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CONSTRUCTING SUSTAINABILITY: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF TESLA'S SUSTAINABILITY REPORTS

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Abstract

This study examines how the paradigm of "green capitalism" is constructed at the level of corporate discourse in the Anthropocene, a period marked by the deepening of the global ecological crisis, using the case of Tesla Inc. Adopting a qualitative research paradigm, this study seeks to reveal the ideological and discursive strategies through which the company legitimizes its sustainability narrative by analyzing the textual content of Tesla's impact reports (2020–2024) using Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and by examining their visual components within the framework of Multimodality. The study demonstrates that Tesla positions itself not merely as a conventional automobile manufacturer, but as a messianic technological actor that "accelerates the world's transition to sustainable energy." In this context, the concept of "sustainability" is detached from its original meaning and reframed around discourses of growth, technological acceleration, and measurable "impact." The findings indicate that the company presents its environmental performance primarily through an emphasis on "zero emissions" during the use phase of its vehicles, while discursively rendering invisible the ecological costs associated with battery production, mining activities, water consumption, and supply chains. In Tesla's reports, life-cycle analyses, graphs, and infographics function as persuasive devices that reinforce technological optimism, while complex ecological problems are presented through a reductionist and technocratic data-driven language. Emphases on artificial intelligence, automation, and recycling further marginalize the political and social dimensions of the environmental crisis, producing a post-political framework in which solutions are delegated almost entirely to technology. Ultimately, the study reveals that, in the case of Tesla, a hegemonic process of rearticulation extending beyond conventional greenwashing is at work, and that an advanced phase of green capitalism is being reproduced through corporate discourse.

Keywords: *Green capitalism, Greenwashing, Critical discourse analysis, Tesla.*

Sürdürülebilirliğin İnşası: Tesla'nın Sürdürülebilirlik Raporlarının Eleştirel Söylem Analizi

Öz

Bu çalışma, küresel ekolojik krizin derinleştiği Antroposen çağında, "yeşil kapitalizm" paradigmasının kurumsal söylem düzeyinde nasıl inşa edildiğini Tesla Inc. örneği üzerinden incelemektedir. Nitel araştırma paradigmasını benimseyen bu araştırma, 2020–2024 yıllarına ait Tesla etki raporlarında yer alan metinleri Norman Fairclough'un üç boyutlu Eleştirel Söylem Analizi (CDA) modeliyle, görsel öğeleri ise Çok Modlu Söylem Analizi (Multimodality) çerçevesinde inceleyerek, şirketin sürdürülebilirlik anlatısını hangi ideolojik ve söylemsel stratejiler aracılığıyla meşrulaştırdığını ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, Tesla'nın kendisini geleneksel bir otomobil üreticisinden ziyade, "dünyanın sürdürülebilir enerjiye geçişini hızlandıran" mesiyanik bir teknoloji aktörü olarak konumlandırdığını göstermektedir. Bu bağlamda "sürdürülebilirlik" kavramı bağlamından koparılarak, büyüme, teknolojik ivmelenme ve ölçülebilir "etki" söylemi etrafında yeniden çerçevelenmektedir. Analiz bulguları, şirketin çevresel performansını özellikle araçların kullanım aşamasındaki "sıfır emisyon" vurgusu üzerinden sunduğunu; buna karşın batarya üretimi, madencilik faaliyetleri, su tüketimi ve tedarik zinciri kaynaklı ekolojik maliyetleri söylemsel olarak görünmez kıldığını ortaya koymaktadır. Tesla raporlarında yaşam döngüsü analizleri, grafikler ve infografikler, teknolojik iyimserliği pekiştiren ikna araçları olarak kullanılmakta; karmaşık ekolojik sorunlar indirgemeci ve teknokratik bir veri diliyle sunulmaktadır. Yapay zekâ, otomasyon ve geri dönüşüm vurguları ise çevresel krizin siyasal ve toplumsal boyutlarını geri plana iterek, çözümü bütünüyle teknolojiye havale eden post-politik bir çerçeve üretmektedir. Sonuç olarak çalışma, Tesla örneğinde yeşil aklamanın ötesine geçen bir hegemonik yeniden eklemlenme sürecinin işlediğini ve yeşil kapitalizmin ileri bir aşamasının kurumsal söylem yoluyla yeniden üretildiğini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Yeşil kapitalizm, Yeşil aklama, Eleştirel söylem analizi, Tesla.*

