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Communicating Sustainability Through Web-based Communication: A case study of Rhetorical Strategies and Organizational Legitimacy in Scandinavian Airlines

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Abstract

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Sustainability communication is an emerging concept in communication practice and become organization matters in term of organizational communication and organizational legitimacy. This study is taking from a sustainability initiatives point of view on how the organization communicates their sustainability initiatives in order to gain legitimacy and stakeholder support, particularly through web-based communication. A case study was conducted in the aviation industry, which is focusing on Scandinavian Airlines, communicating their sustainability initiatives through rhetorical strategies to gain legitimacy. The aims of this study is to understand the role of sustainability communication in the process of gaining legitimacy by using rhetoric strategies through web-based communication. In analysis the empirical material, the study adopts two theoretical frameworks which are legitimacy theory and rhetoric strategies to comprehend the process of gaining legitimacy. A qualitative method is used in this study an approach to understand organizational legitimacy and rhetoric strategies through organization texts on the web-based communication and it was conducted with content analysis as the main method analysis and also semi-structured interview. The result of study indicated that Scandinavian Airlines uses various rhetorical strategies in sustainability communication on their web-based communication, particularly by using strategic rhetoric as the most powerful rhetoric to not only gain legitimacy, but also control and manipulate stakeholders through sustainability initiatives information. Theoretical implication from this study shows that organizations could attain pragmatic and moral legitimacy with ease yet cognitive legitimacy is the most difficult to attain since it is the most powerful legitimacy compared to other legitimacy dimensions.

Keyword: *Legitimacy theory, Legitimacy dimension, Rhetoric strategies, Sustainability, Sustainability communication, Web-based communication, Scandinavian airlines, Aviation.*

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Adam Kurniawan Rumanda

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and problem

Sustainability has become part of society and most organizations agenda. The term of sustainability was firstly used in the Brundtland Commission of the United Nations report which defines as the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland Commission, 1987). As Cerin & Karlson (2002) explained, sustainability has gained lots of interest by academic and organizations due to the pressures of diverse stakeholders to adopt sustainability initiatives. Also, previous studies show that performing sustainable initiatives will contribute to organization's economic value and its competitiveness within the industry (Epstein & Buhovac, 2014; Hussain et al., 2016). Furthermore, climate change has become one of the most pressing issues for governments, civil society, and industries in the twenty-first century where different industries face their own and unique sustainability challenges (Okereke et al., 2012; Reilly & Hynan, 2014). Consequently, many global organizations are now raising their concerns and becoming more sensitive to the sustainability agenda as they wanted to be perceived as ethical or 'green' organization with an awareness of environment issues such as climate change.

Accordingly, this study further took place and focused on organizational level from the communication perspective in the aviation sector, specifically within the airline industry which is perceived as being an un-sustainable and un-environmentally friendly industry which heavily contributes to climate change. As Payán-Sánchez et al. (2018) argue, aviation has become an essential sector and global economy driver, employment and competitiveness, but current mobility patterns and the growth rates of international aviation do not seem to be sustainable. Thus, the physical environmental impact can be seen from the airline industry which has negative environmental effect, such as high fuel consumption, water pollution, waste and noise generation and loss of biodiversity (McGinn, 2009; Lee et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the aviation sector globally produces about 2% of the world's man-induced carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions and 12% of all transport emissions (ATAG, 2019). According to International Air Transport Association (IATA, 2019), the environment issue has been rising as a global challenge and this issue adopted by the most airlines companies to reduce carbon

emission with 50% which complies with IATA mission goal in 2050. Moreover, the climate change issue also gaslighted '*flygskam*' movement which first started in 2017 in Sweden which translates from Swedish as 'flight shaming' that encourages people to stop and change their travel behaviour from using air transportation to other alternative transportation. This movement affected the Europe aviation industry, for instance, in Sweden as reported by Swedavia AB (The Economist, 2019), the number of passengers travelling on domestic flights in Sweden fell by 8% and there was a more modest decline of 2.8% for international flights from January to April 2019. Similarly, this situation also happened in Germany where passenger numbers on German domestic flights fell sharply 12% in November 2019 as reported by the German Airports Association (Le Blond, 2020). Thus, such negative environmental impacts of airline operation have caused social pressures such as 'flight shaming' on environmental sustainability and pushing the airline industry toward organization sustainability initiatives.

Signitzer & Prexl (2008) explained that organization sustainability is increasingly becoming both an organizational value and an integrative part of the business strategy in many companies. It is a relative concept that describes the planned and strategic management processes of working towards a balance of economic, social, and environmental goals and values (Signitzer & Prexl, 2008). Therefore, in order to become more sustainable, airline industries started to focus on sustainable business practice and addressed sustainability initiatives in their strategies, including the communication area. Implementing sustainability in organizational level requires the support from other systems within the organization such as legal, research and development, quality management, human resources, and communication management (Signitzer & Prexl, 2008).

Currently, many airline organizations are aiming to gain legitimacy among various stakeholders by performing sustainability communication, including Scandinavian Airlines (SAS). Sustainability communication defines as external online communications on dedicated corporate websites about corporate sustainability commitment with the purpose to create consumer awareness and influence consumer perceptions towards perceiving the organization as more sustainable (Signitzer & Prexl, 2008; Singh et al., 2012). Moreover, Siano et al. (2016) stated that the web-based communication has developed in the centre for the dissemination of content on organizational sustainability issues. By using communication, organizations could create organizational values and increase their reputational capital by sharing their

commitments and achievements of sustainability (Siano et al., 2015). Coherently, Sustainability-oriented organizations must consistently communicate their commitment regarding sustainability initiatives and social issue in their promotion and organization statements (Gomez & Chalmeta, 2011; Menon & Kahn, 2003). Additionally, Alameeri et al. (2017) also mentioned that the most common organizational sustainability themes in aviation industry is to be environmentally responsible through technological improvement, innovation, and compliance with environmental legislation. In this sense, SAS as the most sustainable airline has been communicating their environmental discourse and sustainability initiatives through many communication channels, including web-based communication.

Nevertheless, communicating sustainability initiatives by the organization seems not practically easy as they possibly face multiple challenges. Previous study on sustainability-related communication has noted that customers who have low awareness levels of organizational sustainability could limit the ability of organizations to gain the relational rewards from their sustainability initiatives (Allen, 2016; Pelozo et al., 2012). Another challenge is that delivering the message or information that is too superficial to cover the true nature of the airline industry will potentially have a backlash to the organization as they could be labelled as doing 'greenwashing'. According to Greenpeace (2011), greenwashing is the process by which organizations spread misleading perception about their products or services that suggests they are more environmentally responsible than is the reality. Seele & Gatti (2017) further explained that greenwashing is disinformation that disseminated by an organization to present an environmentally responsible public image. In this sense, airline organizations possibly face greenwashing accusations as they are not willing to release true or comprehensive information to the public, but instead seek to avoid public scrutiny and only disclose superficial information which could affect to organizational operation and legitimacy. In addition, Allen (2016) also argue that if the organizations cannot build legitimacy and deliver societal expectation, it could threat them in causing loss of customers, lost in clients, citizen protest, and government sanctions.

Furthermore, the scepticism and cynicism might cause a public distrust of the organization which is critical for building and gaining organizational legitimacy. According to Suchman (1995, p.574), organizational legitimacy is a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of the organizations are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions. Moreover, Hutchins et al. (2019)

also mentioned that most of organizations are struggling to gain legitimacy which should be aligned with societal expectations, such as their sustainability initiatives in order to be perceived as genuine and trustworthy organizations.

For this reason, the problem in focus of this study therefore consists of the lack of understanding how sustainability communication is used to gain legitimacy in specific industry, such as airline industry, and how the process of legitimation in this industry can be gained under public discourse regarding sustainability initiatives. Another thing is that if the public might have greenwashing impression through sustainability communication on web-based communication, I am interested to empirically examine how the organization in the aviation industry, which is focusing on SAS, communicating their sustainability initiatives to build legitimacy since SAS is the industry winner in sustainability initiatives which followed by Norwegian (4th position) and Finnair (5th position) (Sustainability Brand Index, 2020). Finding some empirical examples of sustainability communication in chosen web-based communication could strengthen our understanding of how sustainability communication is articulated by the organization, how it can be understood and conceptualized and how SAS contribute to influence public perception.

1.2 Aim and Research Question

The aim of this study is threefold. First, this study seeks to understand the role of sustainability communication in building organizational legitimacy. Second, this study seeks to understand the role of rhetoric strategies in the web-based communication in the process of gaining legitimacy. Third, another aim is to gain an understanding and in-depth knowledge of sustainability communication practices within the airline industry, by using SAS. Gaining these understanding will give a contribution to other airline companies in communication manner to formulate and perform impactful sustainability communication for the future implementations.

Rising from the problem which is previously stated in the introduction, this study will further trying to answer the following qualitative research question:

“How does Scandinavian Airlines utilize rhetoric strategies in their web-based communication to communicate sustainability initiatives in order to gain legitimacy?”

1.3 The studies relevance to Strategic Communication

The topic of sustainability communication and its legitimacy is intriguing based on its relation to strategic communication and public relations. As Ihlen et al. (2009) argues, public relations is strategic communication between an organization and its public. Contemporary public relations theories mainly focus on management or organization as one actor in the public relations process and the publics or stakeholders as the other actors (Ihlen et al., 2009). Moreover, public relations are also considered as a legitimating practice for organizations in society (Capriotti & Moreno, 2007) and establishing legitimacy is a public relations function as it relies on the co-management and perceived alignment of interests between an organization and its stakeholders (Anderson, 2020).

The aviation industry is considered to be a strategic industry, which needs strategic communication to reach organization goals. Hallahan et al. (2007, p.3) define strategic communication as the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission. Moreover, Zerfass et al. (2018) also added that strategic communication is the key success factor or diligence-based strategy which focused on doing fundamental business activities well. Strategic communication also includes examining how an organization presents itself in society as a social actor in the creation of public culture and in the discussion of public issues (Hallahan et al., 2007, p.27). Another driving force behind this study is that I believe modern organizations need strategic communication to operate well and to have strong legitimacy in the modern society. As it relevant with Falkheimer (2014) argument that the overall aim of strategic communication is to enforce, shape or defend legitimacy inside organizations and between organizations and society. In addition, strategic communication is a core modern system legitimacy as the consequences of complex relationship between different stakeholders which creates social demands on organization to be legitimate (Falkheimer, 2014).

1.4 Delimitations

This study only focused on one airline company in Sweden, Scandinavian Airlines (SAS) and its sustainability communication, therefore, other airlines companies in Europe with similar issues, such as the KLM Royal Dutch or Finnair, will not be examined. Due to delimitations, SAS website has used as the main empirical material for this study which focused on text or information that presented on the website which referred as web-based communication. This relevance with Adam and Frost (2006) argument that the website is the preferred channel for

organizational sustainability communications. Additional empirical material is provided by SAS online documents and also qualitative interviews with SAS employees who have responsibility in communication and sustainability area. Lastly, I am not interested to examine the stakeholders and public perception towards the SAS' sustainability communication since the study itself will focus on strategic communication practice on organizational perspective. Equally important, due to COVID-19 crisis situation that happened in Sweden, it was a tough challenge to reach people from SAS to gain empirical data from the interview to support this research. Consequently, due to COVID-19 crisis, only two SAS employees were available to participate in interviews.

1.5 Disposition

This qualitative study is structured in the following way. Initially, the literature review presents previous studies about communicating sustainability and organizational legitimacy. Thereafter, the theory chapter presents legitimacy and rhetoric strategies which are relevant to the this study. The fourth chapter, methodology, describes the research design and strategy for the qualitative study. The fifth and sixth chapter, present the analysis as well as the discussion of SAS' sustainability communication through web-based communication in order to gain their legitimacy. Lastly, the study concludes with theoretical and practical implication and suggestion for further research.

II. Literature Review

This chapter will start by defining both the concept of sustainability and legitimacy in relation of sustainability communication. It will then discuss sustainability communication from organization's perspective to gain understanding how they are addressing sustainability using the websites as the web-based communication. Moreover, this chapter will also cover several relevant previous studies regarding organizational legitimacy from communication perspective as means as to understand the importance of having legitimacy for organization, particularly in sustainability or environmental discourse.

2.1 From Sustainability to Organizational Legitimacy

Sustainability is based on the idea that everything needed for the productive harmony between humans and nature relates back to the natural environment (Hutchins et al., 2019). Taticchi et al. (2013) also added that sustainability has three pillars which include economic, social and environmental as the concept of "quality of life". Another definition of sustainability is also stated by Henriques (2001) that is the capability of an organization or society to continue its activities indefinitely, having taken due account of its impact on economic, social and environmental capitals.

Furthermore, according to The United Nations Global Compact (2014), organization sustainability defines as an organization' delivery of long-term value in financial, environmental, social and ethical terms. Linnenluecke & Griffiths (2013) also explained that organizational sustainability is one of the concepts most widely used to refer to organizational engagement with social and environmental issues in addition to their economic activities. Moreover, Bansal (2005) and White (2009) organizational sustainability is achieved at the intersection of economic development, environmental protection and social responsibility. Consequently, managing organizational sustainability is a strategic and profit-driven organization response to environmental and social issues caused through the organization's activities (Engert et al., 2016). This concept refers to achievement of a long-term profitability of organization's operation and generation of value for all stakeholders while utilizing only the necessary resources, which means reduction in their excessive use (Grabowska & Strzelcyk, 2015). Additionally, organizational sustainability practices tend to be more extensive with

great impact upon stakeholders (Jackson & Apostolakou, 2010), because companies are more visible and exposed to social judgement (Adams et al., 1998; Cho & Patten, 2007).

Another studies include an organizational perspective related to sustainability, legitimacy and communication. As Signitzer & Prexl (2008) argue, organizational sustainability is increasingly becoming both a core value and an integrative part of business strategy in many organizations. Hutchins et al. (2019) studied that sustainability has become a critical transformation for the organization in creating shared value and possibility to “do well by doing good”, but not all companies have the ability to engage in sustainability initiatives. Hutchins et al. (2019) also found that many stakeholders question the depth and genuineness of the sustainability initiatives which raises doubts about the organizations values and efforts if they fail to be perceived as legitimate. In their study, Hutchins et al. (2019) argue that legitimacy is an important objective for organizations when it comes to justifying the expense of their growing sustainability initiatives and marketing to their stakeholders. Hence, when organizations align their interests with their stakeholders, they are more likely to practice sustainability and marketing which can enhance their reputation and profitability (Sheth & Sinha, 2015). In other word, obtaining legitimacy by aligning organization behaviour with stakeholder expectations is necessary to guarantee the organization’s continued existence (Colleoni, 2013). Organizations that are more environmentally legitimate are perceived as more responsible and useful for society as well as considered more caring and less likely to experience negative consequences from key stakeholders (Bortree, 2009). In addition, Gössling (2011) said that companies that disobey social expectations will risk losing their legitimacy, investors, and consumers who can take economic action, thus not buy the products or use the services anymore.

