

Bachelor Thesis in Human Ecology

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The Other Amazon:

Deconstructing Amazon's Climate Pledge and Sustainability Discourse



Abstract

The techno-conglomerate *Amazon* has emerged as a corporate giant, branching out their operations to include many sectors of the global market. While previously concealing their carbon footprint, Amazon co-founded *The Climate Pledge* together with two former architects of the Paris Agreement in 2019 with the goal of reaching net zero carbon by 2040, ten years earlier than the Paris agreement. A copious amount of criticism has been leveled at the firm for a various number of affronts; including accusations of anti-competitive behaviour; surveillance; inhumane working conditions; supporting climate change denying think tanks; and selling software technology to Big Oil and highly criticized Homeland Security subdivision ICE. Through the lens of critical discourse analysis and a greenwashing perspective, a selection of material concerning the Climate Pledge and Amazon's sustainability discourse was analyzed with the question "*how does Amazon construct itself as being sustainable?*" followed by corollaries "*what discourses does it reproduce?*" and "*is Amazon engaging in greenwashing?*" in mind. I argue that Amazon uses its discourse to conceal its preceding abuses and hypocritical behaviours by using language that situate them in an ecomodernist discourse that is vague and contradictory, refraining from acknowledging its culpability in perpetuating waste, pollution and carbon emissions.

Key words: amazon, amazon Inc., amazon.com, sustainability, critical discourse analysis, the climate pledge, greenwashing, ecological modernization, eco-modernism

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Introduction

When deciding on this essay topic, I went straight to my mom to run it by her. I was met with a very enthusiastic response – something that I did not expect since she looks at me with questioning eyes whenever I talk about the internet, let alone discourse analysis. I became suspicious she did not understand what I meant. “I’m talking about Amazon the company... not *the* amazon in South America”. Realization dawned on her and we laughed about it, but the mix-up highlights a dynamic between the human and natural world: while the real amazon is being cut down whenever it’s not being ravaged by wildfires, the eponymous company is rapidly taking over the world.

During the global Covid-19 pandemic, this has proven especially poignant. The Amazon has lost trees at a more rapid pace, while the other Amazon has hired an additional 175,000 new employees and CEO Jeff Bezos’ fortune has grown to 182 billion American dollars – the company is reportedly growing unlike ever before. With stay-at-home orders and restricted freedom of movement, more people than ever have found their way to Amazon’s retail website, attracted by low prices and an abundance of choice. Familiar with reports of the horrible working conditions at Amazon, I set out online Christmas shopping with the intent of avoiding Amazon at any cost. Unsurprisingly, I failed this attempt almost immediately when shopping for books at *Book Depository*, completely unknowing it is also owned by Amazon. Resistance might be futile. Admittedly, I harbour conflicting feelings about the company. While cherishing the vast choice of literature and fast delivery, it is impossible not to be appalled about what journalists and researchers continue to unearth. And while loving browsing brick-and-mortar bookstores, their assortment of books are dwindling, leading me again and again to find what I’m looking for online.

In a turn of events, breaking a pattern of “notorious” non-philanthropy (Duhigg, 2019) Amazon co-founded *The Climate Pledge* together with the organization *Global Optimism* in 2019, in an aim to become environmentally sustainable. It commits to reach net zero carbon by 2040 by pledging to disclose, reduce and offset emissions. The conflicting dynamics of Amazon pledging for the climate while pursuing rapid growth, lead me to wonder about the legitimacy of its claims. Because many times has the world seen big corporations and CEO:s make grand gestures like this: Richard Branson, CEO of *Virgin*, pledged 3 billion dollars to develop “green” technology, something that was deemed “groundbreaking” by former president Bill Clinton. Billionaire and former mayor of New York City, Michael Bloomberg, has been celebrated as a climate hero by donating to green groups, while Bill Gates has pushed for finding “energy miracles” (Klein, p. 236). Despite these seemingly

philanthropic efforts, the climate crisis is accelerating, leading us to question whether Amazon's pledge is any different than these unfruitful efforts. This thesis will explore what it means when Amazon places itself at the forefront of the climate fight, and how the discrepancy between what Amazon *says* and *does* can tell us the merit of The Climate Pledge.

Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this study is to expose how, through language, specific discourses about human-nature relationships are reinforced, and how they perpetuate larger ideas of how the climate crisis should be "solved". This will be explored through a case study of e-commerce giant Amazon. The path to mitigating the current environmental crisis need not be further obscured by bad-faith actors, or worse, seemingly good bad-faith actors.

According to discourse theory, language is closely linked with power and ideology. What we say and what we don't say has an equally big part in shaping our view of the world. I find the exposing of ideology and power particularly fitting for this topic, since Amazon partakes in unequal power relations in several ways. As one of the largest companies in the world, it is obvious that the company wields enormous power. However, discourse is only one aspect of that power. Through user data surveillance (further explained in *Background*), the company has more insight into its customers' activities than the general public have had about their carbon emissions. But it is through discourse they can ostensibly persuade its shareholders that they are taking climate change seriously. Through discourse, they can fill customers with optimistic promises of change, soothing cognitive dissonance and making people feel less queasy about shopping from a company helping ICE separating small children from their families (Hao, 2018).

Amazon deserves extensive scrutiny in all aspects of its business, but for this thesis, its environmental activities and discourses will be the subject. Its ubiquitous nature paralleled with its rapid expansion makes it an interesting case study for investigating how corporations construct themselves as sustainable. How they attempt to marry the contradictory aspects of growth, consumption and technology together with the environment lays the foundation for interesting questions and hopefully interesting answers.

This essay will systematically go through a selection of materials from Amazon's discourse to answer the following question followed by two corollaries: "How does Amazon construct itself as being sustainable?" followed by "what discourses does it reproduce?" and "does Amazon engage in greenwashing?"

2. Background

In *background*, I will first give a contextual understanding of Amazon as a company, their various ventures into different markets, but most importantly, the company as a global force and its effects on consumers, employees, the economy and the environment. The aim of the background is to get a comprehensive perspective on the influence the company has as a global agent. In addition, this background will give an overview of previous research on Amazon.

The main resource for the background is Brevini & Swiatek's book "Amazon: Understanding a Global Communication Giant". I have chosen this as a main text primarily because it was published in November 2020, making it a fresh take on the rapidly expanding company. Secondly, the book is part of a series called "Global Media Giants" published by Routledge. Its publication has the following motivation: "understanding media corporations is essential to understanding the political, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions of our contemporary societies" (routledge.com). I concur with this admission, although adding *environmental dimensions* to it.

2.1 The Everything Company

Sometimes people ask us, are you a book company or a music company, or are you now a toy company or ... ? And we're none of those things. We're trying to be a customer company.

- Jeff Bezos

Amazon is a technology conglomerate, with its arms reaching everywhere from retail (Amazon.com), software (Amazon Web Services), surveillance technology (Rekognition) and entertainment (Amazon Studios, Audible), to grocery stores (Whole Foods), journalism (The Washington Post) and space travel (Blue Origins), with the last two being privately owned by Amazon's founder and CEO, Jeff Bezos. As of writing this, there is talk that Amazon will branch out further and buy the American news corporation CNN (Independent, 2020). Other acquisitions include *Goodreads*, *Book Depository*, *IMDb* and *Twitch*.

The firm was founded by former Wall Street hedge fund executive Jeff Bezos in 1994, initially focusing on online bookselling. Today it has an average annual growth of 26.9%, with about 280.52 billion dollars in product and net revenues in 2020. It is ranked as the fourth World's Most Valuable Brands in 2019 by Forbes, beating Facebook, Coca-Cola and Disney (Brevini, 2020, p. 7-8). Globally, amazon.com usually has an average of 197 million visitors each month (Dayton, n.d),

Amazon's brand revolves around the customer, with the goal of being "Earth's most customer-centric company" (Amazon, 2020). Instead of profiting off high prices, it aims to offer a magnitude of different services with relatively low prices "to lock the customer in the Amazon realm forever" (Brevini, 2020, p. 13). In theory, a person can live a life consumed by Amazon: getting their news from amazon-owned newspapers, food shopping at amazon-owned grocery stores, watching amazon-produced TV shows and movies, using apps with amazon created algorithms, and buying books and everything in between at amazon.com (illustrated in *figure 1.*) However, being consumed by it does not necessarily mean being aware of it. Quinn (2019) explains Amazon's method of operation as "Amazon wants to fade from your life without ever leaving it", blending into the background, wanting to make everyday life run more smoothly. It is the amalgamation of low prices, fast deliveries and an abundance of choice that has made Amazon one of the biggest companies in the world.



