

Course: SKOM12  
Term: Spring 2024  
Supervisor: Marlène Wiggill  
Examiner: Howard Nothhaft

# Driving Change: The Power of Strategic Sustainability Storytelling in the Automotive Industry

KIMIA FAVRE AND NADJA LATRACH

---

Lund University  
Department of strategic communication  
Master's thesis



# Abstract

---

This master thesis investigates the use of strategic sustainability storytelling by four automotive companies in Sweden. The study aims to explore how these organizations implement sustainability storytelling in their external communication to contribute to organizational legitimacy. This thesis has been conducted through a qualitative analysis approach where we compared the case studies qualitatively, applying a narrative thematic analysis method. Narrative thematic analysis methods helped identify four main story themes which constitutes the analysis; *Driving Sustainable Innovation*, *Partnership for Sustainable Progress*, *Organizational Accountability* and *Call to Action*. The findings indicate that these companies primarily emphasize the story theme of *Driving Sustainable Innovation* in their sustainability storytelling. In addition, the results indicate that when automotive companies emphasize values that resonate with their audiences and incorporate real-life descriptions, they enhance the authenticity of their sustainability storytelling. Strategic sustainability storytelling plays an essential role in enhancing organizational legitimacy, as it fosters trust and engagement with stakeholders while contributing to a positive image and reputation. The study contributes to public relations theory, a discipline within strategic communication, by highlighting the importance of aligning storytelling approaches with societal values and preferences and underscores the need for continuous reflection and refinement of storytelling strategies. Practical implications suggest that automotive companies can effectively engage stakeholders, build trust, and drive positive change through strategic sustainability storytelling. Ethical considerations are essential to prevent greenwashing and uphold ethical standards in sustainability communication. Overall, the findings emphasize the significance of strategic sustainability storytelling as a powerful public relations tool for automotive companies to communicate their commitment to sustainability and enhance their organizational legitimacy.

*Keywords:* public relations, storytelling, sustainability, organizational communication, automotive industry, audience engagement.

Word count: 25,444

This thesis was co-authored, with both authors equally engaged and participating throughout every stage of the writing process. Our joint commitment ensured mutual involvement from inception to completion. Together, we contributed to research, analysis, and revising, reflecting our shared dedication to producing academic work and advancing understanding in the field of strategic communication.

Kimia Favre and Nadja Latrach

Lund, May 13th 2024

# Table of Contents

---

1. Introduction	1
1.1 Research aim and research questions	3
2. The Automotive Industry Landscape	4
3. Literature review	6
3.1 Strategic Public Relations	6
3.2 Climate Imaginaries	9
3.3 Sustainability Communication	10
3.4 Synthesis	13
4. Theoretical Framework	15
4.1 Storytelling Theory	15
4.1.1 Organizational Storytelling	16
4.1.2 Strategic Sustainability Storytelling	18
4.2 Theoretical Reflections	22
5. Methodology	23
5.1 Research Paradigm	23
5.2 Research Design	24
5.3 Case Sampling and Data Collection	25
5.4 Method of Analysis	28
5.5 Method Reflection	30
6. Analysis and Findings	32
6.1 Driving Sustainable Innovation	32
6.2 Partnership for Sustainable Progress	42
6.3 Organizational Accountability	52
6.4 Call to Action	59
7. Discussion and Conclusion	66
7.1 Discussion	66
7.2 Conclusion	74
7.3 Suggestions for Future Research	76
References	78
Appendix A.	87

# 1. Introduction

---

For as long as there have been people, there have been stories. As "storytelling animals" or "human narrans", people have relied on stories to explain complex phenomena since ancient times (Kent, 2015; Vasquez, 1993; Vasquez & Taylor, 2001). These stories hold significant power as a communication tool, demonstrated by their ability to foster civil societies, evoke emotions, and persuade audiences (Kent, 2015). In the modern context, sustainability is high on the strategic agenda and is reshaping organizations' operations. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that storytelling, increasingly recognized as a strategic tool for driving change (Spear & Roper, 2013; Dessart & Standeart, 2023), can be used by organizations in contemporary society to establish trust, showcase their commitment, and facilitate seamless communication with stakeholders.

While organizations once relied on their established reputation, modern organizations must continually validate their legitimacy to operate (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018). Additionally, Miceli et al. (2021) argue that societal changes drive organizational transformation, such as the demand for sustainability and digitalization. Organizational change now extends beyond competitive advantage, adapting to a broader context. In this context, the well-documented and scientifically supported phenomena of global warming and climate change (Alibašić, 2022; Lum, 2019; NASA, 2021; UNFCCC, 2015a) are external factors which requires attention and organizational adaptation. Organizations today are not only ethically responsible for prioritizing sustainability and protecting the environment, but they also face a practical necessity to adapt and innovate in response to the challenges posed by a changing climate and society.

Naturally, a significant number of organizations operating according to sustainability guidelines have emerged in various sectors over the past few years (e.g., Tesla and Patagonia). These "born-sustainable companies" are constructed and developed with sustainable values and visions as a response to the ongoing and growing societal demand for sustainable practices (Allal-Chérif et al., 2023; Lynch & Ferasso, 2023), encapsulating the

expectations, pressures, and desires of consumers and other stakeholders. As a result, organizations whose business scope fundamentally lacks a connection to sustainability experience greater pressure than before.

The automotive industry has transformed over the last decade due to a shift towards environmental and sustainable values. Yet, the automotive industry is still one of the main contributors to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (Statista, 2023), thus extensively contributing to climate and environmental changes. Given the growing societal pressure to reduce emissions, it is crucial for organizations to integrate sustainability values in their communication to uphold their reputation (Singh & Misra, 2021). These communication efforts are essential for organizations because trust in their sustainability initiatives fosters trust in the organization itself. Loss of stakeholder trust can result in financial losses and, in more severe cases, organizational demise (Ihlen & Raknes, 2020). Therefore, there is a need to examine the strategic use of storytelling by organizations in the automotive industry.

This study contributes to strategic communication literature by exploring storytelling in public relations, a discipline within strategic communication. Strategic storytelling has emerged as a powerful tool in public relations and has proven effective in crisis communication, reputation building, and organizational management (Heath, 1992; Heath, 2000; Heath, 2006). While storytelling has gained attention in public relations research in the past decade (Elmer, 2011; Gill, 2015; Kent, 2015), recent literature points to a gap in understanding how it aligns with public relations theory (Lane, 2023). Stakeholders express a range of expectations on organizations, from aligning with cultural norms and values to adhering to ethical standards (Lewis, 2011). Meeting and addressing these multifaceted stakeholder demands is essential and subject to organizational change. As automotive companies navigate an increasingly environmentally conscious landscape, strategic storytelling becomes pivotal for organizations in conveying credibility.

In strategic communication, storytelling goes beyond mere message transmission; it fosters connections, builds trust, and inspires change (Heath, 2006). Recognized as fundamental to human nature (Kent, 2015), storytelling is deeply intertwined with broader societal and organizational transformations, assisting organizations not only in conveying information but also in making sense of the world (Lane, 2023). Drawing on the idea that integrating

sustainability storytelling into marketing efforts enhances brand image (Dessart & Standeart, 2023), our focus here is on the strategic use of sustainability storytelling from a public relations perspective. This focus on public relations provides insights into how organizations navigate stakeholder relationships, build trust, and manage their reputation (Ihlen & Raknes, 2020), through sustainability communication efforts. Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to explore how automotive companies use storytelling as a public relations tool to enhance their legitimacy.

Specifically, we investigate *environmental* sustainability, hereafter referred to as sustainability. Through this research, we contribute to the understanding of storytelling in organizational sustainability initiatives within the field of public relations and strategic communication. This is important for organizations seeking to effectively communicate their sustainability initiatives, align with stakeholder expectations, and ultimately enhance their legitimacy in today's climate-conscious landscape.

## **1.1 Research aim and research questions**

As one of the main contributors to climate change, the automotive industry has changed extensively during the last decade. This study aims to investigate the use of strategic sustainability storytelling in the Swedish automotive industry's external communication, exploring how these organizations use sustainability storytelling in an attempt to contribute to organizational legitimacy. Specifically, the study explores how organizations strategically implement sustainability storytelling to establish trust and credibility. This aim is driven by the need to address evolving stakeholder concerns and societal expectations regarding sustainability. Consequently, the study's aim leads to the following two research questions:

**RQ1:** In what way do automotive companies in Sweden implement sustainability storytelling in external communication to promote their sustainability initiatives?

**RQ2:** How does strategic sustainability storytelling contribute to organizational legitimacy?

## 2. The Automotive Industry Landscape

---

In 2015, the United Nations (UN) initiated the intergovernmental Paris Agreement, signed by all 193 member states committing to achieve 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs). In particular, the SDGs aims are to transform and redefine our world, including finding long-term and sustainable solutions to the threat of climate change (UNFCCC, 2015b). As a result, organizations with significant carbon emissions, such as the automotive industry, have found themselves at a critical crossroads, facing pressure to address the environmental impact caused by climate change and to transition towards sustainable practices.

The Paris Agreement led to strict regulations for global automotive manufacturers, including new CO<sub>2</sub> emission standards set by the European Union with the goal of achieving emission-free vehicles by 2035. The automotive sector bears significant responsibility for global greenhouse gas emissions stemming from both vehicle manufacturing processes and vehicle operations (European Parliament, 2023). Today's gasoline- and diesel-powered passenger cars contribute to around 12 percent of energy-related CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in Europe (Council of the European Union, 2023).

Sweden, a leader in decarbonization, possesses the highest global carbon pricing, according to the International Energy Agency (2021). Hence, the automotive industry in Sweden must rapidly adjust to meet evolving regulatory and consumer expectations. To enhance sustainability and stay competitive in the environmentally-conscious market, automotive manufacturers in Sweden must accelerate their shift toward electrification and cleaner technologies. The influence of pioneering and competing companies like Tesla and Northvolt, exemplifying technological advancements, has reshaped industry dynamics. For instance, Tesla's success in electric vehicle development and battery technology has disrupted the traditional market, setting higher sustainability expectations from stakeholders (Zhang & Wang, 2023). Meanwhile, Northvolt, specializing in electric vehicle batteries, offers eco-friendly alternatives (Northvolt, 2024), intensifying pressure on other manufacturers to hasten their transition.



Technological advancements have made electric vehicles more accessible, with reduced costs and improved range, bolstered by expanding charging infrastructure, and have contributed to the growing popularity among consumers (Zhang & Wang, 2023). Simultaneously, events like the 2015 Volkswagen greenwashing scandal, where emissions tests were manipulated, intensified public scrutiny (Jung & Sharon, 2019). This incident underscores the need for transparent and authentic communication, fostering a demand for accountability and ethical practices in the automotive sector.

The automotive industry is undergoing a profound transformation towards sustainability, driven by legislative mandates, technological advancements, and external pressures. At the time of writing, The European Commission is proposing a new directive aimed at limiting greenwashing and misleading environmental claims, referred to as "green claims". This initiative seeks to implement stricter regulations on sustainability communication and marketing across various industries (European Commission, 2023). As such, this directive is likely to have an even greater impact on communication in the automotive industry in the future. Consequently, organizations that merely claim sustainability without aligning their operations with established guidelines may not thrive in the future. As Swedish automotive companies navigate this dynamic landscape, a comprehensive understanding of these factors is vital for informing strategic decision-making, securing a sustainable future, and sustaining competitive advantage.

## 3. Literature review

---

*The following section presents key insights from the literature regarding public relations, sustainability communication, and climate imaginaries. Climate imaginaries refer to collective societal perspectives on climate shifts. These aspects are crucial for understanding how automotive companies can implement sustainability storytelling as a strategic tool in public relations to establish legitimacy. The public relations literature underscores the importance of two-way communication and managing societal expectations to achieve organizational legitimacy. Furthermore, recognizing the transformative potential of climate imaginaries enables organizations to align their values with the public's perceptions of critical global challenges like climate change. Lastly, sustainability communication is regarded as a means of organizational change that enhances identity and legitimacy. We conclude by discussing the broader context of this study and its significance within the existing research landscape.*

### **3.1 Strategic Public Relations**

Given that this study largely examines how automotive industry organizations establish trust and legitimacy through strategic sustainability communication, it is essential to explore relevant literature on public relations. Public relations, a discipline within strategic communication, has evolved from one-way, propagandistic communication to a more interactive two-way exchange between organizations and their diverse stakeholders (Grunig, 2006). Indeed, Zerfass et al. (2018, p. 490) highlight that a significant portion of public relations literature focuses on understanding "audience behavior and relationships between organizations and their stakeholders or publics". Moreover, Ihlen and Raknes (2020) infer that contemporary organizations should engage with their stakeholders and meet societal expectations in order to maintain their "license to operate". This term does not solely refer to the interests of organizations — instead, it involves remaining responsive to its environment, including public interests. Hence, in the context of the automotive industry, organizations must be aware of stakeholders' views in their sustainability initiatives and what the public expects from the organization.

For an organization to achieve its overarching goals, it must continually adapt to its environment and effectively communicate its activities. Public relations, viewed through the lens of two-way communication, emphasizes the importance of actively engaging stakeholders to foster mutual understanding (Capizzo, 2022; Dong et al., 2023). Adopting a stakeholder approach in public relations involves integrating societal perspectives into policy-making, decision processes, and day-to-day operations. Two-way communication facilitates the gathering of formal and informal feedback on stakeholders' needs, views, and trust levels (Dong et al., 2023; Mena et al., 2018). This aligns with Heide and Svingstedt (2023), when they explain that organizations need to prioritize stakeholder engagement, recognizing them as primary value creators, following an outside in perspective. This perspective acknowledges stakeholders' central role in achieving organizational objectives (Heide & Svingstedt, 2023). In other words, enhanced organization-stakeholder engagement fosters mutual understanding and strengthens organizational legitimacy, emphasizing the importance of aligning the organization's vision and goals with stakeholder expectations through two-way communication.

However, while public relations has a responsibility to actively seek and understand multiple stakeholder views and expectations, organizations must also remain true to their identity and purpose (Page & Capizzo, 2024). Therefore, while organizations must engage in dialogue to understand public perspectives and opinions, they must also communicate the mission and vision of the organization. This engagement, in turn, establishes trust, mutual understanding, and strong relationships between the organizations and stakeholders, resulting in organizational legitimacy (Martin-de Castro, 2021). Particularly in sectors prioritizing environmental responsibility, factors such as organizational image, reputation, and legitimacy significantly impact its profitability and success (Martin-de Castro, 2021).

In this study's context, automotive companies, while upholding their primary goal of manufacturing and selling vehicles, can establish legitimacy by incorporating public values and perspectives on eco-friendly car production. This alignment with stakeholder values not only enhances the company's reputation but also reinforces its legitimacy (Martin-de Castro, 2021). This perspective also resonates with Dessert and Standaert (2023), as they argue that organizations are observing a growing demand for sustainable products and practices. Therefore, in contemporary practices, public relations can serve as a bridge between

stakeholders and the organization, facilitating the communication of the organization's actions to stakeholders and informing management about the needs and views of various stakeholders.

With significant technological advancements and the escalating impact of climate crises, public relations practices must now stay attuned to a broader array of stakeholder concerns and needs. For instance, Zharfpeykan and Ng (2021) highlight how the recent COVID-19 pandemic has increased organizations' need to report and communicate their environmental and societal efforts. In response to these evolving dynamics, public relations literature increasingly recognizes the potency of storytelling as a means to engage stakeholders effectively (Canel, 2023; Dessert & Standaert, 2023; Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023) and thus demonstrate commitment to environmental and social responsibility. For instance, Dessert and Standaert (2023) emphasize the transformative role of storytelling in conveying complex sustainability messages to diverse audiences. Additionally, Gill (2015) explains that within the realm of public relations, organizational storytelling has frequently served as a tactic to enhance *internal* commitment and build a stronger internal identity among employees, thereby contributing value to corporate social responsibility (CSR).

While the idea that humans are natural storytellers is commonly heard, what it means or why it is important is not always clear (Lane, 2023). The author argues that although certain researchers have explored the effective use of internal storytelling in public relations, many studies overlook the specific skills required to tailor stories for external public relations purposes. This notion emphasizes the need for additional research and practical guidance to integrate storytelling effectively into public relations and communication strategies, aligning with organizational goals in today's complex landscape.

In summary, public relations and its strategic function in organizations have come to play an essential role in navigating the evolving landscape of stakeholder concerns. With pressing societal issues such as climate change, public relations practices must adapt to address a wider range of stakeholder concerns, particularly regarding sustainability initiatives. Proactive engagement with stakeholders is crucial for maintaining organizational legitimacy in industries like automotive, where sustainability is increasingly scrutinized. Public relations is essential in managing organizational trust, image and reputations.

### 3.2 Climate Imaginaries

In their study, Riedy and Waddock (2022) explain that *climate imaginaries* refer to collective perceptions and conceptualizations of climate change and its impacts held by individuals or societies. The authors emphasize the significance of climate imaginaries in facilitating deliberate shifts toward sustainability. These imaginaries are crucial in understanding how societies collectively perceive and tell stories about the world, especially in addressing pressing global issues like climate change (Milkoreit, 2017; Moore & Milkoreit, 2020; Riedy & Waddock, 2022). Collective climate imaginaries serve as both a tool for comprehending the present reality and as a means to envision potential future states of the world (Moore & Milkoreit, 2020; Riedy & Waddock, 2022).

When Levy and Spicer (2013) introduced the concept of climate imaginaries, they emphasized how symbolic language, shaped by shared values and meanings within cultural contexts, reflects the collective understanding of environmental shifts. Milkoreit (2017) further highlights that when people share their ideas in groups, collective visions begin to take shape. In addition, this process commonly occurs through storytelling, especially when individuals express their visions of the future (Milkoreit, 2017; Riedy & Waddock, 2022). In the context of this study, this notion suggests that automotive organizations can enhance their sustainability initiatives by strategically developing engaging stories that align with the values and expectations of their target audiences. This approach can thus foster stronger connections and increased engagement with their sustainability efforts.

Intentional societal transformation is dependent on imagination to conceive potential, probable, and preferable futures, thus guiding decision-making and steering social change toward a mutually chosen direction (Riedy & Waddock, 2022). However, it is crucial for these transformative imaginaries to maintain a degree of plausibility, ensuring they are not too detached from reality (Levy & Spicer, 2013; Riedy & Waddock, 2022). Social imaginaries that reflect reality just enough to make them feel relatable could involve placing characters that audiences can identify with at the center of the collective story. Crafting and narrating an optimistic pathway from the present reality to the envisioned future is of importance, as it aligns the imaginary with existing values and norms. By striking this balance between aspiration and realism, these imaginaries become more relatable and

achievable, increasing their potential to influence societal direction (Riedy & Waddock, 2022).

To summarize, climate imaginaries play a crucial role in shaping societal perceptions and stories about the world, particularly regarding global challenges like climate change. They serve as a tool for understanding both present realities and potential future states. In the context of this study, leveraging engaging stories aligned with audience values can enhance sustainability initiatives for automotive organizations. However, it is essential for these stories to maintain a balance between aspiration and realism to ensure reliability and achievability.

### **3.3 Sustainability Communication**

As organizations navigate the challenges posed by climate change, it has become essential for organizations to incorporate sustainability into their communication strategies (de Ruyter et al., 2022; Larivière & Smit, 2022). Therefore, the integration of sustainability into organizations reflects a broader process of organizational transformation and change driven by both external pressures and internal initiatives, underscoring the significance of sustainability communication in shaping organizational identity and legitimacy.

Alvesson and Sveningsson (2016) emphasize that the dynamic nature of organizational change is influenced by a range of factors spanning political, technological, cultural, demographic, and economic domains. Furthermore, organizational change can take various forms, classified broadly as revolutionary or evolutionary. Revolutionary changes are comprehensive, affecting various aspects of the organization simultaneously, often triggered by external forces like technological advancements or shifts in industry trends. In contrast, evolutionary changes are operational and impact specific parts of the organization within existing strategies and cultures, gradually responding to emerging needs and opportunities. The scale of change is associated with the pace, with revolutionary changes happening abruptly during specific periods, while evolutionary changes unfold slowly over an extended duration (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). In light of these perspectives, the objective of this study can be categorized as evolutionary organizational change, signifying operational adjustments within specific domains, such as strategies in sustainability communication.

Take, for instance, the automotive industry, where the development of cars that function in a more sustainable way necessitates corresponding shifts in sustainability communication strategies. On the other hand, given that the change in the automotive industry is characterized by its rapid pace driven by external factors like climate change, we argue that it could also be perceived as revolutionary.

The integration of sustainability communication into communication strategies takes various forms, ranging from offering more sustainable products or services to influencing stakeholder behaviors and challenging societal norms, ultimately driving broader change (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019). Regardless of the approach, sustainability communication contributes to enhancing organizational image and corporate reputation and is crucial for maintaining their social license to operate (Dessart & Standeart, 2023).

As Kim (2023) argues, CSR/sustainability communication from a public relations perspective focuses heavily on collective sensemaking. Sustainability communication can as such be defined as: "*societal expectations of organizational practice* addressing economic, legal, ethical, environmental, and societal responsibility of an organization in *its relationship with stakeholders and a larger society*" (Kim, 2023, p. 12). The author emphasizes that when organizations incorporate sustainability communication into their operations, they not only influence but also shape societal norms and values by engaging with the expectations and pressures of society and the public. As a result, these efforts contribute to strengthening organizational legitimacy. Consequently, sustainability communication aligns with public relations efforts, given that public relations inherently focuses on ethical practices and fostering mutually beneficial and positive relationships (Grunig, 2001; Kim, 2023).

Furthermore, Kim (2023) explains that sustainability communication research has undergone a significant shift, characterized by the integration of public relations concepts. These concepts encompass engaging in dialogue with and incorporating stakeholders' views (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Kent & Taylor, 2016; Kim, 2023), understanding audience preferences, needs, and expectations (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Kim, 2023), as well as promoting public trust, engagement, and transparency (Hung-Baesecke et al., 2016; Rim et al., 2019; Kim, 2023). This approach to sustainability communication processes highlights the significance of actively involving stakeholders to grasp broader societal trends and

concerns. As open systems, organizations are continually influenced by and, at the same time, influencing the external environment. Therefore, they must constantly evolve and align with societal expectations and norms (Miller, 2015).

Indeed, successful sustainability communication is achieved when organizations demonstrate credibility and authenticity (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Larivière & Smit, 2022), which are equally central to organizational storytelling (Dessart & Standeart, 2023). Sustainability communication thus involves clearly articulating genuine motives, transparently reporting progress toward sustainability goals, and providing concrete evidence of real impacts (Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022; Dessart & Standeart, 2023). Presenting testimonials, labels, or certificates can further strengthen organizational credibility. Overall, ensuring that sustainability communication reflects a sense of authenticity and credibility fosters trust in the company's sustainability efforts thereby contributing to organizational legitimacy (Dessart & Standeart, 2023). Nevertheless, effective sustainability communication involves more than just conveying facts; it also requires establishing emotional connections with the public and societal groups (Dessart & Standeart, 2023).

Communicating sustainable practices across industries requires a balanced approach. Mainly, if an organization falsely communicates about its sustainable efforts, it may face accusations of greenwashing (Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022; Reilly & Hynan, 2014), which can significantly undermine organizational legitimacy. This risk also applies to organizations that have been sustainable since their inception, referred to as "born-sustainable companies" (Lynch & Ferasso, 2023; Todeschini et al., 2017). Such companies may encounter greenwashing accusations if their communication is perceived as insincere or misleading. Therefore, it is crucial for all companies across industries to achieve a balance in their sustainability communication to avoid accusations and maintain credibility (Dessart & Standeart, 2023), as well as organizational legitimacy.

Nowadays, it is not sufficient for companies to merely communicate about sustainable practices. Instead, they also need to commit to being sustainable in a genuine and trustworthy manner (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022). Clearly, these scholars emphasize the importance of "walking the talk". To achieve this, companies can use storytelling to make their sustainability efforts more emotional and impactful (Cowan &



Guzman, 2020; Dessart & Standeart, 2023), thereby fostering genuine connections with stakeholders and reinforcing their commitment to sustainable practices.

In summary, this section on sustainability communication underscores its crucial role in organizational change and legitimacy. The literature emphasizes the need for organizations to include sustainability in their communication plans to manage climate change effectively. Moreover, it becomes essential to remain adaptable and responsive to the environment to effectively navigate uncertainties. Maintaining authenticity and trustworthiness emerges as essential in successful sustainability communication, fostering trust and mitigating accusations of greenwashing. In essence, sustainability communication is crucial for organizations to adjust to societal changes, shaping their identity and establishing legitimacy in an ever-changing world.

### **3.4 Synthesis**

In this literature review, we have examined key concepts relevant to this thesis. By reviewing previous studies on public relations, climate imaginaries, and sustainability communication, we have gained a deeper understanding of this study's broader context and significance within the existing research landscape. Therefore, it is evident that the interconnected body of previous research not only addresses stakeholder concerns but also responds to societal shifts, thereby enhancing organizational legitimacy.

Strategic public relations literature is increasingly recognizing the power of storytelling as a tool to effectively address pressing issues such as climate change and technological advancements. By weaving stories into their communication strategies, organizations can simplify complex topics, making them more accessible and relatable to diverse audiences. This not only helps convey the urgency of managing challenges like climate change but also demonstrates the organization's adaptability to technological progress. The literature underscores how storytelling plays a pivotal role in catalyzing societal transformation, offering a promising avenue for organizations to enhance their sustainability initiatives through engaging stories.

Furthermore, public relations emerges as a crucial way for organizations to navigate the evolving landscape of collective and societal climate imaginaries. By actively engaging with stakeholders and understanding their values and expectations, organizations can better align their communication efforts with societal norms and preferences on climate change. This alignment not only enhances organizational legitimacy but also fosters stronger connections with diverse stakeholders. In an era where the demand for transparent and socially responsible communication is on the rise, leveraging public relations to craft stories that resonate with stakeholders becomes increasingly vital.