Recent research has also shown that there is a growing number of organizations that develop legitimacy initiatives such as corporate social responsibility or sustainability initiatives (Payne et al., 2018). Payne et al. (2018) also added that the organizations believe that legitimacy is a source of competitive advantage that will help them create new business opportunities, protect their organization from regulation, or satisfy their shareholders as it is increasingly important to adjust to social expectations. In other study, Windolph et al. (2014) studied the implementation of sustainability management and organization motivations to deal with sustainability in the large German companies. The findings indicate that legitimacy is a dominating motivation for organization in sustainability management by showing high

engagement in communication or public relations. Windolph et al. (2014) study also strengthened by Viehöver et al. (2006) that identified communication or public relations as the second most impacted function in the organization for handling sustainability issues and organization's reputation is the main reason for sustainability engagement.

Furthermore, according to Metzler (2001), building and maintaining organizational legitimacy is at the core of public relations activities. Therefore, organizational legitimacy depends on communicating the organization's values and reason for being good in their initiatives to its key stakeholders to ensure strong organization-stakeholder relationships and necessarily for gaining, maintaining and even repairing organizational legitimacy (Wiggil, 2014). For this reason, any initiatives which have taken the organizations to gain legitimacy through responsible organization behaviour must be accompanied by a capacity to communicate and respond to the demands of stakeholders (Moreno & Capriotti, 2009).

Equally important, a study conducted by Bortree (2009) highlights the impact of awareness of environmental initiatives on perceived environmental legitimacy and the sub-sequent impact of legitimacy on organizational admiration. The findings in Bortree (2009) study is that the organizations could improve their environmental legitimacy by raising awareness of their environmental initiatives through communication. Thus, communication about environmental policies and practices has become a critical area of focus for organization (Bortree, 2009). Similarly, Hutchins et al. (2019) also argue that sustainability initiatives are as equally important as communicating its purpose and impact. From a practical point of view, the organization sustainability is related to strategic management to balance goals and needs of the current activities with the long-term objectives, social responsibility and public relations (Bakos & Dumitrascu, 2017). Hence, when an organization engages in sustainability communication, it can influence others to adopt the same practices and this may create a pattern of behaviour because companies in the same industry tend to adopt similar practices and structures (Santos et al., 2016).

2.2 Communicating Sustainability and Organizational Legitimacy

Sustainability communication is an evolving concept that refers to corporate communications about sustainability issues (Signitzer & Prexl, 2008). In other word, sustainability communication is a process of mutual understanding dealing with the future development of

society that takes place on a number of different levels and in different contexts: between individuals, between individuals and institutions, and between institutions and within institutions (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011). Godemann & Michelsen (2011) also pointed out that the task of sustainability communication lies in introducing an understanding of the world that is of the relationship between humans and their environment, into social discourse, developing a critical awareness of the problems about this relationship and then relating them to social values and norms.

Furthermore, sustainability communication is classified as a 'soft' or persuasive instrument and it has gained popularity in the environmental policy field since the 1980s (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011). Signitzer & Prexl (2008) also argue that topics of sustainability communication are aspects of social justice and environmental awareness in relation to economic success such as organization sustainability goals, status-quo, effects and conflicts of sustainability management, corporate social responsibility, sustainability of products and production processes, and stakeholder behaviour. Moreover, the concepts of organization sustainability and sustainability communications may carry economic benefits and bringing more sustainable future with its broad spectrum of communication instruments such as stakeholder dialogues on sustainability topics, sustainability reporting, information campaigns, media relations, sustainable advertisement, labelling, and online and platform communication (Signitzer & Prexl, 2008).

Previous research related to sustainability communication also shows that consumers tend to favour organizations perceived as socially and environmentally responsible (Dach & Allmendinger, 2014). Dach and Allmendinger (2014) further added that sustainability communications are increasingly important for providing consumers with the expected transparent information about sustainability. Moreover, consumers could avoid organizations and their products based on environmental responsibility reputations and costing organizations considerable revenue (Rademaker & Royne, 2018). Therefore, sustainability communication that could positively influence consumer awareness and perceptions are effective and contribute to realizing the benefits of a commitment to sustainability such as competitive advantages and increased buying behaviour (Du et al., 2007, 2010; Porter & Kramer, 2006). In a like manner, Signitzer & Prexl (2008) also added that sustainability communication can enhance trust and credibility among customers by positioning the organization as a sustainable organization with sustainable products or services. Thus, communication becomes important

since organizations have been under public scrutiny about how they communicate their sustainability initiatives, particularly in the markets with major focus on sustainability and strong green consumption preferences such as Sweden (EPI, 2016).

Recent research has shown that the organization's choice of media can affect communication results, particularly communication effects are more negative when the advertising medium is perceived as more environmentally harmful than other media alternatives which why it needs environmental considerations when making media decisions (Rademaker & Royne, 2018). In this sense, I argue this is why an increasing number of organizations now actively engage in sustainability communication, particularly by using web-based communication. As shown in Dach and Allmendinger (2014) study two of the top ten apparel brands in Europe retail industry are committed to sustainability and actively communicate about their sustainability commitments and activities on dedicated webpages. Due to the fact that the Internet is the preferred channel for organization sustainability communications (Adams & Frost, 2006).

Furthermore, Matejek & Gössling (2014) stated that organizations that apply sophisticated communication systems can manage the most important source concerning information about themselves for the majority of stakeholders. In this sense, the Internet is one of the most fundamental aspects of effective sustainability communications and also useful of the organization as sophisticated communication systems. Capriotti and Moreno (2007) also further argue that the Internet has become an essential tool for organizational communication. Internet and web-based sustainability communications are a relevant means to establish the potential added values for the organization (Capriotti & Moreno, 2007, 2009; Maanavilja & Hyder, 2010). In the same way, web-based communications for sustainability are the potential added values and effective communication tool which gives practical implications on how to positively influence consumer awareness and perceptions (Dach & Allmendinger, 2014). Previous study from Capriotti & Moreno (2007) showed the importance of the Internet and organization websites as tools for public relations to have interactivity between the public and the organization are the issue with two basic approaches: the dissemination of information and the generation of relationships between the different publics and the organization. In a nutshell, the first approach, organization' objective is only essential objective of diffusing information and trying to influence the organization image to the various publics which is different from the second approach that rather aiming for establishing relationships with publics by allowing dialogue and interaction between the organization (Capriotti & Moreno, 2007).

Moreover, Siano et al. (2015) explained that there is growing interest of the organization in sustainability orientation and the increasing attention on stakeholder engagement practices to adopt sustainability communications through organization websites. Their work aims at highlighting the most significant principles, tools and content of communication for sustainability through organization websites in order to create a successful value-proposition between the organization and its stakeholders. Siano et al. (2015) also added that in order to increase the effectiveness of organization communication for sustainability on the websites, organization should provide some elements such as organization orientation, the promotion of stakeholder engagement tools, the spread of sustainability contents, the redefinition of relationships with stakeholders, the structure of websites, etc. In Siano et al. (2015) study, they were focusing on organization orientation which can be seen from their commitment to sustainability and organization identity, such as core values, mission, and vision with specific reference to sustainability.

Research on communication has increasingly built on the core concepts of legitimacy and has begun to discover how new forms of legitimacy are in line with technology (Castello et al., 2016; Deephouse et al., 2017). Deephouse et al. (2017) further explained that digital technology is giving new way to influence legitimacy by focusing on the use of social media in legitimation processes. Despite the use of digital technologies being a promising area in legitimacy, the literature remains limited to understand how organizations gain legitimacy through engagements with digital technologies (Castello et al., 2016).

As evidence, previous studies regarding organization that uses sustainability communication related to legitimacy building on the web-based communication can be seen from seaport companies and oil companies. Santos et al. (2016) examined the online sustainability communication practices of European seaports. In their study, seaports have a direct and substantial impact on the social and physical environments in which they operate. Thus, seaport companies are implementing sustainability communication by disclosing environmental information disclosures in the websites even when there is no formal stand-alone sustainability report (Santos et al., 2016). They also explained that the advantages of using the Internet is that make communication more dynamic widely accessible, and enables interaction with stakeholders. In addition, Santos et al. (2016) explained that the Internet is flexible, versatile, and fast in spreading an unlimited amount of information as well as it has a lower cost

compared to the conventional media. Another study by Du and Vieira Jr. (2012) studied the communication tactics of six oil companies by analysing their websites content when communicating about corporate social responsibility (CSR). Palazzo and Scherer (2006) argue that oil companies are controversial industries, and therefore frequently find their organizational legitimacy being challenged. Thus, in this study, organizations communicate their CSR-related information by using website, social media platforms, public relations, advertising, and sustainability report (Du & Vieira Jr., 2012). Du and Vieira Jr. (2012) focused on organization websites as it can provide detail and extensive information about organization's CSR practices and allow for strategic stakeholder communication in attaining organizational legitimacy. Additionally, they also explained a variety of tactics to boost the credibility of CSR messages on the website, such as factual arguments and two-sided messages. Factual arguments serves to enhance credibility of CSR communication by viewing level of organization commitment and societal impact of its initiatives where on the other side, two-sided messages provide both positive and negative information to its viewer (Du & Vieira Jr. 2012). This study also showed that the organizations, which have CSR information, were providing their environmental information and activities in their websites as it is more narrative than other media and have had more information related to products and consumers (Moreno & Capriotti, 2009).

In this chapter, previous studies have gathered regarding sustainability which related to the urgency of organizations in communicating environmental-themed communication through web-based communication for gaining legitimacy. According to the literature on the strategic perspective of organizational legitimacy, organizations attempt to acquire legitimacy through the use of strategic outputs (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Suchman, 1995). This premise suggest that organization's policies and behaviours are considered as strategic legitimation efforts which they provide this information by using web-based communication. Moreover, organization legitimacy is often evaluated based on how it operates in external environment with certain values that could drive expectations that are placed on the organization by its stakeholders. To illustrate, Yao et al. (2015) conducted study that showed that Chinese '*Fortune 500*' organizations communicate their legitimacy efforts through their websites to increase the public awareness and understanding of their values and culture. In a like manner, Branco & Rodrigues (2006) study also examined how bank companies disclosed their social responsibility information through owned online media in order to acquire legitimacy.

2.3 Synthesis

Generally, this chapter has presented some of background, concepts, and relevant previous study as these are giving an understanding of the thesis problem. Sustainability is one the central themes in environmental issues and it is important to address since in the practical level most of the organizations currently have been implementing it as the part of business strategy to support business operation which also sustainability should align with stakeholders and society interest.

Furthermore, since sustainability and social judgement play a central role in Sweden and other Scandinavian countries, organizations utilize communication as an engagement tool with stakeholders. From the organization perspective, sustainability communication is still an evolving concept and some of the previous studies which have been presented shows that there is a connection with organizational legitimacy. The study conducted by Du & Vieira Jr. (2012) and the research by Santos et al. (2016) covered web-based communication in relation to social responsibility and sustainability. However, these studies did not include sustainability communication of airline companies and the importance of web-based communication for gaining legitimacy and communicating sustainability initiatives in aviation industry. Therefore, as a part of this thesis, SAS sustainability communication will be explored to further develop the research field of organizational legitimacy and the communication of environmental issues.

All things considered, previous studies have not considered sustainability communication and legitimacy as critical aspects and there is a gap in previous study that can be filled in regarding communicating sustainability on web-based communication which could lead to organizational legitimacy. Thus, this chapter demonstrates that communicating sustainability and organizational legitimacy are needed to be considered for both researchers in academic settings and practitioners in professional manners in order to improve their web-based communication in the certain themes such as sustainability. In the following chapter, legitimacy theory and rhetoric strategies are therefore presented.

III. Theory

In this chapter, I will present the legitimacy theory which uses the role of various rhetoric strategies in this study in order to provide a better understanding in sustainability communication for organization as it is beneficial for gaining organization legitimacy. This part provided Suchman (1995) legitimacy theory and Castelló & Galang (2011) rhetorical strategies as the opportunity to see how the organization self-presented themselves by providing relevant information and crafted the message regarding sustainability initiatives for claiming their legitimacy. The chosen theory is used later on to conduct the analysis and discussion parts to address the purpose of the current study.

3.1 Legitimacy theory and rhetoric strategies

Legitimacy theory and its implementation are becoming increasingly common in organizational studies (Vollero et al., 2018). This theory has most often focused on institutionalized political, economic, or religious systems and was later applied to organizations as the effects and influences of their actions were recognized by public (De Blasio, 2007). Moreover, Hahn and Kühnen (2013) stated that legitimacy theory has become one of the most cited theories within the environmental area. This theory assumes that organizations' survival depends on whether the society in which they operate recognizes that their activities comply with its value system (Borgstedt et al., 2019). Borgstedt et al. (2019) also added that this assumption appears since organizations did not have inherent rights to use resources until legitimacy is granted by society. Thus, legitimacy is vital for organizational survival because it ensures the continuous flow of resources and the sustained support by the organization's stakeholders (Du & Vieira Jr., 2012; Colleoni, 2013). Accordingly, Nielsen and Thomsen (2018) argue that legitimacy is seen as a process where the organizations are seeking approval from society for their acts. In this sense, Colleoni (2013) supported this definition that organizational legitimacy represents the conformation to these values, norms and expectations that are socially constructed within society.

In light of legitimacy theory, organizations within any industries which possibly have environmental and social impacts are expected to disclose environmental information in order to secure their legitimacy and behave in accordance with society's norms and values (Farache & Perks, 2010). Thus, from a strategic point of view, an organization is able to influence its

legitimacy status by communicating its behaviour to its stakeholder (Borgstedt et al., 2019). As explained by Colleoni (2013), the compatibility between the social values associated with organizational activities and the norms of acceptable behaviour in the social system lies at the core of the legitimacy of business in society. Therefore, gaining legitimacy by aligning organizational action and behaviour with stakeholder expectations is necessary to guarantee the organizational existence (Dawkins, 2004). Taking further from the legitimacy definition, Suchman (1995) has conceptualised legitimacy theory into three dimensions which are pragmatic legitimacy, cognitive legitimacy, and moral legitimacy. These legitimacy dimensions can make organizations become more sustainable if it bases its legitimacy on a pragmatic, moral, or cognitive dimension (Luzon et al., 2018). For this reason, Suchman's legitimacy dimensions are now widely used as a point of reference for scholars dealing with legitimacy and institutionalization processes (Nielsen & Thomsen, 2018). In the same way, Scherer et al. (2013) also explained that organizations must be able to activate various legitimacy approaches to face different issues and to respond to several challenges that stakeholders can voluntarily or involuntarily follow.