Figure 1. Illustration showing a ubiquitous "sustainable" Amazon society: a man listening to audible, woman reading on a kindle, packages being delivered left and right, family watching prime video, woman shopping at presumably whole foods, and an Alexa hovering (Amazon, 2020).

2.2 Amazon as an economic, cultural and political actor

In this section, I wanted to describe Amazon as a global actor in terms of political, economic, and cultural influence. This is essential in order to understand the corporation's behaviour and subsequently understand the context of their sustainability discourse.

In the neoliberal paradigm, corporations have increased influence over politics, with policies founded on free-market thinking and deregulation have given many corporations free reigns (Swiatek, 2020, p. 51) and as a consequence, money in politics has become a way for corporations to leverage politicians' positions on the activities of firms. Influencing whether government agents take a strict or more lenient view of their firms by building personal relationships and giving donations. With the former White House Press Secretary for the Obama administration, Jay Carvey, helming Amazon's global affairs (Wilson, 2015), lobbying has become a vital part of Amazon's operations. In 2018 it had "lobbied more government entities than any other tech company [...] and sought to exert its influence over more issues than any of its tech peers except Alphabet Inc.'s Google" (Nix, 2019). Its 16 million dollar lobbying budget puts them just behind Facebook as the largest lobbying force in Washington D.C in 2019 (Romm, 2020).

The acquisition of *The Washington Post* was a purchase not meant for Bezos to influence its editorial board and content, but to gain political influence in the nation's Capital (Shephard, 2020). Romm (2020) describes how the tech-giants have become "some of the most potent political forces in Washington", and Swiatek (2020) adds how these companies now spend an equal amount or more than the oil industry, banks and the pharmaceutical industry in lobbying (p.34).

Another aspect of their operations with global political implications is *Amazon Web Service*. As one of the world's largest cloud services, it is used by the likes of Instagram, Netflix, Pinterest, NASA, Parler, the CIA and Homeland Security. AWS developed a face recognition service called *Rekognition*, currently deployed by the the US Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) (Rose, 2013), an organization on the receiving end of copious amounts of criticism (Lartey, 2018) One of them being separating young children from their families at the US-Mexican border. AWS also partnered with Big Oil the same time as joining the climate pledge (Stone, 2020), something that white collar employees within Amazon expressed aggrivement against (Brevini, p.41).

Surveillance is also practiced on its customers in several ways through Amazon's algorithms. In the Amazon research literature, this has become a topic of interest. West (2019) highlights how surveillance is perceived as a service by its customers, pinpointing a growing trend where surveillance connotations with loss of privacy are taken over by "warm feelings" for surveilling technologies like Amazon's *Alexa* and *Amazon Echo*, voice-interactive smart speaker devices. Estimates suggest 157 million American households are using Alexa. West also argues that the incentive to produce these devices is to collect more user data to enhance customer experience, improve purchase recommendations and target advertisement. To anticipate what

customers want and therefore increase their consumption (West, 2019). The power the company can wield from consumer attachment is further discussed by Culpepper & Thelen (2019), describing how tech-companies with “platform power” benefit from consumers’ attachment to the platform and service, which proves an important oppositional force when faced with government scrutiny.

In terms of economic influence, Amazon has achieved an operation of scale that lends them an extreme competitive edge. On its retail platform, Amazon-produced items are prioritized by the algorithm (Brevini, 2020, p. 66), while third-party retailers scramble for visibility and fight against resellers selling either copies or unauthorized products (Duhigg, 2019). Third-party retailers also need to pay double-rent to sell and advertise on amazon.com, giving them an unfair disadvantage to Amazon’s own products which have no such terms to follow (Brevini, p.67). Particularly, the publishing sector has been dealt an allegedly devastating blow with the rise of amazon.com (Swiatek, 2020, p.52), with physical bookstores progressively disappearing and “high-brow” and obscure literature taking a backseat to easily marketable, more “mainstream” books. This proves to be a continuing brought-up issue among the publishing industry, authors, journalists and researchers (Budinski & Köhler, 2015), with the industry raising concern that Amazon “has used its dominance in ways that we believe harm the interests of America’s readers, impoverish the book industry as a whole, damage the career (and generate fear among) many authors, and impede the free flow of ideas in our society” (Authors United, 2015).



Figure 2. Amazon Fulfillment Center in Peterborough, UK (Ratcliffe, 2014, Getty Images/Bloomberg)

2.3 Relentless: The Culture at Amazon

To further be able to contextualize and understand Amazon's discourse on sustainability, the internal culture is crucial to describe, since the consequences of this culture has led to criticism from the public and government.

Jeff Bezos, the brains behind Amazon, showed big aspirations already as a teenager. At his high school graduation, he held a speech about wanting to save humanity and the planet by colonizing space and turning the earth into a national park (Besilk, 2020). The ambitions of its founder have perpetrated every aspect of the conglomerate. Before Amazon settled on its current name, Bezos almost chose the name "relentless", foreshadowing the ruthless tinge of ambition permeating and will now be described.

One of the core concepts and guidelines of action part in constituting the company's culture is the *customer*. Alleviating any kind of strain on the customer is the top priority. Another discarded name for the company was "Cadabra" (from Abracadabra) (Stone, 2019), which encompasses the customer-centric approach of the firm and what their end goal is: for customers to click, and for products to magically appear as soon as possible. As Quinn (2019) states "it wants to reduce all friction from commerce". However to achieve this, a culture of efficiency and productivity, or *relentlessness* has been implemented. Swiatek (2020) writes that a "twofold ideology" of intensity and continuity drives the company (p.50). Bezos conceptualizes his company as a flywheel – a metaphor describing a wheel that spins fast while storing energy. This metaphor that informs every business decision that Amazon makes (Gershgorn et al, 2017). The metaphor reflects how amazon attracts customers by cutting prices, which in turn attracts more customers, making it possible to further cut prices – and in theory, the cycle perpetually continues indeterminately.

However, to keep the flywheel spinning, the image of Amazon becomes more socially concerning. In 2015, *The New York Times* exposed how Amazon's warehouse workers were forced to work 80 hours a week with only short breaks (Kantor & Streitfeld, 2015). Additional reports included employees urinating in bottles to meet productivity targets; injury rates reaching higher levels than the US national average; work-caused chronic pain; and sick leave being frowned upon (Godlewski, 2018; Sainato, 2020; Spitznagel, 2019). Vending machines filled with painkillers were reported at one fulfillment center (Rivas, 2019), as they call warehouses at Amazon. Any plans for unionizing has been met with opposition from above, with reports of hirements of union-busting firms and managers manipulating workers to perceive unions negatively (Duhigg, 2019). Similar reports have come from abroad warehouses (Bonazzo, 2018). Higher up in the corporate hierarchy, white collar workers describe a culture of impossible standards requiring them to be available around the clock to

answer messages – a culture described as “bruising” by the New York Times. Employees suffering from miscarriages, cancer or other serious medical or personal issues were not given time to recover, and one employee in book marketing said she saw “nearly every person I worked with, I saw cry at their desk” (Kantor & Streitfeld, 2015). To summarize, Amazon has been unanimously described as a “ruthless workplace driven by the demand for productivity above all else” (Gershgorn et al., 2018). Additional uncovering of the realities of working for Amazon has unfolded in journalistic articles and books, both written by undercover reporters (Bloodworth, 2018; Selby, 2018; Rivas, 2019) and employees (Amazon Workers, 2018; Anonymous, 2018).

Amazon continues to deny these allegations, but in the aftermath of governmental scrutiny, most notably by senator Bernie Sanders, a bill titled *Stop Bad Employers by Zeroing Out Subsidies Act* – or Stop BEZOS Act – passed through congress. This resulted in Amazon increasing its minimum wage to 15 US dollars/hour. However, the company took away stock options and monthly bonuses for employees, resulting in workers overall earning less money than before (Kim, 2018).