However, effective storytelling in the context of organizational communication requires a nuanced understanding of audience values and preferences. Scholars emphasize the need for research to integrate principles of organizational storytelling with established public relations theory, providing practitioners with actionable insights to tailor their narratives effectively. By aligning storytelling with organizational goals and values, organizations can foster deeper connections with stakeholders, ultimately enhancing their legitimacy in the eyes of the public. This highlights the indispensable role of storytelling as a mechanism for driving meaningful change and engagement within organizations.

In essence, the literature underscores the significance of integrating sustainability communication into organizational public relations strategies, aligning them with broader societal trends and expectations. Effective storytelling practices emerge as a key driver in this endeavor, serving as a vehicle for conveying organizational values, fostering stakeholder engagement, and ultimately enhancing organizational legitimacy. As organizations navigate the complexities of today's world, strategic and authentic storytelling practices are essential for adapting to changing societal landscapes and ensuring long-term organizational success.

## 4. Theoretical Framework

---

*In this section, we use storytelling theory as a framework to explore the ways in which automotive industry organizations strategically communicate sustainability stories to strengthen their organizational legitimacy. We delve into the processes through which organizations create compelling stories that emotionally engage audiences, thereby improving the effectiveness of their communications efforts. In the segment about strategic sustainability storytelling, we describe and discuss theories that illustrate how organizations can strategically leverage storytelling to address sustainability challenges and authentically communicate their environmental commitments to stakeholders. By presenting these frameworks, we underscore the importance of authenticity, transparency, and engagement in effectively conveying sustainability stories and fostering meaningful relationships with stakeholders.*

### **4.1 Storytelling Theory**

Humans live stories. Before movies, pictures, and writing, fiction existed through oral stories. Storytelling refers to the uniquely human ability to communicate complex phenomena to one another (Harris, 2017). As "storytelling animals" (Kent, 2015; Vasquez & Taylor, 2001), stories are deeply woven into our social and cultural practices, shaping our experiences from early childhood and continuing to do so throughout our entire lives (Loseke, 2012).

In her work, Lane (2023) highlights how stories (real and fictional) are significant in shaping understanding and meaning, both in real-life and imaginative contexts. In particular, there is a distinction between stories and the *telling* of stories (storytelling) and the presentation of examples, illustrations, and anecdotes. As such, the author suggests that storytelling entails a specific structure, language, characters, and plots that are not typically used in other forms of communication (Lane, 2023). By aligning storytelling with the audience's values, thus engaging in identification processes, stories also have the power to open up new perspectives through dialogue (Riedy & Waddock, 2022). This means that stories involve careful attention to detail and a strategic combination of various elements to get the message across. In this

sense, storytelling uniquely conveys information and evokes emotions that connect the teller to its diverse audiences (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023).

In the field of public relations, practitioners operate with truth and transparency. However, for stories to work, professionals must tailor them to their intended audience, drawing on personal experiences and the audience's emotions to convey the organization's message effectively (Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023). Due to these emotional connections, stories have been shown to affect audience behavior even after the story has ended (Zak, 2015). In addition, the strategic use of elements like place names, details of sights and sounds, or physical descriptions mirrors reality just enough to make stories feel authentic (Lane, 2023). Essentially, through storytelling, organizations can connect with their audience on a personal level, fostering mutual connections and steering audience interest.

#### **4.1.1 Organizational Storytelling**

The use of storytelling emerged in an organizational setting in the mid to late 1990s (Lane, 2023) and has since become a prevalent strategy in corporate settings (Thier, 2018). Organizational storytelling serves as a primary method for members and stakeholders to understand themselves and their relationships. Through this approach, human relationships are formed and comprehended, facilitating connections both within and outside organizations (Boje, 1991; Lane, 2023). This means that achieving organizational success largely relies on the ability to understand and persuade individuals. Consequently, contemporary companies recognize the importance of understanding human behaviors and aligning audience preferences with organizational practices (Thier, 2018). This can, in other words, also be equal to two-way communication and the importance of organizations listening to stakeholders.

Stories represent a unique form of communication that is particularly important within organizational environments. As stated by Heide et al. (2019, p. 12): "Humans are narrative beings; through stories, we can create order and understanding of our experiences. All organizations have stories, weak or strong, about the organization and its 'important' people". Gill (2015) further highlights that strategic storytelling in organizational communication involves crafting and conveying messages through stories that encompass various elements,

such as individuals, the organization's history, visions, social connections, and the essence of organizational work. This approach thus aims to shape perspectives, reinforce existing beliefs, or influence behaviors.

Organizations often convey their goals, histories, visions, missions, and important figures through myths and stories (Gill, 2015; Kent, 2015). Portraying organizations and their members as valued parts of the community requires using effective communication techniques that make people feel connected and understood (Kent, 2015). Yet, knowing that storytelling is important in an organizational context and knowing *how* to create effective stories are not the same things (see the following section). Notably, Kent (2023) emphasizes that storytelling in organizational public relations is not just about telling a story; it also requires professionals to possess persuasive and rhetorical communication skills. Drawing on these previous definitions of storytelling, Lane (2023) explains that organizational storytelling involves strategically using certain types of content and communication methods to engage internal and external audiences, influencing their thoughts and emotions to achieve organizational goals.

Organizational storytelling involves the same story being shared across different platforms, with each piece — whether it is a press release or a sustainability report — contributing to the organization's overarching story, known as its meta-story (story themes) (Lane, 2023). For instance, simply stating the organization's vision does not qualify as storytelling. However, when the organization or its members are depicted as heroes on a mission to improve society, a story begins to emerge. Essentially, the hero element cannot stand alone; it must be accompanied by other elements, just like a plot needs various components to have a meaningful impact. Thus, it is the *combination* of these elements that forms a story encapsulating the organization's aspirations, values, and credibility (Lane, 2023).

Furthermore, compared to other organizational communication methods, storytelling can significantly enhance audience loyalty (Lane, 2023; Love, 2008). This suggests that storytelling can be an effective tool for engaging audiences and conveying complex messages in a memorable way. On the other hand, the reliance on storytelling in organizations may raise ethical concerns. Specifically, while storytelling can be engaging and persuasive, there is a risk of stories being used to obscure facts or manipulate emotions (Dessart & Standeart,

2023; Lane, 2023). In the context of the automotive industry, this can be translated into the process of greenwashing, i.e., when sustainability claims do not align with actual facts (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022; Reilly & Hynan, 2014). As such, stakeholders may become skeptical if they perceive storytelling as a tactic to disguise organizational agendas or gloss over important issues (Lane, 2023; Lindgreen & Swaen, 2010).

Therefore, while storytelling can be effective in achieving organizational goals and objectives, organizations must carefully consider the ethical implications of their storytelling practices (Kent, 2015). It is, therefore, important to strike a balance between engaging storytelling and transparency, ensuring that stories are used authentically and ethically to foster genuine understanding and trust among stakeholders.

#### **4.1.2 Strategic Sustainability Storytelling**

Storytelling is becoming more acknowledged as a strategic tool for driving change (James & Minnis, 2004; Spear & Roper, 2013), which includes building and strengthening an organization's sustainable image and reputation (Dessart & Standeart, 2023). Drawing from the literature on storytelling in public relations (Lane, 2023; Kent, 2015) and the application of sustainability storytelling in marketing efforts (Dessart & Standeart, 2023), we observe common areas of focus and shared themes between these perspectives. Thus, we use insights from each to enhance the understanding of strategic sustainability storytelling in public relations.

Within organizational storytelling, several strategic elements combine to create a compelling story. Storytelling has the ability to engage diverse audiences on cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Lane, 2023), while also providing them with a sense of meaning (Kent, 2015). In particular, the language used in storytelling is different from that of everyday communication in the way it inspires audiences to visualize the story. At times, stories use language that feels real, even to the extent of adopting a particular accent, which makes the story more grounded in reality. This approach can resonate with the audience and make the story more relatable. However, at other times, story language can be more formal and stylized (Lane, 2023). In addition to language, persuasion and rhetorical

approaches are equally important in weaving a captivating story (Kent, 2015). In essence, language choice, emotional resonance, and delivery methods are paramount for strategic storytelling.

Various elements such as plots, characters, and specific structures come together to form a connection between a story and its key stakeholders (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Lane, 2023; Kent, 2015). When these elements are combined effectively, they create a compelling story that captures the audience's interest and emotions (Lane, 2023). As explained by Kent (2015, p. 482): "[S]tories need a clear plot, characters that an audience can identify with, action, a compelling or interesting setting, some sort of climax, denouement, or resolution, and something has to change". In other words, each element contributes to the story's coherence and impact, thus guiding the audience through twists, turns, and revelations that evoke emotional responses and deepen engagement.

In an organizational context, both an organization and its representatives can take on the role of a character. These characters in stories are often based on common archetypes, including the hero(ine), the explorer, the joker, the wise person, and so on (Lane, 2023). The presence of characters in a story serves a dual purpose. Firstly, by including characters, an organization establishes audience expectations; the audience is curious about the characters' actions and behavior (Lane, 2023; Kent, 2015). Secondly, characters play a central role for the audience in empathizing with them and deciding how they, as observers, will align themselves with the story (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023). Specifically, when we empathize with characters, we tend to want to emulate their actions and behaviors. Thus, having a clear hero to support and a problem or villain to challenge them are crucial elements in generating engagement with the story (Dessart & Standeart, 2023).

Characters also serve as a powerful means to enhance the authenticity of the story (Lane, 2023). By identifying with characters, audiences envision the potential consequences of actions, both positive and negative, in real-world scenarios. Furthermore, characters' choices prompt audiences to reflect on their own behavior and decision-making in real-life scenarios. This means that story characters can be used strategically to influence listeners' conclusions or beliefs as determined by the storyteller (Lane, 2023). In strategic sustainability storytelling, organizations can enhance their authenticity and credibility by, for instance,

collaborating with partners, real-life characters and figures renowned for their sustainability efforts (Dessart & Standeart, 2023). These include activists, celebrities, or prominent organizations dedicated to sustainability (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Kent, 2015). Hence, by tapping into the already-established credibility of these characters and partners etc., collaborations contribute to organizational legitimacy and also decrease risks of conveying misleading impressions (Dessart & Standeart, 2023).

All good stories have plots that seek to challenge audience expectations by shaping how unfolding events affect characters (Lane, 2023). These story devices, rooted in familiar patterns that have endured for centuries, establish settings and shape audience expectations for story progression and fulfillment. Plots not only provide character environments but also influence interactions, ultimately determining outcomes (Kent, 2015). Furthermore, using real-life contexts will also help the story feel more realistic (van Laer et al., 2019). However, it is worth noting that if a story is set in a fictional world, it can still draw readers in deeply (Dessart & Standeart, 2023). In storytelling theory, this contextual element is known as the plot. By organizing the story event, the story is given both structure and meaning (Green & Brock, 2002; Dessart & Standeart, 2023).

A familiar structure — characterized by a clear beginning, middle, and end — is paramount for stories to resonate with audiences. Lane (2023) suggests that while stories often follow a linear progression through these stages, they may not necessarily adhere to a linear timeline. These rhetorical principles also serve as predictable structural features, guiding the audience's expectations and satisfaction as the storyline unfolds (Kent, 2015). This means that story timelines not only offer direction but also serve as a helpful memory aid for audience members who wish to retell the story later.

In strategic sustainability storytelling, organizations transitioning towards more sustainable practices can leverage storytelling to showcase their journey, illustrating their past, present, and envisioned future in the shift toward sustainability (Dessart & Standeart, 2023). In particular, there are three primary purposes for organizations employing strategic sustainability storytelling: (1) highlighting existing sustainability values, (2) repositioning toward sustainability values, and (3) transforming ecosystems or society around sustainability values (Dessart & Standeart, 2023, p. 374). These selected strategic purposes should guide



organizations in driving a shift towards new values, effectively conveying a clear lesson learned (Pera & Viglia, 2016).

An example of a company motivated by transitioning to sustainable values and practices is the Swedish energy company Vattenfall AB. Through strategic adoption of renewable energy sources such as solar and wind power, Vattenfall aligns with its commitment to reduce carbon emissions and address climate change. Integrating this journey into storytelling allows companies, such as Vattenfall, to enhance their image and credibility, effectively showcasing their sustainability initiatives to consumers and stakeholders (Dessart & Standeart, 2023).

Most importantly, unlike regular stories, where outcomes might not be as obvious, strategic sustainability stories must clearly show the results of actions taken in the plot (Dessart & Standeart, 2023). This helps address the common issue where different entities intend to act sustainably but struggle to follow through. Therefore, making the sustainability impact easy to understand, visualize, and measure is crucial. By adhering to these story plots, organizations can effectively convey complex social norms and consequences of actions in a manner that resonates with a broader audience (Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023). This accessibility allows audiences to feel reassured as the story connects with their prior knowledge and experiences. Yet, while audiences often anticipate certain outcomes based on these familiar patterns, stories can still captivate them by subverting these expectations (Lane, 2023). A well-balanced story thus lies in surprising the audience with unexpected twists while still satisfying their inherent desires for familiar narratives. As such, the unexpectedness can evoke heightened emotional responses (Lane, 2023).

Therefore, storytelling can serve as a powerful tool for communicating sustainability, even for organizations that do not initially prioritize sustainability or have faced sustainability-related controversies (Clark et al., 2020). By adopting a sincere storytelling strategy, these organizations can effectively communicate their sustainability efforts and motivations, potentially improving their reputation and relationship with stakeholders, thus contributing to strengthening organizational legitimacy (Dessart & Standeart, 2023).

## **4.2 Theoretical Reflections**

Sustainability communication and storytelling theory both have clear, overlapping commonalities that make them complementary theoretical frameworks when applied in organizational contexts, specifically in the automotive industry. Indeed, best practices for each emphasize the importance of authenticity, transparency, and engagement in conveying messages effectively and fostering meaningful connections with stakeholders.

By integrating insights from both frameworks, we can develop a comprehensive approach to analyze strategic sustainability storytelling in organizations. While sustainability communication emphasizes the significance of genuinely reflecting sustainability values and practices to cultivate trust among stakeholders, storytelling theory underscores the need for stories to be both authentic and emotionally engaging. Transparency is central to both frameworks, with sustainability communication emphasizing transparent reporting of progress and storytelling theory promoting transparency in narratives. Moreover, engagement is fundamental: sustainability communication prioritizes stakeholder dialogue and feedback integration, while storytelling theory aims for emotional and intellectual involvement.

Organizations must align with the existing sustainability narrative to thrive in today's competitive landscape. Embracing sustainability goes beyond meeting standards; it involves keeping up with the evolving needs and expectations of society and stakeholders. By doing so, organizations can gain a competitive edge and ensure their long-term relevance.

# 5. Methodology

---

*With the aim of understanding the strategic use of sustainability storytelling and its impact on organizational legitimacy, this thesis was best employed from a constructionist approach using a narrative thematic analysis. The section is structured into five subsections. Firstly, we present the paradigm guiding this study. Secondly, the research design is described and motivated. Thirdly, we specify the empirical data and the process of data sampling. Finally, we describe the data analysis method used in this study followed by a methodological reflection.*

## **5.1 Research Paradigm**

This thesis seeks to explore how organizations strategically construct and communicate narratives about sustainability to external stakeholders to attain organizational legitimacy. To guide this examination of socially constructed sustainability narratives within organizational communication practices, we adopted the epistemological and ontological perspective of the *constructionist paradigm*. Unlike naturalism in traditional science, which tends to adopt an objective or neutral stance, the constructionist approach aims to critically explore the complexity of meaning inherent in social phenomena (Burr, 2003; Holstein & Gubrium, 2008; Esin et al., 2014). This approach highlights the generation of meaning by research participants themselves and the reciprocal shaping of meanings among participants, researchers, and the broader context — where "context" encompasses various levels and intricate power dynamics (Esin et al., 2014).

In constructionist approaches to communication research, language plays a central role in constructing social realities and acknowledging the plurality of interpretations (Foster & Bochner, 2008). These realities are intricately tied to social, historical, and cultural contexts, which both enable and constrain meanings and actions (Esin et al., 2014; Foster & Bochner, 2008). Moreover, the constructionist paradigm recognizes the potential of communication for transformation and sustainable change (Foster & Bochner, 2008). In this view, organizations are not just physical entities but also cultures shaped and defined by symbols, meanings, and

communication processes. Furthermore, researchers' effort to grasp the complexities of the social world reflects a moral and ethical commitment in itself (Foster & Bochner, 2008). Simply put, this pursuit is not just academic; it embodies a values-driven approach that prioritizes ethical and moral considerations.

Drawing from the constructionist paradigm, our research framework explores how organizations employ narratives to establish and attain legitimacy among external stakeholders. As suggested by Esin et al. (2014), the constructionist approach aligns with narrative frameworks because it focuses on analyzing how individuals or groups position themselves in society and their performance of identity or roles. It is important to note that the focus of this thesis is not on how narratives are *perceived* by stakeholders. Instead, our aim is to uncover the strategies by which sustainability meanings are formulated and communicated to stakeholders, ultimately contributing to organizational legitimacy.

## **5.2 Research Design**

Aligned with the study's effort to explore organizational sustainability storytelling and its contribution to organizational legitimacy, the research has been conducted through a qualitative analysis approach where we compared the case studies qualitatively, applying a narrative thematic analysis method. Qualitative approaches to research, as described by Prasad (2017, p. 14), are "firmly built on *interpretive* notions that take acts of subjective meaning very seriously". Thus, through a qualitative analysis approach, we aimed to examine and compare sustainability storytelling practices across different automotive organizations, identifying patterns, similarities, and differences in their strategic approaches.

By using a comparative qualitative analysis, we aimed to not only examine the sustainability storytelling practices across different automotive organizations but also to understand the nuanced contexts and stories that underpin these practices. By delving into the qualitative aspects, we could discern underlying motivations, values, and strategic orientations (Esin et al., 2014). This qualitative exploration enabled us to capture the richness and complexity of sustainability storytelling strategies, providing insights into how organizations construct and communicate their sustainability stories (Esin et al., 2014). Ultimately, the use of comparative

qualitative analysis allows for a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted dimensions of sustainability storytelling, offering insights for practitioners and scholars alike.

As noted by Esin et al. (2014), qualitative research methods demonstrate adaptability, with researchers frequently combining diverse approaches to gain deeper insights into the intricacies of human experiences and behaviors. For instance, it is common in qualitative research to use narrative thematic analysis because this approach focuses on the content within the text (Butina, 2015), therefore it was the approach we selected. Furthermore, in narrative thematic analysis the stories themselves serve as "raw data" (Butina, 2015). This approach has been applied across various disciplines to gain a deeper understanding of the historical experiences, identity, culture, and lifestyle of the storytellers or narrators within their operating context. Specifically, narrative thematic analysis was particularly valuable because it allowed for an examination of specific content, themes and narrative types within sustainability storytelling by automotive organizations in Sweden. This approach enabled us to systematically examine textual data, uncovering patterns and trends in how sustainability is communicated.

Furthermore, narrative thematic analysis provided us to gain deeper insights into the storytelling techniques used by organizations. It helped us to delve deeper into the storytelling strategies employed to enhance organizational legitimacy, uncovering persuasive techniques, narrative frameworks, and multiple meanings within narratives (Esin et al., 2014; Butina, 2015). Overall, narrative thematic analysis offered valuable insights into the research questions underpinning this study.

### **5.3 Case Sampling and Data Collection**

Purposive sampling was deemed suitable for this study due to its ability to gain relevant data tailored to the research objectives (Elo et al., 2014). Given the focus on strategic sustainability storytelling within the automotive industry, purposive sampling provided a means to target organizations that actively engage in sustainability communication efforts, thereby aligning with the study's specific aim of exploring how organizations attain legitimacy through such stories. The sampling relies on specific criteria outlined below.

When conducting purposive sampling, researchers must prioritize data that offers the best understanding of the research object at hand (Elo et al., 2014). Our decision to focus on the automotive industry stemmed from the desire to examine sectors that have significantly transitioned towards sustainability over the last decade while actively communicating these changes. Specifically, we aimed to understand how these companies implement environmental stories to establish legitimacy in an environmentally conscious landscape. As such, we excluded companies that have been sustainable since their inception. As noted by Elo et al. (2014, p. 4): "When using purposeful sampling, decisions need to be made about who or what is sampled, what form the sampling should take, and how many people or sites need to be sampled". Therefore, we consulted *Mobility Sweden's* (2023) list of the top ten car brands with the highest sales in Sweden from the previous year.

Employing a top-down approach helped mitigate potential bias, leading us to select car companies with well-defined sustainability profiles. These companies demonstrated their commitment to sustainability by actively communicating it through various sections of their websites (Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022; Dessart & Standeart, 2023). This resulted in the following four car companies: (1) Volvo, (2) Toyota, (3) Kia, and (4) Audi. We focused our study on the sustainability stories of these four specific car companies to conduct an in-depth comparative qualitative analysis of multiple case studies. Although the remaining six companies were also viable options, limitations in time and space required us to limit the number of case studies. Including more companies would have compromised the depth and detail of our analysis. Thus, we prioritized these four companies to ensure a comprehensive examination within our constraints.

Our data collection involved extracting all content related to *environmental* sustainability from various sections of the companies' websites, including "About Us", "Sustainability", the annual "Sustainability Report", and "Press Releases" from the most recent accessible year. Given time and space constraints we did not include content from other media platforms. While the extent of *environmental* sustainability content varied across sections such as "About Us", "Sustainability", and the "Sustainability Report" for each company, we ensured parity in the total content collected from each, allowing for fair comparability. Additionally, we acquired the most recent sustainability reports available for each company, all of which were from 2022, except for Volvo's, which was from 2023.

To ensure a comprehensive dataset covering a full year, we gathered press releases spanning from February 2023 to February 2024, resulting in a total of eight press releases from each car company. Moreover, our study focused on how these companies communicate legitimacy through their external communications rather than evaluating their actual commitment to sustainability practices. However, to assure a sustainable commitment, another criterion in our sampling was that all selected car companies were certified according to ISO14001, thereby providing concrete evidence of real impacts (Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022; Dessart & Standeart, 2023).

It is worth mentioning that both Kia and Audi are part of larger conglomerates. While Kia had its own Sustainability Report, when examining Audi, the Sustainability Report was conducted by Volkswagen Group. Given that we could not analyze Audi's individual Sustainability Report, we had to consider the company within the broader context of the Volkswagen Group's sustainability initiatives in this specific instance. We opted for Audi over Volkswagen due to the absence of a clear sustainability profile on the company's website at the time of gathering content and data. In the analysis, we will refer to Audi when using Volkswagen Group's Sustainability Report.

Aligned with the theories underpinning this research, we focused on identifying specific elements such as structures, plots, characters, and language within the external communication while collecting the data to assess whether it was storytelling or not. When assessing whether the collected data aligned with criteria for sustainability storytelling outlined in section 4 (Theoretical Framework) we focused on evaluating how effectively the stories communicated the outcomes of sustainability actions. This involved ensuring that the collected content vividly depicted the active efforts of the car companies in achieving sustainability objectives. However, communication devoid of storytelling elements, such as purely informational or bureaucratic language, was excluded from our analysis (Butina, 2015). Finally, it should be noted that this study is a qualitative comparative analysis, where findings from the four cases have been compared to identify any differences or similarities in the organization's strategic sustainability storytelling. This comparison is discussed in the final chapter of the study.

## 5.4 Method of Analysis

Following the constructionist approach, a narrative thematic analysis was conducted to answer the two research questions, namely (1) In what way do automotive companies in Sweden implement sustainability storytelling in external communication to promote their sustainability initiatives? and (2) How does strategic sustainability storytelling contribute to organizational legitimacy? Our method of analysis adhered to the principles of an abductive approach, where we engaged in a continuous exchange between collected data and theoretical concepts to find the best explanation for our observations (Mitchell, 2018).

Narrative thematic analysis was chosen because "although individually oriented approaches focus on analyzing narratives as told by individual narrators, they usually acknowledge the role of the listener in shaping the structure of narratives" (Esin et al., 2014, p. 5). In other words, stories can be used strategically to establish or enhance legitimacy by framing actions or behaviors in ways that align with societal expectations or norms.

Initially, we identified small units within the material, resulting in a significant amount of data segments (McLeod, 2001; Simons et al., 2008). These smaller units then served as the building blocks for establishing broader elements. In this process, we followed the elements outlined in storytelling theory as our guiding framework (see section 4. Theoretical Framework). For instance, we evaluated whether the data contained clear plots and actions, characters, a depiction of the organization's journey (past, present, and envisioned future), and transparent reporting of progress toward sustainability objectives.

We engaged in a continual process of comparing and contrasting these data segments to delineate clear boundaries between story elements as described in the theoretical section, succinctly summarize their contents, and carefully search for any contradictory evidence (Simons et al., 2008). Here, our goal was to uncover conceptual similarities, illustrate differences between story elements, and unveil patterns embedded within them. As a story element alone does not make up a story, it was considered crucial to examine how these story elements *combined* generated story themes contributing to the organization's goals and objectives (Lane, 2023). We identified four story themes that were categorized into sections



constituting the analysis: *Driving Sustainability Innovation, Partnership for Sustainable Progress, Organizational Accountability, and Call to Action*.

After identifying the story themes, we conducted an in-depth narrative thematic analysis, as described by Esin et al. (2014, pp. 7-18), which included analysis of transcription, translation, research positioning, ethical considerations, and excerpts from the analysis. Following the constructionist approach to narrative thematic analysis method, researchers need to take into account the wider social context in which the story is constructed, including the "interpersonal, social and cultural relations" (Esin et al., 2014, p. 4). Put simply, this approach was beneficial when interpreting organizations' attempts at legitimacy, as it facilitates a thorough analysis of textual materials in various contexts.