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1. Introduction

As of the twenty-first century, the global capitalist system has entered a new historical phase commonly referred to as the Anthropocene, in which human activities have become a decisive force shaping the planet's geological processes (Zalasiewicz et al., 2011, p. 835). Within this context, ecological crises such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion have ceased to be merely environmental problems and have instead evolved into structural crises that threaten the continuity of the regime of capital accumulation itself (Foster, 2002, pp. 9–13; Moore, 2015, p. 14). The hegemonic response developed by global political economy to this threat has taken the form of what is termed Green Capitalism. Green capitalism advances the claim that economic growth and environmental protection are not mutually exclusive objectives; on the contrary, it posits that a sustainable green growth or transformation can be achieved through technological innovation, increased efficiency, and market-based mechanisms (Brezovec & Schweiger, 2025, pp. 287–288; Dryzek, 2013, p. 20). Within this paradigmatic framework, practices of nature conservation are reconfigured from being obstacles to capital accumulation into novel domains of profit generation and innovation. Accordingly, nature is no longer conceived as a secondary factor of production but rather as a central element that permeates the entire economy and provides the material foundations upon which it depends (Hawken et al., 2000, p. 148).

This perspective demonstrates that the discourse of green transition is not merely an abstract form of environmentalism but rather a restructuring process that finds concrete expression within specific industrial sectors. In particular, sectors characterized by high environmental costs and deep historical dependence on carbon—where pressures for transformation are most intense—have emerged as the most visible sites of application for this paradigm. In this regard, the automotive and transportation industry stands out as one of the primary arenas in which the green transition discourse is both most prominently articulated and most sharply contested, given its symbolic association with fossil fuel–based industrial capitalism and its responsibility for approximately one third of total carbon emissions (Urry, 2004, p. 26). More specifically, over 60% of road transport emissions originate from passenger cars and light-duty vehicles, further underscoring the centrality of private automobility within the sector's carbon footprint (IEA, 2025). As the contribution of carbon emissions generated by internal combustion engines (ICE) to the climate crisis has become increasingly evident, the sector has been compelled to re-legitimate itself through the promotion of "electric vehicles." Electric vehicles (EVs) are thus presented not merely as a shift in transportation technology, but as the technological savior of an imagined future that is framed as "clean," "smart," and "responsible." As of 2022, the momentum toward a clean energy economy had demonstrably accelerated, with electric vehicle sales increasing by 55% to surpass a record level of 10 million units. Concurrently, the announced production capacity for electric vehicle batteries was projected to be sufficient to meet the anticipated demand requirements for 2030 (IEA, 2023). This rapid expansion appears to substantiate the narrative of technological salvation. However, the manner in which the industry and corporations "greenwash" themselves through this technological optimism (Paterson, 2007, p. 208) reveals a deliberate reduction of the problem to a mere change in powertrain technologies, while systematically overlooking the production phase, which occupies a central position in the structural origins of environmental degradation.

In this context, Tesla Inc. -currently the world's most valuable automobile manufacturer (World Wide Mobility, 2025)- emerges as one of the most powerful representatives of green capitalism and environmental optimism. The company constructs its corporate identity not merely as a conventional automaker, but as a mission-driven technology and energy enterprise. As explicitly stated in its 2020 Sustainability Report, Tesla's core mission is "to accelerate the world's transition to sustainable energy." This ambitious mission statement positions the company not simply as a commercial actor, but as a

"messianic" figure that assumes the responsibility of saving the planet. By claiming that every vehicle it produces directly reduces the amount of carbon in the atmosphere, the company effectively reframes consumption itself as a form of environmental activism.

Such messianic mission narratives are reinforced not through an objective assessment of the company's environmental impacts, but rather through corporate discursive practices aimed at producing a particular framework of meaning. One of the most significant carriers of this discourse is sustainability reporting. Corporate sustainability reports, however, are not inherently neutral datasets; instead, they function as strategic communication instruments through which firms seek to secure legitimacy and manage stakeholder perceptions (Etzion & Ferraro, 2010, p. 1103). Situations in which such communication strategies render invisible the gap between discourses of environmental responsibility and actual environmental impacts are addressed in the literature under the concept of "greenwashing." Greenwashing refers to the strategy whereby corporations construct a positive image of their environmental performance while concealing or downplaying their negative environmental impacts (negative externalities) (Delmas & Burbano, 2011, p. 66; Laufer, 2003, pp. 255–258). In the case of Tesla, this dynamic manifests itself in the emphasis placed on the claim of "zero emissions" during the use phase of electric vehicles, while the substantial ecological footprint and water consumption associated with battery-based production processes—particularly those linked to lithium and cobalt mining—are discursively rendered "invisible" or framed as "inevitable costs."

