model, as written in H&M's annual report from 2023: *"Our investments in innovation mean we are taking important steps on our journey /.../ We are continually working to develop our business model in order to add profitable growth while at the same time reducing our energy consumption, increasing the percentage of renewable energy and reducing our climate footprint"* (H&M, 2024). In similar terms, Scania wrote about their climate journey in their annual report from 2022: *"During 2022 Scania also complemented our decarbonisation journey with targets related to the supply chain."* (Scania, 2023). These excerpts show the common metaphorization of decarbonisation work as a journey. The climate journey thus encompasses moving the company from a past origin of higher GHG emissions towards a future destination of carbon efficiency. The term "journey" is described as a continuous and recursive process in which organisations undergo sustained refinements (Milne et al., 2006), in this case related to climate work. Beyond sustainability journeys, this discourse on climate journeys highlights two significant transformations in organisational impression management strategy, as will be developed in this subsection: Firstly, transition work becomes intrinsic to the firm in question, and secondly, the decarbonization process adopts an inherently optimistic and positive tone.

Intrinsic Centering

The discourse of climate journeys intrinsically places the firm in question at the heart of transition work, thus becoming a central actor in the climate transition. In this discourse, the role of the firm is strongly emphasised and the way to progress on environmental issues is through self-discovery. In this sense, the climate journey is one of self-determination and incumbency, as the topic of interest is delimited to the historical, present and future environmental work of the journeying organisation. In consequence, the impression management strategies that follow are similarly self-centred, assertive and anchored in organisational exploration and discovery. Specifically, the *self-promotion* and *exemplification* impression management strategies are observed to be principal communication strategies used to assert the firm as the protagonist of the decarbonization journey.

To illustrate, consider how Skanska describes their decarbonisation journey in their Annual report from 2022: *“During 2022, we continued our journey towards net-zero carbon emissions, we focused on reducing our own emissions, and made strategic decisions in planning and designing future projects in our property development business.”* (Skanska, 2023). This journey is expanded upon in the previous paragraph: *“We remain committed to our climate target and believe that demand for sustainable and climate-resilient buildings and infrastructure will continue to increase.”* (Skanska, 2023). These excerpts show how *self-promotion* is used as an impression management strategy in the context of the climate journey discourse. Climate efficiency in operations is described as an inherent quality of Skanska’s work and acts to anchor decarbonization as a firm-specific activity that creates stakeholder value in response to changing market demand. Similarly, Scania reflects on their climate journey in their 2023 annual report: *“2025 is far from the end of our decarbonisation journey, but rather an important milestone and a time for evaluation as we continue to drive the shift towards a sustainable transport system”* (Scania, 2024). In this excerpt, Scania applies the *self-promotion* strategy to promote climate innovation as a key capability of the firm. In addition, the *exemplification* impression management strategy is employed to project Scania’s moral worthiness as an evolving provider of sustainable transport. Hence, the climate journey employs multiple assertive impression management strategies in combination, particularly *self-promotion* and *exemplification*, to intrinsically centre the reporting organisation at the heart of decarbonization discourse.

Positive and Optimistic Tonality

In the climate journey, carbon work is frequently portrayed in a positive light and with strong hopefulness. Concepts like cost efficiencies, energy savings, and circularity as a business model are used to frame carbon-efficiency as enhancements of offerings. Skanska emphasises this point in their annual report of 2019, noting that *“Often reducing carbon emissions goes hand in hand with improving efficiency and resource efficiency, thus helping to lower costs.”* (Skanska, 2020). Atlas Copco echoes this sentiment, stating that *“Today’s environmental and societal challenges present business opportunities for a company like Atlas Copco.”* (Atlas Copco, 2021). These excerpts show how companies assert control over the climate crisis in discourse, accentuating the desirability of positive opportunities and cost efficiencies. This emphasis on *enhancement* suggests organisations’ GHG reductions and climate action as avenues for growth, enforcing this positive tone. Nuancing this description, firms adopt a more cautious tone when

underlining the potential risks associated with non-achievement of carbon targets. Essity, for instance, underscores that *"Our commitment [to decarbonize] is accompanied by science-based targets for Scope 1, 2 and 3, encompassing our own operations and our entire value chain. Not achieving these targets constitutes a major risk for Essity, potentially resulting in reputational and, consequently, revenue losses"* (Essity, 2024). Notwithstanding, this cautious tone is specifically relegated to future underperformance, which is rendered improbable due to the optimistic tone of the climate journey, as is explored below.