3.1.1 Pragmatic legitimacy

Pragmatic legitimacy is based on “the self-interested calculations of an organization's most immediate audiences” (Suchman, 1995, p. 578). Suchman (1995) further explained that pragmatic legitimacy is related to the products and services that an organization offers and the perception of these to be relevant for the society. Therefore, according to this view, legitimacy is planned and calculated by the organizations (Vollero et al., 2018). The purpose of pragmatic legitimacy is to reduce the tensions that exist between the market, public policies and society through compliance with the rules and regulations that organizations impose for the activity to be legal (Garcia et al., 2018). Moreover, pragmatic legitimacy focuses on the consideration that legitimacy is an “operational resource” which used by organizations as their competitive background to differentiate themselves from others in the same sector (Suchman, 1988; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). The organizations are utilising pragmatic legitimacy with culture, social norms, and ethical symbols as a means to reach their tangible goals such as sales, revenues and profits (Pfeffer, 1981). Vollero et al. (2018) also added that pragmatic legitimacy can be obtained by organizations by using corporate social responsibility or sustainability strategies and tactics to instrumentally influence public opinion by leveraging ethical symbols to get societal support and trust. Thus, pragmatic legitimacy can be considered a useful strategy for service organizations that compete in a sector characterised by a high degree of

organizational similarity in terms of their offerings and ethical initiatives (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). Also, customers reward service organizations for their support for social initiatives and thus many organizations have adopted similar actions (Vollero et al., 2018). In short, organization grants its legitimacy when they manage to develop pragmatic legitimacy (Garcia et al., 2018).

3.1.2 Cognitive legitimacy

Cognitive legitimacy refers to the “mere acceptance of the organization as necessary or inevitable based on some taken-for-granted cultural account” (Suchman, 1995, p. 582). Likewise, according to the institutional theory, cognitive legitimacy is taken-for-granted by the public, as they expect organizations to direct their efforts so they can be accepted as members of society (Vollero et al., 2018). Allen (2016) further explained that cognitive legitimacy focuses on whether or not an organization’s actions are seen as understandable. This legitimacy is mainly due to existing cultural models that provide plausible explanations for the organization and its efforts (Castro et al., 2018). Castro et al. (2018) added more that in the presence of cognitive legitimacy, the organizational activity is predictable, meaningful and appealing. Consequently, cognitive legitimacy is closely linked to the identity and the image that is transmitted about the capacity, stability and coherence of the organization creating the framework through which the meanings of the organization are constructed (Castro et al., 2018).

Furthermore, cognitive legitimacy also refers to cultural and constitutive beliefs (Suchman, 1988; 1995). Society’s culture and beliefs in cognitive legitimacy are established by how the organization develops, behave, and also how the public will assess and interpret its economic and social performance (Tilling, 2004). This suggests that public expectation associated with organization social performance in environment such as sustainability or CSR. In this sense, sustainability or CSR becomes itself an institution and it is consequently a factor in organization processes even if it is unable to help organizations to effectively achieve their goals (Tolbert & Zucker, 1999; Vollero et al., 2018). From this perspective, sustainability appears to be part of a public expectation which is considered to be acceptable business conduct and it is commonly used to display and communicate organizational values (Castelló & Lozano, 2011; Vollero et al., 2018). In addition, Oliver (1991) mentioned that sustainability and social contribution are very common representations of the environmental movement often

utilized to demonstrate the organization's worthiness and acceptability. In a nutshell, the willingness to comply with broader societal expectations provides organizations with cognitive legitimacy (Suchman, 1995).

3.1.3 Moral legitimacy

Last domain is moral legitimacy reflects a positive normative evaluation of the organization and its activities (Suchman, 1995). At its core, moral legitimacy reflects a prosocial logic that differs fundamentally from narrow self-interest (Suchman, 1995). Unlike pragmatic legitimacy, moral legitimacy is "sociotropic" as it rests not on judgments about whether a given activity benefits the evaluator, but rather on judgments about whether the activity is "the right thing to do" (Suchman, 1995). In this sense, Moral legitimacy involves assessments of whether or not an organization's actions are the right thing to do and contribute to society (Allen, 2016).

Furthermore, Luzon et al. (2018) stated that this kind of legitimacy is granted if the behaviour of the organization is correct. Moreover, this legitimacy focuses on the multifaceted relations between the organisation and different social actors (Vaara & Tienar, 2008) and it occurs through a strong relationship between the organization and its main stakeholders (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). Managing moral legitimacy lies in deliberative communication through persuasion using rational arguments and not through enforcing positions (Scherer & Palazzo, 2007). Thus, moral legitimacy is then the foundation for creating a good level of stakeholder engagement as it is boosted by communication and two-way dialogic dynamics (Vollero et al., 2018). Vollero et al. (2018) also explained that moral legitimacy has been widely defined as a process that reflects a positive normative evaluation of the organization and its activities. Organization activities such as sustainability initiatives or CSR programmes are based on stakeholder engagement that is taking place every service organizations interact with customers and other stakeholders face-to-face (Jackson & Parsa, 2009). Eventually, after taking part in these "ethical" actions, stakeholders are feeling even closer to the organization (Vollero et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, although these legitimacy dimensions seem to have points in common with each other, they reside in different behavioural dynamics and imply a perception that activities within the organization are correct in a social system of norms, values, and beliefs (Luzon et al., 2018). Accordingly, based on Suchman (1995), I aimed to give an overview of the legitimacy dimensions to make them more graspable (*see Table 1*).

Dimension	Characteristics
<i>Pragmatic Legitimacy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interest in the organization's environment - Relationship between an organization and its environment can become a power relationship - There is a materialistic relationship between power and dependence - The organization's receptivity to its own interests is more important than obtaining major benefits - The actions of the organization are supported, since people share their interests, values, and beliefs, and they are considered honest and reliable - Trust is derived from compliance with rules and expectations generated by the industry
<i>Cognitive Legitimacy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analysed by assessing the suitability of the outputs, procedures, and structure that the organization uses to achieve its objectives - It rests on judgments about whether a specific type of action is what really needs to be done - The organization is desirable when stakeholders are treated in the way that is expected in the social system in which they operate - It is more difficult to achieve, but it is easier to manipulate, and is stronger than pragmatic legitimacy
<i>Moral Legitimacy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It belongs to actions that help make sense of decision-making - It helps to solve problems, making sense of decision-making - It is based on knowledge, rather than interest or evaluation - It results from taking the belief system as its own, specifying and codifying knowledge - It includes activities that simplify decision-making processes, making them more rational

Table 1. The overview of Suchman' (1995) legitimacy theory dimensions.

3.2 Rhetoric strategies

Castelló & Galang (2014) mentioned that Suchman's legitimacy dimensions can be associated with specific rhetorical strategies, such as *Strategic rhetoric for Pragmatic legitimacy*; *Institutional rhetoric for Cognitive legitimacy*; and *Political rhetoric for Moral legitimacy*. The rationale behind this is that legitimacy can be defined in different rhetoric in order to achieve the desired general public perception or assumption, particularly regarding sustainability. In short, rhetoric strategies are representative forms of legitimacy strategies (Vaara & Tienari, 2008).

3.2.1 Strategic rhetoric

Strategic rhetoric emphasizes the way in which organizations instrumentally manipulate and deploy strong evocative symbols to garner societal support (Suchman, 1995). Castelló and Galang, (2014) further explained that strategic rhetoric represents the tension between the CSR or sustainability activities and the aim of achieving the organizations' business objectives. Through strategic rhetoric, organisations make every effort to attain strategic interests hidden behind their activities, involving an attempt to "influence" not only the immediate audience, but also the political, economic and social contexts (Suchman, 1988; 1995). Additionally, Castelló & Lozano (2011) also explained that this rhetoric is used by the organization as a self-justification and is dominant in their communications strategies which include themes such as operationalization, reputation, innovation, and strategic link (Castelló & Lozano, 2011).

Furthermore, strategic rhetoric attempts to build organization symbolic links with values embedded in the strategic management tradition, such as efficiency in the management of projects, innovation process, and organization returns, whose final aim is to increase organization returns or improve organization reputation (Castelló & Galang, 2014). Strategic rhetoric denotes an aim by the organization to calculate the strategic interest behind their CSR or sustainability activities resting in what Suchman (1995) defines as pragmatic legitimacy - the organization's calculation of its interests. Suchman (1995) further explained that since strategic rhetoric is oriented toward *pragmatic legitimacy*, it assumes that organizations have the power to strategically influence their societal context and, thus, manipulate the process of legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). Moreover, Castelló & Galang (2014) mentioned that organizations' main interest is that in capitalist societies organizations must earn profits and therefore all of the organizations' activities, including CSR or sustainability are advocated to contribute to this interest. As Castelló & Lozano (2011) explained, strategic rhetoric assumes an instrumental interpretation of the organization responsibility since in capitalist societies they must maximize shareholder value. This objective is served by relating sustainability to the organization's strategy, operationalization and innovation processes (Castelló & Lozano, 2011). Additionally, according to Vollero et al., (2018), strategic rhetoric consist of the strategic value of CSR or sustainability that brought about concrete action, such as sustainability project and activities and the use of pragmatic principles of communication that should reflect an organization's commitment to CSR or sustainability.

3.2.2 Institutional rhetoric

Institutional rhetoric is a recurrent construction in the organization's communications strategies (Castelló & Lozano, 2011). In general, institutional rhetoric incorporates themes such as CSR, philanthropy, and sustainability (Castelló & Lozano, 2011) and institutional rhetoric has a direct bearing on the concept of sustainability (Castelló & Lozano, 2011). Sustainability and social contribution are very common representations which are often utilized by the organization to demonstrate their worthiness and acceptability (Castelló & Galang, 2014).

Furthermore, Institutional rhetoric aims to gain legitimacy through the use of constructs such as CSR, sustainability, and social contribution, which represent a way to gain acceptance in the community (Castelló & Galang, 2014). In institutional rhetoric, Castelló & Galang (2014) also mentioned that organizations consciously or unconsciously use links to institutionalized structures, such as CSR or sustainability to demonstrate the organization's worthiness and acceptability in gaining legitimacy. Through institutional rhetoric, organizations build support for cognitive legitimacy by supporting normative and widely endorsed principles of behaviour (Castelló & Lozano, 2011) and organizations that are willing to comply with broader societal expectations will obtain *cognitive legitimacy* (Suchman, 1995).

Moreover, institutional rhetoric consists of institutional profile and organizational governance in CSR or sustainability context (Vollero et al., 2018). The institutional profile includes organization value statements, vision and mission related to environmental, social and economic sustainability issues, and core elements of the organization identity related sustainability, while organizational governance refers to the presence of CSR or sustainability governance structures both at strategic and operative level (Vollero et al., 2018).

3.3.3 Political rhetoric

Castelló and Galang (2014) explained that political rhetoric denotes a power tension between the organizations and its stakeholders. This rhetoric also involves a certain degree of stakeholder engagement and the creation of communicative bridges between the organization and its communities in the aim of finding mutual understanding (Castelló & Galang, 2014). This rhetoric is associated with *moral legitimacy* which increases organization's desire to gain the legitimacy and focusses on the various relations between the organization and different social actors (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Vaara & Tienar, 2008). In political rhetoric, moral legitimacy occurs through a strong relationship between the company and its main stakeholders

(Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). In general, the political rhetoric includes themes such as partnership, accountability, and stakeholder dialog as the organizational efforts to relate with their stakeholders on the basis of dialog and public deliberation (Castelló & Galang, 2014). Political rhetoric also involves a certain degree of stakeholder engagement and the creation of communicative bridges between the organization and its communities in the aim of finding mutual understanding (Castelló & Galang, 2014). With this rhetoric, organization endeavours in community building via “civilizing” activities that involve reporting to and being held accountable to sustainability standards defined by civil society (Castelló & Galang, 2014).

Moreover, Palazzo & Scherer (2006) explained that political rhetoric can be evaluated by organizations of stakeholder engagement tools, such as dedicated websites. Another thing about this rhetoric is that it can be applied on organizations accountability for sustainability or CSR, such as disclosure or documents and business ethics, sustainability reports, green labels, internal behavioural codes, process or product certifications (Vollero et al., 2018). In addition, political rhetoric also includes interactivity such as feedback and participation platform for external arranged by organizations (Vollero et al., 2018).

On the whole, obtaining an understanding legitimacy theory and rhetoric strategies in this theoretical part are serving its relevance to answer the research question of this study. In this study, I further intend to apply both Suchman’ legitimacy theory and Castello and Galang’ rhetoric strategies in analysing organization sustainability communication through web-based communication. By using these theories, it will give a further understanding in analysis part regarding how organizational legitimacy in communicating sustainability through web-based communication can be cultivated. In addition, as Godeman & Michelsen (2011) explained, sustainability communication still does not have its own theoretical framework. Hence, the rationale of using combination of these theoretical framework is relevant.

IV. Methodology

This chapter will include information about epistemological perspective, research design, data collection, method of analysis, ethical consideration, and reflexivity statement of the thesis study. A qualitative study is used as an approach to understand organizational legitimacy and rhetoric strategies in organization texts on the web-based communication, this thesis will be conducted with content analysis as the main method analysis and also use semi-structured interview.

4.1. Epistemological perspective: Social Constructionism

To expand the understanding of organizational sustainability communication through legitimacy theory and rhetoric strategies, this research has anchored from social constructionism. I argue that this study is suitable from a social constructionist perspective since this approach allows me to understand how organization constructs their reality in the field of organizational communication. Heath et al. (2009) explained that legitimacy is a vital topic in public relations and can draw on the rationale of social construction. Moreover, Constructionist perspectives focus on social reality which involve language and narrative which show that individual or organization creates social worlds through their linguistic symbolic activity by interacting with others (Parton & O' Byrne, 2000). Allen (2005) studied organizations and organizational communication by using constructionist insights and is interested to see how organizational make, modify and maintain meaning about social identity. Basically, social constructionism emphasise the use of language both spoken and written (Burr, 2015). Particularly, written language is considered as texts which in this study is going to be used to comprehend meanings behind information and message which published on the websites. Del Rosso & Esala (2015) argue that texts preserve constructions of reality because of their materiality and/or digitality. Text is a simple word with a complex legacy in the social sciences to produce a dominant meaning (Stevenson, 2006).