For instance, Tesla's 2021 Impact Report presents the complexity of its supply chain and the effects of mining activities on local ecosystems under the heading of "responsible sourcing," employing a technical and audit-oriented language that reduces the ecological destruction generated by these activities to a problem of technological management. Similarly, in the 2023 and 2024 reports, artificial intelligence (AI) and automation Technologies -featured with increasing emphasis- are framed as the key to resource efficiency, thereby reinforcing the perception that solutions to ecological problems are not political or social in nature, but entirely technocratic. As Chen (2016, p. 7) observes, such a discourse produces a misleading "myth of harmony," suggesting that the contradiction between nature and humanity can be overcome through technology alone.

The primary objective of this study is to examine all publicly accessible sustainability reports published by Tesla between 2020 and 2024 on its corporate website (tesla.com/impact) through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), situating the analysis within the theoretical framework of green capitalism and greenwashing. The study aims to reveal how Tesla reproduces the ideology of "green capitalism" within its corporate sustainability reports, how it transforms electric vehicle technology into an object of "environmental fetishism," and which discursive strategies—such as selective disclosure, decontextualization, and the individualization of responsibility—it employs to manage the environmental contradictions embedded in its production processes, including mining, water use, and waste generation. In doing so, the analysis renders visible not only the company's communication strategies but also the internal contradictions inherent in its adopted understanding of "sustainability." This study distinguishes itself from the existing literature by conceptualizing Tesla Inc.'s sustainability discourse not merely through conventional financial analyses or technical life-cycle assessments, but as a multidimensional ideological construction in which textual and visual strategies are intricately intertwined.

1.1 Conceptual Framework

This study examines Tesla's corporate sustainability reports through the lenses of critiques of green capitalism and the greenwashing literature. The analysis centers on how the company depoliticizes the ecological crisis by reducing it to a form of technological solutionism and legitimizes this reduction

through a discourse of messianic leadership. From a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, processes such as the commodification of nature, the concealment of production-related environmental costs, and the presentation of consumption as a practice of "moral redemption" are evaluated within the broader framework of the hegemonic reproduction of capital.

1.1.1. The Ecological Modernization Paradigm and Green Capitalism

With the deepening of the ecological crisis, the theory of Ecological Modernization, which has gained prominence since the 1980s, advances the argument that economic development and environmental protection can be reconciled within a "win–win" framework. Ecological modernization theory grounds its core premise in the capacity of the institutions of modernity—science, technology, and market mechanisms—to be transformed in ways that can effectively resolve environmental crises. From this perspective, capitalism is not conceived as an inherently immutable enemy of the environment, but rather as a flexible system capable of rendering itself sustainable through processes of ecological restructuring (Mol & Spaargaren, 2000).

However, the critical political economy approach interrogates this optimistic narrative through the concept of Green Capitalism. Stephen Graham (2019a; 2019b; 2019c) conceptualizes green capitalism as a strategy that contains ecological critique within capitalist structures, thereby allowing the growth paradigm to persist without being fundamentally challenged. Within this strategy, nature is commodified—through mechanisms such as carbon credits and ecosystem services—thus opening up new domains for capital accumulation.

In this context, one of the most significant critiques directed at technological solutionism is the Jevons Paradox. According to this paradox, although technological progress increases efficiency in resource use, it simultaneously reduces the cost of that resource, thereby leading to an overall increase in total consumption—a phenomenon commonly referred to as the rebound effect (York & McGee, 2016, pp. 77–78). The discourse constructed by companies such as Tesla around technological efficiency -such as the promotion of motors that consume less energy- tends to obscure this structural contradiction, insofar as the core problem lies not in the specific qualities of technology itself, but in the imperatives of limitless growth and consumption.

1.1.2. Corporate Sustainability Communication and Greenwashing

Sustainability reports, through which corporations communicate their activities to the public, play a central role in foregrounding environmental performance as a key instrument of legitimacy construction. For instance, 96% of G250 companies have been publishing sustainability reports since 2022 (KPMG, 2024). This demonstrates that reporting has effectively become a mandatory practice, thereby quantifying how strategically significant the function of "legitimacy management" has become. However, these communication processes are frequently subject to critique under the concept of greenwashing. Delmas and Burbano (2011, p. 66) define greenwashing as "*the act of misleading consumers regarding a firm's positive environmental performance while concealing its negative environmental impacts*." Lyon and Montgomery (2015, p. 225) further broaden this definition by conceptualizing greenwashing as the diverse forms of communication that lead audiences to adopt overly positive beliefs about an organization's environmental performance, practices, or products.