The discourse surrounding climate work as a journey has an underlying optimistic view, in combination with a positive tonality of the firm's decarbonization work. Climate change is rendered to be an immense challenge of existential proportions on a societal scale, yet on the firm-specific scale of the journey, there is an expression of strong optimism regarding the transition in question. In essence, this permeating optimism is summarised as: (1) carbon performance is a strategic priority for our firm, (2) our operations are in line with our targets, and (3) although the climate journey is ongoing, the capabilities acquired throughout this journey are creating value today. An example of this positive tonality and optimism is found in the annual report of Scania from 2020, where its CEO Henrik Henriksson predicts the outcome of their decarbonization process: *"The good news is that we already have most of the elements we need to succeed. We have the right technology, a powerful brand, closeness to customers and amazing people in the Scania family. And we have early on put a stake in the ground with a clear purpose which has developed into a fantastic business asset."* (Scania, 2021). This excerpt illustrates how climate work is expressed by senior management as something to succeed on. The *self-promotion* impression management strategy is constructed through the usage of several positively value-laden words like "amazing", "powerful" and "fantastic", establishing an optimistic view of Scania's climate journey and the firm as central to positive developments. Furthermore, Scania's early prioritisation of decarbonization is described as already becoming a valuable asset, reinforcing point (3) of the climate journey's optimism. The *ingratiation* impression management strategy is also applied in this excerpt to describe the customers' prioritisation of sustainability as central to the decarbonization process.

In other excerpts, this strong optimism in the capabilities of the reporting firm to succeed in their climate journey means that they have the capability to guide others. To illustrate, consider this excerpt from Atlas Copco's annual report from 2022, where the firm's CEO Mats Rahmström states: *"We have a long tradition of focusing on our customers' needs and today*

this includes helping them improve their climate performance. We innovate and develop efficient and low-carbon products, but we can also guide and support our customers on their climate journey.” (Atlas Copco 2023). In this quote, the senior manager appeals to the shared importance attributed to climate performance between Atlas Copco and their customers, hence constituting an *ingratiation* impression management strategy. There is also a suggestion of *self-promotion*, as the firm is described as a leading innovator in the sustainability field and as having the ability to inspire others on their own climate journeys. In summary, the positive and optimistic tonality of the climate journey is achieved through the employment of the assertive impression management strategies *enhancement*, *self-promotion* and *ingratiation* in the discourse of decarbonization work in corporate disclosures.

4.3 Trusting the Science

The theme of “Trusting the Science” represents a prevalent narrative among firms when describing their carbon target setting process. This theme emphasises the scientific and objective characteristics of climate work to lend credibility to the firms' climate goals, especially in connection to external carbon institutions. In this analysis, the description of the SBTi as a source of credibility and the SBTs as the climate science ideal, emerge as central components to the examined discursive material.

Science Based Targets

Consider the appeal to climate science in the following statements: “*Science dictates that we as a society must halve CO2 emissions every decade to meet the global target as defined in the Paris agreement.*” (Scania, 2020) and “*Scientific consensus tells us that to avoid catastrophic effects, we must not go beyond an average global temperature increase of 1.5°C from pre-industrial levels.*” (H&M, 2021b). These excerpts highlight how firms contextualise the importance of climate work with scientific consensus, using science as a basis for the organisation’s carbon reporting. From this basis, SBTs are described as constituting more than carbon target setting, rather signifying the climate leadership and commitment to sustainability of the adhering firm. For example, in Scania’s annual report from 2021, the company writes: “*Our strategic decisions are guided by independent scientific insights, such as the findings of the IPCC report, as well as our own scientific research. Our carbon reduction targets have been approved by the Science Based Targets initiative.*” (Scania, 2022). In a previous annual report, Scania motivates their dedication to decarbonise by appealing to science: “*Scania is an*

