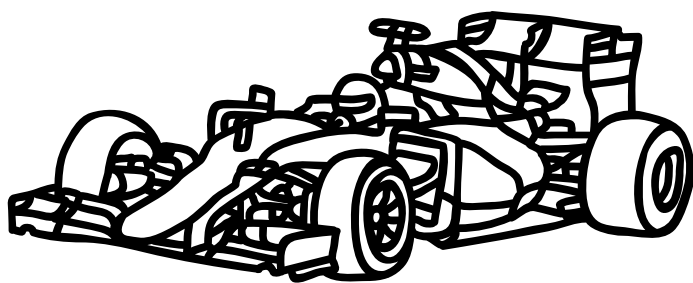# DRIVE TO SUSTAIN
Narrative and Discursive Strategies of Sustainability Communication in Formula One:
A Comparative Analysis of McLaren and Aston Martin.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability communication has become a central element of contemporary corporate communication, particularly in industries characterised by high public visibility and reputational risk. In such contexts, credibility and legitimacy are decisive factors in shaping public trust.

This challenge is especially evident in Formula One. As a global sport that combines technological innovation with significant environmental impacts, Formula One teams increasingly position themselves as sustainable and responsible actors. At the same time, they operate within a resource-intensive system. As a result, sustainability communication unfolds within a structural tension between ambitious narratives of progress and the material realities of the sport.

PROBLEM DEFINITION & RELEVANCE

Organisations in highly visible industries face a fundamental communicative dilemma: they must articulate sustainability ambitions while confronting structural constraints that may undermine credibility.

In Formula One, sustainability is negotiated not only through concrete actions, but through narratives, semantic framings and legitimising communication strategies. These practices strongly influence how ecological responsibility is interpreted and whether sustainability claims are perceived as credible or as greenwashing. Understanding these mechanisms is therefore essential for commercial communication in reputationally sensitive environments.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES & RESEARCH QUESTION

Existing research on sustainability in motorsport predominantly focuses on technological innovation and quantitative performance indicators. However, the linguistic and discursive construction of sustainability at team level remains underexplored.
This study addresses this gap by analysing sustainability communication as a narrative and discursive practice.

OBJECTIVE:

To investigate how different sustainability narratives construct credibility and legitimacy through semantic patterns and legitimising communication practices in the media communication of two Formula One teams, McLaren and Aston Martin.

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

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study follows a **qualitative and interpretative research design.** This approach is particularly suitable for analysing sustainability communication as a process of meaning construction and discursive negotiation rather than as a measurable outcome (Kuckartz, 2018; Keller, 2011).
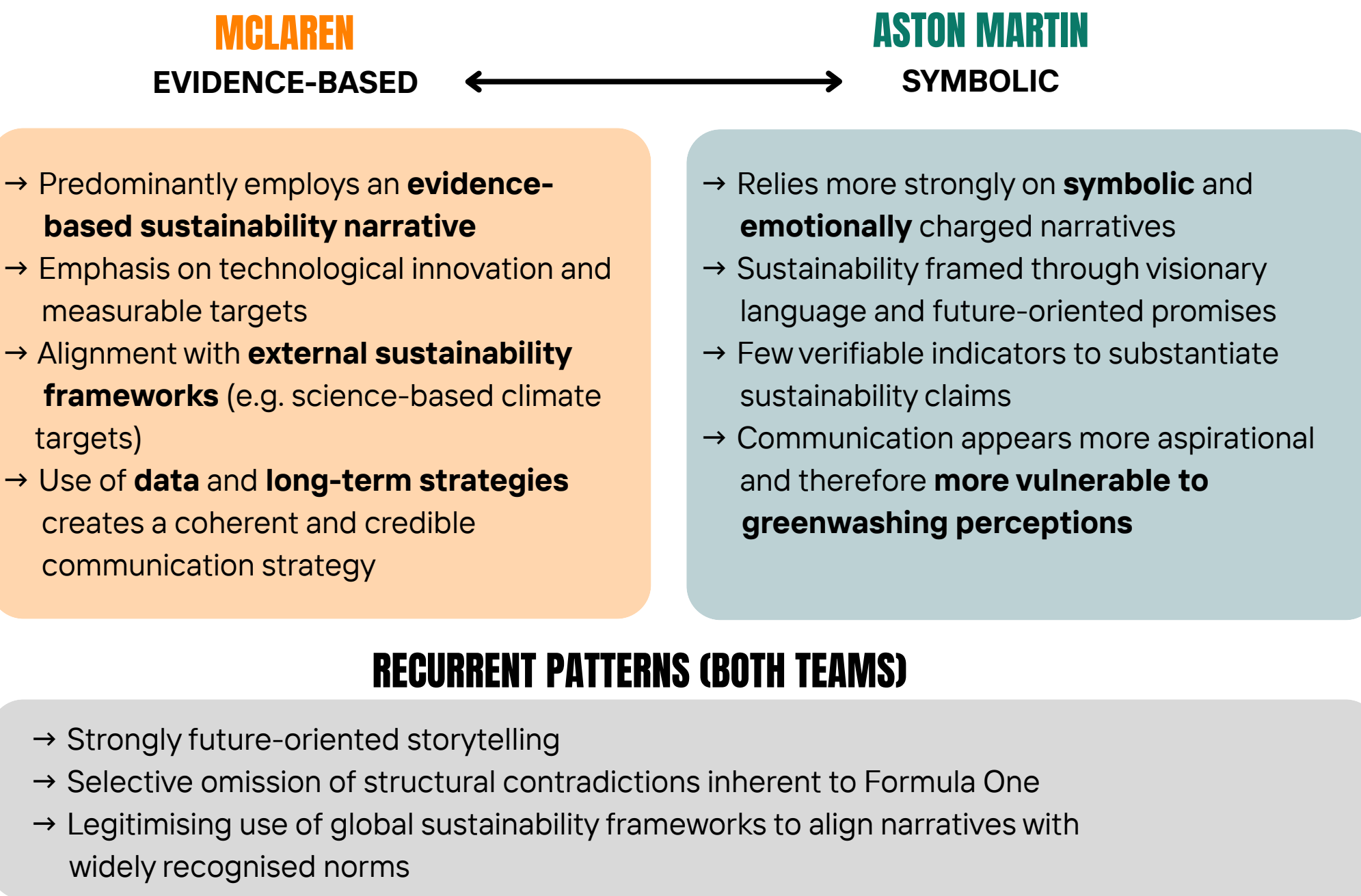
MATERIAL