2.4 Amazon and the Environment

In this part I want to touch on what Amazon has done and plans to do in the name of sustainability. Prior to pledging for the climate in 2019, the conglomerate has been a supporter of the UN’s Paris Agreement and participated in a number of sustainable initiatives, like reducing packaging material, investing in renewable energy and energy efficiency, recycling, technological innovation and sustainable transportation (Amazon, 2019b). Nevertheless, Amazon has been quiet about its environmental footprint, something it has been criticized for years (Ertem-Eray, 2020) publishing its first carbon footprint in 2019 (Amazon, 2019b), and the first sustainability report in September 2020. In 2018, the company’s carbon footprint was 44.4 million metric tonnes, which amounts to near the total carbon emissions of a small country, like Switzerland or Denmark (Marland et al, 2019). The subsequent year it increased by 15% to 51.17 metric tons of carbon dioxide (Danigelis, 2020).

The lack of transparency has attracted criticism from non-profit *Carbon Disclosure Project*, giving Amazon a grade of “F” (Gonzales, 2016) and Greenpeace deeming it “...one of the least transparent companies in the world in terms of its environmental performance, as it still refuses to report the greenhouse footprint of its own operations” (Greenpeace, 2017, p.4).

In 2019, Amazon co-founded the Climate Pledge together with Global Optimist, an independent organization started by former Paris Agreement architects

Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac. They describe the organization as concerned with transforming pessimism to optimism when it comes to social and environmental issues (Global Optimism, n.d). With the pledge, Amazon commits to regularly report, decrease and offset greenhouse gas emissions. To achieve this it will be using and funding solar and wind power technologies, with the goal of powering 40% of their whole operations with renewable energy by the end of 2019, and reaching 80% renewable energy usage by 2024. By 2030, their operations will be powered by “green” technology by 100% and Shipping emissions will be reduced by 50%. In an effort to appear transparent, the firm has publicly shown the location of their wind and solar farms (Amazon, 2020).

To reduce packaging material, the company has employed “frustration free packaging”, which has reduced 665, 000 tons of excess packaging (Amazon, 2019a). Simultaneously the company introduced packaging unfit for recycling in the UK, and with an annual shipping of 4 to 5 billion items, the reduction of packaging weight falters in comparison to the total weight of packages (Brignall, 2019).

The company also hired a leading expert on global supply chains to join their sustainability team in 2016, however despite this alleged “dream team”, their work has remained behind closed doors so far (Gunther, 2016). Although, this signals that the firm has taken a more serious approach to sustainability than before.

In terms of research on Amazon or adjacent companies and the environment, researchers have explored the environmental impact of companies like Amazon and e-retail in general. Initially, research suggested e-commerce resulted in less carbon emissions than physical stores (Weber et al., 2009), but more recent findings shows this is only true for delivery to areas with low population density (Wygonik & Goodchild, 2012), with additional research finding online shopping placing added burdens on transportation networks, resulting in more pollution (Laghaei et al., 2016). Caraway (2020) interrogates Amazon’s sustainability through an ecological economics perspective, systematically rebuking Amazon’s claims of being environmentally friendly by using the laws of thermodynamics to strengthen his argument. He concludes that Amazon’s quest for growth will offset any environmental gains.

2.5 Summary and research gaps

This background section has described several aspects of Amazon’s operation. Dimensions of politics, culture, and economics have painted a picture of a company with wind in its sails, but leaving tainted waters in its wake.

Simultaneously, research regarding Amazon or adjacent topics has systematically been briefly overviewed in the background. While some researchers

have explored Amazon through an explicit ecological perspective (Caraway, 2020), most literature exists within realms of business, sociology, media and communication. Therefore, investigating Amazon's sustainability through the lens of critical discourse theory has seemingly not been practiced, making this thesis an addition to a previously unexplored facet of Amazon literature.

3. Method, Theory and Conceptual Frameworks

This section will outline relevant information regarding *Critical Discourse Analysis*, *ecological modernization* and *greenwashing*. Critical Discourse Analysis serves as both theory and method, while knowing the contents of ecological modernization is important to be able to pinpoint if or when the text is reproducing eco-modernist ideas and words. The concept of greenwashing will give a framework for explaining whether there are discrepancies between Amazon's words and actions, misleading or concealment of information.

3.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

The method used to investigate the research questions is Critical Discourse Analysis. Critical Discourse Analysis (further referred to as CDA) is a theoretical and methodological approach consisting of a smorgåsbord of different approaches, which in turn have different conceptual frameworks and philosophical foundations. However, what unites them is that the praxis is universally concerned with language as shaping and being shaped by our social reality – with *discourse*.

But first of all, what exactly is discourse? Discourse can be conceptualized in numerous ways, but is generally thought to imply *ways of talking* and how those ways influence and draw influence from other ways of talking. This “talk” can be operationalized as texts, visuals, conversations, even being stretched to include non-verbal communications such as behaviours, gestures and aesthetic attributes like clothing styles. For the purpose of this thesis, discourse is limited to verbal and visual signs – text and images. CDA is *critical* in the sense that the purpose of the praxis is to investigate how power relations are upheld through the practice of discourse (p. 69). As Winther Jorgensen & Phillips (1999) puts it, the way discursive practices are reproduced and consumed is a driving force in societal change as well as upholding social and cultural structures and processes (p.67). Secondly, this means that discourse is something that is both constituting and is constituted, and social practice and discourse have a dialectical relationship – like stated before, the world shapes and is being shaped by discourse (p.68). Thirdly, language should be empirically analysed in the social context, something that will be discussed more

further on. And lastly, CDA is of the opinion that discursive practices contribute to perpetuating and creating unequal power relations between different societal groups. The effects of discursive practices are therefore ideological (p.69).

3.2 Human Ecology & CDA

CDA is particularly suited to human ecology because it concerns itself with issues of how power and ideology operates and perpetuate certain ideas and relations. In human ecology, those relations concern the mutually reciprocal interplay between nature, society and the individual (Hornborg, 2010, p. 212). The ongoing ecological crisis puts a question mark around the ethical consequences of our society, our individual choices, and our relationship to nature, as well as raising major questions about the current social order (Hajer, p. 53). Therefore, what CDA and human ecology have in common is the questioning of structures that otherwise seem indisputable.

The measures taken to “solve” or mitigate environmental problems are currently executed top-down with political strategies. These strategies are all formulated through language, making discourses at the center of how we perceive, conceal and approach the crisis.

3.3 Fairclough’s method of Critical Discourse Analysis

Norman Fairclough’s approach to CDA has been chosen as the mode of analysis in this study. What distinguishes this approach from others is that it is one of the more comprehensive and evolved methods in CDA (Winther Jorgensen & Phillips, p.66). This method provides equal weight to both the linguistic, intertextual and social practice aspects of the text, which allows one to get a more comprehensive perspective.

The method consists of analysis on both micro and macro scale, with three inter-relating dimensions of analysis. These are the *description* (textual analysis), *interpretation* (process analysis) and *explanation* (social analysis/social practice) dimensions.

In *description*, close textual analysis is employed, where the purpose is to scrutinize the linguistics used in the text, such as *transitivity* and *nominalisation*. The description dimension can be applied both to visual and verbal signs, but this essay prioritizes explaining the latter in more depth since this is what the material focuses on. It is important to note that the empirical material will be subjected to a number of grammatical terms. This increases validity of the analysis, and rules out some grammatical terms. However, applying all of them in this thesis would be redundant, and the grammatical terms which fit the texts are the only terms that will be

disclosed. Since readers might not be familiar with the nitpicks of linguistic terms, the ones used in the study will now be defined.

Transitivity: analyzing transitivity means looking at how a situation or process is connected/not connected with the object or subject (Winther Jorgensen & Phillips, p.87). For example the phrase “10,000 Amazon warehouse workers were fired” is different from “Amazon fired 10,000 warehouse workers”. The former phrase is passive in that Amazon absolves any agency in the firing, while the latter phrase the firm is giving agency – defined as the capacity a person/group or thing has of exerting power and achieving an end (merriam-webster.com). According to CDA, different ways of phrasing things like this have ideological consequences: power structures (between employer and employee) are reinforced in the former phrase, since there is less responsibility put on the company/people that did the actual firing. Winther Jorgensen & Philipps describes this kind of transitivity as framing the situation as “a natural phenomenon” (Ibid, p. 87).