Furthermore, language carries power and it can be used for clarifying social matters (Allen, 2005). I argue that social constructionist view language as the powerful instrument that can be used by organizations to share understanding about organization information, news, etc. The linguistic is not only as enabling information exchange but also as constructing social and organizational reality (Heracleous & Barrett, 2001). Heath (2011) also argue that language and

meaning are not only means for rhetorical advantage but the foundation of social constructions. Social constructionism focusing on how talk and language can have the effect of moving people to action and changing their views and perceptions (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000, p. 18). I argue that social constructionism is relevant for this study as it enabled the possibility in seeing how the organization constructs the written language as rhetorical strategies on their websites which aims to build legitimacy to their stakeholders.

In connection with the use of rhetorical strategies, rhetorician has qualities and capacity for using their arguments, justifications, and criticisms to achieve particular effects (Billig, 1987). In this sense, I would argue that social constructionism is relevant from an epistemological standpoint to uncover the use of rhetorical aspects in this study. Moreover, in rhetorical organization, rhetoric is constructed as implicit defences against the objections that might be raised to the organization (Burr, 2015). In this sense, this is the core of the current study which is to understand how organizations communicate with their diverse stakeholders through rhetoric strategies to build legitimacy. As Parton & O'Byrne (2000) said that constructionism approach recognises the rhetorical aspects of construction which is a process of persuading one's self and others that one's rendering of social reality is more legitimate. Therefore, studying sustainability communication from organization perspective is relevant with social constructionism because environmental communication research is closer to the paradigm of social constructionism as it is perceived an organization tool to promote, maintain and enhance the social organization image, reputation and legitimacy (Gond & Matten, 2007; Golob et al., 2017).

4.2 Research design

I chose a qualitative research design as I was aware that there is a lack of qualitative research exists in my field of research, and at the time that I started my research, I could not find any comprehensive qualitative studies in specific topic regarding legitimacy, rhetoric strategies, and sustainability communication of airline companies both in Europe and Sweden. Therefore, I wanted my research to contribute towards filling this gap and intended to answer the research question of this study and also I want to give contribution to the previous study in organizational legitimacy and rhetoric strategies by examining a case study.

4.2.1 Case study

In this thesis, case study has been used as an appropriate method to examine an issue, event, process or problem within particular context (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). Yin (2014) explained that case study research involves the study of a case within real-life, contemporary context or setting. In this sense, this study further has used a concrete entity such as organizations or institutions as the single case study which focused on one airline company based in one of Scandinavian countries to explore and seek an understanding of their rhetoric strategies to gain legitimacy. Single case study is suitable for this research because it investigates in-depth a particular case which can be identified as a bounded system (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). As Creswell (2018) said that bounded system is a choice of what is to be studied which means that it has a certain parameter, such as specific place or time frame or issue. Therefore, this study only focused on sustainability topic with a specific focus on sustainability communication performed by SAS through web-based communication. Moreover, SAS is solely used as the single case study as it would be giving in-depth understanding about sustainability communication from a critical point of theoretical proposition whether the legitimacy theory and rhetoric strategies will give relevant explanations or not.

4.2.2 Data collection and sampling

This study employs purposive sampling to identify and select a relevant case. Purposive sampling (Suri, 2011) has been used as an approach to select the organization and get deeper insight of how the organization uses this rhetoric strategies in their sustainability communication. Therefore, I chose to focus on one organization, Scandinavian Airlines (SAS) which is the flag carrier of Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. The reason to select SAS as an organization is because it constitutes one of the most sustainable airline companies in Northern Europe which has been performing their business operation related to sustainability and providing sustainability information on their website. Purposive sampling type requires access to the key informants who can help to provide rich information of study object (Suri, 2011).

Furthermore, since this study uses a single case study method, the major strength that I could advantage is that the opportunity to use many different sources of evidence (Yin, 2014) and data collection in case study research is typically extensive which draws on multiple source of information (Creswell, 2007). Thus, the source of data for this case study further extract from different data collection which primary by using SAS website. Also, single case study allow

me to use multiple data collection methods such as documents and interviews (Daymon & Holloway, 2011), which particularly documents are also available on the organization websites. Moreover, to strengthen analysis, I used another data source from SAS press release as official documents and the interviews with selected SAS employees. For this reason, the interviews from SAS employees were conducted to give an additional explanation of the case. Equally important, collecting the data by using purposive sampling for this study is implemented since there is no interest in sampling data on a random basis since the goal of purposive sampling is to sample cases in a strategic way, so that those sampled are relevant to the research questions (Bryman, 2012).

Websites

I used the organization websites of SAS as the object of this study. The relevance of using SAS website is that since organizational webpage is a rich source of data that could provide insights into the way an organization communicates with its stakeholders, and how it frames a given topic Anderson (2020). Since this study only focus on a certain topic in sustainability, I tried to focus on any text or information which relevant to SAS sustainability initiatives. Websites are often a rich source of data which can provide a unique window into the life of an organization and it represents a snapshot of an incident of organizational communication at a specific point (Cheney et al., 2011). In fact, website contains mixed multiple media such as texts, graphics, animation, video and audio (Kim & Kuljis, 2010). Thus, in this data collection, I focused only on all available texts or information that available on SAS website as it information gave me opportunity to have the proper sample to analyse and answer the study’s research question. I used purposive sampling by selecting one SAS website <https://www.sasgroup.net/> as the primary data which specifically includes selected sustainability webpages which have 16 webpages with the purpose of aiming specific text or information which related to sustainability. Also, I provided an overview of SAS sustainability webpage (*Table 2*) in order to show give the overview and example what sustainability information that they put out.

SAS webpages	Headline	Number of webpages
About SAS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is SAS 	1
SAS view on sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental Responsibility 	1
SAS Stakeholders	-	1

Sustainability policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainability policy • Environmental policy • Work environment policy • Diversity policy • Purchasing policy • Quality policy 	6
Environmental Management System (ISO 14001)	-	1
Initiatives and activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humanitarian support • Newer aircraft of the right size creates less emission • Renewable energy in the wings • SAS takes it social responsibility seriously • CO2 offset 	5
Sustainability contact	-	1

Table 2. *The overview of SAS sustainability webpage.*

Documents

An organization, such as SAS, produce various documents such press releases which likewise are found online on their webpage and publicly accessible. Organizational materials for public consumption such as corporations and institutions are available via webpages (Reapley & Rees, 2018). As Yin (2014) stated that documents information is likely to be relevant to every case study. Documents deploy rhetorical devices to create plausible accounts and to construct believable versions of reality which is in other words documents persuade to describe, explain, and justify (Coffey, 2014). Documents which have extracted from SAS website further were deemed as taken from the organization as the data source of this case study. In addition, looking into organization documents was considered important in a sense that how SAS presented their sustainability initiatives information on these documents that could relevant, complement and coherent with the information that extracted from other data collection for this study. In this case, I only selected press release from SAS website and purposively have sorted out 20 press releases (*Table 3*) from SAS Newsroom webpage by looking at all of available texts or information related sustainability (*Appendix 4*) ranging from 2018 to 2019.

SAS Press Release (Year)	Number of Press Releases
2018	6
2019	14

Table 3. SAS Press Release related to Sustainability topic from 2018-2019.

Interviews

In this study, main purpose to conduct the interviews is that to understand how the rhetoric strategies in sustainability communication is presented on SAS website and to extract more information from the dialogue with interviewees. Equally important, another purpose is that for having personal perspective of the SAS employees in a sense that how they perceive the use of web-based communication for sustainability communication in their sustainability initiatives to gain organization legitimacy in airline industry which I believe has certain purpose, plans, and strategy. For this reason, interviews are valuable way to enhance understanding of organizational communication by engaging an organization's members directly (Cheney et al., 2011). The interviews have been conducted to obtain the additional information of how SAS build and gain their legitimacy through the website which could not possible to be extracted by the information on their website per se.

Furthermore, Brinkmann & Kvale (2015) define semi-structured interview as an attempt to understand themes of the lived everyday world from the subjects' own perspective. In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted since it enables the interviewee to actively construct the nature of the interview and consequently direct it based on what they perceive as appropriate (Cassell, 2011). In this sense, I argue that the nature of the semi-structured interview can create a flexibility between interviewer and interviewee as the subject which allows to ask follow-up questions so a dialogue can be created. Moreover, semi-structured interview is advantageous for this study since semi-structured interview (Edwards & Holland, 2013) allows the interviewee to talk from their own perspective using their own frame of reference, ideas, and meanings that are familiar to them.

Selection and criteria of interviews

The information regarding to SAS sustainability can be extracted only from people or employees both in top management position and low-mid level position who are in charge in communication and sustainability. In this sense, I selected interviewees by using purposive sampling, which means that the participants were selected because of their relevance to answer the research question (Bryman, 2012). Moreover, Brinkmann & Kvale (2015) stated that top management position or so-called elite interviewees are leaders or experts in a community or organization which usually in certain positions and have some expertise concerning the interview topic. Therefore, in the beginning of interviews process, I was selecting potential interview participants who are involving both in communication and sustainability works in SAS since they have credibility to share information regarding sustainability communication. All of the potential interview participants have contacted through emails and LinkedIn between March and April 2020, since it was the fastest and most convenient approach to reach people from this organization. This included the nine employees from middle to top management such as Vice President of Brand & Communications (Public Affairs, Sustainability and CSR); Vice President of Public, International and Regulatory Affairs; Head of Environment and CSR; Sustainability Manager - Commercial Concepts Product, Insights & Loyalty; Head of Corporate Communication; Head of Public Relations & Content; Head of Brand Marketing Communication & Public Relations (interim); Brand, Marketing Communication & Public Relations – Project Leader; and Environment & CSR Officer. To support the reason of this interview participants selection, as Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) argue that the number of interviewees is relative in qualitative research and it depends on the effort to gain an insight of the issue.

Interview proceedings

Contacting these potential interview participants was a rigorous and restless process, particularly in COVID-19 crisis situation. The majority responded to the interview inquiry, but most of them decided not to participate due to the crisis and very tough situation of the coronavirus. Leading to that most of communication and sustainability team members had to work double work hours, even if their aircrafts were grounded (*Appendix 1*). However, the interview was finally conducted with only two employees of SAS who are responsible in sustainability department and communication department. The first employee is working in SAS product department, specifically as Sustainability Manager - Commercial Concepts Product, Insights & Loyalty. She has been working for almost a year in SAS and has

experience, knowledge, and understanding of sustainable business development within the product content in SAS commercial concepts from a customer perspective. Lastly, the second employee is having a responsibility as Brand, Marketing Communication, and Public Relation – Project leader. She has been working for almost two years in SAS and has experience, knowledge, and understanding of public relation, communication project, and also sustainability communication. I also considered an alternative medium for having the interview with interviewees by using online interview strategy which was a good solution in order to cultivate the data or information from the interviewees (Morgan & Symon, 2004; James & Busher, 2006).

The interviews were conducted online via Zoom which was covering the questions in regards to sustainability communication and it lasted between 40 to 50 minutes. The semi-structured interview was conducted by asking questions based on the interview guide (*Appendix 3*). The interview guide that I prepared has a list of questions that related to theoretical framework that has been used on this study which should stimulate the interviewees to answer it more reflectively regarding SAS sustainability communication. The questions in the interview guide covered the rhetoric strategies that connected with organizational legitimacy. As stated by Qu & Dumay (2011), semi-structured interview involves prepared questioning guided by identified themes in a consistent and systematic manner interposed with probes designed to elicit more elaborate responses. Additionally, before interview is conducted, I asked permission to the participants if it was allowed to record the interview which they accepted.

In brief, the interview started with the introduction question to the interviewee regarding what position they hold in the company, what their primary responsibilities are, and for how long they have been working in the company. Next, the interview covered three key questions. First, relates to strategic rhetoric in their sustainability information on the website. Second, it attempts to ask the interviewee concerning institutional rhetoric that involves stakeholder acceptance and sustainability governance. Third is intended to answer the question regarding political rhetoric in their sustainability communication from organization perspective. In addition, during the interview, I also asked follow up questions to the interviewees as the open interactive nature of a semi-structured interview and it allows interviewees to bring up information that may be critically important which I never anticipated (Cheney et al., 2011). In this sense, I argue that follow up questions help me to develop information from the interviewee which will still support answering the research question. When the interviews done, I

transcribed it and use the transcription for supporting analysis of this study as it is suggested by Brinkmann & Kvale (2015) that transcribed interview is regarded as the solid rock-bottom empirical data of the research study. In addition, I should also have mentioned that these were the only two interview that can possibly conducted during COVID-19 crisis in Sweden.

4.3 Data Analysis

This study uses qualitative content analysis to analyse the result from the data collection by using rhetoric strategies framework which previously discussed in theory chapter. Qualitative content analysis serves as a set of techniques for the systematic analysis of texts which addresses content, themes and core ideas in the texts (Drisko & Maschi, 2016). Thus, I argue that this method is considered an appropriate analysis method for analysis data collection and in order to address research question of this study. Content analysis is a flexible qualitative research method that is used to analyse textual data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This analysis method has been employed not only in the field of traditional communication, but also in studies of human-computer interaction such as web based (Kim & Kuljis, 2010). For this reason, all of texts or information related to sustainability on the website and press releases were analysed as the textual data because qualitative content analysis (Kim & Kuljis, 2010) is similar to textual analysis which is primarily interpretive in nature. Further, the interviews in this study also conducted with the content analysis to give an additional explanation of the case study.

Equally important, this qualitative content analysis used deductive approach which allows the researcher categorizes the existing theories beforehand about the legitimacy theory and rhetoric strategies which include pragmatic legitimacy (strategic rhetoric); cognitive legitimacy (institutional rhetoric); and moral legitimacy (political rhetoric). Through deductive approach, data are analysed according to an existing theoretical framework and the aim is not to ‘test’ the theory but to adopt the theory as an analytical tool when analysing data (Kennedy & Thornberg, 2018). For this reason, the findings were categorised based on the theories as mean to see if the theories are applicable to answer the research question.