According to an empirical study, greenwashing refers to the practice whereby companies present themselves as undertaking more substantial environmental action than they actually do. This phenomenon signifies the strategic exploitation of the growing consumer demand for environmentally friendly products. The findings indicate that, at the corporate level, in 59% of the cases examined due to the presence of environmental claims, easily accessible evidence substantiating those claims was not provided. Moreover, in more than half of the cases, insufficient information was made available for

consumers to adequately assess the accuracy of the claims. Furthermore, in 37% of the cases, vague and generic expressions such as “eco-friendly,” “sustainable,” and “conscious” were employed, thereby conveying potentially unsubstantiated impressions regarding the environmental performance of the products (European Commission, 2021).

Within the literature, greenwashing is conceptualized not merely as a set of misleading claims. Rather, it is understood as a multidimensional process through which corporations discursively and representationally reconstruct perceptions of their environmental performance (Gregory, 2024; Pillai & Ramakrishnan, 2025; Willis et al., 2023). In this regard, several recurring strategies are commonly identified:

• **Selective Disclosure:** The practice of emphasizing areas in which the company demonstrates favorable performance (e.g., emissions during the use phase) while concealing domains of poor performance (e.g., pollution within the supply chain).

• **Greenlighting:** A strategy whereby a company foregrounds a symbolic or marginally “green” feature of its operations (e.g., recyclable packaging) despite the overall environmental harm generated by its core activities.

• **Greenshifting:** The displacement of responsibility for environmental problems away from the producer, often by transferring the burden of environmental action or blame onto consumers or other actors.

At this juncture, Andrew Szasz’s (2007) concept of Inverted Quarantine is particularly critical. According to Szasz, rather than addressing environmental problems through collective political action, individuals seek personal salvation by purchasing “clean” products—such as organic food or electric cars—that promise to insulate them from a “toxic” world (Moncure, 2016, p. 2). This form of Green Consumerism positions individuals not as citizens engaged in collective environmental governance, but as consumers, thereby reducing environmental protection to an act of purchase.

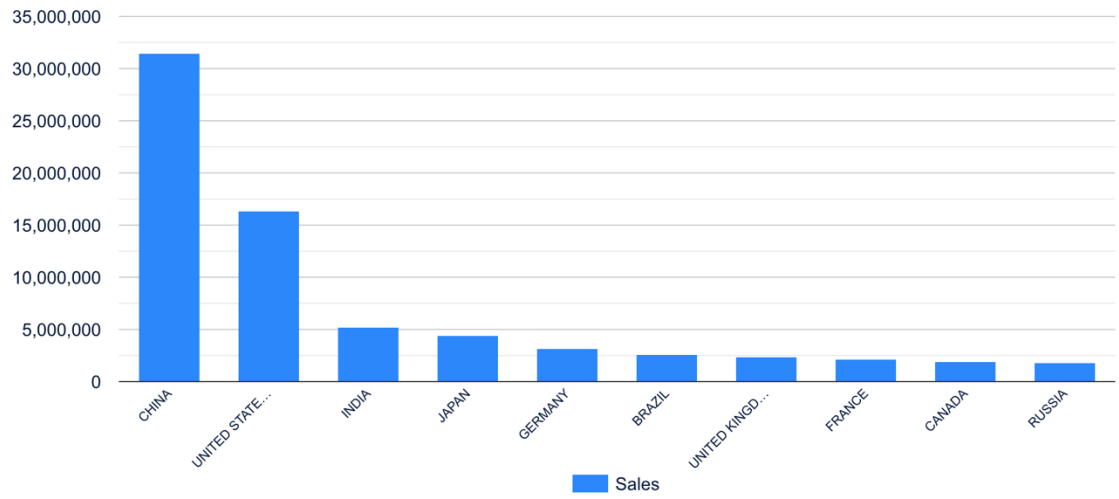
1.1.3. Automobile Politics and Techno-Cultural Hegemony

The automobile is not merely a means of transportation, but a hegemonic system that shapes modern social life, spatial imaginaries, and politics. In Automobile Politics (2007), Matthew Paterson draws attention to the central role of the automobile in the reproduction of capitalism and its significance in the construction of individual identity. As a consequence, the system of “automobility” has been naturalized through its association with values such as autonomy, speed, and freedom, leading to a displacement of meaning in which the automobile comes to signify far more than a simple material object.