Normalisation: This is another grammatical facet which concerns agency by either enhancing or minimizing it in a situation or process, and a noun substitutes the situation or process (Ibid, p. 87) An example: “There were many firings at Amazon”.

Modality: describes the degree of agreement a speaker has with a phrase, or in other words: their subjective relationship to the process/situation (Ibid, p.87-88) An example would be that “maybe climate change is real” has a lesser degree of agreement than “climate change is real”.

After textual analysis, the next level of analysis is *interpretation*. Here we are interested in how the text is produced and consumed. One aspect of analysis is looking at what discursive practices the text reproduces. If the text is reproduced in different forms, it can be of interest to investigate the intertextual chain of texts. CDA practitioners also analyse the material in this dimension by exploring what other discourses the text reproduces (p.85-86).

In *explanation*, a broader perspective is applied to analysis, and we look at what larger context the text can be situated in. In other words, what social reality produces the text? This dimension is important since it acknowledges non-discursive forces like material processes, and requires the use of theories outside of CDA practice. Cultural, sociological or theories relevant to human ecology can be applied – in this thesis, emphasis will be put in explaining Amazon’s discourse through a greenwashing perspective.

3.5 Ecological modernization: People, planet... and profit?

Ecological modernization has emerged as a dominant narrative in which we conceptualize the mitigation of environmental problems, proving it a suitable framework to analyze Amazon's sustainability discourse.

In the literature, two seminal works emerge that cover the topic of ecological modernization through the lens of critical discourse analysis: Maarten Hajer's *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Ecological Modernization and the Policy Process* (1995) and John S. Dryzek's *The Politics of the Earth: Environmental Discourses* (1997). For a simplification of the research process, only one text was chosen. According to Tuler (1998), Dryzek applies a broader perspective of environmental discourse without specific case studies, and no provision of systematic data analysis (p 66). Hajer has a more narrow focus on eco-modernism, which proved to be more illuminating and useful for this study.

Fundamentally, ecological modernization is characterized by believing the solution to ecological problems is further industrial development and advancement of technology, with the leading agents of change being corporations and market dynamics (Fisher & Freudenburg, 2001). The road to how this discourse gained its influence proves interesting: In the 60's, the success of the moon landing proved to be a shift in perspective about the relationship between humankind and the Earth. The image of a tiny blue planet, floating quietly in a dark vastness, triggered a collective realization of the fragility of man and Earth, according to Hajer (p.11). This image prevailed as a symbol of the environmentalist cause, with the Brundtland report, *Our Common Future*, suggesting the image to have been a bigger paradigm shift in thinking than the copernican revolution (p.8).

The publication of *Limits to Growth* and the Stockholm UN conference in 1972 is considered the definitive beginning of environmentalism in the halls of power and government by Hajer (p. 19). Hajer describes the emergence of ecological modernization discourse to be a consequence of (at least) three factors: The first being the publication of the *World Conservation Strategy* in 1980, which argued strongly to view conservation in terms of efficient resource utilization and sustainable development. Secondly, an amalgamation of different activities from the OECD resulted in a push for an eco-modernist perspective where pollution was framed as an "efficiency problem" and environmental issues should be fiscally controlled, not legally regulated. Thirdly, debates within the UN on development, safety and environmental issues resulted in several reports propelling ideas of sustainable development forward. All these factors lead up to the release of the Brundtland report, where a paradigmatic shift occurred in the environmental discourse. The narrative of sustainable development promoted by the report made it

conceivable for different actors with different interpretations of the ecological crisis to assemble as a unified, global coalition (p. 12). The report swayed a variety of previously opposed forces, like the World Bank and IMF behind this new narrative. Essentially, Hajer argues that ecological modernization was a compromised but strategic solution to accommodate a spectrum of different opinions, as the UN commission behind the report initially did not view the free market as a viable solution for environmental problems (p.84-85). What made ecological modernization so attractive to a wide variety of actors was the framing of the ecological crisis as an opportunity for technological innovation and economic growth, a positive-sum game, instead of government regulation.

In terms of discursive composition, ecological modernization should be viewed as a coalescence of different discursive practices that often go hand in hand with each other, forming one overreaching discourse. Subsequently, in my analysis I will look for the parts that form this whole – words like “innovation” and “sustainability”.

What makes eco-modernism such an intriguing concept is briefly argued by Hajer, and I concur with his inquests: Is it the proverbial wolf in sheep’s clothing, or a necessary evolution to eventually lead us to a truly sustainable society (p. 25)? Therefore, it can be fascinating to examine how one of the largest and most rapidly-expanding firms in the world relate themselves to environmental discourse.

3.6. Greenwashing

In 2019, Amazon was the first corporation to sign the Climate Pledge (The Climate Pledge, 2019), a promise including among other things to disclose emissions frequently. The extreme pivot from initially keeping the world in the dark in terms of its sustainability, and then becoming the “leader” of the corporate world in the green transition, raises questions regarding the firm's internal true motivations and aims. Therefore, using a framework of greenwashing can prove productive in pinpointing the authenticity in this behaviour.

We are now living in the fourth decade under eco-modernism as the dominant discourse in environmentalism. As a consequence, different phenomena have sprung up here and there which try to marry green thinking with our modern proclivities like tourism, consumption and development. Eco-modernism put the responsibility on firms to tackle environmental issues, and it seems obvious that the one way firms chose to propel the green agenda forward is through consumption.

The emergence of the green market is a result of increased public awareness of environmental issues such as climate change and pollution. From there, words like *sustainability* and *Corporate Social Responsibility* have become parts of a paradigm in

the business world where environmental and social issues have gained importance (Porter & Kramer, 2006). The green market is expanding (Majlath, 2017) and has proved profitable for companies like *the Body Shop*, creating their entire brand based around the idea of being “natural” and “sustainable” (Kaplan, 1995). However, in terms of actual environmental footprints like carbon emissions and exploitation of the global south’s natural resources and communities, the picture becomes muddier and lets us ask the question whether these brands are as good for the environment as they say they are. The corollary: Is it even possible for a corporation to be *good* for the environment? As established prior, ecological modernization is of this belief. The tension of corporations’ internal quest for growth combined with the external pressure to become more environmental has resulted in a phenomenon called greenwashing. The term was first coined by activist Jay Westerveld in 1986 (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020), and the definition has been debated extensively: Some researchers consider greenwashing to include both social and environmental issues, while others distinguish it as only concerning the environment (p.10). Ultimately, what constitutes as greenwashing lacks definite definition, but some conclusions regarding the general frames in which to think of it is the following: It is thought to encompass the practice of a corporation, organization, or institution, which disclose only positive environmental activity while not disclosing the negative, therefore misleading its customers and stakeholders. The authors identified this as occurring at either firm-level or product-level (Delmas & Burbano, 2011, p. 66).

Contreras-Pacheco & Claasen (2017) provides a framework from which to think of firm-level greenwashing behaviour with five checkboxes: 1) *Dirty business*: indicating businesses who are inherently unsustainable, but promotes sustainable services or products. 2) *Ad Bluster*: using advertising to divert from sustainability issues, 3) *Political Spin*: referring to regulators being influenced to benefit corporations and in consequence be detrimental to sustainability. 4) *It’s the Law, stupid!*: attributing law-required sustainability actions as an accomplishment for business. 5) *Fuzzy Reporting*: exploiting the one-way communication of sustainability reports to twist or conceal truths while overall presenting a false positive image in terms of social corporate responsibility (p. 527). A concrete example of firm-level greenwashing is when Shell asked its followers on twitter “what are you willing to do to reduce emissions? #energydebate”. Instead of acknowledging their role as one of the world’s worst polluters, responsibility was put on the public (Cockburn, 2020). In consequence, this tweet sparked outrage, and highlights how blatant greenwashing can be received by the public. However, sometimes the waters get murkier as it can be hard to really know one is subject to greenwashing. According to advertising firm Ogily and Mather, greenwashing has grown the last ten years on an epidemic scale

(Hsu, 2011). Misleading customers has resulted in decreased trust in corporations and their products, with increased difficulty in identifying actual sustainable products (Nyilasy et al., 2014).