To begin with, the content analysis of website and press release was conducted by reading all of relevant texts or information and summarized each text in order to find important contents and features that relate to the case study. The focus of qualitative content analysis is to identify

categories or themes found in texts that both summarise the content data and also highlight key content (Drisko & Maschi, 2016). Since content analysis is conducted in deductive approach, it allows the researchers develop codes before the analysis begins which generated deductively from the theory (Drisko & Maschi, 2016). Hence, next step is that I coded the rhetoric strategies that were used for each theme that found in the texts which include strategic rhetoric, institutional rhetoric, and political rhetoric. These coding represents possible texts of information found on selected website and press releases. Coding refers to attaching one or more keywords to a text segment in order to permit later identification of a statement (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). In this sense, these coding was chosen to reflect the theoretical framework and to answer the research question since coding (Saldaña, 2013) linked the data to theory and from the theory to all the data which related or applicable to that theory.

Furthermore, content analysis also conducted for the interviews and the first step I took in analysing the interviews is that I read the transcript and codes the relevant passage (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The interviews transcript also were sorted and coded thoroughly in order to make sense of all the collected data (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The interview process has done after conducting two interviewees and the interviews result were compiled and coded based on theoretical framework and literatures to answer the research question of this study since coding (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015) is a key aspect of content analysis of interview texts.

After having analysed the data and uncovered themes and categories, the analysis part of this research is presented in the next chapter by explaining selected themes in relevant findings to the theoretical framework which will be displayed in narrative manner by using quotations from the empirical data that describe the content of website, press release and interview while showing what rhetoric strategies were used.

4.4 Ethical consideration

In terms of ethical perspective of the study, particularly in interviews data collection, SAS and its employees have been both formally and informally informed about the aim and explained specific purpose of this research (*Appendix 2*) in order to have access to the organization to conduct this research and gain support from the employee's participation. Ethically, a non-disclosure agreement between Lund University and SAS should be signed by all participating parties, thus the organization' name, all information and data which might give indication about

their identities can be used either with consent of the organization or anonymous. In reality, a non-disclosure agreement has not been signed by both organizations due to the trustworthiness of SAS employees toward the research for academic purposes. Nevertheless, ethical concerns that arise when conducting this study with limited interview participants is that a probability of participant identity will be exposed unintentionally. Thus, solutions for this might include not reporting any personally identifying information, not identifying the specific community, or giving the participants the choice of being identified in the study or not (Mertens, 2018). In this case, confidentiality of interviewee identity has been treated as anonymous even though they agreed upon only the professional title that was used to identify them in this research.

4.5 Reflexivity statement

Researcher's reflexivity is defined as the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of the researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgment and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome (Berger, 2015). In this sense, I tried to describe personal and academic background, position, and experience that might be relevant behind conducting this study. Personally, I am a male, adult, Indonesian nationality, has a bachelor degree in International Relations, and have been working in the aviation industry for more than seven years in the last position as Acting Assistant Vice President (AVP) of External Relations and Communication within the corporate communication department. From this background, studying SAS' sustainability communication from a strategic communication perspective is considered as taking a communication practice to the next level, but this study specifically has been viewed from a different communication perspective which departs from practical to academic which I believe that it is completely different in comparison between communication best practices in airlines companies in Indonesia and Sweden. In addition, I have knowledge and understanding of how the aviation industry works due to my extensive experience in this industry which I realized might have influenced the analysis and discussion of this research. However, I tried to be critical regarding how sustainability is communicated in Sweden, particularly by using web-based communication since many organizations in Sweden have well-implemented sustainability in their business and communicated sustainability purposefully to the broader society.

V. Analysis

What follow is the analysis chapter of the usage of SAS web-based communication as a communication tool in which rhetoric strategies are used to build and gain their legitimacy through sustainability initiatives. After conducting the content analysis to all the texts on the website, press releases and interviews, the theoretical framework from Suchman' (1995) legitimacy theory and Castelló and Galang' (2014) rhetoric strategies to answer the research question of this study.

5.1 Strategic rhetoric in SAS sustainability communication

In the first part of the analysis, strategic rhetoric to gain pragmatic legitimacy through SAS web-based communication for communicating sustainability is presented based on theoretical framework and the empirical data related to strategic rhetoric which covers SAS strategic value of sustainability and SAS commitment in sustainability.

5.1.1 SAS Strategic value of sustainability

In airline industry, aircraft is a core production tool that generates revenues. Therefore, SAS obviously mentions their sustainability initiatives related to their operation and business by using newer and right size aircraft in order to create less emission. Since the strategic rhetoric brings the organization to do concrete action (Vollero et al., 2018), what presented by SAS in this initiative is considered as organization actions related to SAS core business in airline business as they put this information on 'initiatives and activities' webpage that reads:

“SAS strategy is to replace older aircraft with newer one. The current deliveries A320neo replacing less efficient Boeing 737NG. The A320neo has twelve seats more than the A320neo while reducing the fuel consumption and associated emissions by approximately 15% on a comparable flight” (SAS, 2020)

From the text above, it shows SAS strategic rhetoric in strategic value of sustainability to gain legitimacy as they need to explain to wider society that they have competitive advantage and try to differentiate themselves from other airline companies in term of doing business without destroying the environment. This is how the organization could attain their pragmatic legitimacy since they focuses on communicating their organization concrete action and

highlight their competitiveness amongst their competitors (Suchman, 1988; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). Moreover, during the interview with one of SAS employees, interviewee explained that using new and more efficient aircrafts in possible occasion will make great flexibility for SAS in term of flight operation demand, which guarantees the lowest possible total emissions that they can contribute to environment.

“In 2023, we are planning to have only Airbus for our fleets and these aircraft are more energy efficient, even though we still have some Boeing 737 types. Airbus 320 Neo and Airbus A350 Neo, they are 15% to 18 % more fuel efficient compared to other aircrafts. In this area, we also trying to removing weights on board to make them more fuel efficient and everything is trying to be minimize.”

In conjunction with the statement above, it shows that SAS strategic rhetoric in strategic value of sustainability attempts to build organization symbolic links with innovation process in aiming the increase of organization returns or improve organization reputation (Castelló & Galang, 2014). The innovation that SAS will bring within 10 or 20 years from now in having hybrid and electric aircraft (*Image 1*) is one of the ways that they are trying to gain pragmatic legitimacy as it is related to the organization products that could influence the society perception about SAS sustainability initiatives (Suchman, 1995). In addition, SAS CEO has made official statement about this ambitious future project in their press release ‘*SAS and Airbus to Research Hybrid and Electric Aircraft*’:

“We are proud of our ambitious sustainability work and are now pleased that Airbus has chosen SAS to partner up with us for this future project. If this becomes a reality, it will revolutionize emissions” (SAS, 2019, May 22)



Image 1. Prototype design of SAS-Airbus electric and hybrid electric aircraft.¹

Furthermore, besides SAS brand new aircrafts project, they also highlights other sustainability initiatives information in ‘initiatives and activities’ webpage in the context of renewable energy area by looking at the development of alternative and sustainable jet fuels based renewable sources which is describe in this text:

“Unlike most types of transportation, aviation has no real alternative to the liquid fuels that are currently used. There is also a need to secure access to liquid fuels as the supply of fossil alternatives is expected to decline and/or become more expensive. Developing alternatives that can reduce climate-impacting emissions while also fulfilling the established sustainability criteria is of the utmost importance” (SAS, 2020)

Looking at this text on the webpage, I analysed and found this information was also considered as SAS strategic rhetoric in strategic value of sustainability as they are communicating their concerns in using alternative fuels that could enable reducing air travel emissions. Currently, SAS has been using both conventional fossil fuel and new alternative fuel called the Biofuel. Based on the analysis from the interviews with one of the SAS employees about Biofuel, the organization has been convincing their stakeholders, particularly suppliers and customers, to push forward the production and the usage of this fuel since there are currently a limited amount of suppliers that can provide it and also the fuel price is in high price in the energy market.

¹ Retrieved August 7, 2020, from <https://www.flysas.com/en/sustainability/>

Furthermore, taking on customer perspective, SAS has made a commercial strategy related to sustainability initiatives by making it as an add-on purchase product which could be selected by the customers if they are willing to contribute reducing their carbon footprint of their air travel trip. In this matter, I argue that the Biofuel itself is deemed as the organizational solution in order to perceive as ‘the green airlines’ and doing beyond airlines business as usual to have and keep support from the society. Moreover, SAS communicates its Biofuel product as one of their sustainability initiatives through web-based communication not only to influence their customers, but also vast public opinion by leveraging Biofuel as the ethical symbol as the environment-friendly fuel which is to gain pragmatic legitimacy, trust and get societal support (Vollero et al., 2018). For this reason, sustainability communication could enhance trust and credibility of the organization among customers by positioning the organization as a sustainable organization with sustainable products (Signitzer & Prexl, 2007).

“Yes, we have information about Biofuel on the website when you book the ticket. We also have some development project on how to offer the biofuel, for example, we are trying to introduce it on our app (Image 2) so customer can easily add it there when they buy the ticket. We offer to the customer to buy it because for SAS Biofuel is more expensive compared to the conventional fossil fuel. We trying to convince the customer to invest the Biofuel together with us. If you want to be more sustainable traveler you should buy it.”

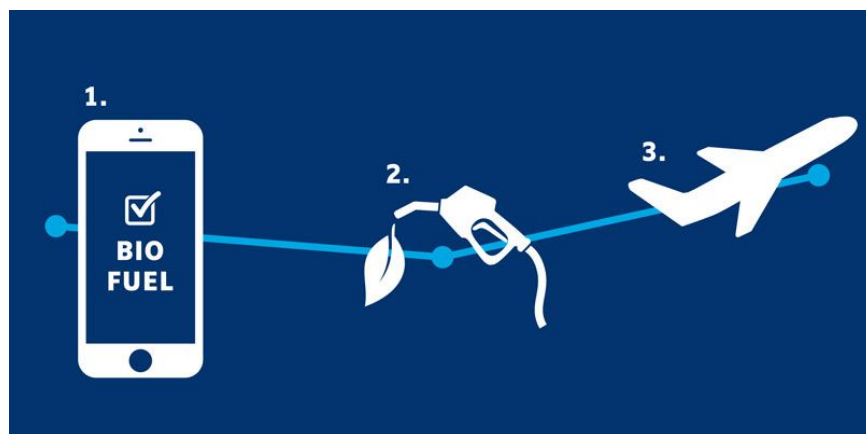


Image 2. Illustration of business process in buying Biofuel via mobile app.²

² Retrieved August 7, 2020, from <https://scandinaviantraveler.com/en/aviation/biofuel-upgrade-now-available-at-sas>

Additionally, I found strategic rhetoric in strategic value of sustainability also displayed in SAS ‘initiatives and activities’ webpage which explained about about SAS’ carbon dioxide (CO₂) offset initiative which there is a paragraph that reads:

“We carbon offset all Youth travel with SAS and our own staff tickets. As of February 2019, we also carbon offset all SAS tickets for our EuroBonus members. For FY 2019, we have offset 1.2 million tonnes of CO₂, or 32% of the passenger-related CO₂ emissions” (SAS, 2020)

This information was revealing the impact that SAS and their customers have been created to neutralise and reducing carbon production from the aircrafts through their product or service. By communicating this initiative, SAS tries to influence public and their customer since pragmatic legitimacy is associated with the products and services that an organization offers (Suchman, 1995). From a communicative perspective, the process of SAS legitimacy building includes the organization rhetorical tactics to justify the profit-making existence of organization (Anderson, 2020). In this sense, I argue that SAS attempts to foster these initiatives as strategic rhetoric in strategic value of sustainability through their web-based communication to highlight positive impact of sustainability initiatives related to organization goal such as profit issue.

5.1.2 SAS Commitment in sustainability

Strategic rhetoric in SAS commitment in sustainability shows at their ‘sustainability policies’ webpage as it is considered as the pragmatic principles of communication that reflected from organization’s commitment to sustainability (Vollero et al., 2018). The policies are covering a whole of SAS sustainability initiatives which include sustainability, environment, work, diversity, purchasing, and quality. However, I only focused on sustainability policy as it relevance with the topic of this study.

“SAS aims to follow strong sustainable practices and to encourage its stakeholders to do the same. Sustainable development is an integrated part of SAS’s business activities and is closely linked to our ability to fulfil and develop the priority program. To contribute to sustainable development, everybody must, in their day-to-day work, take financial as well as environmental and social considerations into account” (SAS, 2020)

This text show strategic rhetoric performed in SAS commitment in sustainability because it was clear that the information in the webpage were using as communication strategy of organization self-justification (Castelló & Lozano, 2011). I argue that these information are typical stakeholder-centric such as partners or suppliers which intended to give an overview to SAS stakeholders regarding what they could expect from sustainability and environmental policies, particularly in doing in business or partnership in sustainability setting. As explained by one of SAS employees, SAS has a lot of stakeholders and the way they communicate to each stakeholder is cannot treated in a similar manner as it depends who is the receiver of the messages. For this reason, the implication of performing strategic rhetoric by displaying sustainability commitment is that leads to retrieve pragmatic legitimacy is that the relationship between an organization and its stakeholder can become a power relationship (Suchman, 1995).

“Since we have a lot of stakeholders, so depends on which stakeholders that we put in the light. For example, the supplier, we have to have a message that we are working together like partnership towards sustainability goals. Because in my commercial department, suppliers are the main priority for our sustainability works since the supply chain is everything for our products and services. In that sense, it is only one type of messages to them in order to be able to push them to work together with us with the same sustainable development goals”

In connection with the statement above, SAS is communicating specific message that intended to their supplier in term of business cooperation as act of strategic rhetoric that oriented toward pragmatic legitimacy because they have the power to strategically influence their societal context or stakeholder as the process of legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). I argue that SAS also positioning themselves in strategic position in communicating sustainability issue and policies to the stakeholders which has an implication to SAS legitimacy and perception, which include customer, supplier, business partners, community and society. In this sense, communication could help organization to manage the industry legitimacy perception (Allen, 2016). Further, the evidence of strategic rhetoric is performed in this context has shown in press release ‘*New Nordic by SAS Serves Up Two Vegetarian Menus*’:

“SAS launched its award-winning ‘New Nordic by SAS’ meal concept with seasonal menus. All the dishes are prepared with a focus on high-quality, seasonal ingredients from small-scale local Scandinavian producers and suppliers. The dishes are Scandinavian

specialities with an exciting twist and, where possible, prepared using organic and sustainable ingredients” (SAS, 2019, June 5)

Moreover, strategic rhetoric also denotes symbolic action of the organization in communicating commitment in sustainability which is evidently found when SAS performing strategic rhetoric by deploying a symbol related to sustainability through introducing new livery on their aircrafts in 2019. Likewise, strategic rhetoric practice represents how the organization aiming pragmatic legitimacy based on their self-interested (Suchman, 1995, p. 578) which in SAS case they are aiming to be the most sustainable airlines. To illustrate, strategic rhetoric is delivered by SAS in this context which has shown in in press release ‘*SAS Presents New Livery*’ that stated by SAS CEO:

“The new livery design is a symbol of our future, a more sustainable and competitive future for SAS, but one that also embraces our heritage. Travelers from Scandinavia will recognize their home, while global travelers will encounter the renowned feeling of the Nordics. They are the face of our brand and their commitment is key to a more sustainable and competitive future” (SAS, 2019, September 19)

From the statement above, this finding is relevant with strategic rhetoric performed to emphasize the way in which organizations instrumentally manipulate society by deploying strong evocative symbols (Suchman, 1995). In this sense, I argue that the new livery design (*Image 3*) depicts as SAS communication symbol towards sustainable and competitiveness since the livery itself represent Scandinavian culture and heritage. SAS that tried to reflect and exploit their customers and stakeholders’ interests by associated Scandinavian identity or ‘Viking pride’ in their new livery. In public relation perspective, this is called as ‘engineered consent’ where communication is seen as a way to control and manipulate people (Anderson, 2020) and this kind of symbolic sustainability communication seems compatible in the Nordic market and Scandinavian countries where people value the environment (Signitzer & Prexl, 2007).