We paid particular attention to the interactive nature of storytelling, considering how narratives are established between organizations and their audiences on various levels (Esin et al., 2015). Through interpretive analysis of these story themes, we identified specific language (e.g. metaphors and subjectives), values, and behaviors aimed at engaging audiences through, for instance, identification processes. Consequently, these endeavors could be viewed as organizational efforts to strengthen its legitimacy (Lane, 2023).

Given that all the material was originally in Swedish, it was important to recognize that different meanings could emerge from the text once it was translated into English. This necessitated a careful rereading of the data and consideration of the specific context in which the words were used in the original language (Esin et al., 2014). Furthermore, we explored the broader social, cultural and historical contexts shaping these stories. This exploration allowed us to understand how these company's stories are constructed to resonate with different stakeholders (Esin et al., 2014).

Through the narrative thematic analysis we also found that authenticity could be derived from several of these story themes. As described in the theory, authenticity is perceived when stories include accurate descriptions of reality (e.g., place names, details of sights and sounds and physical descriptions) and illustrate collaboration with real-life characters or partners renowned for their sustainability efforts (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023).

This is of particular importance because these authentic descriptions also contribute to organization legitimacy as described in theory (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023). In addition, while analyzing quotes to assign them to specific story themes, some presented multiple layers and allowed for various interpretations. However, each quote was ultimately classified into one of the four identified story themes, prioritizing its *primary* focus and message.

Narrative thematic analysis contributed to shed light on the intricate ways in which organizations strategically implemented sustainability storytelling to enhance their legitimacy, providing valuable insights into the dynamics of organizational communication practices.

## **5.5 Method Reflection**

This thesis employed a qualitative approach, specifically using narrative thematic analysis. This method was selected for its ability to delve deeply into the strategic implementation of sustainability storytelling by automotive companies to establish organizational legitimacy. Narrative thematic analysis method offers flexibility, facilitating nuanced data interpretation, and provides a structured framework for identifying recurring story themes (Butina, 2015; Esin et al., 2014). Through narrative thematic analysis method, a comprehensive understanding of sustainability communication dynamics within the automotive sector was achieved. Nonetheless, inherent in all qualitative methods are challenges such as subjective interpretation, potential bias, and coding errors (Elo et al., 2014).

To address and mitigate these challenges, sampling criteria and analytical frameworks were implemented. We considered the validity and reliability of the research in, for instance, the translation of data from Swedish to English where we worked on preserving the nuances and meanings inherent in the original language. While we took measures to ensure accurate translation and interpretation, some degree of information loss may have occurred in the process. Moreover, as co-authors with distinct backgrounds, knowledge, and experiences, we engaged in ongoing discussions and reflections on the interpreted data, mitigating subjectivity in our interpretations.

All content was sourced from the respective organizations' websites, where edits can be made. Therefore, it's important to note that the data collected might have been altered or updated after the analysis was conducted (Holman, 2017). Furthermore, although efforts were made to establish fair comparisons among the organizations, slight differences in the volume of material emerged due to each organization's unique style, preferences, and strategies regarding the amount of information posted on their websites.

The researcher's behavior and ethical considerations are crucial aspects that can significantly impact the entire research process (Esin et al., 2014). In this study, we recognize our influence over the interpretation and analysis process. Ethics play a vital role in ensuring impartiality, minimizing biases, and evaluating the appropriateness of research practices (Allen, 2016). Therefore, we prioritized accuracy, and truthfulness throughout the sample and data collection, analysis, and reporting of findings.

## 6. Analysis and Findings

---

*The following section presents the analysis and findings regarding the ways in which automotive companies in Sweden implement sustainability storytelling in their external communication to promote their sustainability initiatives and contribute to organizational legitimacy. The analysis is structured into four story themes, each focusing on findings that best illustrate these companies' implementation of sustainability storytelling. We start by outlining the most prevalent story themes and then progress to the less common ones. The main insights from the four identified story themes are summarized in their respective sections. However, additional findings are available in **Appendix A** for readers interested in further details. This examination offers insights into the strategies employed by automotive companies in Sweden to promote their sustainability efforts and strengthen organizational legitimacy. Please note that all quotes and examples presented in the analysis are our own translation from Swedish to English.*

### **6.1 Driving Sustainable Innovation**

This story theme consists of actions taken by these companies through a commitment to reducing environmental impact while fostering eco-friendly solutions across operations, products, and services (Dessart & Standeart, 2023). In this part, we exemplify in what way automotive companies implement their sustainability initiatives by strategically developing engaging stories that emphasize technological advancement and forward-thinking as a means for creating a sustainable society (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Lane, 2023). In this section will present twelve examples that best illustrate the story theme of *Driving Sustainable Innovation*. We conclude this section by explaining how this story theme contributes to organizational legitimacy.

On their website, Toyota highlights a commitment to sustainability in their external communication by positioning themselves as industrial leaders in the transition towards sustainable solutions:

As one of the world's leading car manufacturers, we take our responsibility seriously to protect the environment. This means developing vehicles that have as little impact as possible on the surrounding environment. Examples of this are our world-leading electric hybrids and Mirai, the world's first mass-produced hydrogen fuel cell sedan (Toyota, 2024b).

The example above illustrates Toyota's portrayal as a hero committed to sustainable solutions, weaving together character traits like "world-leading", "responsibility", and "protectors of the environment". Through emphasizing its dedication to environmental protection and innovative vehicle development, Toyota emerges as a responsible leader in the industry, resonating with stakeholders interested in sustainability. Positioned as a hero addressing pressing challenges, Toyota enhances its credibility among stakeholders valuing sustainability. Specific product mentions, such as "electric hybrids" and "hydrogen fuel cell" vehicles, offer tangible evidence of Toyota's commitment to innovation and environmental stewardship, reinforcing its narrative of responsible leadership. This tangible evidence also establishes setting and shaping audience expectations for story progression and fulfillment. The mention of their product reflects Toyota's efforts to reposition themselves as a company that prioritizes sustainability. Thus, the example indicates the story theme *Driving Sustainable Innovation*.

In a similar vein, Volvo portrays themselves as the hero in taking on environmental challenges, for instance, on their webpage, they note:

We want to change the automotive industry and be a leader in safety, sustainability, online operations, and set a new global standard for people. Our ambitions chart a clear path for us as we take on our — and society's — challenges (Volvo, 2024a).

As demonstrated in the example above, Volvo articulates its ambition to drive change within the automotive industry and lead in areas such as safety, sustainability, and online operations, setting a "new global standard". By using words like "leader", "safety", and "new global standard", Volvo positions itself as a protagonist or hero in the narrative. Particularly striking is Volvo's commitment to addressing not only its own challenges but also those confronting society at large, portraying itself as a champion striving for a better world. In addition, stating that they have a "clear path" ahead indicates how Volvo leverage storytelling to showcase their repositioning toward sustainability values. However, the use of terms like "want" and "ambitions" suggests that these goals are aspirational rather than immediate actions,

potentially tempering the portrayal of Volvo as an *active* hero. In essence, the example effectively points to the story theme *Driving Sustainable Innovations*.

Another example of an automotive company embodying the hero archetype in their sustainability storytelling is demonstrated by Kia, as showcased on their website:

We will launch 14 new electric cars from 2023 to 2027, and already today we are one of the leading players in Sweden. But we are not satisfied there. With the self-developed electric car platform E-GMP, we continue to drive technological development and enable more people to become part of the chargeable movement. Through our products and services, we create conditions for more fully charged experiences (Kia, 2024a).

The example provided above firstly presents a clear plot by outlining Kia's proactive plan to introduce "14 new electric cars from 2023 to 2027", showcasing a strong commitment to advancing sustainability and technological development. Furthermore, this plot sets the stage for the audience to understand the storyline of Kia's sustainability journey and how they aim to reposition toward sustainability values. Secondly, Kia positions itself as a hero by emphasizing that they are "leading players in Sweden". By highlighting its role in driving "technological development" and promoting the "chargeable movement", Kia aims to resonate with stakeholders interested in sustainability and innovation. Additionally, Kia's mention of creating "fully charged experiences" through their products and services adds depth to their story, creating an engaging setting that connects with the audience's desires for sustainable mobility solutions. Overall, the example effectively indicates the story theme of *Driving Sustainable Innovation* by showcasing Kia's dedication to shaping a more sustainable future through innovative electric vehicle solutions.

Nevertheless, organizations can establish themselves as heroes not only by highlighting their own attributes but also by aligning with the heroic actions or values of others, as illustrated by Audi on their website:

Rikard Wildare has been taking apart everything he owns for as long as he can remember. The 46-year-old innovator has always enjoyed everything related to technology. The journey to electrify various vehicles began with remote-controlled cars. But soon, he would tackle even larger vehicles. [...] One of the key components became a battery pack from an Audi e-tron that had only traveled 1,500 kilometers before ending up at a scrapyard in Norway after a crash. 'The battery was practically unused, and Audi's battery solution fits perfectly into the design I have developed' - Rickard Wildare (Audi, 2024a).

The example above illustrates Audi's efforts to leverage Rickard Wildare's credibility as an innovator who repurposes components from vehicles, thereby contributing to sustainability. Wildare's story provides a clear plotline by detailing his journey from disassembling "remote-controlled cars" to "tackling even larger vehicles". Additionally, Wildare serves as a character in the story, where his passion for technology and determination to repurpose discarded materials make him a relatable figure for audiences interested in innovation and sustainability. By featuring Wildare's story, Audi indirectly associates itself with his problem-solving heroism in using existing resources to drive projects forward and demonstrating a commitment to environmental responsibility. In particular, Audi inserts itself as the "key component" in making Wildare's innovations possible. Ensuring the battery pack is salvaged before reaching "a scrapyards in Norway" demonstrates Wildare's dedication to sustainability, a value that Audi aims to convey and, in this instance, actively shares. Thus, audiences can easily align themselves with the values and authenticity of the story. Yet, although the example can be interpreted as collaboration, the main story theme is about how technology and innovations contribute to sustainability, indicating the story theme of *Driving Sustainable Innovations*.

Additionally, on the website, Toyota highlights its forward-thinking strategy and innovations as an integrated part of the company through the portrayal of Toyota's founder, Sakichi Toyoda:

We have to go back to the 1800s where a poor Sakichi grew up in a remote Japanese village and trained as a carpenter. [...] In Japan, Sakichi Toyoda became known as the king of inventions, and even today, Japanese schoolchildren learn all about Sakichi's works. But inventions and innovations are not just about Toyota's past but also present, and above all, future! (Toyota, 2024a).

In the example above, several story elements indicate the theme of *Driving Sustainable Innovation*. Firstly, Sakichi Toyoda, the founder of Toyota, is portrayed as the protagonist, symbolizing the company's commitment to innovation over generations. His journey from a humble upbringing in "a remote Japanese village" to the "king of inventions" underscores Toyota's dedication to pioneering advancements. Secondly, the story presents a clear plot that traces Toyota's evolution in innovation, emphasizing its persistent dedication to innovation and forward-thinking for several decades. This plot highlights Toyota's sustainability journey, aiming to transform ecosystems and society around sustainability values. Through the

spotlight on Toyota's history, the company not only emphasizes innovation in its past but also underscores that "above all", it is significant for its future endeavors. Finally, the inclusion of real-life contexts, such as Toyota's upbringing and contributions, enhances the authenticity of the story, reinforcing Toyota's position as a leader in sustainability and innovation.

Automotive companies employing stories to position themselves as organizations continually striving to achieve greater sustainability is apparent. For instance, in a press release, Volvo's CEO Jim Rowan states:

'Taking action to combat climate change is non-negotiable, and transitioning to fully electric cars is an important step on our journey', says Jim Rowan, CEO of Volvo Cars. 'As we now work to further reduce emissions across our value chain, we have a responsibility to do more and address our footprint for biodiversity and help improve people's lives. Our updated strategy is designed to help us do just that' (Volvo, 2024c).

The example from Volvo's press release showcases the company's commitment to combating climate change through transitioning to fully electric cars. By stating that "taking action to combat climate change is non-negotiable", CEO Jim Rowan sets a clear story plot, highlighting Volvo's proactive stance in addressing environmental challenges. In addition, Rowan emphasizes the company's determination "to do more" and "improve people's lives", thus underscoring a desire to position Volvo as a visionary leader in sustainability efforts. The statement underscores Volvo's dedication to implementing tangible solutions for reducing emissions and environmental impact. By leveraging the CEO's voice, Volvo seeks to enhance credibility and trust in their communication, portraying Rowan as a leader confronting societal and environmental challenges head-on. Furthermore, Rowan's words establish audience expectations and aim to foster empathy, as audiences align themselves with Volvo's mission to reduce emissions and address environmental impacts. Overall, the example effectively uses storytelling elements to convey Volvo's transition to "fully electric cars" and engage stakeholders in its journey towards a greener future, thus indicating the story theme *Driving Sustainable Innovation*.

On their website, Kia emphasizes their ambitions goals to achieve their vision for a sustainable future:

Our sustainability work is part of Kia's vision for the future, where our goal is to accelerate the transition to



sustainable mobility. To achieve this, we have set the goal of reaching 100% electrified vehicles in Sweden shortly, and 100% electric cars by 2030. The goals are ambitious, but through innovation and the latest technology, we want to show what is possible. Kia wants to inspire others to join the electrified movement so that more people can experience an electrified everyday life (Kia, 2024a).

The above example presents several key elements. Firstly, Kia's statement establishes a clear story plot by outlining the company's vision for the future: "to accelerate the transition to sustainable mobility". This plot sets the stage for the audience to understand Kia's overarching goal to transition toward sustainability values and how the company strategically uses storytelling to convey its sustainability journey. Secondly, Kia positions itself as a character within the story, embodying the archetype of the visionary leader committed to environmental sustainability. Furthermore, by stating that their goal is to reach "100% electrified vehicles in Sweden shortly, and 100% electric cars by 2030", Kia presents itself as a hero on a mission to drive change in the automotive industry. Particularly, Kia's mention of "innovation and the latest technology" creates an engaging setting that aligns with the audience's desire for advancements in sustainable transportation solutions. By articulating ambitious goals and aspirations, Kia invites the audience to identify with its mission and become part of the electrified movement. Overall, the example effectively implements storytelling elements to communicate Kia's commitment to sustainability and inspire others to join in the transition towards electrified mobility, thus indicating the story theme of *Driving Sustainable Innovation*.

In an effort to promote their sustainability efforts, Audi strategically implements storytelling on their website, explaining that:

A completely unique and groundbreaking effort is now being made with recycled glass, a research project that has been going on for over a year and involves taking broken and irreparable windshields that were previously used as insulation material and empty bottles. Now, Audi, as the first car manufacturer, has found a method to reuse the material for new high-quality windshields. The windows began serial production in September and are installed in Audi Q4 e-tron cars (Audi, 2024a).

In the example provided, Audi presents a clear plot by outlining its innovative endeavor to recycle glass for "high-quality windshields". This plot establishes the groundwork for Audi's proactive efforts to address sustainability challenges within the automotive industry. Furthermore, the plot is enriched by the inclusion of characters, with Audi positioned as the

hero pioneering sustainable solutions within the automotive industry, notably as "the first car manufacturer" to do so. By portraying Audi as an innovative leader, the organization positions itself as a character that audiences can identify with in their mission to drive positive change. Additionally, the quote demonstrates how storytelling can effectively convey an organization's values and credibility, as exemplified by Audi's active engagement in research and development efforts to repurpose materials for environmental benefit. Furthermore, the story structure adheres to a familiar pattern, with a clear beginning (the research project), middle (the development process), and end (the implementation in Audi Q4 e-tron cars), ensuring coherence and engagement. Overall, Audi's storytelling strategy effectively communicates its journey towards sustainability, aligning with the story theme of *Driving Sustainable Innovation*.

The role of organizations as the protagonist or hero is also evident in Toyota's external communication. For instance, when promoting their sustainability initiatives on their website, the company explains:

Humanity has never affected the surrounding environment as much as it does now. The consequences of our way of life, such as global warming, are catastrophic. As a company, we need to innovate and find new ways to maintain our quality of life and a strong economy, while preserving and restoring the ecosystems we are a part of (Toyota, 2024b).

In the example above, several key elements indicate the story theme of *Driving Sustainable Innovation*. Toyota's acknowledgment of the severe "consequences" of humanity's impact on the environment, described as "catastrophic", stands out in the example. By recognizing these consequences as "our way of life", with an emphasis on "our", Toyota acknowledges its role as part of the problem. This acknowledgment aligns with the concept of organizations portraying themselves as proactive heroes addressing societal and environmental issues, presenting a problem that requires resolution. Moreover, the example emphasizes the necessity for action, implying Toyota's commitment to addressing environmental concerns. Additionally, Toyota's commitment to foster a "strong economy", and "preserving ecosystems" enhances its credibility and appeals to stakeholders across both spheres. This holistic approach to sustainability effectively conveys a compelling story about the company's stance on environmental sustainability and its dedication to finding innovative

solutions. Overall, the example highlights Toyota's journey and their commitment to transform societies around sustainability values through innovations and technological advancement.

Furthermore, in an effort to promote their sustainability efforts on their webpage, Volvo states:

This year, we took the next step towards electrifying our entire model range. We promised that every new car launched from 2019 onwards would be fully or partially battery-powered. Consequently, we are the first major premium car brand to offer a plug-in hybrid for all our models (Volvo, 2024a).

The example above clearly outlines Volvo's commitment to "electrifying [its] entire model range" and pioneering as "the first major premium car brand" to offer an environmentally friendly and innovative solution. By doing this, Volvo demonstrates a clear plot, which sets the stage for the story by establishing a goal or mission that they aim to achieve, assuming the role of the hero in addressing environmental challenges. By emphasizing their promise to introduce "fully or partially battery-powered" vehicles from 2019, Volvo positions themselves as a leader in the automotive industry's transition towards electrification and as an industry pioneer in "plug-in hybrid" technology. Volvo thus establishes itself as a character that audiences can identify with in their mission to drive positive change. Additionally, the example provided by Volvo follows a familiar structure with a clear beginning (the commitment made in 2019), middle (the development and launch of plug-in hybrids), and end (the achievement of offering plug-in hybrids across all models), ensuring coherence and engagement. This creates a sense of momentum and progress within the story, engaging the audience and generating excitement about Volvo's initiatives. Overall, the example effectively uses storytelling elements to communicate its journey repositioning towards sustainability values, which point to the story theme of *Driving Sustainable Innovation*.

On their website, Kia illustrates their vision, mission, and goals through a story about technological advancement and environmental sustainability:

To enable more people to become part of the chargeable movement, we continue to innovate and inspire. Our dedicated platform for electric cars allows you to take advantage of the latest technology, with ultra-fast

charging, better performance, and long range. Our self-developed E-GMP platform will form the basis for 14 new electric cars in Sweden by 2027 (Kia, 2024a).

The example above clearly highlights several key story elements. Firstly, it illustrates a clear plot by emphasizing Kia's commitment to innovation and inspiring more people to join the electric "chargeable movement". This plot sets the stage for the story, establishing Kia's proactive role in driving sustainable change within the automotive industry and setting clear expectations for the audience regarding Kia's leadership in the electric vehicle movement. Secondly, Kia assumes the character of a hero by developing a dedicated platform for electric cars and promising "14 new electric cars in Sweden by 2027". By highlighting features such as "ultra-fast charging", "better performance", and "long range", Kia appeals to stakeholders interested in cutting-edge technology and eco-friendly transportation, presenting Kia as a catalyst for change and inspiring others to embrace electric mobility. Moreover, by addressing the audience directly ("you"), Kia's message communicates a sense of connection and understanding, inviting individuals to join the chargeable movement and be part of their journey towards environmental sustainability. Overall, the example effectively uses storytelling elements to convey Kia's role in technological innovation and inspiring positive change, thus indicating the story theme of *Driving Sustainable Innovation*.

On their website, Audi communicates its sustainable vision and goals through a story focusing on technological advancement and forward-thinking:

Audi's belief is that high-quality individual mobility can be combined with uncompromising responsibility for sustainability issues. And it doesn't stop at the cars themselves or even the factories where they are manufactured. For example, the battery cells in Audi's electric cars are produced with green electricity, and this also includes a social responsibility to ensure human rights are respected throughout the production chain. (Audi is a member of the Global Battery Alliance, initiated in 2017 by the World Economic Forum) (Audi, 2024a).

The example from Audi embodies key elements aligning with the theme of *Driving Sustainable Innovation*. Audi's dedication to sustainability, combining "high-quality individual mobility" with a sense of responsibility for environmental concerns, presents a clear story plot. Notably, Audi's use of the term "mobility" suggests a broader vision beyond simply producing vehicles, highlighting its aspiration to redefine and elevate the concept of transportation within a sustainable framework. Furthermore, Audi positions itself as an

industry leader in environmentally conscious practices, extending its efforts throughout the production chain, including sourcing "battery cells" with "green electricity" (sustainable electricity). In other words, Audi takes on the role as the hero, striving to effect positive societal change. Indeed, Audi's affiliation with the Global Battery Alliance contributes to its credibility and commitment to broader social and environmental objectives, appealing to stakeholders interested in sustainability and ethical production practices. In essence, Audi's story underscores its credibility in sustainability, affirming its dedication to shaping a better future through innovative technological solutions.

The examples provided above demonstrate in what way each company effectively conveys the story theme of *Driving Sustainable Innovation*. Toyota, Volvo, Kia, and Audi craft compelling stories highlighting their commitment to technological advancement for a sustainable society (Dessart & Standeart, 2023). Commonalities across all examples include moving away from old practices, aspiring to do more, and emphasizing responsible leadership and forward-thinking technological solutions. Through clear plots, relatable characters, and actionable resolutions, these companies engage stakeholders in their sustainability efforts (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023). They express their dedication to sustainability by aligning with audience values, fostering identification processes, and strengthening organizational legitimacy (Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023). These examples illustrate efforts to inspire positive change among the audiences and reinforce their roles as leaders in *Driving Sustainable Innovation*.

Nevertheless, the strategies employed by these companies also exhibit some variation. Toyota and Volvo assert their positions as leading car manufacturers, aiming to establish credibility and organizational legitimacy by positioning themselves as leaders to follow, engaging audiences who value strong leadership (Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023). In contrast, Audi leverages external associations and leadership to underscore its contribution to innovative solutions, thereby enhancing its own legitimacy (Dessart & Standeart, 2023). Furthermore, Kia emphasizes its ambitions to inspire and enable more people to join an electric and sustainable lifestyle. Moreover, by addressing audiences through direct appeals in their communication, Kia's story becomes more relatable. In addition, by including external characters or personal appeals in their stories, Toyota, Audi and Kia strike a balance between realism and aspiration, enhancing organizational legitimacy through identification and authenticity (Dessart &

Standearth, 2023; Lane, 2023). These approaches by Toyota, Volvo, Kia, and Audi highlight the various ways organizations can use sustainability communication to shape their stories and strengthen organizational legitimacy.

## **6.2 Partnership for Sustainable Progress**

This story theme consists of the proactive measures taken by automotive companies to address environmental challenges by collaborating with stakeholders (Dessart & Standearth, 2023). Specifically, we illustrate in what way automotive companies implement their sustainability initiatives by strategically crafting stories that emphasize the central role of *collective* actions in reducing emissions and combating climate change (Dessart & Standearth, 2023; Lane, 2023). In this section we will present twelve examples that best illustrate the theme *Partnership for Sustainable Progress*. We conclude this section by explaining how this story theme contributes to organizational legitimacy.

In an effort to promote their sustainability initiatives in their external communication, Toyota highlights the importance of working collaboratively to achieve sustainability and mitigate negative impact on the environment:

In recent years, biodiversity has become increasingly important at Toyota. We are involved in many small, local projects that together can make a big, positive difference. We promote integration throughout Toyota and among our business partners in all regions of the world, thereby creating 'green corridors' of collaborations worldwide (Toyota, 2024b).

The example above highlights Toyota's commitment to collaboration across regions to advance sustainability initiatives. Initially, Toyota acknowledges the importance of biodiversity, setting the stage for a story plot centered on environmental stewardship. This recognition aligns with the story principle of presenting a clear problem or challenge to engage the audience effectively. Furthermore, Toyota portrays itself as the protagonist or hero by emphasizing its participation in numerous "small, local projects" aimed at making a "big, positive difference". This emphasis on projects at various levels also highlight Toyotas journey aiming to transform ecosystems and society around sustainability values. Additionally, Toyota's global integration efforts reinforce its role as a hero striving to address biodiversity and climate change challenges. The metaphorical use of "green corridors"

underscores Toyota's strategic approach to *green* collective actions in achieving sustainability objectives. Overall, the example effectively showcases how Toyota positions itself as a leader in driving collective action for biodiversity conservation, aligning with the story theme of *Partnership for Sustainable Progress*.

In a similar vein, Volvo underscores that a key factor in driving sustainable change is through partnerships. Specifically, on their website, Volvo notes:

In 2019, the SBTi (Science Based Targets initiative) approved our ambitious climate plan. According to the SBTi, our emission reduction targets are in line with the goals of the Paris Agreement. It's about limiting global warming to below 2°C compared to pre-industrial levels. We are committed to reducing our impact on the planet, and we know it will require a global effort. Therefore, it is important to collaborate with other like-minded companies, suppliers, and organizations to drive our own sustainability efforts and push for changes within our industry (Volvo, 2024b).

In the example provided, several story elements integrate, indicating the story theme of *Partnership for Sustainable Progress*. Firstly, Volvo emerges as a central character in their sustainability story, positioning the organization as the protagonist committed to mitigating its "impact on the planet". Secondly, a clear plot unfolds as Volvo delineates its climate plan and emission reduction targets, offering a structured and familiar framework that guides audience engagement and expectations. This coherent structure, marked by a clear beginning, middle, and end, enhances audience comprehension and satisfaction. Thirdly, Volvo aligns itself with established credibility by referencing collaboration with initiatives like the Science Based Targets initiative and the Paris Agreement. Volvo's emphasis on partnering with other "like-minded companies" serves to showcase its sustainable values and render the story more relatable. By emphasizing these collaborations, Volvo illustrates how collective efforts can foster tangible outcomes and positive changes. Ultimately, the example above underscores Volvo's dedication to create a better and sustainable future through collaborative partnerships.