The neoliberal paradigm of deregulation and free markets has made it difficult to control greenwashing, even if regulation is higher in developed countries compared to developing countries (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). In spite of this, the United States has poor regulation, and since there is no consensus of what greenwashing actually entails Delmas & Burbano call for increased research on the topic to give policymakers and managers the tools to rightly identify and take action against it (p. 65).

De Freitas Netto et al. (2020) also identified two other subcategories of greenwashing: *claim* and *executional* greenwashing. The former term is what the bulk of research has focused on, describing when a corporation conceals, misinforms or misleads that a product is more environmentally-friendly than it really is by using either falsehoods, vague and ambiguous language or a combination of these (Parguel et al., 2015). The latter concerns the use of nature-evoking elements like green colours, birdsong or images depicting picture-perfect natural landscapes in advertisement, websites, or reports. These elements might invoke a false sense of the “greenness” of a firm. Parguel et al. (2015) refer to how these images “trigger ecological inferences subtly by activating implicit references to nature throughout nature imagery”. However, this form of greenwashing is the least explored in the literature, but their study suggests that this tends to affect the non-expert consumer, while consumers with knowledge of greenwashing are not affected (Parguel et al., 2015).

To summarize, greenwashing can be seen as corporations responding to consumer awareness of environmental problems by concealing, misleading, or not disclosing information surrounding the impact of its business and products.

4. Material

The empirical material chosen communicates Amazon’s presupposed concern for the environment and sustainability, but are communicated on different platforms and genres. The reasoning behind having these different sources is to get a comprehensive understanding of the company’s discourse. Even if this study is of a qualitative nature, seeing patterns across different texts enhances certain conclusions about what messaging the company really wants to put forth.

The material chosen for this study is Amazon’s 2020 Sustainability Report, Amazon’s sustainability page and the official website for The Climate Pledge. This website contains a speech transcript of Jeff Bezos and a youtube video.

I have chosen these materials because they are different public channels of communications as well as media (speech, report, video, internet page etc.), and cross-referencing them will give a clearer picture of what discourses Amazon consistently perpetuate and where the texts contradict one another. The sustainability report is 124 pages long, and specific texts have been chosen that are directly relevant to my research question. The Climate Pledge website will be analyzed more in its entirety, while relevant material on Amazon's sustainability page will be chosen. The website for Global Optimism will also be briefly analyzed in the last part of analysis since Amazon's sustainability discourse will have common denominators with it, and including it in the material will enhance the understanding of the intertextual nature of Amazon's discourse.

4.1 Official Website for the Climate Pledge

The first material is the official website for the Climate Pledge, which Amazon co-founded with Global Optimism, an independent organization for “transformative change” founded by Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac, former UN architects of the Paris Agreement. This website was naturally chosen because it is where people are directed to learn about Amazon's new pledge. It consists of stylish web design consisting of several background images: a pair of superimposed hands holding a spinning earth between its thumb and forefinger, and a highrise in the top-right corner with hanging greenery sticking out from every balcony. The main items on the page is a link to a youtube video, a short text and a time line consisting of what and when brands signed the climate pledge. Signatories so far include Microsoft, Unilever, Mercedes-Benz, Best Buy, McKinstry, Siemens, Henkel, Signify, Uber and Coca-Cola European Partners. There is also a link to a speech by Amazon's founder, which exists both in transcript and audio form. The pledge consists of three goals:

- 1) report greenhouse gas emissions, 2) implement decarbonization in line with the Paris Agreement, 3) neutralize any remaining emissions with additional, quantifiable, real, permanent, and socially-beneficial offsets to achieve net zero annual carbon emissions by 2040 (Climate Pledge, 2019).

4.2 Amazon Sustainability Report & Page

The report was published by Amazon in September 2020, titled “*All in: Staying the Course on Our Commitment to Sustainability*” and is available to the public in pdf-format. It consists of 124 pages describing both its ambitions with the climate pledge and what they are doing to implement it, as well as describing its goals and

strategies for example dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic and workers' environment. The report also describes different sustainability projects employed, like joining the Nature Conservancy in an urban greening project in the Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf district in Berlin, and a reforestation program in Appalachia.

When searching for "amazon sustainability" on google, Amazon's sustainability page is on top of the page. This page contains short texts and leads to several web pages about sustainability through different links.

5. Analysis

The analysis will be divided into three sections: section one will discuss the discourse surrounding the climate pledge, and section two will concern Amazon's sustainability report together with its sustainability website. I also wanted to take a brief look at *Global Optimism's* official website, since it is their campaign that set this pledge in motion. The discourse they present will influence Amazon's own, and it can be of interest to understand the intertextuality of amazon's language.

The first two dimension's in Fairclough's method (the textual analysis and discursive practice) will separately be discussed in concert with the specific materials, with some elements of social analysis, while the *explanation* part of the analysis will discuss all of the material together.

By having many different channels of communication analyzed, a clearer picture of what Amazon is trying to communicate might appear. Also of interest, is if any material contradicts other texts, or if some channel of communication elucidates something that the others do not. In the analysis, words of note will be written in **bold**, indicating that these words were of particular interest for analysis.

5.1 The Climate Pledge - Paris... 10 Years Early

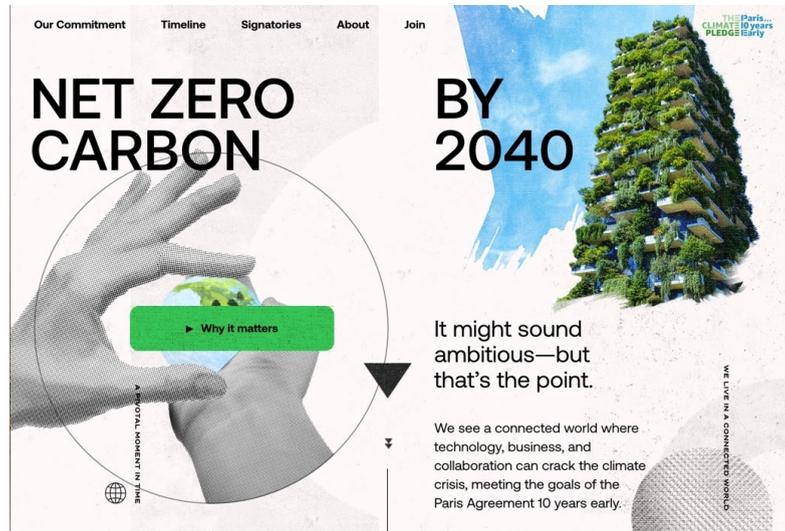


Figure 3. Main page on www.theclimatepledge.com (2019)

5.1.1 The Climate Pledge website

The first materials to be analysed are the ones focusing on the Climate Pledge. These materials consist of a website, made up of pretty graphics, a short text; a youtube video about the pledge; and a speech transcript by Amazon's CEO.

As illustrated in *Figure 1*, The climate pledge website has two giant hands holding a spinning earth, adding another piece of information that creates the larger discourse. This image is the main focal point of the background. As Hajer outlined (p. 7), the image of the earth has a significant place within environmental discourse, and came initially to symbolize the vulnerability of the planet and its inhabitants. The website image can be seen as subverting part of that metaphor: man literally has the Earth in its hands, reverberating the message of “*we have the power to choose our future*”. The image is indicative of ecological modernization discourse when it comes to the power relations between earth and humankind: Man as the dominator and Earth as the dominated – we have the world in our hand. As Hajer outlines, the *story-line* of the famous Earth image has changed, coming later to symbolize a universal threat against all of humanity, instead of a call to reconsider environmental problems locally (p.11). When ecological issues are reconceptualized as one big problem, unified, big solutions seem most fitting.

The introductory text on the website's main page is short, yet summarizing: “*It might sound ambitious, but that's the point. We see a connected world where **technology**, business and collaboration can **crack the climate crisis**, meeting the goals of the Paris agreement 10 years early*” (Climate Pledge, 2019.) This shows how they communicate the solution to the climate crisis to involve technology, business and “collaboration”,

an eco-modernist approach. Furthermore, the notion that the climate crisis can be “cracked”, as if a puzzle with a clear solution, reverberates the positive attitude of “win-win” characterized by ecomodernism.