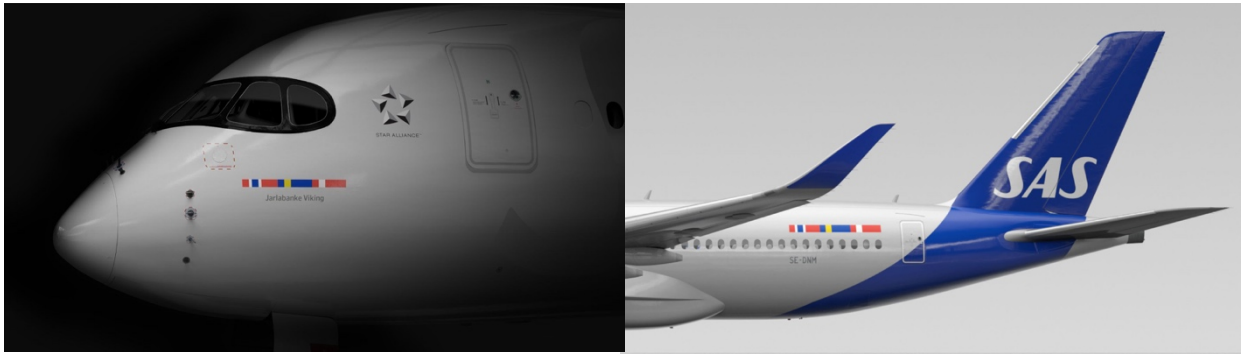


Image 3. SAS New Livery on the aircraft as symbolic strategic rhetoric.³

5.2 Institutional rhetoric in SAS sustainability communication

In this part, institutional rhetoric to gain cognitive legitimacy through SAS web-based communication for communicating sustainability is presented based on theoretical framework and the empirical data. To begin with, institutional rhetoric has relevant texts in SAS value, vision, and mission statement as I identified them as organization ‘DNA, vision, and strategic priorities’ which were mentioned in the ‘This is SAS’ webpage that reads:

“Our DNA. We are Scandinavian by name and nature and our operational priorities are: Safety; Punctuality, and Care” (SAS, 2020)

“Our Vision. To make life easier for Scandinavia’s frequent flyers” (SAS, 2020)

“Our Strategic Priorities. Win Scandinavia’s frequent travelers; Create efficient and sustainable operating platforms; and Secure the right capabilities” (SAS, 2020)

These texts are considered as sustainability institutional profile in SAS value, vision, and mission statement related to sustainability that were communicated through a combination of statements with an institutional rhetoric strategy that promotes cognitive legitimacy as a way to gain acceptance in the community and perceived as the most sustainable airline. For this reason, institutional rhetoric appears to be part of a public expectation which is considered to be acceptable business conduct to display and communicate organizational value (Castelló & Lozano, 2011; Vollero et al., 2018). Further, this could be said institutional rhetoric constructs

³ Retrieved August 7, 2020, from <https://www.boldscandinavia.com/work/sas-livery/>

the use of SAS sustainability to gain cognitive legitimacy as well as a way to gain acceptance in the society (Castelló & Galang, 2014). In fact, based on the interview with one of SAS employees, interviewee explained that stakeholder acceptance in communicating sustainability is important for their organization since sustainability initiatives is deemed as the long-run process and they have a lot of suppliers that comes from small companies and local producers to support their business operation. From public perspective, interviewee further explained that people do not want to work for the airline company due to the reason of aviation industry still give a bad impact to the environment and the suppliers are not willing to cooperate with organization that do not have environmental responsibility in their operations. For this reason, performing institutional rhetoric message to SAS stakeholder is a way for the organization willingness to comply with broader societal expectations to obtain cognitive legitimacy (Suchman, 1995).

Further, during the interviews, one of SAS employees stated that organization shared their sustainability view to different stakeholders with different message since they have a lot of stakeholders, notably mention the suppliers. The aim is that the suppliers should be given a view that SAS works in partnership with all of stakeholders towards sustainability goals since the suppliers are the main priority for SAS sustainability initiatives and its critical role in the supply chain of SAS products and services. As evidence, I found SAS deploys institutional rhetoric on their sustainability initiatives that published in press release by SAS in the context of stakeholder partnership which has shown in *'New Nordic by SAS Goes Vegan'* that stated:

"Some form of plastic is often necessary due to food safety requirements. Therefore, the suppliers of SAS have come up with a solution that replaces the inside plastic container of the Cube (Image 4) with a paper one. It is made of FSC approved paper with a plastic coating, made from organic plant-based plastic instead of oil-based plastic" (SAS, 2019, November 21)



Image 4. SAS Sustainable packaging, *The Cube*, to reduce carbon impact.⁴

Furthermore, I found SAS institutional rhetoric also performed in ‘SAS view on sustainability’ webpage which contains three sustainability responsibility development that cover environmental, social, and financial aspects. However, in this matter, I chose and focused only on ‘environmental responsibility’ aspect which has texts that reads:

“SAS fully supports IATA’s vision that, by 2050, it will be possible to fly commercially without climate impact. This vision is to be realized through a combination of new technology, more efficient air traffic management, new fuels and coordinated actions to improve the infrastructure and the conditions under which air transport operates. To achieve this vision, IATA and other areas of the airline industry have agreed on a joint target, which will subsequently be adopted by the entire airline industry and is now set to be further developed by ICAO: Improvement of fuel efficiency by an average of 1.5% annually until 2020; Carbon-neutral growth from 2020; and 50% reduction in greenhouse CO₂ emissions by 2050, compared with 2005 levels” (SAS, 2020)

This text shows SAS commitment in sustainability that they actively support aviation industry toward zero emission which has a connection with SAS long-term goals. To give an in-depth analysis, one of SAS employees explained that the organization has very high sustainability goals which one of them is that having absolute emissions in 2030 which is 25% lower carbon

⁴ Retrieved August 7, 2020, from <https://www.boldscandinavia.com/work/new-nordic-by-sas/>

emission compared to 2005 and this information is used to influence stakeholders in order to gain organization interests such as gaining profit or creating legitimacy, but it is not contradictory with stakeholder's expectation. In this sense, SAS sustainability initiatives are a representation of the environmental movement to demonstrate the organization's worthiness and acceptability to the stakeholder expectations that it could provide SAS with cognitive legitimacy (Oliver 1991; Suchman, 1995).

Equally important, Interviewee explained that SAS has an ambition and vision in sustainability which shows from the way they operate to make better. Interviewee added that organization do not want to discredit their industry and their operation because of the sustainability issue. In this sense, I argue that this institutional rhetoric information in webpage shows SAS commitment in sustainability and environmental concern as it is intended to build up cognitive legitimacy. However, it can be said that SAS is not performing sustainability communication all the way because the nature of aviation industry is actually not sustainable since most of the airline companies are still using jet fuels to roll their jet engine. For this reason, this shows that any sustainability initiative that is undertaken by organizations to gain legitimacy and the confidence of the public must be accompanied by a capacity to communicate with the demands of stakeholders (Moreno and Capriotti, 2009).

5.3 Political rhetoric in SAS sustainability communication

The last part of the analysis, SAS sustainability communication is presented through political rhetoric which is associated to gain moral legitimacy which specifically covers SAS Stakeholder engagement, Accountability of sustainability, and Interactivity based on theoretical framework with providing the empirical evidence.

5.3.1 SAS Stakeholder engagement

In general, political rhetoric involves stakeholder engagement between the organization and its stakeholders to have mutual understanding (Castelló & Galang, 2014). To give an in-depth understanding, during the interview one of SAS employees stated that SAS stakeholder engagement is reflected from the relationship with media and politicians that they has been communicating intensely. The employee also mentioned that public relation is used as the communication bridges, in particular to the media in Scandinavian countries, to share SAS sustainability initiatives information since the stakeholders in those countries have

environmental conscious and they expect SAS concerns about the environment impact. In this sense, political rhetoric in SAS sustainability communication serves moral legitimacy as it focusses on the relations between the organization and different stakeholders (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Vaara & Tienar, 2008) and increased stakeholder engagement in sustainability initiatives may lead to an increased level of support of sustainability initiatives (Craig & Allen, 2013).

“We worked a lot in Public Relation area, we have a lot of interview inquiries for our CEO and Head of Sustainability & CSR, who are talking a lot about sustainability before the COVID-19 pandemic. This is because we want to be competitive in aviation industry and perceived as the most sustainable airline.”

However, digesting sustainability initiatives information from airline perspective can be quite hard to understand if the stakeholders are not familiar with how the airline industry works. In this case, one of SAS employees briefly explained by giving an example of both Swedish and Danish politicians and journalists did not have sufficient knowledge to understand the context of sustainability communication information since they are not actively engaged in the aviation industry and sustainability. What is more, the interviewee also added that compared to Swedish and Danish, Norwegian politicians and journalists are more knowledgeable about aviation industry since culturally people in Norway are more dependent in air travel compared to people in Sweden. In this sense, it can be understood that interpretations of the concept of sustainability differ between countries as different societal cultures put different emphasis on certain aspects of the concept (Signitzer and Prexl, 2007).

Furthermore, in political rhetoric, stakeholder engagement is also not only about the rhetoric itself but also about involving communication tool, such as dedicated web-based communication or website (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). Thus, communicating sustainability initiatives through web-based communication to diverse stakeholders is more approachable and accessible. Evidently, the public relations practice through dedicated website as the communication tool is recognised by SAS, as highlighted by the employees during the interview.

“In Public Relation area, we also put a lot of the sustainability information in our websites sasgroup.net and flysas.com with dedicated landing page. And we have a lot of different

channels to incorporate sustainability information to repeat what we are doing, what the implication that has, what traveler can contribute to sustainability. We had a campaign with it and use paid media to let people know about it”.

Based on the analysis from the interview, website as the sustainability communication instrument for SAS also serves the important purpose and considered as a way to engage, educate, and inspire people to have a sustainability mind-set and of course support SAS sustainability initiatives. It is important to consider what information is provided to key stakeholders because they may influence the outcomes of sustainability initiatives (Ott et al., 2016), in this case, moral legitimacy for SAS. Legitimacy building through rhetorical tactics, including political rhetoric, relies on social construction as stakeholders and organizations negotiate how to interpret, understand, and make meaning of communication (Anderson, 2020).

Given the explanation of stakeholder engagement from external perspective, political rhetoric evidently also applies in internal perspective at SAS. Through the interviews with one of SAS employees, it can be seen that SAS also put the employees as the essential element in communicating sustainability initiatives that could impact to their moral legitimacy.

“Employees are also important stakeholder. We have type of message for them which we are starting to give it in 2020 such as sustainability education in order to let them having knowledge what SAS is really doing in sustainability. So, everybody in every branches office has the same journey and mindset as we are in the head office. We are expecting them to act as ‘the sustainability ambassador’. So, they will know how to and what to answer the questions from other people outside the company such as friends or family in daily basis conversation like during the dinner or the weekend”

The interviews indicate that political rhetoric in sustainability communication aimed to internal organization, such as the employees, is as important as for external stakeholders and it also means that organization should make their the employees knowledgeable first regarding sustainability before the external stakeholder. It is strongly linked to impression-relevant organization goals and the public case of sustainability communication that the employees get contact with various stakeholders which have the potential to serve as multipliers of the sustainability message and serve as change agents (Signitzer & Prexl, 2007)

5.3.2 SAS Accountability of sustainability

In this part, political rhetoric is associated with organization accountability and it is usually applied by the organization in sustainability documents, ethics, reports, code of conduct, and product certification (Vollero et al., 2018). In that sense, I focused and presented the usage of political rhetoric in the Code of Conduct (CoC) on their website. In general, the CoC contains rules and guidelines regarding SAS business ethics and as ethical rules and guidelines for employees act, customer service standard and even the supplier to have considerate view in reducing the environmental impact.

The code is the result of SAS' involvement in the United Nations Global Compact. This is a program for companies and organizations that wish to contribute to the international work of ten universal principles related to human rights, labor, environmental challenges and anti-corruption (SAS, 2020)

These texts are showing SAS accountability of sustainability and despite the CoC are intended for different stakeholders, both of code of conduct are actually connected as it can be seen from the second texts that it meant to show the compliance and share a joint commitment of stakeholders who are working and cooperating with SAS, including in the context of environment. Further, cooperation in sustainability between SAS and stakeholders means that SAS as an organization has a prosocial logic (Suchman, 1995) that differs fundamentally from narrow self-interest which reflects how moral legitimacy gains. In this sense, political rhetoric is used by SAS as the self-less act and 'the right thing to do' organizational behaviour to gain moral legitimacy. However, political rhetoric expression always denotes a power tension between the organizations and its stakeholders (Castelló & Galang, 2014). To confirm this argument, I got the evidence as described in the interview by one of SAS employees that there is no any tension or conflict between SAS and its stakeholders toward sustainability works, in particular with the suppliers, because both of dependent and independent kind of relationship between SAS and its suppliers in making the supply chain more sustainable. Therefore, based on this evidence, the expression of political rhetoric not always denotes a power tension. Moreover, SAS employee also stated that the suppliers are one of their stakeholders holds an important role as the supply chain of their products and services to support SAS' sustainability agenda. For this reason, thus, performing political rhetoric is critical for SAS as it could serve them a moral legitimacy (Palazzo and Scherer, 2006) which occurs in a strong relationship between the organization and its stakeholders. Thus, SAS performed political rhetoric in their

sustainability communication by sending a specific message to the suppliers, which enables a push forward regarding them working hand-in-hand towards sustainability goals.