engineering company, so listening to science is second nature to us.” (Scania, 2020). Nonetheless, in a subsequent report, the commitment to decarbonise is not only motivated as being the right choice according to climate science, but also as a form of signalling: *”Scania’s commitment to science-based targets will not only contribute to reducing climate risks, but sends a strong signal through the economy that decarbonising constitutes an investment in future competitiveness.”* (Scania, 2021). These statements from Scania reflect a strategic use of both *ingratiation* and *enhancement* impression management strategies. By emphasising their commitment to SBTs, Scania *ingratiates* itself with stakeholders, positioning the company as scientifically conscious and aligned with global climate goals. Additionally, by highlighting the broader economic benefits of decarbonization, Scania *enhances* its image, portraying its actions as not only environmentally responsible but also contributing to future competitiveness.

Another excerpt that underscores the SBTs as a dominant discourse is the following: *”We were the first in our industry to set science-based targets for reducing our carbon emissions and, in 2022, we took another major step towards decarbonising our business by becoming the first to set supply chain carbon reduction targets.”* (Scania, 2023). In this sentence, the SBTs serves to *exemplify* the firm’s image of being environmentally responsible and to underscore the firm’s early adoption of SBTs, upholding the climate leadership narrative as developed in subsection 4.1. Additionally, the likening of their adoption of SBTs as a major decarbonization step constitutes a form of *self-promotion*, aimed at highlighting the firm’s scientific competence and collaborative talent. Hence, the discourse surrounding SBTs in the analytical material equates SBTi-alignment of GHG emission reduction targets with “Trusting the Science”, allowing companies to communicate dedication to evidence-based decision-making and their adherence to global climate goals.

The Science Based Target initiative

In their annual report from 2020, Essity describes their work with the SBTi: *”Essity has adopted the Science Based Targets issued by the Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi) to reduce the company’s climate impact and to support the 2015 Paris Agreement.”* (Essity, 2021). In this excerpt, the credibility of the SBTi is appealed to as an institution for decarbonization, indicating the usage of the *ingratiation* impression management strategy. Similar *ingratiation* appeals to the SBTi can be found in the corporate disclosures of all other analysed firms. For example, H&M writes in their annual report from 2020: *”The H&M group has set an SBTi-approved science-based target to achieve a 40 percent reduction in CO₂ e emissions within*

scopes 1 and 2 by 2030 (compared with the 2017 level), to contribute to keeping global warming to a well below 2°C trajectory.” (H&M, 2021a). Similarly, Skanska writes in their Annual and sustainability report of 2023: “-60% Reduction of carbon emissions from our own operations (scope 1 and 2) since 2015. Our climate target is approved as a science-based target on the 1.5°C trajectory.” (Skanska, 2024). The similarity in application of SBTs in the quotes above suggests the emergence of a standard discourse method for firms to appeal to climate commitment through SBTi involvement, hence encompassing *ingratiation*. In addition, aligning with the SBTi is constructed both as a resource to help guide the decarbonization strategy of the firm, as well as a relational competence that the firm can use to give credibility to its climate work. In this sense, the “Trusting the Science” discourse also applies the *self-promotion* impression management strategy to internalise the perceived scientific and climate-positive qualities of the SBTi. At a deeper level, even the construction of the SBTi as scientific and objective may constitute the application of the *ingratiation* impression management strategy, as the appeal to the apolitical climate science could resonate with more stakeholders.