Additionally, Kia emphasizes the importance of collaboration in their sustainability communication. This sentiment is echoed on their website where Kia articulates:

We want to promote and protect nature, both through collaborations with sustainability organizations and through the transition to sustainable mobility. As part of that effort, we have a long-term partnership with Håll

Sverige Rent [Keep Sweden Clean]. We highlight their work and engage in connection with World Oceans Day and the initiative Håll Sverige Rent!, to reduce littering of nature (Kia, 2024a).

In the example provided above, Kia portrays the organization itself as a central character, positioning it as the protagonist or hero committed to "promoting and protecting nature" through "sustainable mobility" initiatives and "collaborations with sustainability organizations". Moreover, the example illustrates the presence of a clear plot by outlining Kia's actions and initiatives in promoting sustainable practices and engaging with environmental causes, providing a structured story framework that guides audience expectations and engagement. This plot progression follows a familiar story structure, with Kia's commitment to sustainability serving as the driving force behind the story. Additionally, by referencing collaborations with sustainability organizations and initiatives such as "World Oceans Day", Kia tries to align itself with the already established credibility of these entities in the field of sustainability. By emphasizing the company's "long-term partnership" with Håll Sverige Rent to reduce littering of nature, Kia establishes credibility through showing consistency in their collaborative efforts towards environmental sustainability. The example above from Kia includes several key story elements such as character portrayal, plot development, and alignment with external initiatives, thereby indicating the story theme of *Partnership for Sustainable Progress*.

On their website, Audi illustrates its commitment to a sustainable future by showcasing collaborative efforts with the Swedish battery company Northvolt:

We collaborate, among others, with Swedish Northvolt to ensure a good and reliable battery supply - but we also want to take responsibility for the batteries when they start to wear out in the car. Therefore, several development projects are underway where the batteries are used in a so-called 2nd Life, where they can still be very useful. One of the applications is battery storage that provides extra capacity during temporary power peaks. A cycle for the future. We have met Peter Carlsson, the entrepreneur behind Europe's largest battery factory, which will lead the world into a new electric era (Audi, 2024b).

The above example from Audi exemplifies several key elements of storytelling. Firstly, it portrays Audi as a central character, positioned as the hero committed to sustainable initiatives such as battery recycling and repurposing. Nonetheless, Audi is not the sole hero in this example, as it is stated that external entities such as "Swedish Northvolt" and



entrepreneur "Peter Carlsson" will "lead the world into a new electric era". Therefore, this alignment with an external and already established and sustainable company showcases Audi's present values and future aspirations in sustainability. Secondly, the example outlines a clear plot by describing Audi's actions and initiatives in developing "2nd life" applications for batteries, providing a structured story framework that guides audience engagement. Audi's sustainability dedication drives the storyline, forming a circular story similar to the recycling process, reinforcing the commitment to sustainability. Thus, by actively engaging in partnerships and collaborations aimed at shaping a more environmentally sustainable world, the example clearly indicates the story theme of *Partnership for Sustainable Progress*.

In their external communication efforts to promote sustainability initiatives, Toyota emphasizes their involvement in numerous projects and collaborations with partners:

As a global provider of mobility, Toyota feels a great social responsibility. Therefore, we have long been driving projects to support and develop society, both globally and nationally. The projects range from protecting forests to supporting youth activities. Toyota is also involved in various international initiatives, including the WBCSD — The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (Toyota, 2024a).

As highlighted in the example above, Toyota is portrayed as a central character, positioned as a responsible protagonist or hero committed to "driving projects to support and develop society", both on global and national levels. This characterization aligns with the archetype of the hero, emphasizing Toyota's social responsibility and its proactive efforts to contribute positively to the world. Secondly, the example outlines a clear plot by describing Toyota's diverse range of projects. In particular, Toyota's commitment to projects ranging from "protecting forests" to "supporting youth activities", as well as its involvement in international initiatives like the "WBCSD", highlights its dedication to sustainability across different levels of society. This holistic approach to sustainability effectively conveys a compelling story about the company's stance on environmental sustainability and underscores Toyota's sustainability journey: aiming to transform ecosystems and society around sustainability values. By referencing collaborations with organizations like the WBCSD, Toyota aligns itself with established entities in the field of sustainability. Overall, the example effectively communicates Toyota's sustainability values, actions, and aspirations, indicating the story theme of *Partnership for Sustainable Progress*.

On their website, Volvo highlights the importance of collaborations in achieving sustainability and driving real change

We are committed to reducing our impact on the planet, and we know it requires a global effort. Collaborating with companies and organizations is crucial to driving industry change and results (Volvo, 2024b).

The example from Volvo exemplifies the organization's commitment to sustainability through collaboration, highlighting several key story elements. Volvo positions itself as a central character dedicated to "reducing [its] impact on the planet", portraying the company as a protagonist committed to environmental stewardship. Notably, Volvo emphasizes the importance of "collaborating with companies and organizations" to achieve sustainability goals, thereby underscoring the role of partnerships in driving industry change. This acknowledgment of the global effort required to address environmental challenges reflects a broader context, enhancing the story's credibility by resonating with real-life concerns and experiences. Therefore, it is clear that Volvo has an ambition to reposition toward sustainability values. However, without clear communication about specific partners and the actions taken through collaboration, Volvo risks undermining trust and credibility in their sustainability initiatives. This lack of transparency could perhaps hinder their ability to inspire meaningful change and garner support from stakeholders. Overall, because collaboration is highlighted as a central means of achieving sustainability and reducing impact on the planet, the example indicates the story theme of *Partnership for Sustainable Progress*.

In a similar vein, Kia emphasizes how they are to achieve sustainability by collaborating and partnering with various stakeholders:

We support the UN's global sustainability goals and are aware that we, along with the rest of the automotive industry, have a key role in transitioning to a fossil-free vehicle fleet. Conducting sustainable business involves minimizing our negative impact on the environment. Kia Sweden strives to operate responsibly and sustainably in Sweden, considering social, environmental, and economic factors in the company's operations at all levels. We aim to follow the global goals for sustainable development agreed upon by the majority of the world's countries (Kia, 2022).

In the example above, Kia positions itself as a central character aligned with the UN's global sustainability goals, portraying the company as a hero dedicated to driving change within the automotive industry. Particularly, the acknowledgment of Kia's and "the rest of the automotive industry's" central role in the transition towards more sustainable practices shows a recognition of the collective responsibility shared by all stakeholders within the industry. In addition, Kia's mention of "conducting sustainable business" and "minimizing" negative environmental impact demonstrates a clear plot, in which the company is portrayed as the protagonist of the story. This plot progression outlines Kia's actions and initiatives in operating "responsibly and sustainably in Sweden", providing a structured story framework that guides audience engagement and expectation. Furthermore, by mentioning its commitment to follow "global goals" for sustainable development, as "agreed upon by the majority of the world's countries", Kia emphasizes the need for collaboration in achieving sustainability objectives. This acknowledgment adds credibility to Kia's sustainability story, connecting with real-world concerns and experiences. Overall, the example underscores the importance of partnerships and collaborations in driving sustainable change, thus indicating the story theme of *Partnership for Sustainable Progress*.

On their website, Audi highlights their proactive approach to addressing environmental issues by partnering with two external companies:

The main advantage of charging stations is, of course, that they can be built or taken down much faster than traditional gas stations and with less impact on the environment and surroundings. Just take the example of how Audi Sweden, in collaboration with Skistar and Jämtkraft over the past two years, has installed mobile fast chargers for holiday travelers on their way up to the mountains (Audi, 2024a).

As demonstrated in the example above, Audi is depicted as a central character aligning itself with sustainability goals through collaborations with outdoor company Skistar and energy company Jämtkraft. Specifically, by stating that their collaborations have proceeded "over the past two years" and highlighting their accomplishment of "installing mobile fast chargers" as a solution to the environmental impact of traditional gas stations, Audi underscores clear actions taken in the plot. In addition, this story plot also showcases Audi's sustainability journey, where they aim to transform society and ecosystems around sustainability values. By emphasizing the significance of collaboration in achieving sustainability objectives, Audi is portrayed as the protagonist in the story taking proactive steps towards an environmentally

friendly society. Furthermore, by offering a real-life context and a familiar story structure, Audi makes the story more accessible to stakeholders, thereby enhancing audience engagement. Overall, Audi communicates its commitment to sustainability and underscores the significance of collaboration in advancing environmental initiatives, indicating the story theme of *Partnership for Sustainable Progress*.

In a similar vein, Toyota underscores its commitment to achieving sustainable and environmentally friendly practices through collaborations aimed at shaping a sustainable future:

Toyota Motor Europe is today launching a completely new innovation platform, Toyota Open Labs. A unique initiative that brings together start-up companies with Toyota's various business units within sustainable social change. The purpose is to scale up innovations and lead the market into the next phase of mobility (Toyota, 2023).

The example from Toyota exemplifies the organization's initiative in driving sustainable social change through collaboration with start-up companies via the "Toyota Open Labs" platform. By showcasing itself as a central character dedicated to fostering innovation and leading the market into the next phase of mobility, Toyota aligns itself with the archetype of the hero. In particular, words like "unique initiative", "brings together", and "leads the market" underscore Toyota's proactive role in addressing societal and environmental challenges. By bringing together start-ups and its own business units, Toyota creates a story that emphasizes the importance of partnerships in achieving sustainable objectives, aligning with the strategic purpose of transforming ecosystems or society around sustainability values. This collaboration serves as a plot progression in Toyota's sustainability story, outlining concrete actions taken to drive positive change. Overall, the example underscores the significance of collaboration and innovation in advancing sustainability goals, thus pointing to the theme of *Partnership for Sustainable Progress*.

On their website, Volvo highlights their collaboration with external logistics partners as a pivotal step towards a sustainable future:

The initiative is developed in collaboration with our logistics partners Maersk, Kuehne+Nagel, and DB Schenker. These logistics service providers have, from June 1, 2023, switched to using renewable fuel equivalent to the amount of energy required for all container shipping done for Volvo Cars (Volvo, 2023a).

The example from Volvo effectively showcases the organization's strategic approach to sustainability through collaboration with "logistics partners Maersk, Kuehne+Nagel, and DB Schenker". By positioning Volvo as the central driver of sustainable change, the company aligns itself with the hero archetype. This alignment is evident in Volvo's proactive efforts to promote environmental responsibility within its supply chain. The collaboration with logistics partners to transition to renewable fuel underscores Volvo's dedication to addressing environmental challenges and emphasizes the importance of partnerships in achieving sustainability objectives. These collaborative endeavors serve as a progression in Volvo's sustainability story, illustrating concrete steps taken to drive positive change. Volvo's clear announcement of transitioning to "renewable fuel" starting "June 1, 2023", provides tangible evidence of their sustainability commitment. This action not only strengthens their credibility but also sets a transparent and accountable example for the industry. Although the example can be interpreted as organizational accountability, the main story theme is about how collaborations and partnerships contribute to a sustainable future, thus indicating the story theme of *Partnership for Sustainable Progress*.

In a press release, Kia Vice President of Marketing & Product Kia Europe, Sjoerd Knipping, states:

‘Sustainability is at the heart of our movement to inspire new mobility,’ says Sjoerd Knipping, Vice President of Marketing & Product Kia Europe. ‘We share this vision with young brands like Odyssey Innovation, Waterhaul, Polyola, and Sieve by creating responsible experiences that enrich our customers' lifestyles and invite positive change’ (Kia, 2023a).

The example from Kia effectively demonstrates how the organization strategically employs storytelling to convey its commitment to sustainability and align its image with societal values. By featuring "Sjoerd Knipping, Vice President of Marketing & Product Kia Europe" as the spokesperson, Kia establishes a relatable character for the audience to connect with, embodying the hero archetype within the sustainability movement. On the other hand, by collaborating with these emerging "young brands like Odyssey Innovation, Waterhaul,

Polyola, and Sieve", Kia demonstrates a willingness to explore unconventional avenues and foster a sense of adventure in its sustainability journey. Furthermore, Knipping's statement positions sustainability as the core value driving Kia's endeavors, emphasizing the importance of inspiring "new mobility" while collaborating with innovative brands. These collaborations serve as a plot progression in Kia's sustainability story, showcasing concrete actions taken to promote responsible experiences and positive change. By weaving together elements of character, plot, and real-life context, Kia constructs a compelling story that resonates with its audience, which indicates the theme of *Partnership for Sustainable Progress*.

In its sustainability report, Audi highlights its collaborations and emphasizes the company's commitment to sustainability:

Through the partnership with the Alpine National Team, the brand contributes to the federation's sustainability work through national team cars that can be fueled with HVO100 alternatives or are entirely electric (Volkswagen Group, 2022)

The example from Audi showcases several storytelling elements aimed at aligning with societal values and emphasizing dedication to sustainability. Firstly, Audi portrays itself as a central driver of sustainable change by partnering with the "Alpine National Team" and offering "national team cars that can be fueled with HVO100 alternatives or are entirely electric". Through collaboration with the esteemed Alpine National Team (ANT), there is a mutual exchange of credibility. On one hand, Audi seeks to leverage ANT's existing credibility to enhance its own reputation. On the other hand, by supplying ANT with sustainable cars, Audi also lends its credibility in sustainable solutions to ANT, enabling them to emerge as not only leaders but also sustainable leaders. The collaboration thus makes Audi assume the role of the protagonist in the sustainability story. Additionally, by highlighting high-profile partnerships in their storytelling, Audi aims to connect with audiences who resonate not only with nature-friendly and sustainable values but also with leadership values. By weaving together character, plot, and real-life context, Audi crafts a compelling story that resonates with its audience, indicating the theme of *Partnership for Sustainable Progress*.

The examples provided above illustrate how companies strategically communicate the story theme of *Partnership for Sustainable Progress*. Automotive companies such as Toyota, Volvo, Kia, and Audi craft compelling stories that not only showcase their dedication to sustainability but also highlight the central role of strategic collaborations in achieving an environmentally sustainable future within the industry (Dessart & Standeart, 2023). Commonalities across these examples include collaborating with like-minded companies, forming long-term partnerships, and participating in international and national initiatives. Through clear plots, relatable characters, and actionable resolutions, these companies effectively engage stakeholders in their sustainability efforts (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023). As a result, Toyota, Volvo, Kia, and Audi frame their actions and behaviors to align with societal expectations and norms, thus enhancing their legitimacy (Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023).

Nonetheless, there are also some differences in how they strategically implement storytelling to establish and strengthen organizational legitimacy. For instance, Toyota and Kia more often than not emphasize partnerships that illustrate values related to nature, such as Kia collaborating with Håll Sverige Rent to mitigate littering and Toyota participating in projects aimed at protecting forests. In contrast, Volvo and Audi tend to collaborate with larger corporations like logistics partners DB Schenker or energy company Northvolt and Alpine National Teams to enhance their credibility (Dessart & Standeart, 2013; Lane, 2023). This suggests that Volvo and Audi lean towards a top-down approach to collaborations in their storytelling, targeting stakeholders who identify more closely with these major corporations. On the other hand, Kia and Toyota appear to take a bottom-up approach, actively engaging with smaller or emerging organizations in their storytelling, aligning themselves with the "little person" or grassroots stakeholders.

These collaborations not only contribute to the company's legitimacy by drawing audiences in through identification processes but also enhance the authenticity of the story by including characters that are recognizable to their stakeholders (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Lane, 2023). The authenticity of the story is heightened as audiences envision the tangible impact and results that may occur in the real world due to this collective action (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Lane, 2023). By sharing details of their collaborative efforts, including goals, outcomes, and challenges, the companies build trust with stakeholders and reinforce their

legitimacy as credible sources of information regarding their sustainability initiatives (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Lane, 2023). In essence, these collaborations enhance automotive companies' legitimacy by showcasing their proactive approach and leveraging external expertise in sustainability initiatives. Through strategic storytelling and partnerships, Toyota, Volvo, Kia, and Audi strengthen their legitimacy as sustainability leaders, aligning with societal values and emphasizing environmental responsibility (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023).

### **6.3 Organizational Accountability**

This story theme encompasses action taken by automotive companies to address their environmental footprint (Dessart & Standeart, 2023). Specifically, we delve into the ways these companies implement their sustainability initiatives by strategically crafting stories that involve transparently reporting their commitment to reduce emissions and outlining their plans to invest in sustainable and renewable energy to achieve sustainability (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Lane, 2023). In this section, we will present eight examples that best illustrate the story theme of *Organizational Accountability*. We will conclude this section by discussing how this story theme contributes to organizational legitimacy.

On their website, Toyota transparently describes their sustainable efforts through storytelling:

Long before legislation regulated the handling of chemical substances, we made changes to reduce our environmental footprint. We have reduced or completely eliminated the use of heavy metals such as lead, cadmium, and mercury, which can cause long-term damage to the environment if not handled correctly. We use lead-free parts and rust protection treatment as well as mercury-free lighting and controls. We also avoid using solvents and paints that may contain harmful substances (Toyota, 2024b).

As demonstrated in the example above, several key elements indicate the story theme of *Organizational Accountability*. Firstly, the organization itself is portrayed as a central character in their sustainability storytelling. Particularly, words like "reduced", "completely eliminated", and "avoid using" portray Toyota as a responsible hero or protagonist striving to make positive changes for the environment. Secondly, the example illustrates the presence of a clear plot by transparently reporting concrete actions of eliminating "lead, cadmium, and mercury". As such, Toyota showcases a repositioning towards sustainability values and thus



aligns itself with the story principle of presenting a clear problem or challenge to engage the audience effectively. Toyota's proactive approach to environmental responsibility is evident in its early adoption of sustainable practices, "long before legislation" mandates were in place. This early initiative not only demonstrates Toyota's dedication to sustainability but also underscores its credibility as a leader in environmental stewardship. Finally, by illustrating its action before regulatory requirements were enforced, Toyota attempts to establish itself as a credible and trustworthy pioneer in the industry. This plot progression also follows a familiar structure, characterized by a clear beginning, middle, and end. The language used is both informational and descriptive, as well as vivid and engaging. Overall, the example from Toyota effectively demonstrates how organizations can use strategic storytelling to convey their sustainability initiatives and showcase their accountability to stakeholders.

In a similar vein, Volvo takes accountability for its role in climate change and describes its plan for achieving a sustainable future:

Climate change is a fact. We are a mobility provider, and we realize that we are part of the problem. We have a responsibility to act. Our goal is to achieve zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2040. How? By reducing emissions throughout the value chain (Volvo, 2024b).

The example from Volvo exemplifies several ways in which the company acknowledges its role as a contributor to climate change. Initially, by stating "climate change is a fact", Volvo confronts the reality of environmental challenges and establishes a clear plot. This upfront statement attracts attention and signals to stakeholders that the company is aware of the problem and addresses it up front, thus acknowledging stakeholders' environmental concerns. This initial statement aligns with the storytelling principle of presenting a clear problem or challenge to engage the audience effectively. Secondly, Volvo positions itself as a *responsible* protagonist by acknowledging its own contribution to climate change with the statement, "we realize that we are part of the problem". Additionally, Volvo's insertion of a rhetorical question (the "How?") further engages audiences' interest. Overall, Volvo's example effectively demonstrates how organizations can use strategic storytelling to convey their sustainability initiatives and showcase their accountability to stakeholders. By aligning with effective storytelling principles, Volvo communicates its environmental efforts in a clear,

engaging, and almost vulnerable manner, thus indicating the story theme of *Organizational Accountability*.

On their website, Kia implements sustainability storytelling in their external communication by emphasizing its emissions reduction targets:

Kia wants to take responsibility for the entire production chain and from 2040, we will therefore use 100% renewable electricity in all our production. [...] We want to be a leader in the transition to sustainable energy and inspire others to join us on the journey (Kia, 2024a).

The example from Kia includes several story elements that indicate the story theme of *Organizational Accountability*. Firstly, Kia's commitment to using "100% renewable electricity" in production by 2040 serves as a clear plot, marking a significant shift towards sustainability values. This proactive stance not only establishes Kia as a responsible protagonist but also aligns with the storytelling principle of presenting a clear problem or challenge to engage the audience effectively. Secondly, Kia's aspiration to be "a leader in the transition to sustainable energy and inspire others" showcases Kia as a visionary leader striving to engage audiences through identifying with Kia's vision. Furthermore, Kia not only sets ambitious goals for itself but also holds itself accountable for driving positive change within its industry. Through this strategic vision, Kia aims to highlight its journey and its aim of repositioning towards sustainability values, thus appealing to audiences' desire to be part of a larger movement. Overall, Kia's example underscores how organizations can use storytelling to convey their sustainability initiatives, inspire action, and showcase their accountability to stakeholders.

In their sustainability report, Audi strategically implements storytelling to communicate about their sustainability efforts over the past year:

The past year with lifted restrictions, which meant a return to offices and workplaces, has led to increased travel for us at VGS. This has resulted in increased emissions through flights and a greater number of car trips, as well as more employees using the office's resource and energy consumption. Despite this, it is extremely positive that our emissions from business trips by car have decreased compared to the previous year. The biggest contributing factor to the decrease is that we have been able to continue offering our employees the option of electric cars instead of fossil-fueled vehicles as company cars. By being able to offer our employees to choose electric cars,

as well as various forms of hybrid cars, we have managed to reduce our emissions from our company cars by 31%, from 67 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> to 46 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> (Volkswagen Group, 2022).

The excerpt from Audi's sustainability report indicates the story theme of Organizational Accountability through transparent reporting of emissions. By addressing challenges such as "increased travel" and "increased emissions through flights", Audi sets the stage for a story that acknowledges responsibility. Audi's story unfolds with a clear plot, outlining challenges faced and actions taken to address them. This aligns with the storytelling principle of presenting a clear problem and showcasing efforts to address it, fostering audience engagement. However, the example provided could be interpreted as the company shifting blame onto external circumstances, such as past restrictions that have now been lifted. Despite this, Audi's emphasis on providing "electric cars instead of fossil-fuel vehicles" to employees illustrates the company as a *responsible* hero that has managed to reduce company emissions "from 67 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> to 46 tons of CO<sub>2</sub>". As such, the example also showcases Audi's journey towards sustainability and their aim to reposition towards sustainability values. Through clear plots, the insertion of the company as a responsible character, and transparent storytelling, Audi aims to inspire action and drive positive change towards sustainability. Overall, Audi's example demonstrates how strategic storytelling can effectively engage audiences in sustainability initiatives, thus indicating the story theme of *Organizational Accountability*.

Another method for organizations to portray themselves as responsible protagonists is by demonstrating their willingness to embrace industry scrutiny, as exemplified by Toyota on their website:

At Toyota, we welcome the change to WLTP as it provides our customers with a more accurate basis for calculating fuel consumption and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. As a leader in clean mobility, we have been researching for decades how vehicles can be made more environmentally friendly and have produced technical solutions such as electric hybrid – which reduces greenhouse gas emissions and carbon dioxide emissions (Toyota, 2024b).

The above example from Toyota exemplifies several key elements of storytelling. Firstly, Toyota's proactive response to the change in Worldwide Harmonised Light Vehicles Test Procedure (WLTP) regulations serves as a clear plot, emphasizing the company's

commitment to transparency and environmental responsibility. Toyota's statement of "welcoming the change" not only reflects confidence in their products but also enhances the perception of the company as trustworthy, particularly in terms of sustainability. By positioning itself as a *responsible* protagonist or hero in the story of "clean mobility", Toyota underscores its commitment to environmental responsibility and reinforces its role as a leader in sustainable transportation. Secondly, the example from Toyota also presents a clear plot, highlighting the company's extensive research spanning decades, "we have been researching for decades", aimed at developing environmentally friendly solutions. This plot effectively outlines the challenges faced in achieving sustainability goals, engaging audiences by presenting a clear problem and the efforts undertaken to address it. In addition, this example also showcases Toyota's sustainability journey and the company's aim to highlight its existing sustainability values. Overall, the example clearly indicates the story theme of *Organizational Accountability*.

Volvo highlights several ways they aim to take responsibility for the environment, one of which is illustrated on their website:

We have presented our ambition to be climate-neutral in our entire operation by 2040, in line with the goals of the Paris Agreement. In the meantime, we strive to reduce our carbon dioxide emissions per vehicle by 40 percent between 2018 and 2025, address emissions within our operations and supply chain, as well as exhaust emissions (Volvo, 2024a).

In the example demonstrated above, there are several story elements that indicate the story theme of *Organizational Accountability*. Initially, Volvo presents a clear plot by outlining its ambition to achieve climate neutrality in its "entire operation by 2040, in line with the goals of the Paris Agreement". This statement positions Volvo within a broader context where its vision aligns with wider societal goals, showcasing the company's ambition to raise audience expectations and encourage others to identify with Volvo's mission towards sustainability. By addressing that they will "reduce [its] carbon dioxide emissions per vehicle by 40 percent", Volvo acknowledges the challenges it faces and demonstrates accountability, positioning itself as a responsible protagonist in the story of climate action. The use of terms like "in the meantime" and "we strive to" suggests that there is a lack of specific and tangible evidence, which could moderate the depiction of Volvo as an actively responsible protagonist. However, the example above underscores Volvo's sustainability journey and their aim to

transition towards sustainability values. Overall, Volvo's approach to sustainability storytelling effectively conveys its journey, goals, and commitment to addressing climate change.

In a press release, Kia strategically features one of their brand ambassadors, surfer Tim Latte, to emphasize the company's commitment to reducing its environmental footprint:

'Everyone knows the impact humans have on our climate [...] That's why I'm very grateful for the opportunity to drive an electric car to the waves. It feels good for the conscience. I think this car has what it takes for the modern adventurer', says Tim Latte. Kia centrally wants to inspire a more sustainable development through social engagement and lifestyles that also care for the environment. 'Tim's drive, creativity, and forward-thinking go hand in hand with Kia's vision *Movement that inspires*,' says Jonas Nilsson, Marketing Manager at Kia Sweden (Kia, 2024b).