According to the latest data published by the Organisation Internationale des Constructeurs d'Automobiles (OICA) (2024), motor vehicles continue to command a substantial share of the global market in terms of both production and sales. Even disruptive dynamics such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the escalating ecological crisis appear not to have fundamentally undermined the structural centrality of this sector. The approximately 95 million vehicles sold worldwide in 2024 alone (*See Fig. 1*.), together with estimates indicating that more than 1.5 billion automobiles are currently in use globally, underscore the hegemonic scale of the phenomenon. These figures are significant not merely in quantitative terms, but also in revealing the depth to which automobility remains embedded within contemporary economic systems and social life.

Figure 1

World Motor Vehicle Sales 2024, OICA Sales Statistics



Traditional environmental policies, rather than questioning this cultural hegemony, aim to sustain it by "painting it green." In this sense, electric vehicles (EVs) function as a form of "technological bandage." According to Paterson (2007, p. 152), in order to preserve its legitimacy in the face of ecological crisis, the automobile industry recontextualizes nature not as an obstacle to be conquered, but as a "scenery" to be protected. Consequently, the vision articulated by Tesla promises the preservation of existing consumption patterns and status symbols by merely changing the power source—from internal combustion engines (ICE) to electric vehicles—without fundamentally transforming the culture of automobile ownership itself.

In this context, it is important to refer to the following data. According to the IEA (2024), by 2023 the electric vehicle market had experienced such remarkable growth that nearly one out of every five vehicles sold globally was electric. In this regard, the trajectory of electric vehicle sales since 2013 reveals a striking and sustained pattern of expansion (*See Fig. 2.*).

This trend can also be observed concretely in model-based global sales data. In the ranking of the best-selling battery electric vehicles (BEVs) covering the January–September 2025 period, Tesla models display a clear dominance. The Tesla Model Y ranks first with 808,173 units sold, while the Tesla Model 3 follows in second place with 369,756 units. Even the figures for September 2025 alone indicate sales of 145,651 units for the Model Y and 62,114 units for the Model 3, confirming Tesla's structural weight within the global BEV market (*See Fig. 3.*).

This picture demonstrates that Tesla functions not merely as a technological innovator, but also as a central actor in the production of cultural and economic hegemony within electric automobility. The global standardization of the Model Y and Model 3 as mass-consumed commodities signals that electric vehicles are no longer a marginal alternative, but have become integrated into the mainstream automobile regime as its new norm. The Tesla case therefore suggests that the electric transition does not curtail the quantitative expansion of automobility; rather, it re-scales and reproduces it on a new technological basis. In other words, the replacement of the internal combustion engine with the electric motor does not, in itself, entail a structural transformation of the car-centered culture of consumption.