Evolution of Carbon Target Discourse over Time

The discussion concerning GHG reduction targets has undergone substantial evolution over time. Prior to the adoption of SBTs, companies had already shown a dedication to addressing GHG emissions, with several targets established in 2019, and some already in alignment with the SBTi (as previously shown in **Table 1** and **Table 2**). An illustrative example of pre-SBT discourse is found in Atlas Copco’s communication in 2019: “*The goal for reducing carbon dioxide from operations and transport has already had considerable impact in the organization [...]*”, continued by the description that they have seen “*significant investment and action across the organisation*” in renewable energy and other sustainability initiatives (Atlas Copco, 2020). In the 2021 annual report, when Atlas Copco set a science-based target, this transition was communicated as “*The science-based targets significantly raise Atlas Copco’s ambition for carbon emissions reduction*” (Atlas Copco, 2022). The change in targets is presented as an elevation in ambition, employing *selectivity* to accentuate and highlight the notion that SBTs constitute climate ambition, thereby portraying their climate work in a positive light. However, one could argue that this strategy diverts attention from the inadequacy of their previous goals and its failure in guiding long-term decarbonization strategies. This abandonment of previous targets is not explained beyond raising ambitions: “*The targets have been validated by the Science Based Targets initiative and replace our previous greenhouse gas emission targets from 2022*” (Atlas Copco, 2022). Once again, appeals are made to the scientific nature of the

SBTi, signalling an *enhancement* of their new targets as more desirable and as a specific instance of “Trusting the Science”.

Looking further at the target communications, Essity's 2019 annual report states: *"Essity's new targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions were approved by the Science Based Targets initiative in 2018,"* (Essity, 2020) highlighting the establishment of new targets and the significance of their scientific basis. In 2021, Essity increased their cooperation with the SBTi: *"During the year, we raised our ambitions and have, for example, committed to achieving net-zero emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050."* (Essity, 2022). This commitment is suggested to reflect the firm's dedication to sustainability and hence aligns with the broader industry trend towards more alignment of climate goals with carbon institutions over time. Companies hence strategically *exemplify* their SBTs as “Trusting the Science”, serving as reinforcement for the projection of social responsibility.

Beyond the SBTi

Outside of the SBTi, other NGOs were mentioned in the observations to lend credibility to the climate work of the firms, providing an *exemplification* strategy for firms to project the image of climate integrity. Although, in contrast to the SBTi, these other collaborations were neither consistently mentioned across firms nor over time. For example, Skanska describes their cooperation with several other sustainability certifiers: *"We continue to offer our customers certified projects using established certification schemes such as Living Building Challenge, LEED, BREEAM, BREEAM Infrastructure and WELL."* (Skanska, 2024). Similarly, H&M wrote about their commitment to remove carbon emissions with the NGO, Frontier, in their annual report from 2023: *"We joined Frontier, an advanced market commitment for permanent carbon removal, to support the scaling of this emerging sector"* (H&M, 2024). From these excerpts we can recognise that the SBTi is not the only institutional actor used by firms for climate communications, although none of these were observed to have acquired a similar degree of trans-organisational discourse relevance as the SBTi.

4.4 Excusing Underperformance and Future Promises

Excusing underperformances and future promises refer to the communication strategies applied when firms underachieve or fail to meet their carbon targets. The impression management strategies evident in these instances focus on externalising the underperformance and refuting

the notion that long-term targets risk being missed. For instance, consider Atlas Copco's statement *"In 2022, the absolute emissions in scope 3 were 29% higher than in the baseline year. The main reason for this was increased sales, but the availability of renewable energy to our customers has also been lower than we expected."* (Atlas Copco, 2023). In this excerpt, Atlas Copco attributes the increase in absolute scope 3 emissions to increased sales, while also citing the lower-than-expected renewable energy consumption of their customers as a contributing factor. By attributing the increase in emissions to factors beyond their control, particularly to the availability of renewable energy, the firm employs a defensive strategy of *external attribution* to link carbon underperformance with external factors. In a later annual report from Atlas Copco, published in 2023, similar externalisations of poor scope 3 performance are attributed to customers: *"[A]s the majority of our products run on electricity, the impact during the use-phase, and thus their value-chain footprint, is affected by the availability of renewable energy, which varies between countries and regions."* (Atlas Copco, 2024). Because of the attribution of poor climate performance with organisations beyond the control of the organization, in this case the electricity suppliers of their customers, the *external attribution* impression management strategy is applied here to relegate the responsibility for GHG emission target underachievement away from Atlas Copco.

