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Discourses of Sustainability: Critical Approaches in Contemporary Contexts

Discorsi di sostenibilità: approcci critici nel discorso contemporaneo

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Editorial
Discourses of Sustainability
Critical Approaches in Contemporary Contexts

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1. Introduction

Few concepts have attained the global prominence of sustainability in contemporary public, political, corporate, and institutional debates. Moving from simplistic popular interpretations linked to environmental protection and resource management, a more widespread understanding of sustainability has recently acknowledged other aspects of this concept, including economic concerns, social justice, corporate responsibility, technological innovation, and political governance (Godemann and Michelsen 2011; Krieg and Toivanen 2021) – all relevant at both the local and global level. Such complexity also emerges when it comes to the practical applications of sustainability, whereby actors and practitioners in this field are now fully aware of the need to integrate all sustainability dimensions into their operations (Setyadi *et al.* 2025). Consequently, the meaning of sustainability is constantly negotiated across different communicative arenas and amongst diverse social actors, making sustainability a dynamic discursive field in which competing visions are articulated and challenged (see Nervino *et al.* 2024 for an overview of the subject).

In this context, discourse studies provide invaluable analytical tools for understanding how sustainability is constructed, circulated, and contested through language and other semiotic resources. Particularly, critical approaches in discourse studies have recently focused upon sustainability-related communicative practices that shape public perceptions, as well as corporate policies, and institutional agendas. Combining

disciplines such as ecolinguistics (see, for example, Alexander 2009; Alexander and Stibbe 2014; Poole 2022), media discourse analysis (Ziemann 2011), corporate communication (Fuoli and Beelitz 2024), digital discourse research (Herrada-Lores *et al.* 2025), and sustainability studies (Spangenberg 2011), discourse-based research has contributed to highlighting the subtle and potentially problematic ways in which sustainability is represented in prevailing and specialised discourses.

One of the most common approaches for discourse studies of sustainability is frames analysis. Framing constitutes an overarching lens for reading and interpreting competing discourses, as sustainability is framed through value – or purpose – and interest-driven perspectives (Heath 2018; Saari *et al.* 2025), prioritising motifs of environmental stewardship, corporate and economic growth, or social and political challenges. Frames are essential in shaping and driving how audiences interpret sustainability issues, thus directly affecting social practices through discourse (Marshall and Toffel 2005). Framing also serves a pivotal role in legitimation processes enacted by individuals, groups, and larger bodies, for instance in corporate (de Castilho Rossoni and Lima 2026) and institutional (Patala *et al.* 2019) communications, social media campaigns, and policy debates. In these contexts, actors seek to justify their actions, establish credibility, and secure public support, thus providing *personalised* and *tailored* constructions of sustainability. This also raises issues of agency and responsibility. As evidenced in the literature (Fischer and Newig 2016; Niceforo 2024; Balirano *et al.* 2026), the ideological dimension of sustainability communication seeks to answer questions pertaining to who should lead sustainability transitions and how responsibility and obligations are distributed amongst governments, corporations, institutions, and citizens.

In this context, digital and multimodal communication assumes growing significance in relation to sustainability discourses and practices. On the one hand, social media platforms increasingly mediate public engagement with sustainability-related issues, creating new forms of information circulation and public participation; on the other, digital communication inherently amplifies misinformation and polarisation, given its participatory nature whereby information circulates in both top-down and bottom-up directions. Therefore, critical discourse approaches remain relevant for examining how language participates in the production and reproduction of power relations, institutional authority, and social and environmental values related to sustainability. By doing so, they contribute to a deeper understanding of the cultural and political dimensions of sustainability.

2. Contributions to this issue

The contributions collected in this Issue emerge from the developments detailed previously, as they all seek to explore questions of legitimation, framing, agency, and responsibility across a variety of institutional, corporate, political, media, and terminological settings. Employing an array of methodologies and analytical perspectives, all articles present sustainability as a contested site of ongoing meaning-making where social actors negotiate values, identities, and future trajectories. While dealing with discourse emerging from different contexts, they collectively reveal recurring themes that characterise contemporary sustainability discourse.

