



DRIVE TO SUSTAIN

Narrative and Discursive Strategies of Sustainability Communication in Formula One: A Comparative Analysis of McLaren and Aston Martin.

ABSTRACT

The study examines how sustainability is linguistically constructed and discursively negotiated in the media communication of Formula One teams. In highly visible and reputationally sensitive industries, sustainability communication plays a central role in shaping credibility, legitimacy and public trust. This challenge is particularly evident in Formula One, a global sport that combines technological innovation with significant environmental impacts. While teams increasingly position themselves as sustainable and responsible actors, their communication unfolds within a structural tension between ambitious sustainability narratives and the realities of a resource-intensive racing ecosystem.

Against this backdrop, sustainability communication functions not only as information but also as a strategic and symbolic resource. Narrative strategies, semantic framings and legitimising references strongly influence how ecological responsibility is communicated and evaluated within the field of commercial communications.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to investigate differences in sustainability narratives, semantic patterns and legitimising communication practices in the media communication of two Formula One teams, McLaren and Aston Martin, and to examine how these differences influence the perceived credibility of sustainability claims and the risk of greenwashing. The study is based on the hypothesis that evidence-based sustainability communication is perceived as more credible than symbolically framed sustainability narratives in reputationally sensitive industries.

To address this objective, the following research question guides the analysis:

RQ: How is sustainability linguistically constructed and discursively negotiated in the media communication of the Formula One teams McLaren and Aston Martin?

A qualitative research design was applied. The empirical material consists of thirteen official team documents and journalistic media articles published between 2022 and 2025. A structured qualitative content analysis following Kuckartz was conducted, complemented by discourse-theoretical perspectives (Keller) and narrative theory (Bruner; Ryan) to capture both meaning construction and narrative framing in sustainability communication. A combined deductive-inductive category system enabled the systematic identification of narratives, discursive patterns and communicative strategies across both cases.

The results directly reflect the research objective and reveal clear differences between the two teams. McLaren predominantly employs an evidence-based sustainability narrative, emphasising technological innovation, measurable progress and alignment with external frameworks such as science-based climate targets. This results in a comparatively coherent and credible communication strategy. Aston Martin, by contrast, relies more strongly on symbolic and emotionally charged narratives and future-oriented visions, while providing fewer verifiable indicators. As a result, its sustainability communication appears more vulnerable to perceptions of inconsistency and greenwashing. Across both cases, recurring patterns include future-oriented storytelling, the selective omission of systemic contradictions and the legitimising function of global sustainability frameworks.

These findings contribute to research on sustainability communication and corporate social responsibility in professional sports by demonstrating how narrative and discursive strategies shape the perceived credibility of sustainability claims. From a practical perspective, the study highlights the importance of semantic consistency, transparency and narrative coherence for organisations operating in highly visible commercial communication environments. Future research could extend the analysis to additional teams and sports contexts, examine audience perceptions of sustainability narratives, and explore how transparent communication practices can strengthen trust in sustainability-oriented brand communication.

KEYWORDS

Formula One, Sustainability Communication, Narrative Strategies, Discourse Analysis, Corporate Social Responsibility, Greenwashing, Commercial Communications