Another example of how organisations explain not reaching targets is found in H&M's annual report of 2022: *"The increase in scope 1 and 2 emissions compared to last year was largely a result of the reduction in the share of renewable electricity purchased in 2022. This is primarily due to us not purchasing renewable electricity certificates in Russia, and to some degree sourcing challenges in a few other markets. A historic undercalculation due to use of an incorrect conversion factor for natural gas calculations also caused part of this increase in emissions."* (H&M, 2023). This quote shows how the rise of GHG emissions is discursively associated with specific challenges in renewable electricity certificate obtainance and calculation errors. H&M hence employs the *external attribution* impression management strategy to limit the firm's responsibility for negative outcomes, instead emphasising the exit from the Russian market and historic miscalculations as short-term anomalies that should not be considered indicative of changes in long-term climate performance.

In Scania's annual report from 2022, the firm discusses their carbon performance: *"The rise in emissions during 2021 and 2022 is related to our operations returning to a more normal level of activity post-Covid-19. Despite this increase, emissions have fallen by 44 percent since 2015."*

By following our decarbonisation roadmap, Scania still sees a clear path towards reaching our targets for 2025. Important steps towards this goal will be growing the number of electrified vehicles in the company fleet, as well as switching to renewable fuels and fossil free electricity in our operations globally.” (Scania, 2023). The discursive explanation of short-term carbon underperformance is once again made using *external attribution*, suggesting the extraordinary external circumstances of the rebound from the Covid-19 pandemic as the context through which one should see their emissions increase. Within the broader trajectory of emissions reduction, Scania reassures its stakeholders that their GHG emissions are in line with their long-term targets and repeat their confidence in their strategy to achieve these goals. Another clear example of the *external attribution* impression management strategy to explain suboptimal climate performance, specifically in terms of value chain and scope 3 emissions, is found in the following annual report of Scania: *“In 2023, our scope 3 reduction was lower than planned at 3 percent. This is due to the slower-than-expected pace of the industry transition, among other external factors.”* (Scania, 2024). In this quote, Scania explicitly attributes poor climate outcomes to external factors and the industry as a whole. Beyond the *external attribution* impression management strategy applied, there is also a simultaneous *disassociation* of Scania from the remaining industry players. The heavy vehicle manufacturing industry is described as external to the firm and as a force counteracting the climate ambitions of Scania itself as a climate leader. Through this limitation, Scania can maintain stakeholder confidence in their future sustainability efforts.

In summary, the discourse surrounding underperformance in GHG reduction efforts reveals a complex interplay of impression management strategies, aimed at limiting the firm’s responsibility and to reestablish confidence in the firm’s long-term decarbonization strategy. The companies utilise the defensive external attribution and disassociation impression management strategies, to attribute increases in emissions to external factors, and to distance the firm from less carbon-efficient actors respectively. Altogether, this aggregate theme aims to restore confidence in the firm’s long-term carbon strategy.

5. Discussion

Through Dunne et al.'s (2021) impression management framework, we have identified four distinctive impressions that companies aim to convey when communicating their carbon reduction targets and progression: (1) *We are climate leaders*, (2) *We have embarked on a climate journey*, (3) *We trust the science*, and (4) *Underperformance is not our fault - We will perform in the long term*, as explored in their respective sections of the empirical analysis (4.1 for (1), 4.2 for (2), and so on). These insights shed light on how companies employ impression management strategies in corporate communications to shape perceptions of their carbon emission targets and initiatives. Our discussion is divided into two parts that compare our empirical findings to existing literature, hence identifying our contributions. In the first part, we explore how our findings contribute to the existing carbon accounting literature, delving into the implications of the outlined impression management mapping and their alignment with previous research. In the second part, we broaden our scope of the carbon accounting literature to analyse the political implications of the impressions conveyed by these discursive strategies, especially in the context of previous critical literature on carbon institutions and organizational translations of climate change to business-as-usual (Tilsted et al., 2023; Wright & Nyberg, 2016). By doing so, we contribute to the existing literature in carbon accounting by offering new insights into how organizations communicate carbon reduction targets and influence stakeholder perceptions through corporate communication strategies.