The empirical material consists of **thirteen** official team documents and journalistic media articles published between 2022 and 2025. The selection focuses on central communication formats through which Formula One teams articulate sustainability-related messages to the public. Media texts were included to capture how team narratives are reinforced, translated or contested within broader public discourse.

METHOD

A **structured qualitative content analysis** following Kuckartz (2018) was conducted. The method combines theory-driven and data-driven categories and was complemented by discourse-theoretical perspectives (Keller, 2011) and narrative theory (Bruner, 1991; Ryan, 2007) to analyse meaning construction and narrative framing.
A deductive–inductive category system was used to identify recurring sustainability narratives, semantic patterns and legitimising communication practices, capturing both sustainability claims and the narrative strategies through which credibility is constructed.

RESULTS

The analysis reveals **systematic differences** in how sustainability is constructed and legitimised in the media communication of the two Formula One teams, directly reflecting the research objective.

MCLAREN	ASTON MARTIN
EVIDENCE-BASED	**SYMBOLIC**
→ Predominantly employs an **evidence-based sustainability narrative**	→ Relies more strongly on **symbolic** and **emotionally** charged narratives
→ Emphasis on technological innovation and measurable targets	→ Sustainability framed through visionary language and future-oriented promises
→ Alignment with **external sustainability frameworks** (e.g. science-based climate targets)	→ Few verifiable indicators to substantiate sustainability claims
→ Use of **data** and **long-term strategies** creates a coherent and credible communication strategy	→ Communication appears more aspirational and therefore **more vulnerable to greenwashing perceptions**

RECURRENT PATTERNS (BOTH TEAMS)

→ Strongly future-oriented storytelling
→ Selective omission of structural contradictions inherent to Formula One
→ Legitimising use of global sustainability frameworks to align narratives with widely recognised norms

CONCLUSION

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The analysis shows that sustainability communication in Formula One is primarily shaped through narrative and discursive strategies, with framing playing a decisive role in perceived credibility.
Clear differences emerge between the two teams. McLaren employs an evidence-based sustainability narrative emphasising measurable progress and alignment with external frameworks, resulting in a coherent and credible communication strategy. Aston Martin predominantly employs symbolic and emotionally charged sustainability narratives and future-oriented promises, while providing fewer verifiable indicators, increasing the risk of greenwashing perceptions.

Overall, the findings indicate that semantic consistency, narrative coherence and transparency are key drivers of credibility in highly visible industries. **Credibility in sustainability communication is not created by ambition or symbolism, but by semantic consistency, transparency and verifiable evidence.**

LIMITATIONS & FURTHER RESEARCH

Focusing on two Formula One teams limits the generalisability of the findings to other teams or sports contexts. The qualitative research design prioritises interpretative depth over breadth and **does not allow for quantitative generalisation of the findings.** In addition, the analysis focuses on media and organisational communication and does not directly assess stakeholder perceptions of sustainability narratives.

Future studies could include **additional Formula One teams or other professional sports** to enable broader comparisons. Investigating audience perceptions would provide further insights into credibility and greenwashing evaluations. **Longitudinal research** could examine how sustainability narratives evolve over time, while further studies may explore how transparency and reflexive communication practices influence long-term trust across different media channels

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