5.1.2 Climate Pledge Youtube Video

On the Climate pledge website, a green rectangular button with the words “why it matters” written on it (shown in *figure 2.*) redirects to a 56 seconds-long youtube video made specifically for the website. It is presented with animated graphics and instrumental music, with a female voice stating the following:

“We’re at a crossroads, a pivotal moment in time where we can change the course of history if we take meaningful action now. Because while climate change presents many challenges, the opportunities might be just as great. We have the opportunity to create a better future... And we can get there sooner than you think if we act together now. The Climate Pledge unites companies from around the globe in building a better world. All companies that signed the pledge commit to net zero carbon by 2040, by agreeing to regular recording, carbon elimination and credible offsets. Let’s make our future the one we choose. Take a leadership position on climate change and learn more about becoming a signatory.” (The Climate Pledge, 2019)

The use of a collective but vague “we” creates an active but elusive voice in the text. Who exactly is “we”? However, the last line firmly confirms that this is directed at other companies, but the “we” implicitly also refers to humanity. When it comes to modality, the first words “*We’re at a crossroads, a pivotal moment in time*” cement how climate change is in fact an undeniable truth, but in terms of transitivity it refrains from acknowledging agency in why the world is headed in this direction.

“... *the **opportunities** might just be as great*” introduces cautiously optimistic uncertainty – a low degree of affinity. In addition, the discourse sees the crisis as an opportunity for innovation and growth, echoing the rhetoric of ecological modernization. With “*Climate Pledge unites companies from around the globe in building a better world*”, reiterates the message of corporate environmental governance, with “*building*” signifying sustainable development.

Other interdiscursive practices deduced from this text is found in the phrase “*let’s make our future the one we choose*”. As stated previously, the former UN executive of Climate Change co-founded this pledge has written a book specifically titled “the future we choose” (Figueres & Rivett-Carnac, 2020). Furthermore, this phrase is also indicative of the power these companies now have, and that they decide the future.

There are also a significant number of vague concepts presented in the text, like *net zero carbon* and *credible offsets*. Net zero carbon does not mean that carbon emissions stop, but that an equal amount of emissions will be sequestered as emitted. They are vague because there is no consensus as to what “credible offsets” entail and how exactly net zero carbon can be reached in a socially responsible way. Even if one of the Climate pledge’s commitments is to offset emissions in a “realistic” and socially responsible way”, there is no further description or guidelines as to how that will go about. This leaves the interpretation very open to the reader, and makes the meaning conducive to an individual’s, corporation’s or institution’s own comprehension of these concepts.

5.1.3 Jeff Bezos’ Speech

The speech can be found on the official website (www.theclimatepledge.com) for the pledge, under the title “impossible is an attitude” beside a picture of Jeff Bezos. One can click on either an audio recording or transcript of the speech.

By analyzing how the head of the firm tries to publicly communicate this new step for the company, this can further tell us what discourses the company perpetuate, since a consistency between different channels of communication give more of a whole picture of what they want to say. The following text is a transcript of the speech:

“The Climate Pledge is to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement 10 years early. This is really only something that can be done in collaboration with other large companies, because we're all part of each other's supply chains. And one of the things that we know about Amazon as a role model for this is that our business, it's a difficult challenge for us because we have deep, large physical infrastructure. We're not only moving information around, we're moving packages around. We deliver 10 billion items a year. This is real physical infrastructure at real scale. And so, we can make the argument—and we plan to do so passionately—that if we can do this, anyone can do this. It's going to be challenging, but we know we can do it and we know we have [sic] do it.” – Jeff Bezos, CEO, Amazon (The Climate Pledge, 2019)

Analyzing the nominalisation of the first sentence in the speech shows an absolvment of agency – it is not “The Climate Pledge is for *Amazon/Companies* to meet the goals...” but “*The Climate Pledge is to meet the goals...*”

When it comes to transitivity, the speech describes how taking on climate change is “a difficult challenge” because of the company’s scale. In the text, Amazon situates itself as a passive actor in relation to the crisis. Bezos further reiterates the theme seen in the other material: the “solving” of climate change as a collective

effort by the business world, therefore putting the challenge out of governmental and institutional hands, and into the corporate. Again, this points less to the responsibility and complicity Amazon has, but frames it as a collective responsibility, without acknowledging how companies are complicit in the crisis.

When it comes to modality, the level of agreement of whether the company can go through with this pledge is dual: phrases like *“that if we can do this”*, *“it’s going to be challenging”* and *“something that can be done only in collaboration with other companies”* juxtaposed with *“but we know we can do it and we know we have to do it”* creates an uncertainty in Bezos’ and the company’s degree of sureness in taking on this pledge. Even the more active and sure phrases (*“but we know we can do it...”*) is constructed in a way that lowers its affinity, since the phrase *“we **know** we can do it and we **know** we have to do it”* is not the same as *“we **can** do it and we **have** do it”*. Just knowing that you can do something does not equal that you will do it – but it does communicate that the company is aware of surmounting pressure from the outside that it has to take climate problems seriously.

In general, the speech only addresses the main narrative in broad strokes: Amazon joins climate pledge, wants other companies to join, says they know they have to do something. Any specifics are left out, and in this particular text, the company implicitly situates themselves in the eco-modernism discourse, even if words or phrases signifying eco-modernism are lacking. But the idea of companies acting together to reach the Paris agreement ten years early indicates they are reproducing the discourse. By being situated on the climate pledge website, the discourse of the speech, visuals, video and short text, creates an interdiscursivity. The interplay between the more explicitly eco-modernist discourse of the rest of the website and the more implicit speech makes it appear that Amazon agrees with this discourse, without having to explicitly use the more positive and spirited language of Global Optimism.

5.2 Amazon and Sustainability



Figure 4. Illustration Amazon's sustainability report (Amazon, 2020)

First of all, I want to briefly analyze how Amazon reproduces their sustainability discourse on its official website: **“Our Planet** - We are committed to and invested in sustainability because it's a **win all around** – it's good for the planet, good for business, for our customers, and for our communities” (Amazon, n.d). Certain power structures are reinforced in this text already in the first words – “our planet” upholds an anthropocentric perspective on humans' ownership of nature. *“It's a win all around”*, reproduces business language, where there exists a dichotomy of winners and losers, where business deals need to be win-win, and here Amazon frames sustainability as a win-win situation. This is very much an ecological modernization narrative, where the ecological problems are framed as a positive-sum game (Hajer, p. 138), or in other words, a win-win situation.

5.2.1 Amazon Sustainability Report

The Amazon Sustainability Report is 124 pages long, so a selection had to be made of what material should be included for analysis. The main focus was on text that concerned 1) sustainability, 2) the environment and 3) the climate pledge. The rest of the report brings up issues concerning the employment environment, which proved not to be relevant for this particular essay.

I chose this material because while the climate pledge is a collaboration with another actor, this report is where the company has a chance to formulate their own rhetorics around sustainability.

Several quotes which concern the environment, the pledge and sustainability will now be analysed. Firstly, I wanted to acknowledge one of the images in the report, resembling the hands-holding-the-earth-image that was seen on the climate pledge website. That is a large hand holding a pen, evidently drawing an image of a sphere teeming with biodiversity: ponds filled with fish, green hills, mountains and trees, butterflies, birds, a frog and a stag (Amazon, 2020, p.20). The hand echoes the sentiments of “we make the future”, and upholds an anthropocentric perspective of human-nature relationships.

As established in the background, Amazon prides itself on being a “customer-centric company”. Their business model is centered around making commerce “frictionless” for the customer (Quinn, 2019). Several times in the report, we can see that Amazon constructs itself as a vessel for customers to make environmental decisions, making it one of the recurring themes throughout the report, with variants of the word “customer” being referenced over 150 times in the report. An example of this is: “Amazon is committed to making it easier for **customers** to participate in making a positive impact on society” (Amazon, 2020, p.15). In another sentence Amazon states: “At Amazon, we take a science-based, **customer-centric approach to sustainability**” (p.91). In the former sentence, the company implicitly refrains from acknowledging their part in environmental problems, and instead constructs itself as a vessel, which through people can make “sustainable” choices. The latter phrase informs us that the firm perspective of sustainability is seen through the customers’ eyes, which is further reinforced in the phrase “*sustainable food selection means something different to each customer*”(p.39), becoming clear that “sustainable” is an elusive concept, lacking clear definition. Thereby, confirming that the company doesn’t define the word, the customer does.