Furthermore, the use of political rhetoric in accountability of sustainability can be seen at SAS environmental management system (ISO 14001) certification. This certification is considered as SAS competitive advantage and differentiation that they are one-step-ahead in sustainability compared to other airline companies. SAS' ISO 14001 certification has comprehensive environmental management system that covers many aspects such as management, airline operation, cargo handling, technical maintenance, and ground handling. This certification shows as an act of political rhetoric of SAS that the organization has accountability and compliance in sustainability that further whether they will achieve moral legitimacy or not. Moral legitimacy involves stakeholders assessments of whether or not an organization's actions are the right to contribute to society (Allen, 2016). In this sense, I argue that by exposing environmental management system in their web certification on their website, SAS tried to represent as the organization that complies with good corporate governance which aims to gain moral legitimacy and increase organization reputation in the context of business ethics in sustainability. Therefore, as evidence, it is relevant to the statement from one of SAS employees that expressed during the interviews.

“SAS also have ISO 14001 certification for environmental management system and this certificate is really important for us because it could help SAS improve environmental performance which also could gain stakeholders trust, improve reputation, legitimacy, and we are more confidence in communicating sustainability initiatives from strategic communication context”

5.3.3 SAS Interactivity

In carrying out the use of political rhetoric in their sustainability communication, SAS utilise sort of interactive feedback and participation platform for external stakeholders. Interactivity also means having a particular channel or platform for communicating sustainability, such as, sustainability contact, that deployed by the organization to give the stakeholders opportunity expressing their sustainability concern in different purpose. In this case, SAS provides their communication platform through 'sustainability contact' environment@sas.se webpage that reads:

"SAS is committed to maintaining a proactive, open, and professional dialogue with stakeholders. We greatly appreciate your ideas on how to further improve relations" (SAS, 2020)

The statement above shows that SAS is open and willing to interact with their stakeholders. From this finding, I confirmed that this is considered as a political rhetoric and I argue that this particular contact is available because the web-based communication not only shows text or visual information of the organization, but also a place to interact and connect with the organization which will help build an engagement and relationship with stakeholders in order to gain trust. During the interview, one of SAS employees described that despite SAS web-based communication solely is considered as one-way communication to build mutual understanding in sustainability initiatives with their stakeholders, external stakeholders could utilize dedicated sustainability contact to send their sustainability concerns directly to Head of Sustainability & CSR. On contrary, during the interviews with other SAS employees, interviewee made a statement that even though people could send their sustainability concerns through this dedicated contact, most of people are giving their respond or suggestion or feedback about SAS sustainability initiatives in different platform, such as social media.

"In social media, we used Instagram stories a lot, including LinkedIn as well. So, these are the approach that we use to people, so they will know and keep update about our sustainability initiatives"

Despite the importance of communicating sustainability initiatives through web-based communication, social media, such as Instagram and Facebook, is deemed more engaging to reach people and to build mutual understanding between stakeholders and organization. Further, based on the interview with one of SAS employees, SAS used Instagram as the short-period campaign to launch and promote their services and products, notably mention 'the Biofuel' and 'the Cube'. Furthermore, SAS also utilised other social media as the sustainability communication tool such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn. Digital technology is giving new way to influence legitimacy by focusing on the use of social media in legitimation processes (Deephouse et al., 2017). In this sense, I argue that these digital technology tools are used as feedback and participation platform by SAS for external stakeholders which includes in political rhetoric. These social media platforms were featured

in SAS website which shared their views on many issues in aviation, including sustainability, and the availability of these platforms in their website could make easier to access.

Furthermore, I found that SAS Facebook is the main channel that people used through their post to criticize SAS sustainability initiatives or even more regarding greenwashing accusation and the attack of flight shaming movement supporter in social media post. The search for environmental legitimacy is an element of organizational survival and organizations must be responsive to their stakeholders (Stevenson & Steckler, 2015). Thus, it is relevant with one of SAS employees statement:

“There are always people who criticize and are critical to SAS sustainability initiatives, including greenwashing accusation and flight shaming in our social media feeds, this social media tension has been happening because most of people out there are not educated and knowledgeable about aviation industry and sustainability. Therefore, SAS still continuously educate and interact with these people as long as we could”

Additionally, in term of legitimation process, stakeholders are not a passive part as they control their reactions to the organizational messages and it is important to consider the reciprocal relationship between organization and stakeholder when building legitimacy (Anderson, 2020). In this sense, I argue that interactivity as political rhetoric in sustainability communication is more critical for SAS because their sustainability initiatives tend to expose publicly and exposed by stakeholder judgment. Without a doubt, gaining moral legitimacy is clearly important to organization in managing the level of conflict between organizations and their relevant publics (Behram, 2015).

VI. Discussion

By extensively examining sustainability communication through SAS' web-based communication to build legitimacy, this chapter further will present the discussion regarding the result of the study. First, Sustainability communication of Scandinavian Airlines will be presented to give an overview of sustainability initiatives and rhetoric strategies from organization perspective. Lastly, the use of rhetoric strategies on SAS web-based communication in communicating sustainability for gaining three legitimacies will be displayed in order to fulfil the purpose of the study.

6.1 Scandinavian Airlines' sustainability communication

From the analysis, it can be comprehended that as one of the biggest airline companies in Europe with a sustainability ambition, SAS has been continuously improving their operation along with sustainability initiatives towards sustainability targets 2030 with sustainability-related projects such as in innovation aspect to have energy efficient and electric-hybrid aircrafts from Airbus; the renewable energy in the wings 'the Biofuel' as the game changer in the future aviation industry; CO₂ Emissions reduction; and deliver products and services that environmentally adapted through the sustainable box 'the Cube'.

In conjunction with SAS sustainability targets 2030, they presents sustainability information and projects through sustainability communication by applying rhetorical strategies. Further, in the context of sustainability communication, rhetorical strategies indicate that SAS uses these sustainability initiatives information as a 'soft' persuasive instrument that shows commitment and actions on the sustainability-related projects. In this sense, I argue that the rationale behind this is that communicating sustainability is a form of showing organizational credibility and positive existence to the stakeholders and public sphere. Based on that SAS understands that they frequently will be criticized regarding environmental issues due to the unsustainable nature of the aviation industry. Moreover, In this sense, I can confirm that SAS has been positioning themselves as a the most sustainable organization in their industry and using sustainability communication to enhance trust and credibility among stakeholders as similarly argued by Signitzer & Prexl (2008). Likewise, SAS has been transparent by providing stakeholders with expected transparent information regarding their sustainability initiatives, through web-based communication. Additionally, turning to the argument of Santos et al.

(2016), SAS engagement in sustainability communication could influence other organizations in the same industry to adopt similar sustainability communication approach on their website which in this case applies to other European-based airline such as KLM Royal Dutch.

Furthermore, the analysis also showed that SAS has been tried to be more strategic and long-term oriented when it comes to sustainability communication by not only using web-based communication but also social media. It indicates that SAS has not been treating sustainability initiatives as a public relation stunt, instead they immersed it in their business operation as well as being transparent throughout the sustainability implementation process in order to minimize the negativity that they can acquire from external stakeholders. Thus, sustainability initiatives for long-term orientation is not possible without communication (Karmasin, 2002).

Moreover, I found that the sustainability initiative information on SAS' web-based communication is still complicated and hard to understand as confirmed by the SAS employees during the interview that the organization has not reached their potential since they have not utilized the usage of multi-content. At this point, the improvement that SAS can implement is that not only improving user-experience aspect, but also refining sustainability information with Du and Vieira Jr. (2012) message tactics, which are factual argument and two-sided messages to boost SAS' credibility in organization communication. In this sense, I identified that SAS has been performing sustainability communication in their website only with providing factual arguments. Factual arguments in SAS' website serves to enhance credibility of sustainability communication by viewing level of organization commitment and societal impact of its sustainability initiatives as generally has adequately described on the website. Meanwhile, two-sided messages provide both positive and negative information to the viewer. Undoubtedly, SAS used web-based communication as the medium of rhetoric strategies in sustainability communication to explain their commitment to sustainability and sustainability initiatives, thus, in next part will further explain sustainability communication in order to gain legitimacy by looking at rhetoric strategies and legitimacy theory.

6.2 Rhetoric strategies utilization for gaining organizational legitimacy

This thesis argues that SAS is transparent, informative and engaged with regards to sustainability initiatives from stakeholders perspective which can be seen through their website and social media. These also mean that their sustainability communication is intended to obtain

legitimacy. Based on the analysis chapter, the study highlights that Scandinavian Airlines uses various rhetoric strategies through their web-based communication. I found that SAS used web-based communication in addressing their sustainability initiatives in order to gain legitimacy and boost the credibility of their sustainability communication yet depending on which stakeholders and cross-partnership that they targeted. Further, the picture (*Figure 1*) below shows the process of gaining legitimacy of SAS through all of three rhetoric strategies in order to have stakeholder support. In this sense, I agree with Anderson (2020) who suggests legitimacy building through rhetorical tactics that relies on social construction between stakeholders and organizations on how to interpret, understand, and make meaning of communication.

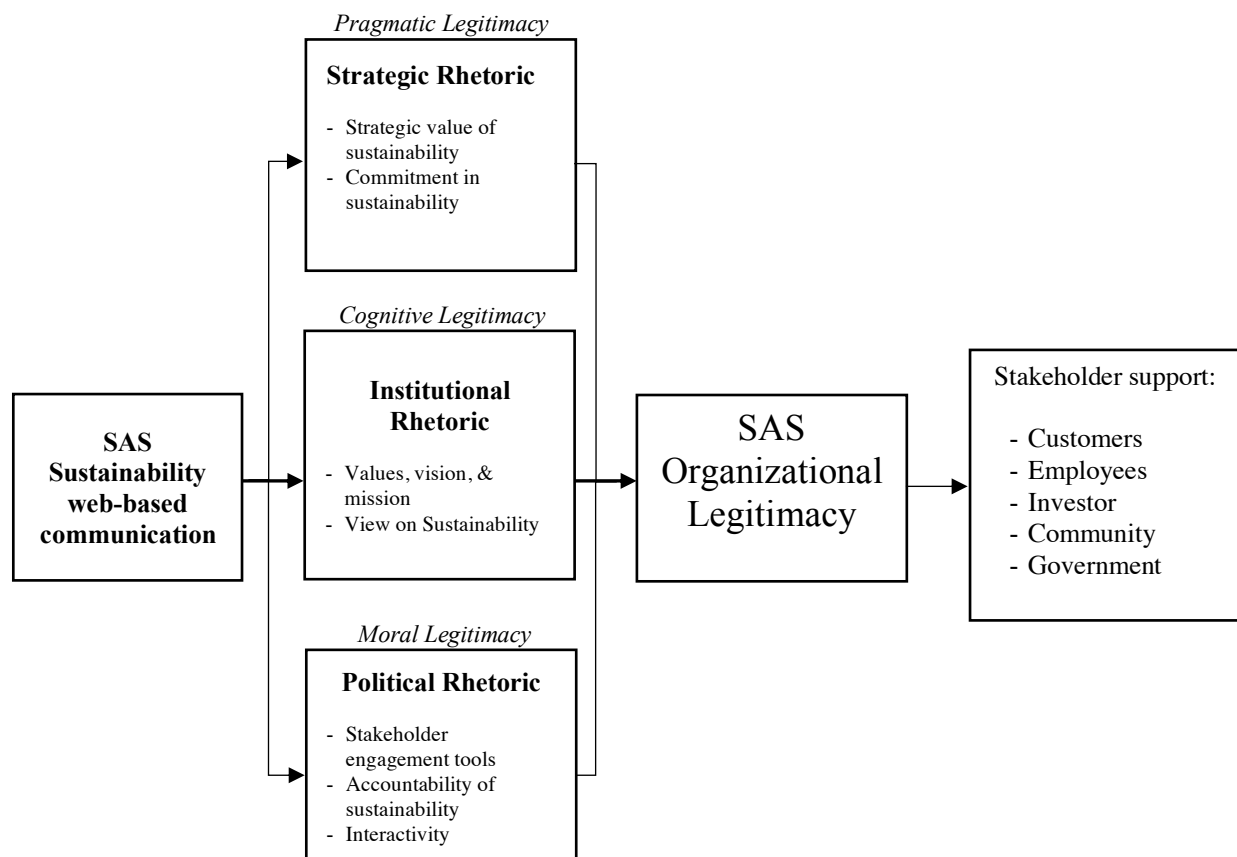


Figure 1. Legitimacy gaining process by using rhetoric strategies in SAS sustainability communication

The study found that strategic rhetoric is the most the dominating rhetoric that SAS has exploited and it can easily expressed by sustainability communication since this rhetoric suggest the organization to communicate through concrete action and symbolic communication as the way SAS could harvest their pragmatic legitimacy from stakeholder. Looking at the

evidence strategic value in sustainability and commitment in SAS sustainability initiatives, it shows that organization legitimacy relies on what kind sources or causes that can be justified and communicated by the organization to the stakeholders by using on point rhetorical messages. Another theoretical implication of strategic rhetoric that is of value to highlight is the one related to public relations, 'engineered consent' (Anderson, 2020). From the analysis, it is a way to control and manipulate stakeholders perception which one of which using symbolic communication that evidently found through both in the web-based communication as the self-justification strategy or physical symbolic communication such as the aircraft livery. Therefore, I argue that those are the concrete ways for an organization to gain pragmatic legitimacy as it is related to the tangible organization communication that could influence the stakeholders perception towards both SAS sustainability initiatives and SAS brand.

Meanwhile in institutional rhetoric strategy of SAS values, vision, mission and SAS view on sustainability, the study found that organization rewarded by cognitive legitimacy as long as they have stakeholder acceptance and not contradictory with stakeholder's expectation. Further, if we are talking specifically about the process of how legitimacy can be acquired, as suggested by Suchman (1995), moral legitimacy is more difficult to gain than pragmatic legitimacy, but cognitive legitimacy is more difficult to attain than moral legitimacy. In this sense, it can be understood that cognitive legitimacy dimension is the most powerful legitimacy as well as the most difficult to gain and manipulate, unlike pragmatic legitimacy that can be easily manipulated by the organization.