In the example above, Kia begins with the statement "Everyone knows the impact humans have on our climate", acknowledging the widespread awareness of environmental challenges and establishing a clear plot. This phrase fosters a shared understanding among the audience. However, by attributing responsibility for climate change to "humans" in general, Kia indirectly shifts some environmental accountability away from itself. Furthermore, the example introduces two key characters: Tim Latte, a Kia ambassador, and Jonas Nilsson from Kia's management. By incorporating these real-life figures, Kia aims to portray itself as a responsible and trustworthy organization offering sustainable solutions to a broad audience. While collaboration is present in the example, the content primarily emphasizes taking responsibility for the environment by driving an environmentally friendly car that "feels good for the conscience". Furthermore, Kia's emphasis on the company's desire to "inspire a more sustainable development through social engagement and lifestyles that also care for the environment" demonstrates the company's proactive efforts to take accountability and responsibility for the environment through ambassadorship. By promoting responsible practices, the example provided indicates the story theme *Organizational Accountability*.

In their sustainability report, Audi conveys that taking responsibility for their emissions is more complex than one might think, stating that:

The biggest source of our emissions falls under our indirect emissions, i.e., Scope 3 according to the GHG protocol, namely the cars we sell to customers. It is a complex emission factor because it is directly linked to our business and growth. Electrification and the transition to electric drive are powerful forces for drastically reducing this part of emissions, and the Volkswagen Group has an aggressive strategy to launch and sell electric cars (Volkswagen Group, 2022).

In the excerpt from Audi's sustainability report, several elements of storytelling are evident. Firstly, Audi acknowledges that "the biggest source of [its] emissions" originates from the cars they sell to customers, establishing a clear story plot. The transparency is noteworthy, as Audi openly admits its contribution to global emissions. However, by attributing the majority of emissions to "indirect emissions" from customer-owned cars, Audi shifts some responsibility onto the car owners. Nevertheless, Audi's acknowledgment that this is a "complex emission factor" directly linked to the company's "business and growth" demonstrates responsibility and accountability. In particular, the statement reflects Audi's understanding of the intricate and often paradoxical realities of the automotive industry. Through their reference to the Volkswagen Group's "aggressive strategy" for electrification, Audi portrays itself as a *responsible* hero in driving sustainability initiatives. Furthermore, by outlining this strategy "to launch and sell electric cars", Audi takes proactive steps towards mitigating its environmental impact and fulfilling its commitment to reduce emissions stemming from its products. Overall, the example above showcases how Audi effectively implements storytelling to explain complex phenomena in a way that resonates with and engages their audiences. Hence, the example clearly indicates the story theme of *Organizational Accountability*.

The examples provided above illustrate how companies strategically communicate the story theme of *Organizational Accountability*. Through transparency and a willingness to take responsibility for their actions in pursuit of a sustainable future, automotive companies like Toyota, Volvo, Kia, and Audi craft compelling stories that effectively engage and resonate with their audience (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023). Furthermore, all examples include clear plots, relatable characters, and actionable resolutions (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023). Across these examples, a common thread emerges in their approach to storytelling: vulnerability. Each company openly acknowledges its role in contributing to the problem, demonstrating a willingness to admit fault and take responsibility. By doing so, they establish credibility and trust with their audience (Dessart &

Standearth, 2023; Lane, 2023). Moreover, they emphasize their proactive efforts to address the issues at hand, highlighting their commitment to finding solutions and driving positive change. This combination of vulnerability and action not only showcases their dedication to sustainability but also resonates with audiences by demonstrating authenticity and accountability for their actions (Dessart & Standearth, 2023; Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023).

The storytelling structure used by these automotive companies follows a linear progression. These rhetorical principles serve as predictable structural features, guiding the audience as the storyline unfolds (Kent, 2015). For example, when Toyota mentions "long before legislation" or when Volvo states that "climate change is a fact", they adhere to familiar story structures with a clear beginning, middle, and end, while also acknowledging stakeholders' values about a subject. This structured approach is essential for stories to resonate with audiences (Lane, 2023).

However, there are some differences in how these companies strategically implement storytelling to establish organizational legitimacy through accountability. While Kia and Toyota employ storytelling techniques that evoke personal connection and emotional engagement, such as including external characters like surfer Tim Latte or illustrating extensive experience in environmental research, Volvo and Audi focus more on presenting facts and progress reports. Although all companies outline clear goals and actions taken to address environmental challenges, Volvo and Audi often frame their sustainability efforts within a logical and factual story structure. On the other hand, Toyota and Kia often exhibit optimism and openness in taking responsibility and addressing the transition towards more environmental solutions. Despite the differences in emotional tone, Toyota, Volvo, Kia, and Audi all frame their actions and behaviors to align with societal expectations and norms. These approaches effectively communicate the companies' commitment to environmental responsibility and contribute to their organizational legitimacy through accountability and transparency (Dessart & Standearth, 2023; Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023).

## **6.4 Call to Action**

This story theme encompasses actions taken by automotive companies to address their environmental footprint and calls for urgent action across industries (Dessart & Standearth,

2023). Specifically, we delve into the ways these companies advocate for proactive measures and leadership from both industries, political leaders and other stakeholders to work towards an environmentally sustainable future. In this section, we will present six examples that best illustrate the story theme of *Call to Action*. We will conclude this section by discussing how this story theme contributes to organizational legitimacy.

In a press release, Volvo Cars CEO Jim Rowan urges immediate action for a sustainable future:

‘What the world needs now, in this critical time, is leadership’, says Jim Rowan. ‘It is high time for industry and political leaders to be strong and resolute and deliver meaningful strategies and actions to combat climate change. We are committed to doing our part and encourage both our colleagues and political leaders around the world to do theirs’ (Volvo, 2023b).

The example above from Volvo includes several story elements that indicate the story theme *Call to Action*. Firstly, it emphasizes that "what the world needs now, in this critical time, is leadership", thus setting a clear plot that highlights the urgency of addressing climate change. Jim Rowan's call for "colleagues and political leaders around the world" to take action and encourage others to work towards an environmentally sustainable future portrays Volvo as a proactive protagonist or hero in the story. Furthermore, "we are committed to doing our part" underscores that Volvo leads by example while urging other stakeholders to join in collective efforts towards sustainability. By positioning themselves as advocates for change, Volvo not only establishes themselves as a credible character but also inspires the audience to align with their mission. This example demonstrates how Volvo strategically employs storytelling to convey their vision, mission, and values, thereby effectively engaging stakeholders.

In Kia's case, their call for action towards a sustainable future takes shape through framing nature as a leader:

Let's move towards a more sustainable future together. Nature, the world's greatest innovator. But what so greatly advanced us has also hurt our greatest sources of inspiration. Nature. It's time to step back. Step back and realize that we can do better. In small steps and in giant leaps. We must act, together. Let nature lead the way. To create a fully sustainable future (Kia, 2024a).



The example from Kia exemplifies several key elements of storytelling. Firstly, "Let's move towards a more sustainable future together" establishes a clear plot by urging collective effort towards a common goal. By encouraging collective action towards a more sustainable future, Kia's story aligns with the strategic goal of driving a shift towards new values and conveying a clear lesson learned. Moreover, Kia personifies nature as "the world's greatest innovator", framing nature as a central character in the story. By stating that "what so greatly advanced us has also hurt our greatest sources of inspiration", Kia attributes human-like qualities to nature. Additionally, by highlighting that it is time to "step back and realize that we can do better" Kia fosters a sense of self-awareness and reflexivity while underscoring the need for immediate change. As such, Kia engages the audience's empathy and emphasizes the importance of environmental conservation. Furthermore, Kia's use of inclusive language, such as "let's" and "together", fosters a sense of community and encourages audience participation in the sustainability journey. The example embodies the purpose of strategic sustainability storytelling, namely, transforming ecosystems or society around sustainability values. Overall, Kia's storytelling effectively captures the audience's interest and emotions while conveying a powerful persuasive message for environmental and collective stewardship, thus indicating the story theme of *Call to Action*.

On their website, Audi states that the issue of climate change calls for immediate actions:

The journey will not be easy, everyone agrees on that. The green transition places tough demands on everyone involved in the mobility industry, and far beyond that. How we produce energy, how raw materials are extracted and used, and how infrastructure is developed and expanded — these are just a few of the key issues that must be addressed. Urgently. (Audi, 2024a).

The example from Audi exemplifies several key elements of storytelling. Firstly, Audi's mention of "The journey will not be easy" establishes a clear plot, indicating the presence of obstacles and challenges that need to be overcome. Moreover, by stating that "everyone agrees" that the journey will be a tough one, they include stakeholders across industries and create a sense of togetherness in their story. Audi's reference to the "green transition" and its demanding nature highlights the importance of action and underscores the urgency of addressing sustainability issues. This sense of urgency serves as a compelling setting,

creating a backdrop that emphasizes the critical nature of the situation. Additionally, Audi's acknowledgment of the multifaceted nature of sustainability challenges, including energy production, raw material usage, and infrastructure development, adds depth to the story by illustrating the complexity of the issues at hand. In particular, Audi is explicit in their immediate call for action, stating that these issues must be addressed "urgently". Furthermore, by addressing these challenges directly, Audi positions itself as a proactive hero in the story, committed to tackling sustainability issues head-on. Overall, Audi's use of storytelling elements effectively conveys the message of urgency and highlights the importance of collective action in addressing sustainability challenges, thus aligning with the theme of *Call to Action*.

In a press release, Volvo's Chief Operating Officer and Vice President urges leaders around the world to act for a sustainable future:

‘COP28 is a historic commitment to climate action’, says Javier Varela, Chief Operating Officer and Vice President of Volvo Cars. ‘The world must quickly come together and take action to avoid the worst effects of climate change. We are committed to doing our part, and we urge business leaders and political leaders around the world to do the same’ (Volvo, 2023c).

In the example provided above, there are several story elements that indicate the story theme of *Call to Action*. Firstly, Javier Varela's statement, "COP28 is a historic commitment to climate action", serves as a clear story plot, emphasizing the urgency and significance of the global climate crisis. This declaration not only establishes the context but also highlights Volvo's active role in tackling climate change. When stating that "The world must quickly come together and take action to avoid the worst effects of climate change", Volvo positioned itself as a leader, urging collective action from both business and political leaders. By portraying Volvo as a proactive and responsible company, the organization becomes a relatable character that the audience can identify with. Furthermore, by stating that "we are committed to doing our part", Varela underscores the organization's effort to reposition towards sustainability values. Overall, this example integrates clear plot development and character engagement while showcasing Volvo's dedication to sustainability, inspiring collective action in addressing the global climate crisis.

In a press release on Kia's website, Jesper Johansson, the chairman of the association of Gröna Mobilister (Green Mobilist), announces that Kia has been awarded the environmental award for being a "green role model":

‘Gröna Mobilister congratulates Kia and a few other brands on the award’, says the association's chairman, Jesper Johansson. ‘We hope that other car companies will be inspired by these green role models. Car manufacturing does not become sustainable just because it is made transparent, but it must be made transparent to have a chance to become sustainable’ (Kia, 2023b).

The example above presents descriptions of Kia by external figures outside the company. However, these statements are featured within a press release from Kia, thus becoming part of Kia's story. Initially, Jesper Johansson's statement positions Kia, along with "a few other brands", as inspirational figures, urging other automotive companies to follow Kia's lead in adopting sustainable practices. By congratulating Kia and emphasizing the importance of transparency in sustainability efforts, Johansson underscores the necessity for proactive measures within the industry. Specifically, by showcasing the phrase "we hope that other car companies will be inspired by these green role models", Kia clearly demonstrates its dedication to leading by example, aiming to stimulate change across the industry and drive the journey towards sustainability values. Moreover, Johansson's assertion that companies "must be made transparent to have a chance to become sustainable" underscores the imperative for collective action and industry-wide transformation. However, the inclusion of terms like "we hope" and "become" allows for the interpretation of the example as an aspiration rather than an *immediate* call to action. Nevertheless, the example effectively implements storytelling elements to encourage and inspire engagement while advocating for sustainable practices, thereby indicating the story theme of *Call to Action*.

On their website, Audi implements storytelling to communicate the urgency in transitioning towards sustainable practices:

The transformation awaiting the transport sector and all industries adjacent to it is more disruptive than when humanity transitioned from horse and carriage to motorized vehicles. Not everything will be ready at the same time — but all parameters must contribute to the common goal. That's how one could describe the era that awaits us. There are truly big questions waiting for solutions and gigantic challenges that must be tackled with determination and wisdom (Audi, 2024a)

The example above clearly indicates the story theme of *Call to Action* through various storytelling elements. Firstly, the comparison of the journey towards sustainable practices to the historical transition "from horse and carriage to motorized vehicles" establishes a clear plot, highlighting the significant challenges and obstacles ahead. This historical analogy emphasizes the urgency and magnitude of the transformation needed in the present era. Furthermore, by stating that "there are truly big questions waiting for solutions and gigantic challenges that must be tackled with determination and wisdom", Audi emerges as a visionary leader and protagonist navigating this era while also encouraging others to do the same. Audi's acknowledgment that "Not everything will be ready at the same time" demonstrates a realistic approach to the challenges of achieving sustainability across industries. Additionally, by highlighting that "all parameters must contribute to a common goal", Audi emphasizes the need for immediate and collective action, indicating that while immediate success may be difficult, everyone can contribute in some way. As such, Audi's story effectively conveys the imperative for proactive engagement with sustainability issues. Overall, the example combines clear plot development, character engagement, and real-life contexts to convey a compelling story, prompting others to take immediate actions towards a sustainable future.

The examples provided above from Volvo, Kia, and Audi all clearly demonstrate how automotive companies strategically communicate the story theme of *Call to Action*. It is important to note that Toyota did not have any examples aligning with this particular story theme. This finding will be discussed in the final chapter of this study. As shown in this section, automotive companies implement storytelling to communicate the urgency of transitioning towards sustainability practices. Through storytelling elements such as plots and characters that audiences can relate to, as well as actionable resolutions, automotive companies effectively engage stakeholders in their sustainability efforts (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023). Specifically, these companies often emphasize the importance of collective global action in driving the necessary change toward a sustainable future (Dessart & Standeart, 2023).

Volvo, Kia, and Audi all emphasize their commitment to sustainability, encouraging other leaders, organizations, and stakeholders to follow their lead. By showcasing their actions or

"walking the talk", these companies establish their organizational legitimacy through credible examples (Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023). Specifically, Volvo outlines their proactive measures in their stories, inspiring stakeholders to join their journey towards sustainability and engage them through identification processes (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023). Similarly, Kia advocates for stepping back and allowing nature to guide the way. By explicitly acknowledging nature's role in their storytelling, Kia not only showcases environmental stewardship but also deepens connections with stakeholders who prioritize ecological harmony through identification (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023). Additionally, Audi confronts the challenges of sustainability head-on, infusing the story with realism and authenticity (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Lane, 2023).

By reflecting the pressing reality of climate change, Volvo, Kia, and Audi are all portrayed as authentic in their sustainability storytelling (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Lane, 2023). Through the strategic implementation of storytelling in their call to action towards sustainability and environmentally friendly practices, Volvo, Kia, and Audi strengthen their legitimacy as sustainability leaders. They align with societal values and emphasize environmental responsibility, thereby reinforcing their position as influential entities in driving positive change (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023).

## 7. Discussion and Conclusion

---

*The aim of this study was to investigate the use of strategic sustainability storytelling in the Swedish automotive industry's external communication and how these stories contribute to organizational legitimacy. Specifically, we aimed to answer 1. In what way do automotive companies in Sweden implement sustainability storytelling in external communication to promote their sustainability initiatives? and 2. How does strategic sustainability storytelling contribute to organizational legitimacy? The findings indicate that these automotive companies primarily emphasize technological innovations in their sustainability storytelling. Additionally, the results indicated that these companies incorporate values that resonate with audiences and use real-life descriptions, enhancing authenticity and thereby contributing to organizational legitimacy. In the following and concluding chapter, we summarize, discuss and reflect upon these findings to answer the research questions. Through this, we aim to further emphasize the implications of strategic sustainability storytelling in organization's legitimacy-building efforts in public relations theory and practices.*

### **7.1 Discussion**

Public relations, a discipline within strategic communication, is essential in managing organizational trust, image, and reputation (Ilhen & Raknes, 2020; Martin-de Castro, 2021). Public relations in organizational practice involve actively seeking and understanding various stakeholder perspectives and expectations, while also staying true to the organization's identity and purpose (Page & Capizzo, 2024). Through this two-way communication organizations can foster mutual understanding and establish organizational legitimacy (Capizzo, 2022; Dong et al., 2023). With the increasing impact of climate crises and significant technological advancement, public relations practices must now stay attuned to a broader range of stakeholder concerns and needs. As such, public relations literature increasingly acknowledges the power of storytelling as a tool to effectively engage stakeholders and demonstrate commitment to environmental responsibility (Canel, 2023; Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023).

Across the story themes identified in the analysis, we noticed both similarities and distinctions. Notably, Toyota, Volvo, Kia, and Audi primarily employ storytelling to convey messages about technological progress, innovation, and electrical solutions to promote their sustainability initiatives. Through this story theme — *Driving Sustainable Innovation* — these companies portray themselves as innovative, forward-thinking, and morally driven heroes and leaders of environmental sustainability, thus aiming to strengthen their reputation as trustworthy entities. Whether it is Toyota's pioneering efforts in hybrid technology, Volvo's commitment to electrification, Kia's ambitious goals for renewable energy, or Audi's focus on emissions reduction and electric mobility, each automotive company underscores its dedication to sustainability by resonating with audiences who value technological innovation.

Automotive organizations primarily present technological innovations as the solution for mitigating their impact on climate change, and thus acknowledge the growing societal pressure for sustainable products, practices, and emissions reduction (Singh & Misra, 2021). These efforts foster emotional connections with stakeholders through optimistic pathways. The strategic implementation of transformational innovation by automotive companies, positioning themselves as leaders driving this change, demonstrates a clear focus on public relations in their external communication. By aligning their sustainable actions and behaviors with societal expectations, norms, and narratives, these companies show a clear recognition of stakeholders as primary value creators (Heide & Svingstedt, 2023).

Through comparison, it is evident that Volvo and Toyota seek to establish legitimacy by emphasizing their leading roles as car manufacturers, thus engaging audiences who value strong leadership (Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023). Conversely, Kia often communicates its ambitions to inspire others to join the movement towards electrification, positioning itself as a catalyst for change. Meanwhile, Audi takes a different approach by leveraging external associations to tap into the established legitimacy of these entities (Dessart & Standeart, 2023). By adhering to audience values, fostering identification processes, and demonstrating a commitment to sustainability, these companies showcase clear actions taken in their sustainability journey through the implementation of storytelling, thus contributing to organizational legitimacy (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Lane, 2023). Indeed, the prevalence of the story theme *Driving Sustainable Innovation* among automotive companies may stem from their strategic focus on addressing issues within a realistic capacity. Given that innovation in

car manufacturing is one of their primary purposes and business goals, it is natural for these companies to center their storytelling around this aspect of their operations. In doing so, they not only remain true to their identity as leaders in technological advancement but also align with societal expectations for sustainable solutions in an industry with significant environmental impacts.

The prevalence of the story theme *Driving Sustainable Innovation* could also be attributed to automotive companies' strategic efforts to align with values and norms resonating with stakeholders who continue to purchase cars despite the scientifically supported phenomenon of climate change (Alibašić, 2022; Lum, 2019; NASA, 2021; UNFCCC, 2015a). In most cases, people purchase cars out of necessity. However, when they choose "green" and more sustainable cars, they are making an effort to reduce their carbon footprint, even if they are not dedicated environmentalists. Furthermore, by emphasizing the transformative potential of technological innovations in fostering a better and more sustainable world, these companies further align with societal imaginaries and stories about climate change (Levy & Spicer, 2013; Riedy & Waddock, 2022) thereby maintaining their social license to operate (Dessart & Standeart, 2023).

Despite the apparent contradiction between the automotive industry and sustainability, the strategies employed by these companies align with research criteria for effective sustainability communication and storytelling (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Kim, 2023; Lane, 2023; Larivière & Smit, 2022). Public relations approaches to sustainability communication emphasize the importance of understanding broader societal trends and concerns, demonstrating credibility and authenticity, and striking a balance between aspiration and realism, feeling authentic yet aspirational. By crafting and implementing sustainability stories that feel relatable and achievable, organizations, leveraging public relations, have the potential to drive broader change and establish organizational trust, thus contributing to their reputation and legitimacy.

The second largest story theme, as observed in the analysis, highlights Toyota, Volvo, Kia, and Audi's efforts to craft compelling stories that not only demonstrate their commitment to sustainability but also emphasize the importance of strategic collaborations in driving environmental progress within their industry. Hence, the story theme of *Partnership for*



*Sustainable Progress.* Commonalities include partnering with like-minded companies and participating in local, national, and international sustainability initiatives to combat climate change and promote sustainable practices.

In contemporary society, organizations must commit to being sustainable in a genuine and trustworthy manner (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022). Despite their credibility in traditional car manufacturing, Toyota, Volvo, Kia, and Audi all face challenges in transforming and positioning themselves to changing societal values and demonstrate a genuine commitment to environmental responsibility. The emphasis on partnerships and collaborations in the external sustainability stories is tangible evidence of their commitment to sustainability and their journey toward transforming ecosystems and society around sustainability values (Dessart & Standeart, 2023). Furthermore, collaborating with like-minded partners signifies a strategic decision by Toyota, Volvo, Kia, and Audi to align themselves with the values and principles upheld by those entities.

Although Toyota, Volvo, Kia, and Audi all communicate partnerships and collaborations in their sustainability storytelling, there are some variations across the examples provided by each company. For instance, Toyota and Kia prioritize partnerships emphasizing local and nature-related values such as Kia's collaboration with Håll Sverige Rent for littering mitigation and Toyota's projects for forest protection. Volvo and Audi, on the other hand, often partner with major corporations like DB Schenker and Northvolt, as well as Alpine National Teams. Nevertheless, what sets this story theme apart and makes it particularly engaging and effective is the introduction of unexpected partnerships that defy audience expectations and drive the stories forward. Integrating plots that incorporate unlikely collaborations, automotive companies challenge conventional storylines and offer new perspectives on sustainability initiatives. These unexpected partnerships add depth and complexity to the story, and draw readers in deeply (Dessart & Standeart, 2023).

By featuring real-life characters that resonate with audiences, automotive companies are able to humanize their sustainability efforts, making them more tangible and accessible to stakeholders (Lane, 2023; Riedy & Waddock, 2022). Moreover, characters serve as a powerful means to enhance the authenticity of the story. This strategic implementation of characters taps into the power of storytelling by creating emotional connections. When

audiences can see themselves reflected in the stories told by these companies, they are more likely to connect with the message on a personal level, leading to increased engagement, and buy-in. By identifying with characters, audiences envision the potential consequences of actions, both positive and negative, in real-world scenarios. As audiences connect with the characters and storyline, they are more likely to trust the company's commitment to sustainability, contributing to organizational legitimacy and long-term stakeholder relationships (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Lane, 2023; Love, 2008; Reidy & Waddock, 2022).

Furthermore, by partnering with reputable entities renowned for their sustainable practices, automotive companies enhance their sustainability communication and strengthen their credibility and authenticity in the eyes of stakeholders and the public (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Lane, 2023). These partnerships serve as powerful public relations tools for reputation management and trust, showcasing these automotive companies' dialogical engagement with stakeholders (Kent & Taylor, 2016; Kim, 2023). Strategically aligning themselves with trusted organizations that already possess established credibility in sustainability allows Toyota, Volvo, Kia, and Audi to mitigate the risk of conveying misleading impressions and enforce their commitment to sustainable practices.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that while partnerships and collaborations can indeed enhance an organization's sustainability efforts, there are ethical implications to consider. In some cases, companies may engage in partnerships primarily to improve their public image without genuinely committing to sustainable practices throughout their operations. This practice, known as greenwashing, can mislead stakeholders and the public into believing that an organization is more environmentally responsible than it actually is (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022; Reilly & Hynan, 2014). Therefore, it is essential for companies to ensure that their partnerships are not merely for cosmetic purposes but align with their core values and result in tangible, meaningful actions towards sustainability. Careful evaluation, alongside setting clear goals and accountability measures, is central to steering companies away from greenwashing pitfalls and instead ensuring genuine progress towards sustainability.

The final two story themes identified from the findings are *Organizational Accountability* and *Call to Action*. These story themes center around the notions of responsibility and improvement, whether it is the company holding itself accountable or urging others to take action. Firstly, the story theme of *Organizational Accountability* shows the ways in which Toyota, Volvo, Kia, and Audi strategically convey their dedication to building a sustainable future. Through the emphasis on responsibility and accountability for their environmental impact, these automotive companies engage their audience with actionable resolutions. One key aspect evident across this story theme is the companies' willingness to show vulnerability by openly acknowledging their role in contributing to environmental issues. This transparency, combined with their efforts to mitigate emissions, enhances their relatability and authenticity, ultimately building credibility and trust with their audience (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023).

The variations observed in the findings related to this story theme reflect nuanced approaches tailored to the automotive companies' respective identities and audience preferences. On the one hand, Toyota and Kia convey optimism and openness in their sustainability journey, embracing responsibility with a forward-looking perspective. By highlighting their commitment to sustainable values and portraying themselves as agents of positive change, they resonate with audiences who value proactive and optimistic approaches to addressing environmental challenges (Riedy & Waddock, 2022). These stories not only enhance their credibility but also strengthen their organizational legitimacy by demonstrating a genuine commitment to change (Dessart & Standeart, 2023).