5.1 Contribution to Discursive Understandings of Carbon Targets

Our investigation highlights the crucial role of carbon accounting as a robust tool for evaluating carbon-related performance and advancing decarbonization efforts, a concept reinforced by previous research (Kumarasiri & Gunasekarage, 2017; Lee & Wu, 2014; Linnenluecke et al., 2015; Ratnatunga & Balachandran, 2009). Notably, the findings echo the previous scholarly emphasis on the importance of carbon assurance in enhancing the reliability of carbon emission information (Simnett et al., 2009), but in our case from a discursive approach that highlights strategic communications as another layer to organizational carbon assurance. In this sense, the ingrained adoption of carbon targets in organizational practices as previously established in literature (He et al., 2022) is expanded upon, by creating an impression management approach for understanding stakeholder communication with regards to carbon targets, hence warranting further discursive examination.

Our findings illuminate how organizations leverage SBTs, the SBTi, and other environmental certification initiatives through strategic communications to portray early-adopter advantages and position themselves as frontrunners in the climate action arena. As evidenced by the widespread adoption of SBTs (Gieseke et al., 2021), companies aspire to align themselves with esteemed institutions like SBTi, seeking to bolster their credibility. Specifically, the (1) *We are climate leaders* aggregate theme, along with the identified underlying impression management strategies (*exemplification, ingratiation, selectivity, and concealment*), describe how this positioning of leadership in corporate disclosures is achieved. These findings mirror those of Green (2010), who observed a similar trend where companies adopt emission accounting standards to secure a sustainability leadership position, highlighting parallel motivations across emission accounting standards and SBTs adoption. In addition, research by Milne et al. (2009) revealed how organisations project a “leading the way” image in sustainability development through their discourse, meaning that our findings support the continued perpetuation of this image with respect to decarbonization. Hence, the widespread adoption of leadership positioning in sustainability discourse constitutes a theme reaffirmed by the carbon accounting domain, and by our research in the specific context of impression management strategies in corporate climate work.

Impression management emerges as a crucial concept in understanding organizational discourse, as highlighted by previous researchers (Cooper & Slack, 2015; Dunne et al., 2021). Our investigation identifies these prevalent assertive impression management strategies utilized in corporate communication regarding carbon emission reduction. When unexpected or insufficient carbon outcomes arise, defensive impression management strategies surface (*disassociation and external attribution*), exemplified by the narrative (4) *Underperformance is not our fault - We will perform in the long term*. These findings resonate with observations by Sandberg and Holmlund (2015), who noted similar patterns in impression management. In particular, Sandberg & Holmlund (2015) found that while companies often employ praise to shape favourable impressions, they resort to defensive methods inform about failures, hence meaning that our research finds support for these patterns in the discourse of decarbonization. Moreover, our research unveils a notable trend wherein companies' communication concerning climate targets is evolving to convey increased complexity and technicality, as described in the (3) *We trust the science* aggregate theme. This trend echoes the observations of Milne et al. (2009), who highlighted the organizational adoption of sophisticated mechanisms and

institutions to address sustainability challenges, albeit our findings grant a specifically communicative approach with regards to carbon target setting and initiatives.

Shifting focus to the tonality in communications of corporate climate work reveals distinct patterns of predominantly positive and optimistic formulations surrounding carbon reduction targets, as described in the aggregate narrative of (2) *We have embarked on a climate journey*. Moreover, this imbalance between positive and negative communication underscores the prevalent inclination towards highlighting positive content and trends, aligning with the findings of Cho et al. (2012) regarding the portrayal of corporate actions in sustainability contexts. Beyond confirming Cho et al.'s (2012) positive framing of organizational sustainability work, but specifically with regards to carbon communications, our analysis also indicates that when companies fail to meet targets, they tend to downplay unfavourable information and emphasize their future performance, promising improvement. This observation, developed in (4) *Underperformance is not our fault - We will perform in the long term*, expands upon the research of Rogers et al. (2011), who unveiled a common trend among companies to pivot towards a positive and forward-looking stance immediately after addressing financial stress from litigation. Thereby, we have expanded these defensive discursive strategies to the context of non-financial accounting and carbon targets, hence contributing to the furthering of carbon accounting research.