A first group of articles focuses upon the communicative strategies through which institutions and organisations construct and legitimise sustainability. These studies highlight the central role of discourse in shaping organisational identities and fostering public trust in increasingly sustainability-oriented societies.

In her analysis of corporate sustainability communication in the cosmetics industry, Antonella Napolitano investigates how organisations mobilise distinct discursive resources to position themselves within sustainability debates. By comparing the sustainability narratives of internationally recognised brands, the study demonstrates that corporations do not simply communicate environmental commitments but rather construct broader value systems through language. Different models of sustainability emerge from these narratives: one emphasising interconnectedness with nature and ethical responsibility, and another foregrounding innovation, governance, accountability, and measurable transformation.

Yassine El Rhaffouli provides an analysis of annual reports produced by international organisations. Such documents represent important sites where global environmental governance is articulated and justified. The study shows how sustainability initiatives are discursively framed through strategies of legitimation that construct institutions as trustworthy and effective agents of global change. Specifically, institutional actors seek to establish their authority while simultaneously reinforcing specific views of environmental governance by using linguistic patterns that emphasise expertise, collective action, and responsibility. Overall, the article underlines how organisations play an active role in shaping the frameworks through which sustainability challenges are understood.

Considering social media discourse, Nataliia Goshylyk and Volodymyr Goshylyk examine sustainability communication on Instagram.

As social media environments are key spaces where organisations seek to establish legitimacy and engage audiences around sustainability issues, this study provides a detailed analysis of discursive combinations of textual, visual, and multimodal resources used to construct narratives that align sustainability with authenticity, responsibility, innovation, and community engagement. By doing so, corporate actors adapt traditional legitimation strategies to the affordances of visual and interactive platforms, illustrating how digital communication reshapes processes of persuasion and legitimacy-building.

A second cluster of articles presents sustainability as a space in which competing discourses emerge around environmental policies, climate action, technological transitions, and economic priorities.

Maria Cristina Aiezza investigates media representations of the debate surrounding Chinese electric vehicles, offering a compelling illustration of how sustainability intersects with geopolitics, economic interests, and ideological positioning. While electric mobility is generally associated with environmental transition and decarbonisation, media narratives often add considerations of economic competition, technological leadership, and national security. The resulting discursive landscape reveals sustainability as a contested domain in which multiple interests compete for prominence.

The contribution by Giuseppe Balirano and Robin Donadio examines climate-related discourse on Instagram in the United States and Italy, looking at how communicative practices may challenge, resist, or delegitimise climate action initiatives. Particularly significant is the identification of discursive strategies associated with climate delay, scepticism, and policy opposition. These discourses often employ subtle rhetorical mechanisms that shift responsibility, question policy effectiveness, or emphasise economic costs. The study underscores the importance of social media platforms as influential arenas where competing narratives about environmental futures are produced and circulated.

Finally, the contribution by Marina Niceforo broadens the scope of the Issue by focussing on sustainability terminology. The analysis of a sustainability glossary from a coffee company shows how definitions may foreground environmental concerns, human needs, economic objectives, or social equity, thus contributing to different framings and conceptual models of sustainability. In this way, sustainability concepts influence both expert and public understandings of sustainability-related phenomena, underlining the foundational role of language in knowledge production.

Taken together, these studies highlight that sustainability discourse is characterised not only by consensus-building but also by conflict. The struggle to define environmental priorities is inseparable from broader ideological struggles concerning economic development, social justice, technological change, and political authority. Consequently, critical approaches to discourse analysis play a crucial role in uncovering the power relations embedded in competing sustainability narratives. It is our hope that this Issue will stimulate further interdisciplinary dialogue between discourse studies, ecolinguistics, communication research, media studies, and sustainability scholarship. Future research will undoubtedly continue to explore emerging communicative arenas, evolving forms of environmental engagement, and new struggles over meaning in an era marked by profound ecological and social transformation.

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