On the other hand, Volvo and Audi opt for a more logical and factual approach in their sustainability storytelling, using a more formal and stylized story language (Lane, 2023). Through transparently presenting facts and progress reports, they underscore accountability through data-driven stories, aligning with the principles of sustainability communication in public relations (Hung-Baesecke et al., 2016; Rim et al., 2019; Kim, 2023). As such, this approach appeals to audiences who value clear and tangible evidence of progress in sustainability efforts. By providing detailed insights into their environmental initiatives and performance, Volvo and Audi build trust with stakeholders and enforce their commitment to transparency and accountability (Dessart & Standeart, 2023).

Reflecting upon these variations, it becomes evident that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to strategic sustainability storytelling. Instead, automotive companies must carefully consider their organizational identity, audience preferences, and the specific objectives of their communication efforts when crafting their stories (Page & Capizzo, 2024). In particular, this story theme highlights how public relations can serve as a bridge between organizations, stakeholders, and the public. The purpose of public relations is to actively seek stakeholder views through dialogical and two-way approaches while also communicating the organization's vision and mission in an authentic and realistic way (Heide & Svingstedt, 2023; Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Martin-de Castro, 2021; Page & Capizzo, 2024). Moreover, by aligning their storytelling approach with the values and expectations of their target audience, automotive companies can establish trust, mutual understanding, and ultimately organizational legitimacy.

Secondly, the story theme of *Call to Action* illustrates the ways in which Volvo, Kia, and Audi advocate for proactive measures and leadership from various sectors. Particularly, in this story theme, automotive companies encourage industry and political leaders, as well as other stakeholders, to collaboratively work towards achieving a sustainable future. Through their storytelling, Volvo, Kia, and Audi effectively convey the urgency of addressing climate change as an undeniable reality. By acknowledging the critical nature of the current situation and highlighting the challenges inherent in the journey towards sustainability, these companies strategically craft stories that resonate with audiences through authenticity and identification processes (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023).

Through presenting the complexities of sustainable solutions, these companies deepen audience engagement, evoking empathy and fostering a shared sense of responsibility (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Lane, 2023). Specifically, by aligning their stories with societal values and the audience's expectations, organizations create a sense of unity, where both the organization and their stakeholders come together in a common mission (Levy and Spicer, 2013; Milkoreit, 2017; Riedy & Waddock, 2022). This approach not only raises awareness but also encourages action and commitment to collective efforts in combating climate change.

Here, the most prominent distinction as observed in the analysis is that Toyota does not exhibit any examples aligning with this particular story theme. On the one hand, the absence of communication aligned with the story theme of *Call to Action* may represent a missed opportunity for Toyota to actively engage its audience in environmental challenges. Without such messaging, the company could appear somewhat passive, potentially undermining its credibility as a sustainability leader in the automotive industry.

On the other hand, not adhering to this strategy could be interpreted as a strategy in itself. It is possible that Toyota refrains from promoting *Calls to Action* out of concern for potential backlash or criticism, as stakeholders may question the sincerity or adequacy of their efforts (Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022; Reilly & Hynan, 2014). Furthermore, Toyota may believe that the most authentic approach is to refrain from prompting others to take action and instead focus on demonstrating their own commitment to sustainability through tangible initiatives and practices. This strategy could be interpreted as Toyota's dedication to maintaining credibility and authenticity while promoting positive environmental impacts aligned with its values and goals. Overall, it reflects Toyota's commitment to fostering trust and upholding a positive reputation among stakeholders (Martin-de Castro, 2021; Page & Capizzo, 2024).

As automotive companies communicate their efforts towards sustainability, the story they craft becomes more than a mere strategy; it becomes a shared story of innovation, partnership, responsibility and a collective commitment to a better future. Recognized as fundamental to human nature, storytelling is deeply intertwined with broader societal and organizational transformations, assisting organizations not only in conveying information but also in making sense of the world (Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023).

Both sustainability communication and storytelling frameworks emphasize the importance of authenticity, transparency, and engagement in effectively conveying messages and fostering meaningful connections with stakeholders (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Hung-Baesecke et al., 2016; Kim, 2023; Lane, 2023; Rim et al., 2019). Therefore, in a world where sustainability is high on the strategic agenda, strategic sustainability storytelling emerges as a powerful public relations tool that goes beyond mere message transmission to foster connections, build trust, and inspire change (Heath, 2006). Specifically, storytelling aids organizations in articulating the complexities of sustainability in a manner that resonates with audiences.

In the field of public relations, practitioners operate with truth and transparency (Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023). The variations in storytelling approaches highlighted throughout the discussion underscore the importance of flexibility and adaptability in sustainability communication strategies. As societal values and preferences evolve over time, organizations must be prepared to adjust their messaging accordingly to maintain relevance and trust with their audience while also remaining true to the organization's identity (Capizzo, 2022; Dong et al., 2023; Ihlen & Raknes, 2020). Therefore, it is essential to continuously reflect upon, evaluate, and refine sustainability storytelling strategies. This ongoing process enables companies to ensure that their sustainability stories remain authentic, compelling, and impactful in driving positive and long-lasting change.

## 7.2 Conclusion

Based on the analysis and discussions presented above, we addressed the research questions posed in this study. Our analysis reveals that automotive companies in Sweden predominantly implement sustainability storytelling to highlight technological innovations in their external communication efforts. Specifically, through story themes such as *Driving Sustainable Innovation*, these companies craft stories emphasizing their commitment to environmental responsibility and progress. By emphasizing values that audiences can identify with and integrating real-life descriptions, automotive companies enhance the authenticity of their sustainability stories, effectively engaging stakeholders and promoting their sustainability initiatives (Dessart & Standeart, Kim, 2015; Lane, 2023).

Strategic sustainability storytelling plays a pivotal role in enhancing organizational legitimacy for automotive companies in Sweden. By crafting stories highlighting leadership, strategic partnerships, accountability, and calls to action for sustainability, automotive companies showcase their dedication to addressing environmental challenges. Through strategic alignment with societal values via public relations practices, automotive companies enhance their credibility and trustworthiness (Dessart & Standeart, 2023; Kent, 2015; Kim, 2023; Lane, 2023). These public relations efforts in external communication build trust and engagement with audiences, contributing not only to a positive image and reputation but also to organizational legitimacy (Dong et al., 2023; Martin-de Castro, 2021; Mena et al., 2018). Moreover, the findings and discussion highlight the importance of flexibility and adaptability

in storytelling strategies to navigate evolving societal values and maintain relevance with stakeholders.

This study contributes to public relations theory by emphasizing the role of strategic sustainability storytelling in organizational legitimacy-building efforts. While previous research has acknowledged storytelling's importance in public relations (Kent, 2015; Lane, 2023), our study fills a gap by exploring how storytelling aligns with public relations theory and practice. By emphasizing authenticity, transparency, and engagement in sustainability communication, organizations can effectively convey their messages and foster meaningful connections with stakeholders. Moreover, our findings stress the need for continuous reflection, evaluation, and refinement of storytelling strategies to ensure their authenticity and effectiveness in driving positive change.

From a practical standpoint, our study offers valuable insights for automotive companies in Sweden on how to effectively implement sustainability storytelling to enhance organizational legitimacy. If done correctly, storytelling from a public relations approach can assist organizations in effectively engaging stakeholders, building trust, and driving change within the organization and beyond. Moreover, our findings underscore the importance of incorporating two-way communication and gaining a thorough understanding of the audience in strategic communication efforts. By actively engaging with stakeholders and continuously monitoring societal values and preferences, organizations can ensure that their storytelling approaches resonate effectively. This approach not only fosters transparency and accountability but also enhances the authenticity and credibility of sustainability communication efforts. Practitioners can leverage these insights to develop comprehensive stakeholder engagement strategies and foster collaborative partnerships, ultimately advancing their sustainability goals.

Ethical considerations are paramount in sustainability storytelling, and practitioners must uphold ethical standards and prevent greenwashing by ensuring that their storytelling accurately reflects the organization's sustainability efforts. Integrating strategic sustainability storytelling into organizational identity and corporate culture further strengthens the organization's commitment to environmental responsibility. Engaging with communities and

supporting sustainability initiatives provide valuable storytelling opportunities and help build trust.

In conclusion, the findings of this study underscore the significance of strategic sustainability storytelling as a powerful public relations tool for automotive companies to communicate their commitment to sustainability and enhance their organizational legitimacy. By aligning storytelling approaches with public relations theory and continuously refining their strategies, organizations can effectively engage stakeholders, foster trust, and drive positive change in society.

### **7.3 Suggestions for Future Research**

This thesis offers valuable insights into the strategic use of sustainability storytelling in the Swedish automotive industry. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations. Firstly, the scope of the study is limited to a specific industry and geographical context, namely the Swedish automotive sector. Additionally, the research has been conducted through a qualitative analysis approach where we compared the case studies qualitatively, which may have introduced subjectivity in interpretation and analysis. Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on public relations and strategic communication, offering valuable implications for both theory and practice.

Furthermore, this thesis has examined the process of formulating and externally communicating sustainability meanings to stakeholders through storytelling in the automotive industry. Thus, future researchers can conduct studies focusing on stakeholder *perceptions* of sustainability storytelling. Understanding how stakeholders interpret and respond to sustainability storytelling can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of organizational communication strategies and the impact of storytelling on shaping stakeholder attitudes and behaviors.

Moreover, exploring the alignment between organizational storytelling and stakeholder perceptions can help identify areas where the organization needs to improve its communication to ensure that their stories align well with stakeholder perceptions, ultimately fostering a more positive and effective relationship. Methods such as focus groups or surveys



can be employed to gather stakeholders' perspectives and uncover the underlying meanings and interpretations attributed to sustainability storytelling efforts. By bridging the gap between organizational messaging and stakeholder perceptions, future research can further contribute to enhancing the strategic relevance and impact of sustainability storytelling initiatives in fostering mutual understanding, trust, and engagement between organizations and their stakeholders.

Ultimately, future research may also explore the integration of feedback mechanisms and listening processes into sustainability storytelling initiatives, allowing organizations to actively seek stakeholder input, address concerns, and co-create stories collaboratively. By gaining insights into how organizations manage this balance, future research can provide valuable guidance for practitioners seeking to enhance the authenticity, transparency, and effectiveness of their sustainability communication strategies.

# References

---

- Alibašić, H. (2022). *Strategic Resilience and Sustainability Planning. Management Strategies for Sustainable and Climate-Resilient Communities and Organizations* (2nd ed.). Springer International Publishing.
- Allal-chérif, O., Costa climent, J., & Ulrich Berenguer, K. J. (2023). Born to be sustainable: How to combine strategic disruption, open innovation, and process digitization to create a sustainable business. *Journal of Business Research*, 113379.
- Allen, M. (2016). *Strategic communication for sustainable organizations*. Springer International Publishing.
- Alvesson, M., & Sveningsson, S. (2016). *Changing Organizational Culture: Cultural Change Work in Progress* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Audi. (2024a). *Om Audi Sverige*. Retrieved from <https://www.audi.se/se/web/sv/foretaget>
- Audi. (2024b). *Vårt hållbarhetsarbete*. Retrieved from <https://www.audi.se/se/web/sv/hallbarhet.html>
- Boje, D. M. (1991). Learning storytelling: Storytelling to learn management skills. *Journal of Management Education*, 15(3), 279–294.
- Burr, V. (2003). *Social constructionism* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Butina, M. (2015). A narrative approach to qualitative inquiry. *Clinical Laboratory Science*, 28(3), 190-196.
- Canel, M. J. (2023). A call for the “Public Relations-imperative for sustainability”: Roles for public relations in advancing the 2030 Agenda. *Public Relations Review*, 49(4).
- Capizzo, L. (2022). What counts amid contention? Measuring perceived intractable problems in public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 48(2), N.PAG.
- Clark, M. K., Lages, C. R., & Hollebeek, L. D. (2020). Friend or foe? Customer engagement’s value-based effects on fellow customers and the firm. *Journal of Business Research*, 121, 549–556.
- Council of the European Union. (2023). *Fit for 55: Emissions from cars and vans* (Infographic). Retrieved from

- <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/sv/infographics/fit-for-55-emissions-cars-ad-vans/>
- Cowan, K., & Guzman, F. (2020). How CSR reputation, sustainability signals, and country-of-origin sustainability reputation contribute to corporate brand performance: An exploratory study. *Journal of Business Research*, *117*, 683–693.
- de Ruyter, K., Keeling, D. I., Plangger, K., Montecchi, M., Scott, M. L., & Dahl, D. W. (2022). Reimagining marketing strategy: Driving the debate on grand challenges. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *50*(1), 13-21.
- Dessart, L., & Standaert, W. (2023). Strategic storytelling in the age of sustainability. *Business Horizons*, *66*(3), 371-385.
- Dong, C., Zhang, Y., Li, Y., Lee, E., & Chen, L. (2023). What makes nonprofit organizations (NPOs) talk transparently about their connections with businesses on Twitter? Insights from nonprofit-business network portfolios and resource dependencies. *Public Relations Review*, *49*(2).
- Elmer, P. (2011). Public relations and storytelling. In L. Edwards & C.E.M. Hodges (Eds.), *Public Relations, Society & Culture* (pp. 59-72). Routledge.
- Elo, S., Kääriäinen, M., Kanste, O., Pölkki, T., Utriainen, K., & Kyngäs, H. (2014). *Qualitative content analysis*. SAGE Open, *4*.
- Esin, C., Fathi, M., & Squire, C. (2014). Narrative analysis: The constructionist approach. In U. Flick (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analysis* (Chapter 14). Sage.
- European Commission. (2023). *Green claims*. Retrieved from [https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/circular-economy/green-claims\\_en#related-policies](https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/circular-economy/green-claims_en#related-policies)
- European Parliament. (2023). *CO2 emissions from cars: facts and figures* (infographics). Retrieved from <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20190313STO31218/co2-emissions-from-cars-facts-and-figures-infographics>
- Falkheimer, J. (2018). *Strategic communication: An introduction* (M. Heide, Ed.). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Foster, E., & Bochner, A. P. (2008). Social constructionist perspectives in communication research. In J. A. Holstein & J. F. Gubrium (Eds.), *Handbook of Constructionist*

- Research* (pp. 85-106). Guilford Press.
- Gill, R. (2015). Why the PR strategy of storytelling improves employee engagement and adds value to CSR: An integrated literature review. *Public Relations Review, 41*(5), 662-674.
- Green, M. C., & Brock, T. C. (2002). In the mind's eye: Transportation-imagery model of narrative persuasion. In M. C. Green, J. J. Strange, & T. C. Brock (Eds.), *Narrative impact: Social and cognitive foundations* (pp. 315-341).
- Grunig, J. E. (2001). Two-way symmetrical public relations: Past, present and future. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *Handbook of public relations* (pp. 11–30). Sage.
- Grunig, J. E. (2006). Furnishing the Edifice: Ongoing Research on Public Relations As a Strategic Management Function. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 18*(2), 151–176.
- Harris, D. M. (2017). Telling the story of climate change: Geologic imagination, praxis, and policy. *Energy Research & Social Science, 31*, 179-183.
- Heath, C. W. (1992). Structural changes in Kenya's broadcasting system: A manifestation of presidential authoritarianism. *Gazette: International Journal for Communication Studies, 50*(1), 37–51.
- Heath, R. L. (2000). A Rhetorical Perspective on the Values of Public Relations: Crossroads and Pathways Toward Concurrence. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 12*(1), 69–91.
- Heath, R. L. (2006). Onward Into More Fog: Thoughts on Public Relations' Research Directions. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 18*(2), 93–114.
- Heide, M., Simonsson, C., Nothhaft, H., Andersson, R., & von Platen, S. (2019). *The Communicative Organization – final report*. Sveriges Kommunikatörer.
- Heide, M., & Svingstedt, A. (2023). *Strategic Listening: How Managers, Coworkers, and Organizations Can Become Better at Listening* (1st ed.). New York: Productivity Press.
- Holman, A. (2017). Content Analysis, Process of. In *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*. SAGE Publications.

- Holstein, J. & Gubrium, J. (Eds.). (2008). *Handbook of Constructionist Research*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Hung-Baesecke, C.-J. F., Chen, Y.-R. R., & Boyd, B. (2016). Corporate social responsibility, media source preference, trust, and public engagement: The informed public's perspective. *Public Relations Review*, 42(4), 591–599.
- Ihlen, Ø., & Raknes, K. (2020). Appeals to 'the public interest': How public relations and lobbying create a social license to operate. *Public Relations Review*, 46(5).
- International Energy Agency. (2021). *Sweden*. Retrieved from <https://www.iea.org/countries/sweden>
- James, C. H., & Minnis, W. C. (2004). Organizational storytelling: It makes sense. *Business Horizons*, 47(4), 23-32.
- Jung, J. C., & Sharon, E. (2019). The Volkswagen emissions scandal and its aftermath. *Global Business & Organizational Excellence*, 38(4), 6–15.
- Kent, M. L. (2015). The power of storytelling in public relations: Introducing the 20 master plots. *Public Relations Review*, 41(4), 480–489.
- Kent, M. L., & Taylor, M. (2016). From Homo Economicus to Homo Dialogicus: Rethinking social media use in CSR communication. *Public Relations Review*, 42(1), 60–67.
- Kemper, J. A., & Ballantine, P. W. (2019). What do we mean by sustainability marketing? *Journal of Marketing Management*, 35(3/4), 277-309.
- Kia. (2022). *Hållbarhetsrapport 2022 Kia Sweden AB*. Retrieved from [https://www.kia.com/content/dam/kwcms/kme/se/sv/assets/contents/purchase-guide/kampanjer/Hallbarhetsredovisning\\_2022\\_utan\\_globala\\_uppslaget\\_230315\\_sidor\\_2.pdf](https://www.kia.com/content/dam/kwcms/kme/se/sv/assets/contents/purchase-guide/kampanjer/Hallbarhetsredovisning_2022_utan_globala_uppslaget_230315_sidor_2.pdf)
- Kia. (2023a, June 8). *Kia inleder samarbeten för att inspirera till ansvarsfull rörelse till havs*. [Press Release]. Retrieved from <https://www.kia.com/se/om-kia/nyheter-och-press/#/pressreleases/kia-inleder-samarbeten-foer-att-inspirera-till-ansvarsfull-roerelse-till-havs-3258089>
- Kia. (2023b, July 4). *Kia tilldelas miljöpriset "Grönt föredöme"* [Press Release]. Retrieved from <https://www.kia.com/se/om-kia/nyheter-och-press/#/pressreleases/kia-tilldelas-miljoepriset-groent-foeredoeme-3263018>

- Kia. (2024a). *Hållbarhet*. Retrieved from <https://www.kia.com/se/om-kia/hallbarhet/>
- Kia. (2024b, February 28). *Surfaren Tim Latte är ny ambassadör för Kia* [Press Release]. Retrieved from <https://www.kia.com/se/om-kia/nyheter-och-press#/pressreleases/surfaren-tim-latte-are-ny-ambassadoer-foer-kia-3306843>
- Kim, S. (2023). CSR Communication from a Public Relations Perspective. In A. O'Connor (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Corporate Social Responsibility Communication* (pp. 11–20).
- Lane, A. (2023). Towards a theory of organizational storytelling for public relations: An engagement perspective. *Public Relations Review*, 49, 102297.
- Larivière, B., & Smit, E. G. (2022). People–planet–profits for a sustainable world: Integrating the triple-P idea in the marketing strategy, implementation, and evaluation of service firms. *Journal of Service Management*, 33(4/5), 507-519.
- Leroi-Werelds, S., & Matthes, J. (2022). Transformative value positioning for service brands: key principles and challenges. *Journal of Service Management*, 33(4/5), 552–564.
- Levy, D. L., & Spicer, A. (2013). Contested imaginaries and the cultural political economy of climate change. *Organization*, 20(5), 659–678.
- Lewis, L. K. (2011). *Organizational Change: Creating Change Through Strategic Communication*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Lindgreen, A., & Swaen, V. (2010). Corporate Social Responsibility. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 12(1), 1–7.
- Love, H. (2008). Unraveling the technique of storytelling. *Strategic Communication Management*, 12(4), 24–27.
- Lum, L. (2019). Climate Change: What the Science Tells Us. *American Family Physician*, 100(10).
- Lynch, C., & Ferasso, M. (2023). The influence of a company's inherent values on its sustainability: Evidence from a born-sustainable SME in the footwear industry. *Cleaner and Responsible Consumption*, 9(100124-).
- Martin-de Castro, G. (2021). Exploring the market side of corporate environmentalism: Reputation, legitimacy and stakeholders' engagement. *Industrial Marketing*

- Management*, 92, 289–294.
- McLeod, J. (2001). *Qualitative research in counselling and psychotherapy*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mena, L. R., Tsai, W.-H. S., Chen, Z. F., & Ji, Y. G. (2018). Social presence and digital dialogic communication: Engagement lessons from top social CEOs. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 30(3), 83–99.
- Miceli, A., Hagen, B., Riccardi, M. P., Sotti, F., & Settembre-Blundo, D. (2021). Thriving, not just surviving in changing times: How sustainability, agility and digitalization intertwine with organizational resilience. *Sustainability (Switzerland)*, 13(4), 1-17–17.
- Miller, K. (2015). *Organizational Communication: Approaches and Processes* (7th ed.). Stamford, CT: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Mitchell, A. (2018). A Review of Mixed Methods, Pragmatism and Abduction Techniques. *Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods*, 16(3), 103–116.
- Mobility Sweden. (2023). *Statistik: Databas nyregistreringar*. Retrieved from <https://mobilitysweden.se/statistik/databas-nyregistreringar>
- Moore, M.-L., & Milkoreit, M. (2020). Imagination and transformations to sustainable and just futures. *Elementa: Science of the Anthropocene*, 8(1).
- Milkoreit, M. (2017). Imaginary politics: Climate change and making the future. *Elementa: Science of the Anthropocene*, 5(62).
- Northvolt. (2024). *Environment*. Retrieved from <https://northvolt.com/environment/>.
- Page, T. G., & Capizzo, L. W. (2024). Toward a tent-driven model of organizations: Stakeholders, permeability, and multiple identities in public relations theory. *Public Relations Review*, 50(1), N.PAG.
- Pera, R., & Viglia, G. (2016). Exploring How Video Digital Storytelling Builds Relationship Experiences. *Psychology and Marketing*, 33(12), 1142-1150–1150.
- PreventionWeb. (n.d.). *Resilience*. Retrieved from <https://www.preventionweb.net/understanding-disaster-risk/key-concepts/resilience>
- Prasad, P. (2017). *Crafting qualitative research: Beyond positivist traditions* (2nd ed.).
- Reilly, A. H., & Hynan, K. A. (2014). Corporate communication, sustainability, and social media: It's not easy (really) being green. *Business Horizons*, 57(6), 747-758.

- Riedy, C., & Waddock, S. (2022). Imagining transformation: Change agent narratives of sustainable futures. *Futures*, *142*, 103010.
- Rim, H., Kim, J., & Dong, C. (2019). A cross-national comparison of transparency signaling in corporate social responsibility reporting: The United States, South Korea, and China cases. *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, *26*(6), 1517–1529.
- Singh, K., & Misra, M. (2021). Linking Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Organizational Performance: The moderating effect of corporate reputation. *European Research on Management and Business Economics*, *27*(1), 100139.
- Simons, L., Lachlean, J., & Squire, C. (2008). Shifting the focus: Sequential methods of analysis with qualitative data. *Qualitative Health Research*, *18*(1), 120–132.
- Spear, S., & Roper, S. (2013). Using corporate stories to build the corporate brand: An impression management perspective. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, *22*(7), 491–501.
- Statista. (2023). *Carbon dioxide emissions from cars, vans, and transport worldwide*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1388092/carbon-dioxide-emissions-cars-vans-transport/>
- The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). (2021). *Climate change evidence: How do we know? NASA*. Retrieved from <https://climate.nasa.gov/evidence/>
- Thier, K. (2018). *Storytelling in Organizations. A Narrative Approach to Change, Brand, Project and Knowledge Management* (1st ed. 2018.). Springer Berlin Heidelberg.
- Todeschini, V. B., Nogueira Cortimiglia, M., Callegaro-de-Menezes, D., & Ghezzi, A. (2017). Innovative and sustainable business models in the fashion industry: Entrepreneurial drivers, opportunities, and challenges. *Business Horizons*, *60*(6), 759–770.
- Toyota. (2023, August 29). *Toyota söker innovativa startupföretag – lanserar unik samarbetsplattform för en hållbar framtid* [Press Release]. Retrieved from <https://sverige.toyota/nyheter/pressreaser/toyota-soker-innovativa-startupforetag-lanserar-unik-samarbetsplattform-for-en-hallbar-framtid>



- Toyota. (2024a). *Om Toyota*. Retrieved from <https://www.toyota.se/om-toyota>
- Toyota. (2024b). *Miljö*. Retrieved from <https://www.toyota.se/miljo>
- United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). (2015a). *Adoption of the Paris agreement*. Retrieved from <https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2015/cop21/eng/l09r01.pdf>
- United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). (2015b). *Paris Agreement*. Retrieved from <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement>
- Van Laer, T., Edson Escalas, J., Ludwig, S., & Van Den Hende, E. A. (2019). What Happens in Vegas Stays on TripAdvisor? A Theory and Technique to Understand Narrativity in Consumer Reviews. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 46(2), 267-285–285.
- Vasquez, G. M. (1993). A Homo Narrans Paradigm for Public Relations: Combining Bormann's Symbolic Convergence Theory and Grunig's Situational Theory of Publics. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 5(3), 201-216–216.
- Vasquez, G. M., & Taylor, M. (2001). Research perspectives on "the public". In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *Handbook of public relations* (pp. 139-154). Sage, Newbury Park, CA.
- Volkswagen Group. (2022). *Volkswagen Group Sverige Hållbarhetsredovisning 2022*. Retrieved from [https://vwgroup.se/contentassets/9bf407743cb241f98a6276c81d4e24c5/hallbarhetsredovisning-vgs-2022\\_publ-20230630.pdf](https://vwgroup.se/contentassets/9bf407743cb241f98a6276c81d4e24c5/hallbarhetsredovisning-vgs-2022_publ-20230630.pdf)
- Volvo (2023a, July 4). *Volvo Cars går över till förnybart bränsle för sjöfrakt – minskar koldioxidutsläppen med 84 procent* [Press Release]. Retrieved from <https://www.media.volvocars.com/se/sv-se/media/pressreleases/316593/volvo-cars-gar-over-till-fornybart-bransle-for-sjofrakt-minskar-koldioxidutslappen-med-84-procent>
- Volvo. (2023b, September 19). *Volvo Cars tillkännager "end of diesel" på Climate Week NYC – vår sista dieselbil produceras i början av 2024* [Press Release]. Retrieved from <https://www.media.volvocars.com/se/sv-se/media/pressreleases/317640/volvo-cars-tillkannager-end-of-diesel-pa-climate-week-nyc-var-sista-dieselbil-produceras-i-borjan-a>
- Volvo. (2023c, November 30). *Volvo Cars dubblar sina klimatåtaganden – har som mål att minska koldioxidutsläppen per bil med 75 procent till 2030* [Press Release]. Retrieved

from

<https://www.media.volvocars.com/se/sv-se/media/pressreleases/321665/volvo-cars-du-bblar-sina-klimatataganden-har-som-mal-att-minska-koldioxidutslappen-per-bl-med-75-pro>

Volvo (2024a). *Om oss*. Retrieved from <https://www.volvocars.com/se/v/discover>

Volvo (2024b). *Hållbarhet*. Retrieved from

<https://www.volvocars.com/se/v/sustainability/highlights>

Volvo. (2024c, January 12). *Volvo Cars bekräftar sitt engagemang för hållbarhet med nya mål och fokus på biologisk mångfald* [Press release]. Retrieved from

<https://www.media.volvocars.com/se/sv-se/media/pressreleases/322528/volvo-cars-bekraftar-sitt-engagemang-for-hallbarhet-med-nya-mal-och-fokus-pa-biologisk-mangfald>

Zak, P. J. (2015). Why inspiring stories make us react: The neuroscience of narrative.