5.2 Contributions to Critical Research on Organizational Climate Work

From a broader perspective, our research findings reveal the political strategies in carbon accounting that underly the organizational discursive processes involved in corporate translations of climate change, especially in the context of carbon target setting. We echo the findings of Tilsted et al. (2023), whose research on the SBTi describes the obfuscating political power of the initiative, encouraging critical engagement with corporate climate work. In particular, the aggregate theme (3) *We trust the science*, was enforced through multiple assertive impression management strategies in our analysis (*enhancement, exemplification, ingratiation, selectivity, and self-promotion*), indicating corporate appeals to depoliticized constructions of carbon institutions. The SBTi and SBTs were similarly emergent in corporate discourses as permeating sources of climate credibility over the period, supporting the normative power of the SBTi as explored by Tilsted et al. Furthermore, we outline the legitimization of incumbent-driven decarbonization in the aggregate theme (2) *We have embarked on the climate journey*, creating connections between the incumbency focus of the journey metaphor (Milne et al.,

2006) and the narrow portrayal of decarbonised futures of the SBTi (Tilsted et al., 2023). Through these mechanisms, the analysed incumbents are discursively portrayed as central actors in decarbonization, reinforcing the literature of impression management theory in organizational analysis (Cho et al., 2012; Cooper & Pearce, 2011; Dunne et al., 2021). Hence, by creating understanding for the impression management strategies applied in the current discourse of carbon targets, the furthering of critical engagement with corporate climate governance is achieved.

Beyond carbon institutions, this paper addresses the work of Wright & Nyberg (2016), who explore how organizations transform climate change into business-as-usual through discourse. Our research hence expands the literature on discursive understandings of climate work (Cooper & Slack, 2015; Khalifa et al., 2007; Kolk et al., 2008) by investigating the perception management strategies underlying the organizational translation process of climate change (Wright & Nyberg, 2016). We reiterate Wright & Nyberg's description of organizational regression to treating climate change as business-as-usual – i.e. mundane, comfortable concerns to be addressed through incumbent business models rather than transformative action – through the aggregate themes of (2) *We have embarked on the climate journey* and (4) *Underperformance is not our fault – We will perform in the long-term*. The Climate Journey encompasses the treatment of climate work as an organizational process of learning and adaptation (Milne et al., 2006), positively communicated and optimistic in terms of the communicator's carbon performance. Paradoxically, the simultaneous attribution of worsened carbon performance to short-term, external factors in the same corporate disclosures highlight the discursive strategies that together: limit corporate responsibility for decarbonization while constructing the perception of compatibility between incumbent business models and effective climate work. In this sense, we join previous research in emphasising the role of critical research on business engagement in climate work (Ogden & Clarke, 2005; Talbot & Boiral, 2018; Tilsted et al., 2023; Vesty et al., 2015; Wright & Nyberg, 2016), urging continued scientific involvement in the popularisation of corporate carbon management and the institutionalisation of carbon assurance.

6. Conclusion

In face of the urgent threat posed by climate change, corporate engagement in carbon target setting has become increasingly prevalent as a means of displaying commitment to climate action with regards to stakeholders. This study meticulously examines the annual and sustainability reports of five major firms – Atlas Copco, Essity, H&M, Scania, and Skanska – utilizing a typology of impression management strategies to discern prevalent themes in their recent communications on decarbonization targets. Our analysis reveals four primary discursive themes employed by these companies, that together convey the following impressions: (1) *We are climate leaders*, (2) *We have embarked on a climate journey*, (3) *We trust the science*, and (4) *Underperformance is not our fault - We will perform in the long term*. These impressions are manifested through impression management strategies underlying the textual content of the corporate disclosures, resulting in the cultivation of positive stakeholder impressions with regards to the companies' climate efforts. While some minor variations were found in communication approaches among the firms studied, these variations were explained by industry-specific conditions. Hence, the strong similarities observed in the carbon disclosures of interest suggest the emergence of dominant impression management strategies involved in the reporting of organisational decarbonization work, within the scope of our study. Consequently, our findings contribute to the critical discussions in carbon accounting research that explore the translation of climate change in the business context and the political considerations of carbon institutions. In conclusion, our study bridges the research gap in carbon accounting on the ways firms manage perceptions of their climate work through the textual content of their corporate disclosure, elucidating the impression management strategies underlying organizational carbon disclosures, hence addressing broader societal implications of corporate climate engagement.