Finally, in a nutshell, political rhetoric it is intended for building strong stakeholders relationship between organization and its stakeholders by using rational arguments as the communication bridge. The finding of the study is that political rhetoric, particularly in stakeholder engagement, is not only always heavily intended for external stakeholders but also for internal stakeholders that could give an impact to the organization to have moral legitimacy. What is more, the role of employees in the organization is truly critical as agent of change or organizational ambassador to support the organization internally as the foundation to deliver the organization rhetoric or message externally. I argue that insufficient product, service, or even sustainability knowledge among the employees in any organization could influence the process gaining moral legitimacy and also how the stakeholders perceive the organization. Likewise, theoretical implication of legitimation process in political rhetoric is that both

accountability and interactivity are equally critical because those are the way of organization has strong credibility when it comes to act and to talk to the stakeholders as well as stay relevant with society and its current constructed beliefs. Finally, the theoretical implication that could be criticised from Suchman (1995) legitimacy dimensions is that the contradiction between pragmatic legitimacy that it is based 'organization self-interested' and moral legitimacy since it is based 'narrow self-interest'. Both dimensions serve in the process of gaining legitimacy, yet it can be viewed as contradictory for the organization when performing rhetorical strategies. The rationale behind this is that the difficulty in finding the balance of the organization in term of which interests that they should prioritize. In one hand 'organization self-interested' associated with revenue, profits, and benefits that the organization could harvest, and the other hand is 'narrow self-interest' associated with public or stakeholders' expectation that also equally important to keep up as mean as ensuring the existence of the organization.

VII. Conclusion

7.1 Theoretical and practical implications

This study contributes to previous research of sustainability communication as means of gaining organizational legitimacy, which I firmly believe that the application of the topic itself has been almost unexplored yet in the aviation industry. Moreover, this thesis unveils the connection among airline business strategy, sustainability initiatives practices, and sustainability communication in airlines organization which attempts to gain legitimacy within a socially conscious environment. The study also contributes to the discussion on what I found on the analysis and from the content analysis, highlighting that SAS' utilizes web-based communication covering rhetorical strategies (strategic, institutional, politic) when communicating sustainability in relation to legitimacy building (pragmatic, cognitive, moral). Thus, these rhetoric strategies have important practical implications for SAS, as an examination of different communication strategies that justify their sustainability initiatives and could make organizations conscious of their future rhetorical strategies as well as how they might want to alter the strategies to communicate sustainability much better to their stakeholders.

From the theoretical perspective, the coding scheme implemented in this study could contribute as guidance in this study could contribute as the guidance to help the organization provides what kind of rhetorical information that can be displayed in their web-communication features that could enforce what kind of legitimacy that they are aiming to achieve through sustainability communication. Nevertheless, as the analysis showed, web-based communication is not enough for SAS in communicating sustainability due to the website being a one-way communication tool and they complement it with other two-ways communication platform such as social media. Additionally, the study provides an in-depth understanding of legitimacy approaches elicited by web-based communication as the practical implication in professional setting which communication department or communication strategist of the airline industry can benefit from suggestion on how to optimise the sustainability contents to specific legitimacy strategies.

In the light of the airline industry effects on the environment and stakeholder scepticism regarding their sustainability initiatives, this study also makes a number of practical implications for how SAS can improve their rhetorical strategies effectively on their web-based

communication. First, from a practical point of view, the findings of this study indicate that a whole of SAS management should be aware of the importance of sustainability communication to gain organization legitimacy as it previously explained that communication department still has challenge from cross-function within the management in term of sustainability content approval for their web-communication. Second, Since the website is a reflection of the organization, SAS should continuously evaluate both what they mean by sustainability and what is their sustainability initiative to make sure that their web-based communication and other communication channels reflect their values, vision, and mission. One approach that can be accounted is that having an obvious sustainability campaign by narrative or story-telling to capture stakeholders' feelings and emotions so they could develop positive impression toward the organization. Also, having a dedicated online platform that contains SAS sustainability initiatives comprehensively by providing rich content or multi content such as text, audio, video, infographic, animation, etc. to increase their audiences understanding and awareness of their sustainability initiatives.

7.2 Suggestion for future research

As this case study are based on one organization, I suggest that future research could further develop with a large sample of airlines companies or comparison between the companies as it will give more understanding in the sustainability communication. Moreover, since the current study is from organization perspective, the future research could also possibly use an online ethnography as the method to uncover the external stakeholders' perspective and perception toward organization' sustainability communication. Equally important, future research should possibly investigate other airlines companies that also performing sustainability initiatives such as KLM Royal Dutch and Finnair or comparison study between the organizations in term of aiming greater understanding sustainability communication in aviation industry. Another suggestion could strive to build further linkages between sustainability communication other theoretical approach such as media theory, issue management theory, or crisis communication theory which considers the fact that sustainability or environment issue is prone to be accused for greenwashing practice. Also, it also would be interesting to conduct and examine sustainability communication from other industries such as Digital Technology, Aerospace and Defense, and Alcohol to further develop this field. Last of all, future research could also explore the linkage between sustainability communication and internal communication within the organization or how the organization use sustainability communication to re-build legitimacy post crisis situation.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 – Interviewees respond due to COVID-19 pandemic

 **Gunilla.Danstroem@sas.se** Wed, Apr 8, 12:35 PM ☆ ↶ ⋮
to Amanda.Degerkvist, me ▾

Dear Adam,


We get a lot of interest from students regarding our work with sustainability and sustainability communication, which makes us really happy.

However, in these challenging time, where all staff are temporary laid-off, full-time or part-time, we are not able to provide service to student the way that we would like. Especially within communication, where we right now are working double work hours, even if our aircraft are on ground. Therefore I'm afraid that we have to turn down all requests.

When we hopefully get back to more normal operations, I would be happy to participate.

Regards,
Gunilla

⋮

 **Amanda.Degerkvist@sas.se** Thu, Apr 9, 11:04 AM ☆ ↶ ⋮
to me ▾

Hi again Adam,


I have talked to all four colleagues from the communication department now since they replied me. Unfortunately they don't have time for the interviews at the moment due to the current very tough situation for SAS, and in particular for our communication team. Therefore I believe that it is of no value for you to only interview me since you will only get answer to some of your questions, and it would be from a narrow product perspective.

I wish you good luck with your thesis and I really hope you can find others to interview during this crisis.

Best regards,

⋮

Karin Nyman ⋮
Vice President Brand & Communications (Public Affairs, Sustainability and

 **Karin Nyman** • 9:48 AM

Hi Adam, Thank you for your message. We are in a special situation because of Corona so at the moment we don't have the time to help you. Best regards, Karin Nyman

 **Adam Kurniawan Rumanda** • 12:25 PM

Hi Karin,

Thanks for the reply and I totally understand your situation regarding Coronavirus outbreaks.

Write a message...



INVITATION LETTER

Helsingborg, March 2020
Strategic Communication Master's Degree
Lund University – Sweden

To Scandinavian Airlines professionals involved in communication and sustainability,

I am Adam Kurniawan Rumanda, Strategic Communication Master's student at Lund University, currently writing my thesis about sustainability communication for gaining organizational legitimacy.

Many organizations are tackling nowadays environment issues, such as climate change and has been practicing sustainability initiatives in their business process, including their communication practice on web-based communication. Specifically, airline industry has been simultaneously taking initiatives in performing sustainability communication to all key stakeholders, including customers or passengers as the commitment and compliance to save and preserve the environment as well as obtaining organization legitimacy towards sustainability.

Research on this specific issue on sustainability communication for building legitimacy is still underdeveloped, particularly in aviation industry and this approach is extremely interesting to study. Thereby, I am looking to interview communication professionals within the organization who expertise and involved in this of practices to gather data for my thesis project which aim is the following:

I seek to increase understanding regarding the process of organizational legitimacy building in the airline company by communicating their sustainability initiatives on their web-based communication platform.

The interview will consist of one-hour conversation basis where I will dig into interviewee specific communication practices and experiences.

If you want to participate you can contact you can contact me at adamrumanda7@gmail.com or +46 704365243 to set a date for one-hour interview. Do not hesitate to ask any questions.

Regards,

Adam Kurniawan Rumanda
LinkedIn

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Background

Airline company like Scandinavian Airlines (SAS) has been concerned about sustainability as it has been reflected on their web-based communication. Nowadays, this kind of communication is commonly use, but sometimes stakeholders have scepticism, different expectation, and even disbelief about whether the company has been truly doing the sustainability initiatives or not. Legitimacy is important for the company to legitimize their sustainability action in order to guarantee their sustainable business.

Sustainability initiatives & Sustainability communication

1. Please tell me about your job/responsibility? What do you do in the organization (SAS)?
2. Can you explain about SAS sustainability initiatives in general?
3. Can you tell me about how your company communicating sustainability initiatives on the websites?
4. Why communicating sustainability is important for SAS?
5. In your experience, what is the purpose of sustainability communication at SAS?

Strategic Rhetoric

1. What is strategic value of message of SAS sustainability initiatives?
2. Do you think SAS reputation or credibility can be increased by showing commitment in communicating sustainability?
3. How SAS shapes the message or information regarding sustainability in order to gain organization interests (such as profit/legitimacy), but not contradictory with stakeholder's expectation?

Institutional Rhetoric

1. Do you think stakeholders acceptance (from community, public, customer) is important for SAS in communicating sustainability?
2. Do SAS have specific organizational sustainability structure or sustainability governance structure? If yes, can you explain what the purpose of it and why this is important?

Political Rhetoric

1. Do you think that SAS websites are considered as the communication engagement tool to build mutual understanding to stakeholders?
2. Is the sustainability initiatives information on the websites are targeted to specific stakeholders (i.e. investors, employees, suppliers customers, etc.)? And why SAS targeted it for them?
3. Is there a (power) tension between the organization and its stakeholders regarding SAS sustainability initiatives? How you can relate with *Fylgskam* (flight shaming) movement or possibly 'greenwashing' accusation?
4. Can stakeholders or people give suggestion or feedback about SAS sustainability initiatives? If Yes, in which platform?
5. Last question, do SAS included disclosures or documents such as business ethics, reports, internal behavioural codes, and process or service-product certifications related to sustainability on the website?

**** In case I have any further questions or clarifications, can I contact you back?**

SAS

2018

SAS ORDERS ONE AIRBUS A330E TO REPLACE ONE AIRBUS A340

<https://www.sasgroup.net/newsroom/press-releases/2018/sas-orders-one-airbus-a330e-to-replace-one-airbus-a340/>

SAS CO2 COMPENSATES ALL YOUTH TICKETS

<https://www.sasgroup.net/newsroom/press-releases/2018/sas-co2-compensates-all-youth-tickets/>

SAS INTRODUCES SAS YOUTH GO LIGHT

<https://www.sasgroup.net/newsroom/press-releases/2018/sas-introduces-sas-youth-go-light/>

SAS LAUNCHES NEW CAMPAIGN: WE ARE TRAVELERS – THE ARRIVALS

<https://www.sasgroup.net/newsroom/press-releases/2018/sas-launches-new-campaign-we-are-travelers-the-arrivals/>

NORDIC CEOS JOIN FORCES FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

<https://www.sasgroup.net/newsroom/press-releases/2018/nordic-ceos-join-forces-for-a-sustainable-future/>

NEW NORDIC BY SAS GOES VEGAN

<https://www.sasgroup.net/newsroom/press-releases/2018/new-nordic-by-sas-goes-vegan-2/>

2019

SAS TO OFFSET THE FLIGHT CARBON FOOTPRINT OF EUROBONUS MEMBERS

<https://www.sasgroup.net/newsroom/press-releases/2019/sas-to-offset-the-flight-carbon-footprint-of-eurobonus-members/>

SAS LAUNCHES NEW CAMPAIGN – SCANDINAVIA STARTS AT TAKEOFF

<https://www.sasgroup.net/newsroom/press-releases/2019/sas-launches-new-campaign-scandinavia-starts-at-takeoff/>

SAS POP-UP RESTAURANT TRANSFORMS SXSW FOOD WASTE INTO 9-COURSE GOURMET DINING

<https://www.sasgroup.net/newsroom/press-releases/2019/sas-pop-up-restaurant-transforms-sxsw-food-waste-into-9-course-gourmet-dining/>

SAS HAS BEEN CO2 OFFSETTING 1.5 MILLION YOUTH TICKETS

<https://www.sasgroup.net/newsroom/press-releases/2019/sas-has-been-co2-offsetting-1-5-million-youth-tickets/>

SAS AND AIRBUS TO RESEARCH HYBRID AND ELECTRIC AIRCRAFT

<https://www.sasgroup.net/newsroom/press-releases/2019/sas-and-airbus-to-research-hybrid-and-electric-aircraft/>

CUTTING WEIGHT – FOR MORE SUSTAINABLE FLYING

<https://www.sasgroup.net/newsroom/press-releases/2019/cutting-weight-for-more-sustainable-flying/>

NEW NORDIC BY SAS SERVES UP TWO VEGETARIAN MENUS

<https://www.sasgroup.net/newsroom/press-releases/2019/new-nordic-by-sas-serves-up-two-vegetarian-menus/>

SAS ANNOUNCES FIRST A350 FLIGHTS AND FEATURES

<https://www.sasgroup.net/newsroom/press-releases/2019/sas-announces-first-a350-flights-and-features/>

SAS TRAVELERS CAN NOW BUY BIOFUEL

<https://www.sasgroup.net/newsroom/press-releases/2019/sas-travelers-can-now-buy-biofuel/>

SAS PRESENTS NEW LIVERY

<https://www.sasgroup.net/newsroom/press-releases/2019/sas-presents-new-livery/>

SAS JOINS NORDIC INITIATIVE FOR ELECTRIC AVIATION

<https://www.sasgroup.net/newsroom/press-releases/2019/sas-joins-nordic-initiative-for-electric-aviation/>

NATIONAL X-COUNTRY TEAM BUYS BIOFUEL FROM SAS

<https://www.sasgroup.net/newsroom/press-releases/2019/national-x-country-team-buys-biofuel-from-sas/>

FIRST NEW A321LR TO ENTER SAS FLEET

<https://www.sasgroup.net/newsroom/press-releases/2019/first-new-a321lr-to-enter-sas-fleet/>

SAS LAUNCHES SUSTAINABLE PACKAGING ONBOARD

<https://www.sasgroup.net/newsroom/press-releases/2019/sas-launches-sustainable-packaging-onboard/>