*Cerebrum: the Dana Forum on Brain Science*, 2015(Jan-Feb).

Zerfass A, Verčič D, Nothhaft H, Werder KP. Strategic Communication : Defining the Field and its Contribution to Research and Practice. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*. 2018;12(4):487-505.

Zhang, Z., & Wang, Y. (2023). New-arrival or second-hand? A direct-to-consumer business model for electric vehicles in the sustainable transportation. *Energy Reports*, 10, 3035–3038.

Zharfpeykan, R., & Ng, F. (2021). COVID-19 and sustainability reporting: what are the roles of reporting frameworks in a crisis? *Pacific Accounting Review*, 33(2), 189–198.

## Appendix A.

Story Theme	Description and Summary of Examples Illustrating the Theme	Findings from the Material (Our translation from Swedish to English)
<p><b>Driving Sustainable Innovation</b></p>	<p><i>This story theme encapsulates the automotive companies' proactive pursuit of eco-friendly solutions and groundbreaking technologies. It reflects a commitment to reducing environmental impact while fostering innovation across operations, products, and services. This theme embodies a dedication to advancing sustainability through forward-thinking initiatives and practices.</i></p> <p><b>Total number of examples by:</b>            Toyota: 12            Volvo: 8            Kia: 12            Audi: 28  <b>Total: 60</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "As one of the world's leading car manufacturers, we take our responsibility seriously to protect the environment. This means developing vehicles that have as little impact as possible on the surrounding environment. Examples of this are our world-leading electric hybrids and Mirai, the world's first mass-produced hydrogen fuel cell sedan". - Toyota, Sustainability Tab.</li> <li>- "Humanity has never affected the surrounding environment as much as it does now. The consequences of our way of life, such as global warming, are catastrophic. As a company, we need to innovate and find new ways to maintain our quality of life and a strong economy, while preserving and restoring the ecosystems we are a part of". - Toyota, Sustainability Tab.</li> <li>- "Although we are proud of our reputation as a pioneer in environmental technology, we believe there is still much more we can achieve. We have developed 6 environmental challenges that we will work to achieve by 2050, which go beyond zero environmental impact to also deliver positive environmental effects". - Toyota, Sustainability Tab.</li> <li>- "We will launch 14 new electric cars from 2023 to 2027, and already today we are one of the leading players in Sweden. But we are not satisfied there. With the self-developed electric car platform E-GMP, we continue to drive technological development and enable more people to become part of the chargeable movement. Through our products and services, we create conditions for more fully charged experiences". - Kia, Sustainability Tab.</li> <li>- "To enable more people to become part of the chargeable movement, we continue to innovate and inspire. Our dedicated platform for electric cars allows you to take advantage of the latest technology, with ultra-fast charging, better performance, and long range. Our self-developed E-GMP</li> </ul>

		<p>platform will form the basis for 14 new electric cars in Sweden by 2027". - Kia, Sustainability Tab.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "We want to change the automotive industry and be a leader in safety, sustainability, online operations, and set a new global standard for people. Our ambitions chart a clear path for us as we take on our - and society's - challenges". - Volvo, About Us.</li> <li>- Taking action to combat climate change is non-negotiable, and transitioning to fully electric cars is an important step on our journey," says Jim Rowan, CEO of Volvo Cars. As we now work to further reduce emissions across our value chain, we have a responsibility to do more and address our footprint for biodiversity and help improve people's lives. Our updated strategy is designed to help us do just that. - Volvo, Press Release (2024, January 12).</li> <li>- At Toyota, we believe in giving everyone the opportunity and freedom to move. As cities become overcrowded and we humans are constantly connected, we need to change how we move forward. That's why we present KINTO as part of our goal to offer mobility for all. A mobility solution that offers cars for all needs, as long as you need them. - Toyota, About Us.</li> <li>- "This year, we took the next step towards electrifying our entire model range. We promised that every new car launched from 2019 onwards would be fully or partially battery-powered. Consequently, we are the first major premium car brand to offer a plug-in hybrid for all our models." Volvo, About Us.</li> <li>- "Electric powertrains are our future and superior to combustion engines: they generate less noise, less vibration, lower service costs for our customers, and zero emissions," says Jim Rowan, CEO of Volvo Cars. "We are completely focused on creating a broad portfolio of premium, fully electric cars that deliver everything our customers expect from a Volvo - and are a key part of our response to climate change." Volvo, Press Release (2023, September 9).</li> <li>- "With this initiative, we want to create an ecosystem where we can develop the future of mobility, including cars, the technology in them, and the infrastructure around them, all hand in hand," says Jim Rowan, CEO of Volvo</li> </ul>
--	--	--

		<p>Cars." Volvo, Press Release (2024, February 7)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "To help protect the world we share, we must do more than just electrify our cars. We have decided to think differently about sustainability in our operations, in our cars, and in society". - Volvo, Sustainability Tab.</li> <li>- "Now I have a fantastic opportunity to be part of the team and drive the company towards its sustainability ambitions and integrate sustainability as a competitive advantage in all aspects of the value chain. Volvo Cars is rapidly transitioning to meet the demand for sustainable actions, and I look forward to being part of making a positive change for people and society." Volvo, Press Release (2023, December 21)</li> <li>- "Today, there are electrified versions of all our car models. Our plan is to be a pure electric car company by 2030, meaning we want all new cars to be fully electric. We're going all-in." Volvo, Sustainability Tab.</li> <li>- "Our vision is zero emissions and to produce cars that have no negative impact on the environment. The work starts in the design phase, where we work on hybrid technology, electric motors, fuel cells, and other solutions for reduced environmental impact. We also consider material production, disassembly, and recycling." Toyota, About Us.</li> <li>- "Our mission is to improve lives through new technology, new ways of working, and contribute innovation to reduce emissions, increase recycling, protect natural resources, and increase the use of cleaner, renewable energy sources. We aim to achieve this while helping people around the world live and work in harmony with nature." Toyota, Sustainability Report p. 1.</li> <li>- "Ever since vehicles began using the combustion engine in the late 19th century, they have largely relied on fossil fuels contributing to global warming. While conventional engines will continue to play a significant role in the short to medium term, we are working on developing alternatives such as biofuels from organic sources, electricity, and, more recently: hydrogen. With this multi-pronged strategy, we aim to be able to offer the right car, in the right place, at the right time." Toyota, Sustainability Tab.</li> </ul>
--	--	---

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Toyota is in the process of developing next-generation fuel cell technology expected to deliver industry-leading performance with longer life cycles and reduced costs. The new fuel cell technology planned for introduction in 2026 will deliver even higher power. The new fuel cell system is also expected to have a 20 percent increase in driving range. Additionally, technical advancements and increased production volumes are expected to lower costs by more than one-third. Toyota is also exploring the potential for scalable fuel cell stacks with different power outputs and various designs of hydrogen tanks with complex shapes, compatible with vehicles of different sizes." Toyota, Press Release. (2023, December 4)</li>   <li>- "We want to reduce our cars' carbon dioxide emissions by 90% by 2050 compared to 2010 levels. It's an ambitious goal, but we are convinced that the development and refinement of these technologies, as well as making them available to everyone, will get us there." Toyota, Sustainability Tab p.6.</li>   <li>- "Kia Sweden has successfully demonstrated how it is possible to transition to offering almost exclusively plug-in models. This has resulted in an average CO2 emissions of 34 grams in December 2022*, compared to the Swedish average of 69 g/km. 34 g/km exceeds the target of 40 grams for 2022. We hope that even more people will join the movement towards 100% plug-in and thus even lower CO2 emissions." Kia, Sustainability Report pp. 6-7.</li>   <li>- "Kia was the second largest in plug-in cars in 2022, the second largest car brand in terms of plug-in hybrid sales, and the third largest car brand in electric cars in the Swedish car market. Kia has a long history and experience with plug-in cars. Already in 2013, our first electric car, the Soul EV, was launched in Sweden. In 2022, we had a total of 9 plug-in models in our product portfolio." Kia, Sustainability Report p. 8.</li>   <li>- "Overall, Kia has an offer that simplifies the customer's transition from fossil dependence to sustainable mobility. But Kia not only offers cars that facilitate the transition. We also offer charging solutions that reduce environmental impact." Kia, Sustainability Report p. 9.</li> </ul>
--	--	---

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "In addition to wanting as many people as possible to transition to electric driving, Kia also wants to make it easier for our customers to charge in a more sustainable way. Therefore, Kia offers solutions whether you are charging at home or on the go." Kia, Sustainability Report p. 9.</li> <li>- "From an environmental perspective, Kia follows a long-term roadmap to improve fuel efficiency by 25% compared to 2014 by gradually replacing existing powertrains. The goal is to take a leading position in the automotive industry by continuously launching alternative power sources and environmentally friendly vehicles." Kia, About Us.</li> <li>- "Our sustainability work is part of Kia's vision for the future, where our goal is to accelerate the transition to sustainable mobility. To achieve this, we have set the goal of reaching 100% electrified vehicles in Sweden shortly, and 100% electric cars by 2030. The goals are ambitious, but through innovation and the latest technology, we want to show what is possible. Kia wants to inspire others to join the electrified movement so that more people can experience an electrified everyday life." Kia, Sustainability Tab..</li> <li>- "Innovation inspired by nature. Under our brand vision to provide sustainable mobility solutions, we are committed to realizing carbon neutrality by 2045, through our 3S activities. Sustainable mobility. Sustainable energy. Sustainable planet." Kia, Sustainability Tab.</li> <li>- "In Kia's sustainability strategy - as part of Plan S - more climate-smart materials are integrated into the cars using renewable resources. Phasing out animal-based leather, using ten defined sustainable materials in the cars' interiors, and continuously developing new bio-based materials are part of this strategy." Kia, Press Release (2023, June 8)</li> <li>- "The vision for Kia Corporation is to become a sustainable, responsible, and innovative provider of mobility solutions. With this vision, Kia has set the course for investments towards a more sustainable society. The vision 'Kia Sustainability Movement' aims to accelerate various sustainability initiatives and create sustainable mobility services for consumers and</li> </ul>
--	--	--

		<p>society at large". Kia, Sustainability Report p. 2.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "We want as many people as possible to transition to electric driving. In 2022, a total of 84% of the cars we sell were electrified. But we want to go even further. Our goal is to sell 100% electrified cars by 2024." Kia, Sustainability Report p. 6.</li> <li>- "Rikard Wildare has been taking apart everything he owns for as long as he can remember. The 46-year-old innovator has always enjoyed everything related to technology. The journey to electrify various vehicles began with remote-controlled cars. But soon, he would tackle even larger vehicles. [...] The drivetrain and battery pack were built simultaneously as the search for a suitable boat continued. One of the key components became a battery pack from an Audi e-tron that had only traveled 1,500 kilometers before ending up at a scrapyard in Norway after a crash. 'The battery was practically unused, and Audi's battery solution fits perfectly into the design I have developed.' [...] Last summer, Rikard received a great confirmation that his Elektra is indeed something special. In the prestigious and worldwide competition, Gussies Electric Boat Awards, the boat won first prize in the do-it-yourself class." Audi, About Us.</li> <li>- "A completely unique and groundbreaking effort is now being made with recycled glass, a research project that has been going on for over a year and involves taking broken and irreparable windshields that were previously used as insulation material and empty bottles. Now, Audi, as the first car manufacturer, has found a method to re-use the material for new high-quality windshields. The windows began serial production in September and are installed in Audi Q4 e-tron cars." Audi, About Us.</li> <li>- Audi's belief is that high-quality individual mobility can be combined with uncompromising responsibility for sustainability issues. And it doesn't stop at the cars themselves or even the factories where they are manufactured. For example, the battery cells in Audi's electric cars are produced with green electricity, and this also includes a social responsibility to ensure human rights are respected throughout the production chain. (Audi is a member of the Global Battery Alliance, initiated in</li> </ul>
--	--	--



		<p>2017 by the World Economic Forum)." Audi, About Us.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "The charging station is located in a densely populated area with residential buildings, where many electric car drivers lack home charging. Thanks to the Audi charging hub, an alternative for fast charging is offered while visitors can shop or eat in the market hall." Audi, Press Release (2023, April 6)</li> <li>- "But, of course, the use of recycled materials and maintaining high-quality standards should not conflict with each other. The materials returned must be of the highest possible quality or adapted to new uses. 'This is not about downcycling, that is, the properties of a new product made of recycled material are lower than those of the original product,' says Philipp Eder, a strategist within Audi Procurement." Audi, About Us.</li> <li>- "Electric car drivers know that it can be challenging to find a charging station in the city center when you need to charge at a rate of 150 kW or more. Fast charging stations are usually only available along heavily trafficked highways. Audi is now solving this problem by offering a fast charging concept in urban environments: the Audi charging hub. Following the success of the world's first Audi charging hub in Nuremberg, a second one has now been established in Zurich. It has four charging stations with up to 320 kW of charging capacity per station." Audi, About Us.</li> <li>- "In total, the Audi charging hub can supply up to 60 electric cars with power per day. And more Audi charging hubs will be opened. In 2023, Berlin will be the first, followed by Salzburg and Munich. Thus, electric car drivers in these cities, who do not have the opportunity for home charging, can easily and quickly charge their cars compared to other charging infrastructures." Audi, About Us.</li> <li>- "The last link in the chain should not be forgotten either: the electricity used to charge the cars. Ensuring it is produced sustainably is normally a process beyond the reach of the car manufacturer. But even there, Audi has taken action, including starting and co-owning energy production themselves. The first project is a solar park in Germany planned to start in 2022 and consisting of 420,000 solar</li> </ul>
--	--	---

		<p>panels that together can generate 170 million kilowatt-hours (kWh)." Audi, About Us.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "For Audi's customers, the investments will be noticeable in an increasingly cohesive ecosystem of car purchase, car ownership, and charging, where each component maintains the premium level the brand stands for. One example is the 'charging hubs' that Audi is planning, where HPC (high power charging) takes place while the driver relaxes in an exclusive lounge. The hubs themselves are also part of the well-thought-out cycle, with, for example, re-used lithium-ion batteries from electric cars for energy storage. A new life for the batteries as one of many small steps to reshape the mobility sector." Audi, About Us.</li> <li>- "No one claims that the challenges are small - but Audi shows that a persistent belief in the possibilities of technology will be able to solve them." Audi, About Us.</li> <li>- "Due to track work, SJ has canceled all summer trains between Gothenburg and Malmö since last week - a decision that has upset both travelers and other train operators. Ahead of the most intense holiday period, Audi is therefore helping to operate the route through shuttle traffic with its new electric car Q8 e-tron." Audi, Press Release (2023, July 6).</li> <li>- "- We are not trying to criticize trains; on the contrary, they are an important piece in the transition to a sustainable infrastructure. However, we can contribute with electric transport during the most intense travel period and at the same time allow more people to test-drive an electric car. It is also important to raise the issue of predictability and continuity in the transport system," says Jörgen Wedefelt." Audi, Press Release (2023, July 6).</li> <li>- "- Of course, we will not be able to fully replace train traffic, but hopefully, this will lead to a few more being able to travel electrically between major cities in Sweden," concludes Jörgen Wedefelt." Audi, Press Release (2023, July 6).</li> <li>- "Our momentum in e-mobility continues to increase, as evidenced by the nearly 60 percent increase in deliveries of fully electric Audi models compared to the previous year. During</li> </ul>
--	--	---

		<p>the first three quarters, we also delivered more cars to our customers overall than during the same period last year. With approximately 1.4 million cars delivered and an increase of 16 percent despite the challenging market situation, we can be very pleased. Thanks to all Audi employees for this strong performance!" Audi, Press Release (2023, October 30).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "A meeting between giants and pioneers in motorsport: Nine-time Le Mans winner Tom Kristensen met with the three drivers in Audi's Dakar team to experience the forerunners that paved the way for electrified drivetrains. In 2012, Audi was one of the pioneers to start electrification in racing with the Audi R18 e-tron quattro at Le Mans." Audi, Press Release (2023, November 1)</li> <li>- "Electric, fast, and emotionally charged: The five models that were gathered for the first time at Audi Sport in Neuburg also inspire experienced racing drivers. After decades of professional success, Mattias Ekström, Stéphane Peterhansel, and Carlos Sainz were impressed by the development of the electric drivetrains. Also present was 'Mister Le Mans' Tom Kristensen, who drove the predecessor to all e-tron models." Audi, Press Release (2023, November 1).</li> <li>- "For Audi, the future is an attitude. It's about promoting innovation, driving development forward, and reshaping the perception of mobility. Already, Audi is putting this into practice in several areas such as technology and design, sustainability, and lifestyle. Let yourself be inspired by our stories of progress." Audi, About Us.</li> <li>- "The first Swedish gas station was opened in 1902 by a man named Algot Tapper in Borlänge. It was a primitive solution, where Algot pumped gasoline via cans and barrels. But soon, the development gained momentum when the pump manufacturer MACK began building a network of stations across the country. However, with the breakthrough of electric cars, completely new and exciting opportunities arise. In the USA alone, the Biden administration has decreed that by 2030, there should be 500,000 charging stations in the country. Car manufacturers and designers are already busy updating the classic gas station concept and opening the door to the future. This is a development that Audi is actively driving." Audi, About Us.</li> </ul>
--	--	--

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Just this past summer, Audi opened an innovative city concept for fast charging in Berlin, collaborating with a gourmet bistro and a market hall while sharing the existing power grid. The charging station, consisting of energy storage with so-called "second life" batteries, only charges when the market hall has low energy demand. "It's truly a successful example of an intelligent charging concept, designed as efficiently and sustainably as possible, and also allowing us to purchase renewable energy," says Ralph Hollmig, project manager for Audi charging hub." Audi, About Us.</li>   <li>- "The circular economy stands in stark contrast to the traditional linear business model, which focuses on large amounts of readily available raw materials and low-cost energy. This despite knowing that the world's resources are finite and energy is becoming increasingly valuable - efficient use of both is crucial for how we want the future to look. "There is a definition of sustainability that we at Audi strive for: in everything we do, we should try to create sustainability that lasts forever - with an emphasis on 'forever'," says Dennis Christian Meinen." Audi, About Us.</li>   <li>- "Put simply: Audi has decided to take the lead in the impending transformation by doing what Audi does best - being a pioneer of new technology. "Vorsprung durch Technik continues to be necessary because we can only solve many of the world's major problems, such as carbon dioxide emissions and global warming, by using green technologies. We see ourselves as a company that guarantees freedom and individual mobility for our customers," says Audi CEO Markus Duesmann." Audi, About Us.</li>   <li>- "At Audi, we have a long-term vision for how we can contribute to a more sustainable world and drive development forward. The overall ambition is to create a lifecycle for all new models where we consider the climate all the way; from development, manufacturing, and operation - to service and recycling." Audi, Sustainability Tab.</li>   <li>- "Audi aims to become a leading provider of sustainable mobility. A clear commitment to electromobility is a cornerstone of Audi's sustainability strategy. Over the next five years, Audi</li> </ul>
--	--	--

		<p>will expand its portfolio of fully electric vehicles, with the plan to offer fully electric models in all core segments by 2027." Audi, Sustainability Tab p. 2.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Audi is on its way to becoming a provider of sustainable electric premium mobility. On its journey, the brand with the four rings follows an ambitious electrification strategy, which from step one provides the clarity needed for the transition to the era of electromobility." Audi, Sustainability Tab.</li> <li>- "With the launch of the Premium Platform Electric (PPE), Audi strengthens its position to become a leading provider of connected, fully electric premium mobility. Developed in collaboration with Porsche, the platform is a key building block to broaden Audi's global range of electric vehicles." Audi, Press Release (2023, March 17).</li> <li>- "We are on an exciting journey towards the future in an industry facing significant changes in the coming years. The challenges are global environmental factors: global warming, urbanization, dwindling natural resources, and digitization. The automotive industry is tackling these challenges in three key areas: Electric cars, connected cars/e-commerce, and new mobility services." Audi, Sustainability Report p. 5.</li> <li>- "We have to go back to the 1800s where a poor Sakichi grew up in a remote Japanese village and trained as a carpenter. [...] In Japan, Sakichi Toyoda became known as the king of inventions, and even today, Japanese schoolchildren learn all about Sakichi's works. But inventions and innovations are not just about Toyota's past but also present, and above all, future!" Toyota, About Us.</li> <li>- "Kiichiro, just like his father, was an inventor and unusually curious. He set off on long trips to Europe and the USA to study how industries worked. Not to imitate, but to do it better. [...] Instead of producing as much as possible, only as much as needed is produced. No waste of resources, no inventory, and no waiting for materials. Today, Akio Toyoda, Kiichiro's grandson, is the CEO of Toyota. Whether it's looms or cars, the drive to make improvements has always been present at Toyota." Toyota, About Us.</li> </ul>
--	--	---

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Berlin is yet another successful example of our intelligent charging concept," says Ralph Hollmig, project manager for Audi charging hub. "In this way, we can manage all hubs as efficiently and sustainably as possible. We also work on energy optimization so that we can buy renewable energy when it is cost-effective," adds Hollmig." Audi, Press Release (2023, April 6).</li> <li>- "Put simply: Audi has decided to take the lead in the impending transformation by doing what Audi does best - being a pioneer of new technology. "Vorsprung durch Technik continues to be necessary because we can only solve many of the world's major problems, such as carbon dioxide emissions and global warming, by using green technologies. We see ourselves as a company that guarantees freedom and individual mobility for our customers," says Audi CEO Markus Duesmann." Audi, About Us.</li> <li>- "The effort is a key part of Toyota's transition plan for carbon neutrality. A multi-faceted strategy aiming to offer a wide range of vehicles with reduced climate impact for the global market's various needs and conditions: electric hybrid, plug-in hybrid, battery electric car, and fuel cell car. The development of a hydrogen-powered transport sector is a crucial part of the strategy." Toyota, Press Release, (2023, September 5).</li> <li>- "Toyota argues that future mobility will go beyond just providing physical transport tools, to become more of a lifestyle partner closely tailored to each customer's individual needs. The design possibilities that the new battery electric platforms provide, together with individually tailored technical features, according to Toyota, offer new opportunities to create a more stress-free and comfortable experience." Toyota, Press Release, (2023, October 18).</li> <li>- "Therefore, we are constantly developing new products and solutions for a better everyday life and world. One example is the world's first hybrid that we launched as early as 1997. Today, we are on the fifth generation of hybrid technology. But the world cannot afford to stand still. Therefore, we have taken the next step in the development of future sustainable mobility." Toyota, About Us.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Partnership for</b></p>	<p><i>This story theme is illustrated by automotive companies joining forces</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Since last summer, Kia has been collaborating with innovative start-up</li> </ul>

**Sustainable Progress**

*with stakeholders to tackle environmental challenges collectively. Through collaborations, they implement innovative solutions, such as renewable energy adoption and emission reduction initiatives, driving environmental progress.*

**Total number of examples by:**  
 Toyota: 9  
 Volvo: 4  
 Kia: 13  
 Audi: 4  
**Total: 30**

companies: Odyssey Innovation, Waterhaul, Polyola, and Siev. They all re-use plastic waste from the sea in everything from surfboards to paddles and sunglasses, thereby contributing to reduced climate impact. Kia is also running a project to clean the sea of plastic waste in collaboration with Ocean Cleanup." Kia, Press Release (2024, February 28).