Figure 2

Global Electric Car Stock, 2013-2023, IEA Global EV Outlook 2024

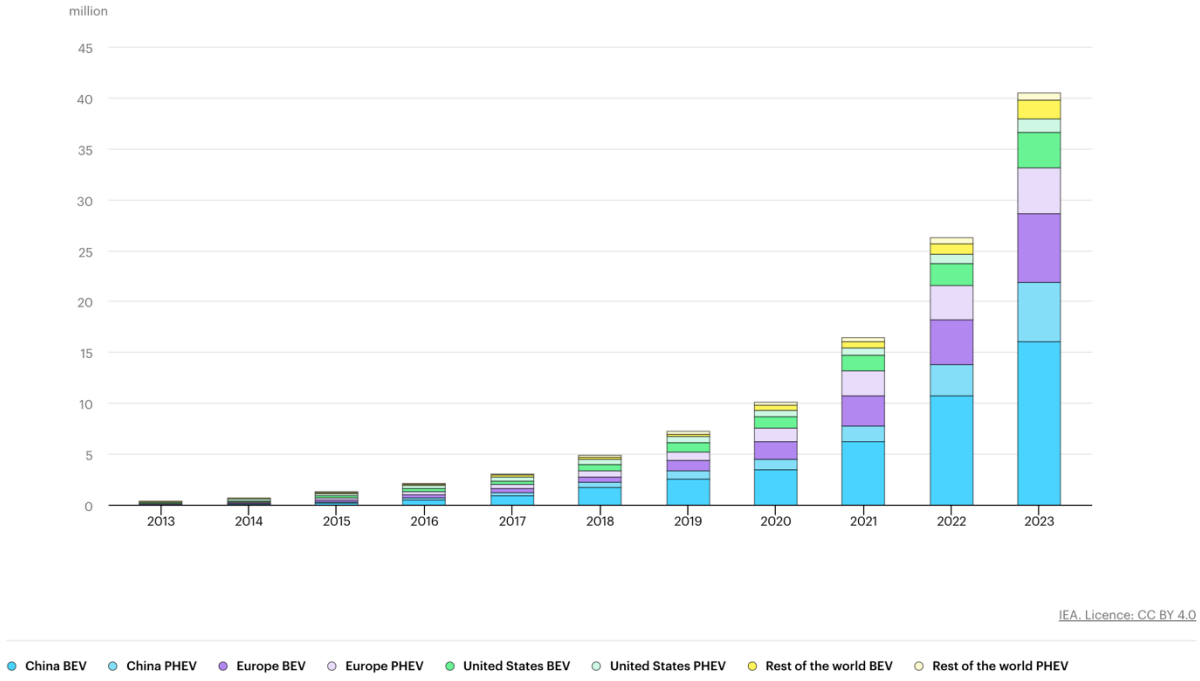


Figure 3

Best-Selling BEVs Worldwide 2025, JDPower EV Volumes

	Model	January to September 2025	Model	September 2025
1	Tesla Model Y	808,173	Tesla Model Y	145,651
2	Tesla Model 3	369,756	Tesla Model 3	62,114
3	Geely Geome Xingyuan	343,514	Wuling Mini	51,767
4	BYD Seagull / Dolphin Surf	292,579	Geely Geome Xingyuan	48,080
5	Wuling Mini	287,082	BYD Seagull / Dolphin Surf	32,883
6	Xiaomi SU7	219,810	BYD Yuan Up / Atto 2	28,561
7	BYD Yuan Plus / Atto 3	184,300	BYD Dolphin	27,723
8	BYD Yuan Up / Atto 2	174,137	Changan Lumin	23,552
9	BYD Dolphin	162,744	Xiaomi YU7	22,387
10	Xpeng M03	131,812	BYD Yuan Plus / Atto 3	21,221

2. Methodology

This study adopts an interpretive approach situated within the qualitative research paradigm, aiming to uncover the power relations, ideologies, and implicit meanings embedded within texts. The central focus of the analysis is the discursive construction of Tesla Inc.'s corporate sustainability reports and the relationship of this construction to the ideology of Green Capitalism.

2.1. Research Design and Dataset

The dataset of this study consists of corporate sustainability reports published by Tesla Inc. that detail the company's environmental, social, and governance (ESG) performance. The period under

examination (2020–2024) encompasses all reports made publicly available on the company's tesla.com/impact website. At the same time, this timeframe represents a critical historical interval marked by the acceleration of the global automotive industry's transition toward electric vehicles (EVs), the emergence of post-pandemic supply chain disruptions, and the increasing integration of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies into production processes.

The documents included in the analysis are as follows:

- **Tesla 2020 Impact Report:** The report in which the company's mission crystallizes around "accelerating the transition to sustainable energy," and in which battery recycling technologies are emphasized comprehensively for the first time.
- **Tesla 2021 Impact Report:** A text in which defenses concerning supply chain transparency, water usage, and the environmental impacts of Gigafactories—particularly those in Berlin and Texas—are brought to the forefront.
- **Tesla 2022 Impact Report:** The dataset that features the company's claim of having prevented 13.4 million tons of CO_2e emissions through its customers, alongside comparative analyses of "production versus use-phase" emissions.
- **Tesla 2023 Impact Report:** A comprehensive report that announces the "Master Plan Part 3" vision and focuses on expanding energy storage solutions and mass production capacity.
- **Tesla 2024 Impact Report:** The most recent text, in which the company shifts its discourse beyond automotive production toward a triad of "artificial intelligence, robotics, and energy," foregrounding technological optimism.

These reports are not randomly selected corporate documents; rather, they are treated as strategic "discursive moments" through which the company reproduces its legitimacy vis-à-vis investors, regulatory authorities, and the broader public.

2.2. Data Analysis Method: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

In this study, Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework is adopted to examine Tesla's sustainability/impact reports. Fairclough (2013) conceptualizes language not merely as a tool of communication, but as a "social practice" through which power relations, ideologies, and identities are constructed. This perspective enables corporate texts to be understood not as neutral documents that simply convey information, but as strategic discourses designed to produce particular regimes of meaning and frameworks of legitimacy.

In this context, corporate sustainability reports appear not as documents that present objective data, but rather as discursive instruments aimed at establishing a particular "regime of truth" and reproducing corporate narratives of environmental responsibility. CDA seeks to uncover the hegemonic struggles underlying the linguistic and semantic choices embedded in such texts—for instance, the use of passive constructions to obscure agency, or the decontextualization and re-framing of the concept of "sustainability."