6.1 Limitations

This study's findings should, nevertheless, be considered in light of the following limitations. Firstly, the lack of prior research on the topic of impression management in carbon targeting constitutes a methodological limitation, causing a reliance on adjacent discourse analysis literature in carbon accounting. Secondly, linguistic interpretations could be subject to cultural or other biases, having systemic consequences for our data analysis process. Thirdly, the study is limited to the five companies of interest, which may restrict the generalizability of our findings to firms (i) operational in other markets with different regulatory requirements, (ii)

with different organizational types (e.g. privately held businesses or NGOs), and/or (iii) with different carbon targeting practices (e.g. non-alignment with the SBTi). These factors collectively suggest that while this study provides valuable insights into the discursive carbon target strategies of the studied companies, caution should be exercised when extending the findings beyond this scope.

6.2 Further Research Suggestions

The notable contribution of the theoretical and empirical contents of this study to the discursive analysis approach in carbon accounting necessitates similar research. Specifically, we encourage future researchers to conduct further investigations into longitudinal studies of different periods, firms in different markets and firms with different corporate governance structures. Firstly, the emergent nature of the carbon targets in institutional and corporate contexts elucidates the need for additional research into the longitudinal effects of impression management in corporate sustainability discourse. This study's period of 2019-2023 was especially interesting from an SBTi standpoint, but similar studies could contextualize climate work with other carbon initiatives like the GHG Protocol. Secondly, studies in different national contexts could reveal the cultural impacts on impression management strategies applied in communicating carbon targets to stakeholders. Finally, the disclosures of firms of a different corporate governance structure could expand the impression management analysis of carbon targets by considering these differences in stakeholder interests.

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8. Appendices

Appendix A: Initially identified discursive themes in the analysed excerpts.

Discursive Theme	Description
A	Accentuating the desirability of climate engagement
B	Projecting an image of integrity and environmental responsibility
C	Expressing decarbonization as an organizational priority, appealing to climate science
D	Selective showcasing and framing of climate initiatives
E	Enhancing decarbonization-related capabilities
F	Giving less prominence to GHG emissions from operationally significant activities
G	Distancing the firm from its industry, which is presented as carbon inefficient
H	Attributing substandard carbon performance to external factors beyond the firm's control

Appendix B: Full typology of impression management strategies, as defined by Dunne et al. (2021). “x” indicates that the impression management strategy was identified in this study.

Assertive IM Strategy	Definition	Usage
Enhancement	An organization accentuates the desirability of a positive event for which it was at least partially responsible	x
Exemplification	An organization projects an image of integrity, social responsibility or moral worthiness	x
Ingratiation	An organization flatters an audience or expresses similar beliefs and attitudes to the audience	x
Internal attribution	An organization attributes positive events to its own actions	
Intimidation defensive	An organization emphasizes its power, dominance, and willingness to hurt those that oppose it	
Performance comparison	An organization attempts to portray strong performance using low prior-period benchmarks	
Selectivity A or D	An organization highlights facts that portray it in the best possible light	x
Self-promotion	An organization promotes its competence, talents and capabilities	x
Defensive IM Strategy	Definition	
Supplication	An organization attempts to appear weak and in need of assistance	
Apologies	An organization accepts responsibility for a negative event and expresses remorse	
Concealment	An organization downplays transgressions by giving them less prominence	x
Denial	An organization denies its role in a negative event	
Disassociation	An organization distances itself from a negative event	x
External attribution	An organization attributes negative outcomes to external events or chance factors	x
Justification	An organization describes an external cause for its action	
Omission	An organization withholds negative information from an audience	
Organizational Handicapping	An organization presents a task as being so difficult to complete, that it should be excused for not completing it	
Restitution	An organization offers compensation to victims of a negative event	