- "The initiative is developed in collaboration with our logistics partners Maersk, Kuehne+Nagel, and DB Schenker. These logistics service providers have, from June 1, 2023, switched to using renewable fuel equivalent to the amount of energy required for all container shipping done for Volvo Cars." - Volvo, Press Release (2023, July 4).
- "At Volvo Cars, sustainability is as important as safety. We strive to be pioneers in protecting people and the planet by working towards net-zero greenhouse gas emissions, embracing the circular economy, and conducting responsible business. When we do this, in collaboration with others, we contribute to addressing global sustainability challenges while supporting our profitable growth. Sustainability is at the heart of our business and is simply the key to our future success." - Volvo, Sustainability Report, p. 36.
- "In 2019, the SBTi (Science Based Targets initiative) approved our ambitious climate plan. According to the SBTi, our emission reduction targets are in line with the goals of the Paris Agreement. It's about limiting global warming to below 2°C compared to pre-industrial levels. We are committed to reducing our impact on the planet, and we know it will require a global effort. Therefore, it is important to collaborate with other like-minded companies, suppliers, and organizations to drive our own sustainability efforts and push for changes within our industry." - Volvo, Sustainability Tab.
- "We are committed to reducing our impact on the planet, and we know it requires a global effort. Collaborating with companies and organizations is crucial to driving industry change and results." - Volvo, Sustainability Tab.
- "In recent years, biodiversity has become increasingly important at Toyota. We are involved in many small, local projects that together can make a

		<p>big, positive difference. We promote integration throughout Toyota and among our business partners in all regions of the world, thereby creating 'green corridors' of collaborations worldwide." - Toyota, Sustainability Tab.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Toyota also impacts society and the environment through the purchases made from various suppliers. Therefore, it is important that all Toyota suppliers share the vision of a sustainable society and have active sustainability work themselves. In this way, we create and maintain long-term and mutually beneficial relationships with an ongoing focus on our shared responsibility. By working closely together, we can develop and deliver the best quality at the best price." - Toyota, About Us.</li> <li>- "The project receives financial development support from the UK government through the Advanced Propulsion Center, APC, which aims to support development projects that contribute to zero emissions in the automotive industry. The Toyota Hilux is a global icon for the brand, a work vehicle with exceptional reliability and durability. The development project has focused heavily on ensuring that these qualities can be maintained with a carbon-free fuel cell drivetrain." - Toyota, Press Release (2023, September 5).</li> <li>- "As a global provider of mobility, Toyota feels a great social responsibility. Therefore, we have long been driving projects to support and develop society, both globally and nationally. The projects range from protecting forests to supporting youth activities. Toyota is also involved in various international initiatives, including the WBCSD - The World Business Council for Sustainable Development." - Toyota, About Us.</li> <li>- "In Sweden, Toyota collaborates with high schools to keep them updated on the very latest technological developments. Students and teachers learn about environmental technology, hybrid technology, and other innovative technical solutions. Toyota, About Us.</li> <li>- "We have climate goals for our dealers aimed at reducing carbon dioxide emissions for all new cars sold. Among other things, car buyers are informed about how to think energy-efficiently when choosing a car and to choose a car according to their needs. To achieve</li> </ul>
--	--	---



		<p>sustainable mobility, we also focus on increasing people's awareness of the environmental properties of different cars and fuel-efficient driving. Therefore, we work with various types of environmental communication and training of dealers." - Toyota, Sustainability Tab.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Toyota Motor Europe is today launching a completely new innovation platform, Toyota Open Labs. A unique initiative that brings together start-up companies with Toyota's various business units within sustainable social change. The purpose is to scale up innovations and lead the market into the next phase of mobility." - Toyota, Press Release, (2023, August 29).</li> <li>- "If you are a startup focused on solving tomorrow's sustainability and mobility challenges, Toyota Open Labs is the right place for you. Toyota Open Labs represents a unique opportunity to turn bold startup visions into reality through exclusive support from our innovation ecosystem," says Kylie Jimenez, SVP People, Tech &amp; Corporate Affairs at Toyota Motor Europe." Press Release, (2023, August 29).</li> <li>- "We at Toyota believe in the future and have therefore taken several innovative initiatives and committed ourselves to driving them for the sake of future generations. It ranges from sunflower farming to strengthen the local economy in Rwanda, nitrogen oxide-absorbing grass (refined by Toyota themselves!) on an office roof in Japan, to cars powered by hydrogen that are partly made up of components made from plants!" - Toyota, Sustainability Tab.</li> <li>- "We want to promote and protect nature, both through collaborations with sustainability organizations and through the transition to sustainable mobility. As part of that effort, we have a long-term partnership with Håll Sverige Rent. We highlight their work and engage in connection with World Oceans Day and the initiative Håll Sverige Rent!, to reduce littering of nature." - Kia, Sustainability Tab.</li> <li>- "Kia Sweden initiates collaboration with surfer, photographer, and outdoor enthusiast Tim Latte. Tim has a long competitive career behind him, both in Sweden and internationally. Nowadays, he only surfs for himself and preferably in the cold waters along Sweden's coasts. Tim appears in Kia's commercial</li> </ul>
--	--	---

		<p>where he surfs in ten-degree temperatures and strong winds. Next up, Tim embarks on a road trip to Portugal with the electric SUV Kia EV9 GT Line." Kia, Press Release, (2024, February 28).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "We want to be part of the solution and contribute to creating a more sustainable future. As part of that effort, we not only want to take responsibility for our products and services but also influence the entire value chain. Therefore, Kia has entered into a global partnership with Ocean Cleanup, an NGO working to clean our oceans of plastic waste and prevent further pollution." Kia, Sustainability Tab.</li> <li>- "Kia Sweden initiates collaboration with one of Sweden's most famous interviewers. In the podcast 'Värvet,' Kristoffer Triumf has persuaded creators, entertainers, and influencers to open up and share their experiences. Now, he continues in a Kia EV6." Kia, Press Release, (2023, March 31).</li> <li>- "There are several ways to care for nature. Driving electrically is one. Not littering is another. To focus on the problem of littering in nature and try to influence motorists to behave better, Kia Sweden has been collaborating with the Håll Sverige Rent foundation since 2019. We want to contribute to creating awareness of how we can counteract littering in nature." - Kia, Sustainability Tab.</li> <li>- "Kia wants to contribute to reducing the footprint in nature. Driving electric is one way, not littering is another. As a friend company to Håll Sverige Rent, Kia Sweden wants to contribute financially and also help raise awareness of how we can counteract littering in nature. Håll Sverige Rent is running a special project on beach cleaning." Kia, Press Release, (2023, June 8).</li> <li>- "Today on World Oceans Day, Kia Europe launches a new initiative to contribute to a more sustainable development even at sea. Together with start-up companies Odyssey Innovation, Polyola, Sieve, and Waterhaul, the aim is to continue driving the passion for a sustainable movement." Kia, Press Release, (2023, June 8).</li> <li>- "As a Friend Company to Håll Sverige Rent, Kia wants to help raise awareness of how we can counteract littering in</li> </ul>
--	--	---

		<p>nature." Kia, Sustainability Report p. 15.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Litter along the roads is a big problem, and both animals and nature are harmed. Especially our seas and waterways are affected when litter from land blows into the water. To focus on the problem and be part of the solution, to influence drivers to behave better, Kia has supported Håll Sverige Rent since 2019." Kia, Sustainability Report p. 15.</li> <li>- "Sustainability is at the heart of our movement to inspire new mobility," says Sjoerd Knipping, Vice President of Marketing &amp; Product Kia Europe. "We share this vision with young brands like Odyssey Innovation, Waterhaul, Polyola, and Sieve by creating responsible experiences that enrich our customers' lifestyles and invite positive change." Kia, Press Release, (2023, June 8).</li> <li>- "We support the UN's global sustainability goals and are aware that we, along with the rest of the automotive industry, have a key role in transitioning to a fossil-free vehicle fleet. Conducting sustainable business involves minimizing our negative impact on the environment. Kia Sweden strives to operate responsibly and sustainably in Sweden, considering social, environmental, and economic factors in the company's operations at all levels. We aim to follow the global goals for sustainable development agreed upon by the majority of the world's countries." Kia, Sustainability Report p. 4.</li> <li>- "The main advantage of charging stations is, of course, that they can be built or taken down much faster than traditional gas stations and with less impact on the environment and surroundings. Just take the example of how Audi Sweden, in collaboration with Skistar and Jämtkraft over the past two years, has installed mobile fast chargers for holiday travelers on their way up to the mountains." Audi, About Us..</li> <li>- "We collaborate, among others, with Swedish Northvolt to ensure a good and reliable battery supply - but we also want to take responsibility for the batteries when they start to wear out in the car. Therefore, several development projects are underway where the batteries are used in a so-called 2nd Life, where they can still be very useful.</li> </ul>
--	--	--

		<p>One of the applications is battery storage that provides extra capacity during temporary power peaks. A cycle for the future. We have met Peter Carlsson, the entrepreneur behind Europe's largest battery factory, which will lead the world into a new electric era." Audi, Sustainability Tab.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "- We knew there was a need in Sveg but not that it was so great. During the weekends, there were queues on several occasions, and there have been cars here charging well into the night," says Jimmy Anjevall at Jämtkraft, who, together with SkiStar and Audi, has set up the temporary chargers in Ljusdal. And - Many have been very grateful for our effort, which also shows the need for more permanent charging stations on the way to the mountains. The number of electric car drivers is increasing every year, so the need will not decrease. And the location in Sveg was a request in the survey conducted by SkiStar and Jämtkraft among mountain travelers. Härjedalen Municipality contributed by making the municipal visitor parking lot available for the mobile charging station, where the proximity to service points for eating and shopping was particularly appreciated during the charging stop." Audi, Press Release, (2023, March 20).</li> <li>- "Through the partnership with the Alpine National Team, the brand contributes to the federation's sustainability work through national team cars that can be fueled with HVO100 alternatives or are entirely electric." Audi, Sustainability Report p. 40.</li> <li>- "- Kristoffer Triumpf is not only a skilled interviewer but also a self-made entrepreneur with great drive and creativity in everything he does. His keen interest in electric cars and technology, and the fact that he genuinely likes Kia and what we stand for in our ambitious goals to become a sustainable mobility provider, make Kristoffer Triumpf credible in conveying what the electric freedom with Kia entails," says Jonas Nilsson, marketing manager at Kia Sweden." Kia, Press Release, (2023, March 31).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Organizational Accountability</b></p>	<p><i>This story theme emphasizes the responsibility of companies to address their environmental footprint. This involves transparently reporting their commitment to emission reductions and outlining their plans to invest in</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Sustainability is central to our purpose and our business, and the key to our future success," says Johan Ekdhall, CFO of Volvo Cars. "In 2022, we became the first traditional car manufacturer to completely exit the</li> </ul>

	<p><i>sustainable and renewable energy to achieve sustainability.</i></p> <p><b>Total number of examples by:</b>  Toyota: 10  Volvo: 6  Kia: 4  Audi: 9  <b>Total: 29</b></p>	<p>development and production of combustion engines. Instead, we focused our investments and capital allocation on developing high-performance, fully electric powertrains. This updated framework reflects our continued commitment to sustainability, market practices, and regulatory reporting requirements." Volvo, Press Release, (2023, May 24).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "In 2030, Volvo Cars plans to only sell fully electric cars, and by 2040, we aim to be a climate-neutral company. The clear roadmap towards full electrification represents one of the automotive industry's most ambitious transformation plans." Volvo, Press Release, (2023, September 9).</li> <li>- "At the same time, the industry is changing rapidly - in terms of electrification, software, core data technology, and direct customer interactions," added Jim Rowan. "We gained a head start and are rapidly moving towards our ambition to become 100% electrified. We will continue to invest in the expertise, technology, and tools needed to create safe and sustainable mobility for our customers. We can do this through structural changes and increasing efficiency throughout the company." Volvo, Press Release, (2023, May 4).</li> <li>- "We are staying the course and continuing to make progress towards our ambition to lead in next-generation mobility," says Jim Rowan. "The proof of real transformation lies in execution, and we maintain focus on this as we enter the second half of 2023." Volvo, Press Release, (2023, July 20).</li> <li>- Although we have achieved a lot, we want to do even more and inspire others. Therefore, it is natural for us to set new and higher environmental goals for ourselves to build a better future. - Toyota, Sustainability Tab.</li> <li>- "Kia wants to take responsibility for the entire production chain and from 2040, we will therefore use 100% renewable electricity in all our production. [...] We want to be a leader in the transition to sustainable energy and inspire others to join us on the journey." Kia, Sustainability Tab.</li> <li>- Climate change is a fact. We are a mobility provider, and we realize that we are part of the problem. We have a responsibility to act. Our goal is to achieve zero greenhouse gas emissions</li> </ul>
--	---	---

		<p>by 2040. How? By reducing emissions throughout the value chain. Volvo, Sustainability Tab.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- We have presented our ambition to be climate-neutral in our entire operation by 2040, in line with the goals of the Paris Agreement. In the meantime, we strive to reduce our carbon dioxide emissions per vehicle by 40 percent between 2018 and 2025, address emissions within our operations and supply chain, as well as exhaust emissions. Volvo, About Us.</li> <li>- Kia sees itself as a global citizen and commits to an engagement that extends beyond the pursuit of the company's growth by contributing to making the world a better place - economically, socially, and environmentally. - Kia, About Us.</li> <li>- As one of the world's leading car manufacturers, we take our environmental responsibility seriously. This means creating vehicles that have as little impact as possible on the surrounding environment. It's not just a matter of emissions from vehicles while driving; we believe it's equally important to find cleaner, more sustainable alternatives both in manufacturing and disposal when they reach the end of their lifespan. - Toyota, Sustainability Tab.</li> <li>- "– Everyone knows the impact humans have on our climate," he says. "That's why I'm very grateful for the opportunity to drive an electric car to the waves. It feels good for the conscience. I think this car has what it takes for the modern adventurer." Kia centrally wants to inspire a more sustainable development through social engagement and lifestyles that also care for the environment. – Tim's drive, creativity, and forward-thinking go hand in hand with Kia's vision 'Movement that inspires'," says Jonas Nilsson, marketing manager at Kia Sweden." Kia, Press Release, (2024, February 28).</li> <li>- But, of course, the use of recycled materials and maintaining high-quality standards should not conflict with each other. The materials returned must be of the highest possible quality or adapted to new uses. 'This is not about downcycling, that is, the properties of a new product made of recycled material are lower than those of the original product,' says Philipp Eder, a strategist</li> </ul>
--	--	--

		<p>within Audi Procurement." Audi, About Us.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "If sustainability has gone from being a trend to becoming an obvious hygiene factor, transparency has climbed quickly among our priorities. American surveys even show that a majority of dissatisfied consumers are willing to give companies more chances - as long as they can demonstrate a high level of transparency." Audi, About Us.</li> <li>- "With net-zero carbon emissions, Audi means a situation where the company, after exhausting other possible reduction measures, compensates for carbon dioxide emissions from Audi's products or activities and/or carbon dioxide emissions that currently cannot be avoided in the supply chain, manufacturing, and recycling of Audi vehicles through voluntary offset projects worldwide. In this context, carbon dioxide emissions generated during a vehicle's usage phase, i.e., from delivery to the customer, are not considered." Audi, Sustainability Tab.</li> <li>- "At a global level, the Volkswagen Group has ambitious environmental work where they are connected to the Global Compact. In order to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement, Volkswagen AG has also committed to reaching Net Zero according to the framework of the Science Based Targets initiative, where the goal was approved in 2022. Having an owner and being part of a group with ambitious environmental and climate goals is a driving force for us at VGS to further reduce our environmental impact. Their environmental work is also evident through the increasingly comprehensive requirements they place on us as a distributor." Audi, Sustainability Report p. 34.</li> <li>- "The past year with lifted restrictions, which meant a return to offices and workplaces, has led to increased travel for us at VGS. This has resulted in increased emissions through flights and a greater number of car trips, as well as more employees using the office's resource and energy consumption. Despite this, it is extremely positive that our emissions from business trips by car have decreased compared to the previous year. The biggest contributing factor to the decrease is that we have been able to continue offering our employees the option of electric cars instead of fossil-fueled vehicles as company cars. By being able to offer</li> </ul>
--	--	--

		<p>our employees to choose electric cars, as well as various forms of hybrid cars, we have managed to reduce our emissions from our company cars by 31%, from 67 tons of CO2 to 46 tons of CO2." Audi, Sustainability Report p. 34.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "The car's final journey should no longer lead to the scrapyards. Material Loop is Audi's pilot project to utilize parts and materials from older vehicles. All with a focus on sustainability and the circular economy." Audi, About Us.</li> <li>- "Responsible use of resources is the very heart of the circular economy. This means that we must improve sustainability, reparability, and thus also the recyclability of our products," says Dennis Christian Meyer." Audi, About Us.</li> <li>- Specifically, the charter supports our principle of 'devoting our business to providing clean and safe products and improving quality of life through all our activities'. The charter was developed in 1992 and revised in 2000. It expresses how we want to contribute to a prosperous society with zero emissions by developing environmental technology, making continuous improvements, and collaborating with others. - Toyota, Sustainability Tab.</li> <li>- "Audi has set the goal for the entire company to be net carbon dioxide neutral by 2050. This goal entails a significant transformation for the company. Various measures to achieve this goal have already been implemented throughout the value chain. Audi's production facilities worldwide are already geared to operate net carbon dioxide neutral by 2025." Audi, Sustainability Tab.</li> <li>- "The biggest source of our emissions falls under our indirect emissions, i.e., Scope 3 according to the GHG protocol, namely the cars we sell to customers. It is a complex emission factor because it is directly linked to our business and growth. Electrification and the transition to electric drive are powerful forces for drastically reducing this part of emissions, and the Volkswagen Group has an aggressive strategy to launch and sell electric cars." Audi, Sustainability Report p. 36.</li> <li>- "We are proud of our environmental history and the environmental achievements we have made – for example, we were the first to establish a</li> </ul>
--	--	--



		<p>special recycling operation for vehicles, the first to have a factory where no waste goes to landfill, and the first to mass-produce a hybrid car, a hydrogen-powered fuel cell sedan." Toyota, Sustainability Tab.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Long before legislation regulated the handling of chemical substances, we made changes to reduce our environmental footprint. We have reduced or completely eliminated the use of heavy metals such as lead, cadmium, and mercury, which can cause long-term damage to the environment if not handled correctly. We use lead-free parts and rust protection treatment as well as mercury-free lighting and controls. We also avoid using solvents and paints that may contain harmful substances." Toyota, Sustainability Tab.</li> <li>- "We have spent decades researching to develop vehicles that are kinder to the environment. This has led to the production of, among other things, hybrid technology, which has already proven its value in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and helping us move towards a more sustainable mobility. However, we want to go even further, and the goal is to reduce CO2 emissions from our vehicles by 90% by 2050, compared to the level we were at in 2010." Toyota, Sustainability Tab.</li> <li>- "At Toyota, we welcome the change to WLTP as it provides our customers with a more accurate basis for calculating fuel consumption and CO2 emissions. As a leader in clean mobility, we have been researching for decades how vehicles can be made more environmentally friendly and have produced technical solutions such as electric hybrid – which reduces greenhouse gas emissions and carbon dioxide emissions." Toyota, Sustainability Tab.</li> <li>- Toyota's commitment to the environment has always extended beyond its own operations. As citizens of society, we have a responsibility to the planet we inhabit and want to contribute to a sustainable society in harmony with nature. - Toyota, Sustainability Tab.</li> <li>- 'Returning to nature' may seem like an unexpected message from a mobility company. But it stems from our commitment to consider the environment in all our operations. We strive to have a positive impact on</li> </ul>
--	--	---

		<p>society, the planet, and its inhabitants, to leave things better than we found them. - Toyota, Sustainability Tab.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Our choices, both as individuals and as organizations, affect our climate. Sweden's overarching climate goal means that by 2045 at the latest, we should have no net emissions of greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere. We at Kia Sweden are well aware that what we can primarily contribute is to increase our sales of plug-in cars and contribute to responsible mobility. Kia in Sweden is currently the third largest car brand in Sweden and is at the forefront of plug-in car sales." Kia, Sustainability Report p. 23.</li> <li>- "We are constantly looking for ways to reduce our impact on the environment. This applies not only to the impact of cars, but also to how they are manufactured and the resources we use. It can be summarized with four R's - Reduce, Re-use, Recycle, and Recover. These are our guiding principles to ensure careful use of natural resources, increase the lifespan of our products, increase recycling opportunities, and do more to recover energy. - Toyota, sustainability Tab.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Call For Action</b></p>	<p><i>This story theme emphasizes the urgent need for action and responsibility in addressing climate change, calling for proactive measures and leadership from both industries and political leaders and other stakeholders to combat the issue effectively.</i></p> <p><b>Total number of examples by:</b>  Toyota: 0  Volvo: 3  Kia: 3  Audi: 7  <b>Total: 13</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The use of renewable fuel is by no means the ultimate solution when it comes to removing carbon dioxide from maritime freight. However, this initiative shows that while waiting for long-term technical solutions, we [the automotive industry] can actually take action now and implement methods that yield significant results," says Javier Varela, Chief Operating Officer and Vice President of Volvo Cars. Volvo, Press Release, (2023, July 4).</li> <li>- "What the world needs now, in this critical time, is leadership," says Jim Rowan. "It is high time for industry and political leaders to be strong and resolute and deliver meaningful strategies and actions to combat climate change. We are committed to doing our part and encourage both our colleagues and political leaders around the world to do theirs." Volvo, Press Release, (2023, September 19).</li> <li>- "COP28 is a historic commitment to climate action," says Javier Varela, Chief Operating Officer and Vice President of Volvo Cars. "The world must quickly come together and take action to avoid the worst effects of climate change. We are committed to</li> </ul>

		<p>doing our part, and we urge business leaders and political leaders around the world to do the same." Volvo, Press Release, (2023, November 30).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Let's move towards a more sustainable future together. Nature, the world's greatest innovator. But what so greatly advanced us has also hurt our greatest sources of inspiration. Nature. It's time to step back. Step back and realize that we can do better. In small steps and in giant leaps. We must act, together. Let nature lead the way. To create a fully sustainable future." Kia, Sustainability Tab.</li> <li>- "– Gröna Mobilister congratulate Kia and a few other brands on the award," says the association's chairman, Jesper Johansson. "We hope that other car companies will be inspired by these green role models. Car manufacturing does not become sustainable just because it is made transparent, but it must be made transparent to have a chance to become sustainable." Kia, Press Release, (2023, July 4).</li> <li>- "The journey will not be easy, everyone agrees on that. The green transition places tough demands on everyone involved in the mobility industry, and far beyond that. How we produce energy, how raw materials are extracted and used, and how infrastructure is developed and expanded - these are just a few of the key issues that must be addressed. Urgently." Audi, About Us.</li> <li>- "The transformation awaiting the transport sector and all industries adjacent to it is more disruptive than when humanity transitioned from horse and carriage to motorized vehicles. Not everything will be ready at the same time - but all parameters must contribute to the common goal. That's how one could describe the era that awaits us. There are truly big questions waiting for solutions and gigantic challenges that must be tackled with determination and wisdom. Audi, About Us.</li> <li>- "In other words, there is no reluctance to change. On the contrary, one might detect a certain frustration that many other parts of society and industry cannot keep up at the same pace. From a Nordic perspective, it is easy to get the impression that electric propulsion will soon be a matter of course, and in countries like China, development is also progressing rapidly. In other parts</li> </ul>
--	--	--

		<p>of the world, it will take longer." Audi, About Us.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "The circular economy stands in stark contrast to the traditional linear business model, which focuses on large amounts of readily available raw materials and low-cost energy. This despite knowing that the world's resources are finite and energy is becoming increasingly valuable - efficient use of both is crucial for how we want the future to look. "There is a definition of sustainability that we at Audi strive for: in everything we do, we should try to create sustainability that lasts forever - with an emphasis on 'forever'," says Dennis Christian Meinen." Audi, About Us.</li> <li>- "The year ended with the abolition of the climate bonus for environmentally friendly cars, leading to an extreme surge in orders for electric cars, which then tapered off. The political decision has since created uncertainty that the market for environmentally friendly cars is stagnating in favor of fossil-fueled vehicles. We at VGS and the Volkswagen Group are convinced that electrification is one of the key prerequisites for us to achieve the Paris Agreement, and the electric development continues strongly with more and updated models." Audi, Sustainability Report p. 13.</li> <li>- "A key factor for success with electric mobility and the ongoing transition is the charging infrastructure, i.e., the availability of good opportunities to charge one's electric vehicle, which today is not developing at the same pace as the demand for electric cars. Creating an efficient and accessible charging infrastructure is a major challenge that affects our ability to meet the demand for electric vehicles in the future." Audi, Sustainability Report p. 54.</li> <li>- "An essential issue for us is that our customers should be able to charge their electric cars at home overnight, as user studies show that this is the most important place for charging. Today, our customers who live in apartment buildings, which is over half of Sweden's households, do not have the same opportunity to charge their electric cars near their homes as homeowners with their own charging box. Our customers in apartment buildings depend on the public charging infrastructure, which has not kept up with the rapid growth in the number of</li> </ul>
--	--	---

		<p>new electric cars in recent years. We at VGS work to influence the development of the charging infrastructure and drive the development towards E-mobility. For example, we participated during Almedalen Week to highlight the future of mobility and its challenges and opportunities. We have also, together with Mobility Sweden, provided input to the Swedish Transport Administration and the Swedish Energy Agency's work on an action program for charging infrastructure and hydrogen refueling infrastructure. Since 2021, we have also been part of an electrification pact together with the City of Stockholm, Ellevio, and Scania. The purpose of the collaboration is to accelerate the transition to an electrified transport sector by 2030." Audi, Sustainability Report p. 54.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "We want to create a movement where we work together for a sustainable future. Because it is the movement forward that allows us to discover new worlds, experience new things, and awaken new ideas. But it is a journey we need to take with respect. For the nature where we draw our inspiration, for the communities we operate in." Kia, Sustainability Tab.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Total number of examples by:</b>  Toyota: 33  Volvo: 20  Kia: 32  Audi: 48  <b>Total number of examples: 133</b></p>	