Amazon’s discourse revolves around the customer, and this discursive practice merges with eco-modernism, with the use of the word “science-based”. Amazon further uses the word when saying “...In line with our ongoing **science-based approach to tackle climate change**” (p.111). Hajer describes how in eco-modernism “*there is a renewed belief in the possibility of mastery and control, drawing on modernist policy instruments such as expert systems and science*” (Hajer, p.25). “Science-based” therefore signals an ecomodernist discursive practice, conjuring associations of pathos, rationality and control.

Amazon also touts *circular economy* as a major aspect of the report through big bold titles and references to it. Contextually, this word is used when describing how Amazon is “*minimizing waste, increasing recycling and providing options for our customers to reuse, repair and recycle their products – sending less material to the landfill and more back into **the circular economy loop***” (Amazon, 2020, p.31). Circular economy is also an

ecomodernist friendly concept, since it implies that consumption can continue, if only the material can be recycled or reused as it goes into the “loop”. By using this concept, Amazon is somewhat (although implicitly) acknowledging how consumption is an ecological problem, but does not explicitly reckon with the issue of consumption, or say that consumption needs to decrease. Instead, they put the responsibility on the customer to make green choices.

To conclude, a pattern emerges in the textual analysis. Amazon both refrains from acknowledging its own role in the climate crisis, while constructing its sentences to often have low degrees of affinity when it comes to communicating its commitment to following the climate pledge. It reproduces several discourses that can be placed with the larger discursive framework of ecological modernization.

5.3 Social Practice

In this part of the analysis, the textual and discursive aspects of analysis will be placed in relation to the broader context of social practice. Social practice can illuminate us about the ideological consequences of Amazon’s language (Phillips & Winther Jorgensen, p.90), and what that tells about whether it reinforces power structures and/or if the discourse is somehow indicative of societal change.

First of all, I consider it important to contextualize how the Climate Pledge has emerged. Independent organization *Global Optimism* approached Amazon about joining this pledge, and as described in the *material* section, plenty of big brands have joined. One can draw several parallels between this pledge and the emergence of sustainable development as the dominant discourse of environmentalism with the Brundtland Report. As described, Our Common Future managed to coalesce a different range of actors with a wide range of opinion to rally under this “unified” approach to handle environmental problems. Therefore, the strategy of Global Optimism is reminiscent of Our Common Future – compromising its message to bring on previously opposed actors. The question is whether this is just repeating the same mistakes or if the Climate Pledge actually can end differently.

The language on its website proves interesting to analyze: there, Global Optimism proclaims that “*we aim to change the story about climate change, from one of doom to one of opportunity*” (Global Optimism, n.d). As previously established in the background, eco-modernism echoes the same optimistic sentiment, where environmental problems should be seen as an opportunity. In their mission statement, they use words often seen in more critical environmental discourses, like “*radical collaborations*” and “*outrage*”, but juxtaposes these buzzwords with phrases indicative of eco-modernism like “*resilient mindsets*” and “*be at the vanguard of investing in nature*”. This might reflect the fact that a more critical climate discourse is

emerging, and Global Optimism is seemingly trying to play both sides and appeal to everybody. They are engaging in an interdiscursive practice that could be seen as contamination discourse, essentially meaning co-opting words to appeal to other demographics. However, it is difficult to reach conclusions without hindsight of whether this is *discourse contamination*, or simply a *tactical polyvalence of discourses*. The latter describes how different discourses merge to create a new space for discussion and debate (Hajer, p. 41).

On the website there is also an advertisement for Global Optimism's podcast. The title of their podcast captures this merging of two discourses as well, calling it "*Outrage + Optimism*". It is interesting that "outrage" takes center stage in their discourse, since the feeling of outrage in the context of social issues often indicates asymmetries of power, where the agent is on the receiving end of oppression with outrage coming from a place of powerlessness and directed at the powerful. The narrative of Global Optimism seems to be that there is no culprit, no one to blame, but that the crisis is just something that is happening to us. Where is the outrage supposed to be directed at? At the companies who now are said to hold the answer to the crisis, that are now the poster boys of change and optimism? The whole *raison d'être* for Global Optimism therefore seem to be just about changing attitudes, something they explicitly state as their mission with "we believe it is essential to change narratives" (referring to climate change) – believing that denialism and apocalyptic narratives are what refrains the world from doing something, when it is in fact a problem related to structural and political dimensions, like capitalism, neoliberalism and corporatism, that have a large part in perpetuating environmental problems. Governmental action on corporations like regulations would be a much more effective implementation than trying to slowly make corporations tip the scale towards more environmental gains than losses. The *narrative change* Global Optimism is looking for is to reinforce the idea that this can be a positive-sum situation, a win-win situation, however the win-win seems to self-evidently encompass the idea that when the corporate world wins, everybody wins. I want to come back to a discussion of this line of reasoning, since it envelops hegemonic discourses that should be deconstructed. However, firstly I want to explore how the concept of greenwashing can illuminate Amazon's discourse further.

As established in the "greenwashing" part of this thesis, when a firm only discloses positive information about its environmental activities and disregards the negative – it is greenwashing. Laufer (2003) asserts that "*The very firms that wash their reputation through public relations, complex front coalitions, sponsored "think tanks" and who publicly lead the fight against global warming [...] remain some of the worst corporate offenders. **The appearance of environmental leadership [...] may actually serve to***

decrease care levels. Corporations can rely on their reputations for compliance and social responsibility with lesser scrutiny” (p. 257). Assessing Amazon through Laufer’s statement proves that many things check out: Complex front coalitions? Check. Publicly leading the fight against global warming? Check. Remain some of the worst corporate offenders? Check.

Notwithstanding, Its numerous climate sins outlined in this essay are not accounted for on either Amazon’s sustainability page or the report, which does indeed give an overly rosy picture, hence misleading customers and shareholders. However, Amazon does disclose their carbon emissions in the report (p.X), as well as reporting that they achieved 42% renewable energy “*across their business*”, 2% over the goal (Amazon, p.23). Although, what exactly “*across their business*” entails is not clear. Unfortunately, stating its carbon emissions and showing its progress with sustainability commitments only muddies the waters further in terms of determining whether it is engaging in greenwashing. But, I would argue that omitting one sin does not outweigh the rest of the greenwashing sins. Assessing its firm-level greenwashing against the backdrop of Contreras-Pacheco & Claasen’s (2017) five checkboxes (described on pages 16-17), three of those emerge as relevant. *Dirty Business* raises the question whether Amazon is an inherently dirty business. Even if it evidently does business with Big Oil, e-commerce is not obviously more “dirty” than any other business, like the fashion or food industry. Therefore, one can not definitively brand them as “dirty business”. However, one can make the argument that its scale is inherently dirty, due to being responsible for a large part of global emissions and waste. *Political Spin* puts the spotlight on Amazon’s venture into lobbying. Even if details of its lobbying efforts remain concealed, it is valid to speculate that *if or when* the government decides to either employ economic regulations, Amazon will fight since it wants to remain unrestricted. The last checkbox of relevance, *Fuzzy Reporting* accurately summarizes Amazon’s sustainability report, since the analysis has continually shown “fuzzy” language. To conclude, the sin of *Political Spin* is a behaviour that one can firmly argue Amazon engages in.

The greenwashing literature further concur with my conclusion of why Amazon pushes for sustainability. In the literature, moves like the ones Amazon is making is often written off as a response to public pressure or damage control of public perceptions (Hooks et al., 2002; Adams, 2002), rather than a genuine wish for change. As highlighted in Laufer’s statement above, this might paradoxically result in lesser scrutiny from government agents. However, American president-elect Joe Biden has stated that “*No company pulling in billions of dollars of profits should pay a*

lower tax rate than firefighters and teachers” (Duhigg, 2019), affirming how the government is continuing its quest to investigate tech-companies.

However, even if the accumulating evidence suggests that Amazon engages in firm-level greenwashing, the question is still open to whether they can reach the goal of being carbon net zero by 2040. What remains contradictory is the plethora of different sustainability initiatives Amazon has undertaken, initiatives easily categorized as ecomodernism. It is using and starting solar power plants, wind farms, net zero carbon delivery and funding a number of conservation projects. Ecological modernization has historically been a hotly debated concept, with both proponents and critics, often taking a black-and-white stance. However, as Fisher & Freudenburg argues (2001) the reality might be more complex (p. 704). I do not want to make any absolute judgement of eco-modernism as a project, since there might be situations where aspects of it proves to be productive, resulting in more environmental gains than losses. However, the question one needs to ask oneself is whether eco-modernism is a viable option *for Amazon*.