Following Fairclough's (1992; 2013) CDA model, which conceptualizes discourse as a three-dimensional structure, the analysis is conducted across three interrelated levels: (i) the textual level, focusing on linguistic choices, vocabulary, and narrative structures; (ii) the discursive practice level, examining the production, circulation, and consumption of texts; and (iii) the social practice level, which situates discourse within its broader ideological and structural contexts. In addition, due to the extensive and strategic use of visual elements in Tesla's corporate sustainability reports to support and reinforce the information presented, the study also draws on the principles of Multimodal Discourse Analysis developed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), as employed in Chen's (2016) work. Within this framework, the relationship between textual narratives and visual modes of representation is examined

jointly, allowing the analysis to capture how discourse is constructed not only at the linguistic level but also through visual means.

Accordingly, this study examines how the concepts of "nature," "technology," and "responsibility" are discursively constructed in Tesla's reports and how these constructions serve the ideology of green capitalism. In doing so, the analysis elucidates the discursive and visual strategies through which the company's narrative of its environmental impacts is legitimized. According to Fairclough's model, the analysis is conducted in three stages.

2.2.1. Textual Level: At this stage, the linguistic features of the reports are examined, with particular attention to the following indicators:

- **Lexical Choice:** Conceptual preferences such as the use of "Impact" instead of "Sustainability," or "Transition" in place of "Consumption."
- **Transitivity:** The ways in which agency is represented in actions. For example, the active use of the subject "we" (Tesla) when describing environmental achievements, contrasted with the use of passive constructions when addressing negative outcomes associated with mining activities.
- **Modality:** The degree of certainty attached to future-oriented claims, such as the use of definitive future constructions ("will") versus more ambiguous formulations ("is aimed," "is targeted").

2.2.2. Discursive Practice Level: At this stage, the hybrid nature of Tesla's reports—oscillating between an "investor relations" document and an "environmental manifesto"—is examined. The analysis focuses on how the reports blend scientific data (such as Life Cycle Assessment [LCA] analyses) with marketing-oriented language, as well as on the institutional sources of "authority" (e.g., IPCC reports, U.S. government data) to which they appeal in order to secure legitimacy.

2.2.3. Social Practice Level: At this level, the findings derived from the texts are situated within broader social contexts. The analysis explores how Tesla's discourse reproduces or reshapes the ideologies of Green Capitalism and the neoliberal individualization of responsibility, while also emphasizing the preservation of the automobile as a status symbol and the fetishization of technology (AI, automation) as the singular solution to the ecological crisis—an orientation commonly described as techno-fetishism.

2.3. Visual Discourse Analysis (Multimodality)

Tesla's reports rely on visuality as much as on text. Photographs, graphs, and diagrams within the reports function as "visual evidence" that reinforces the ideological effects of the written narrative. In this context, the analysis focuses on the following dimensions:

- **Representation:** The ways in which visual materials are presented in corporate sustainability reports.
- **De-contextualization:** The removal of visual elements from their original social, ecological, or production contexts within corporate sustainability reporting.
- **Infographics:** The graphical presentation of complex data and its role in simplifying and legitimizing corporate claims.

This multi-layered methodological approach makes it possible to read Tesla's sustainability reports not merely as collections of technical data, but as ideological apparatuses that seek to impose a particular worldview.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

This study is based on a document analysis of publicly available corporate sustainability reports published by Tesla Inc. and materials released on the company's official website. No data were collected from human participants, no personal data were used, and no experimental procedures were conducted. Therefore, this study does not fall within the scope of research requiring ethics committee approval.

3. Findings

This section presents the findings of the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) conducted on Tesla's Impact Reports covering the period from 2020 to 2024. The analysis categorizes the company's discursive strategies into four main thematic areas.

3.1. Theme 1: Messianic Leadership and the Reframing of Sustainability as "Impact"

The language employed in corporate reporting defines not only what a company does, but also who it claims to be. One of the most salient and foundational discursive strategies evident in Tesla's reports is the deliberate choice of the title **Impact Report** rather than the industry-standard designation Sustainability Report. As Fairclough (1992, pp. 28; 158–162; 194) argues, such lexical choices constitute attempts at ideological re-framing. While "sustainability" evokes notions of preservation, balance, and the maintenance of existing conditions, "impact" connotes active intervention, transformation, and measurable outcomes. Through this terminological choice, Tesla positions itself not as a passive actor merely "adapting" to environmental constraints, but as an active agent of change.

3.1.1. The Sanctification of the Mission: The Company as an "Accelerator"

In the introductory sections of all reports examined (2020–2024), the company's raison d'être is repeatedly articulated through an unchanging motto: "*Our mission is to accelerate the world's transition to sustainable energy*".