Despite its many sustainable initiatives, Amazon has shown in the construction of its sustainability discourse that expanding its consumer base is the top priority, and with sentences like “*we take a customer-centric approach to sustainability*” suggesting consumers’ beliefs about Amazon being sustainable is more important than actually being sustainable. One of the main themes in Amazon’s discourse has been the *customer*, and therefore, *consumption*. In the sustainability report, Amazon lauds initiatives like *shipment zero* and its electrical vehicle fleet, claiming that soon customers can order “carbon net zero” (Amazon, 2020, p.105). However, a few aspects need to be taken into account before saying that this proves it can in fact become sustainable, despite what the discourse indicates. One of the main points to bring up is connected to Amazon’s surveillance project of increasingly collecting user data. Remember that the company does this in part to target advertisement, and in consequence make people *buy more stuff*. With just a click of a button the safeguards against our impulses are dwindling. With ads becoming more accurate with exponentially improving algorithms, they can anticipate what you want and when you want it. It is not too speculative to make the connection that this will overall increase consumption, making it questionable whether Amazon can reduce waste and emissions at the same pace they are creating it. Caraway (2020) makes a similar argument. Even if the company consumes slightly less resources than it would without the circular economy implementations for example, the growth incentive means that overall consumption will increase (p.72).

The growth incentive therefore becomes paramount in evaluating Amazon, and its behaviour regarding social issues can shine a light on how relentlessly they

are pursuing growth over all else. This is showcased when Amazon pledged for the climate while simultaneously doing environmental harm; funding an event for the *Competitive Enterprise Institute*, a libertarian think tank that promotes climate change denial and believes statements such as “the California wildfires were caused by having too many trees” (Root, Friedman & Tabuchi, 2019). Another example is the company stating AWS is “committed to run in the most environmentally friendly way”, while simultaneously being sold to the oil industry to effectivise oil production (Stone, 2020).

Furthermore, one has to look beyond the discourse discussed here to truly understand how deep the ideology of growth goes: Jeff Bezos has stated numerous times that he knows we live on a finite planet where resources will sooner or later run out, proposing space colonization as the solution to problems of expanding populations and stripped resources: “*The Earth is finite, and if the world economy and population is to keep expanding, space is the only way to go*” (Levy, 2018). In another interview, Bezos is paraphrased as stating the most dangerous threat to humankind is not extinction by climate change, but that we might have to stop growing the economy someday (Beslik, 2020). On the website of *Blue Origin*, Bezos privately owned space program, furthermore states that “*we are committed to building a road to space so that our children can build the future*” (Blue Origin, n.d). The juxtaposition of this discourse together with their sustainability discourse presents a paradox, or *discourse contamination*.

Ecological modernization is of the fundamental assumption that growth can reconcile with the environment, through innovation and technology. Even though one could argue that eco-modernism could include scavenging for resources in outer space, Bezos presents a perspective where capitalism is fundamental for the human project of civilization and irreconcilable with preserving the natural world. There is a conflict between Amazon’s public and internal discourse, indicating that its sustainability discourse is mostly for image repairment and concealing its true belief, a belief it has in common with more critical environmentalists – that green growth is not sustainable. However, the difference being that Amazon essentially believes humans are incapable of reconciling with nature.

With the surveillance, growth incentive and obsessive efforts in lobbying, it is not unreasonable to conclude where Amazon is heading without any restrictions: towards hegemony. I want to reiterate Quinns (2019) argument that “*Amazon wants to fade from your life without ever leaving it [...] there is no backlash if there’s nothing to really think about*”. To reach hegemony, Fairclough (1992) describes that an organization or institution needs “alliances, incorporation of subordinate groups and generation of consent” (p.9). As established in the background, Amazon is doing a number of

things to fulfill these points. They are making commerce competitors into subordinate groups by creating a situation where competitors have a disadvantage to Amazon's own products, by promoting Amazon's own products first and making third-party retailers pay double rent.

Generating consent has been shown to be a tense but dynamic process, but as West (2019) showed, customers are generally harbouring warm feelings towards Amazon despite privacy concerns. Incorporating subordinate groups also includes customers, since many people have no choice but to buy from Amazon (Willis-Aronowitz, 2018). When prices are low and delivery is fast, many can't afford choice, and privilege becomes a prerequisite for opting out. Using Amazon's services then becomes so indisputable and structural, breaking away becomes hard – fading from people's life while still being present. To summarize, this puts Amazon in a position of power that is moving towards this all-encompassing situation, becoming an *everything company*.

However, government agencies are recognizing this monopoly-in-the-making, making Amazon a target for increased governmental scrutiny (Kim, 2018), with the company becoming progressively “wary of Washington” (Griswold, 2018). This leaves it in a situation of having to adjust their brand so associations of criticism fade and it can become a symbol of sustainability and goodwill, rather than rectifying their culpability in the climate crisis. The sustainability discourse functions here as a mechanism for generating further consent, both from consumers and shareholders, enabling Amazon to continue its operation unrestricted and consolidating power.

As a last point of analysis, I wanted to circle back to the discourse of *win-win*. One of the tenets of ecological modernization is viewing sustainable development as a positive-sum game, a perspective of “everybody wins”: if corporations can become sustainable, then the whole world will be helped. This hegemonic discourse is built on the gross mischaracterization of the market as a public good, when in reality, this illusion has a large part in perpetuating wealth inequality, resource disparity and environmental problems, a conclusion reached across disciplines (Stiglitz, 2012; Hornborg, 2015; Piketty, 2013). The win-win mindset lets corporations engage in “philanthropic” or “social responsibility” behaviours without risk, even capitalizing on being viewed as “environmentally friendly”. Hornborg (2009) argues that realizing the illusion of the win-win mentality is crucial to understanding that broadly, ecological modernization is also an illusion. Just like tackling problems of inequality, environmental problems must be approached as a win-lose situation, or a zero-sum game. The “lose” indicating that corporations need restrictions for tangible change to happen.

6. Conclusion and Discussion of Future Research

This thesis set out to explore and expose Amazon's construction of sustainability by asking the question: "*How does Amazon construct itself as being sustainable?*" with the follow up questions of "*what discourses are they reproducing?*" and "*Is Amazon engaging in greenwashing behaviour?*" These research questions have proved to generate some answers and some further questions.

As an answer to the first question, the three different dimensions of analysis have shown Amazon's discourse to use concepts that are poorly defined, refraining from recognizing its own part in perpetuating environmental problems (and other problems) and using contradictory logics when comparing its sustainability discourse with the discourse of Blue Origin. The discourse it is unanimously reproducing is ecological modernization, with words like "win-win", "innovation" "sustainability" and "science-based" indicating it is situated in a narrative where environmental problems can be solved with technology-oriented solutions and growth is reconcilable with nature. The third question was explored in the social practice part of the analysis. Assessing Amazon's discourse through a greenwashing lens showed how it engages in firm-level greenwashing, checking the boxes of *political spin* and *fuzzy reporting*.

The implications of this thesis opens up further inquiries regarding several topics. Primarily, Amazon should be on the receiving end of further scientific inquiry since aspects of its operation pose a threat to values of privacy, human rights and enterprise competition. In addition, the discourse of Global Optimist can point researchers to explore questions regarding how coalitions between different actors are built and why they fail or succeed. Ultimately, one particular line of interest should be continued to be explored in a human ecological context: the human-environmental dynamics and processes that underlie Amazon's rapid expansion. A suggestion would be Alf Hornborg's theory of unequal exchange. The underlying mechanisms of consumer behaviour would also be an interesting line of research. What social, economic and human-environmental processes drive an individual to be locked into Amazon's world?

Finally, this thesis has demonstrated that Amazon is trying to consolidate power and conceal its preceding abuses by constructing itself as sustainable. It upholds current power structures both in society and between humankind and nature. To conclude this thesis I would like to emphasize a quote by Caraway (2020) which aptly summarizes Amazon's discourse: "For Amazon, sustainability is about sustaining Amazon".

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