The verb "accelerate" in this statement carries critical significance. The company presents the energy transition as an inevitable historical process, while simultaneously defining itself as the catalyst of that process. The statement in the 2020 Report (p. 33) "*We are not just trying to build the best electric cars, we are striving to build the best cars, period.*" intertwines a commercial objective (selling cars) with a claim to moral superiority.

This discourse reflects a narrative structure commonly described in the literature as "Messianic Leadership," in which a leader or institution identifies itself with a salvific mission. In its reports, Tesla speaks not merely as a commercial enterprise accountable to shareholders, but as a moral agent responsible for the future of the planet. For instance, the statement included in the 2023 Report (p. 37) "*An ambitious stance on GHG emissions reduction is necessary to continue moving the world toward a sustainable energy economy*." positions the company as the pioneer and planner (Master Planner) of this "tremendous effort," thereby reinforcing its self-ascribed role as a guiding force in the global energy transition.

3.1.2. The Construction of Binary Oppositions: "Us" and "Others"

One of the core aims of CDA is to examine how texts construct distinctions between "us" and "them." Tesla's reports interpret the automotive industry through a sharp binary opposition. On one side stands the "traditional" and "dirty" past associated with internal combustion engine (ICE) production; on the other stands the "electric" and "clean" future embodied by Tesla itself.

This dynamic is articulated in the 2021 Report (p. 9, 13) as follows: "*We are designing and manufacturing a complete energy and transportation ecosystem*. […] *Our unique business requires a*

unique approach to corporate governance." Here, an implicit contrast with "traditional automakers" is at work. This oppositional emphasis discursively marginalizes or casts doubt on the sincerity of other manufacturers' efforts. Tesla thus constructs itself not as one actor within the industry, but as the industry's antithesis.

Across the 2024 Report as a whole, this binary distinction evolves into a discourse of technological superiority. By foregrounding its investments in "artificial intelligence and robotics," the company presents itself as a "technology ecosystem" so advanced that it can no longer be meaningfully compared to a conventional automobile manufacturer. This strategy functions as a form of discursive insulation against critiques that foreground the company's environmental responsibilities -such as those related to mining- on the grounds that an entity positioned as "building the future" should not be judged by the ostensibly "minor" details of the present, including waste or water use.

3.1.3. The The Quantification of "Impact" and Technocratic Legitimacy

Tesla legitimizes its mission not through abstract values, but through a data-driven language reduced to quantifiability. Throughout the reports, "impact" is consistently materialized in terms of tons of CO_2e (carbon dioxide equivalent) avoided. While the 2020 Report (p. 5) states that "Tesla customers avoided 5.0 million metric tons of CO_2e emissions," this figure is emphasized as increasing to 8.4 million tons in 2021 (p. 3) and to 13.4 million tons in 2022 (p. 18).

This quantitative language represents a paradigmatic expression of green capitalism's ideology of technological solutionism. Complex ecological problems are reduced to a simplified mathematical equation -*Number of Teslas Sold × Per-Unit Savings = A Saved Planet*- within which the act of "purchase" (consumption) is directly transformed into an act of "salvation" (environmentalism). In the graphs and infographics through which these data are presented, the company consistently depicts growth (sales) and environmental benefit (carbon savings) as parallel, upward-moving trajectories. This visual rhetoric naturalizes the paradox of "more consumption = more environmental protection" (the Jevons Paradox), rendering it visually self-evident and largely immune to critical interrogation.

In sum, the analysis under this theme demonstrates that Tesla transforms the concept of "sustainability" from a static notion of preservation into that of "impact," which functions as a legitimizing foundation for an aggressive strategy of growth and technological expansion. Within this discourse, the company is positioned not as a profit-seeking capitalist enterprise, but as a messianic technological force that has arrived to deliver humanity from the age of fossil fuels.

3.2. Theme 2: The "Zero Emissions" Myth and the Primacy of the Use Phase

One of the most prevalent strategies identified in the greenwashing literature is Selective Disclosure. This strategy involves emphasizing the positive aspects of a firm's environmental performance while concealing, downplaying, or rendering less visible its negative impacts. In Tesla's reports, this strategy manifests through the absolutization of "zero tailpipe emissions" during the vehicles' use phase, while the substantial carbon intensity and resource burdens of the manufacturing phase are relativized or marginalized.

3.2.1. The Invisibilized Burden of Production

Across all of Tesla's reports (2020–2024), the notion of "Zero Emissions" is presented as the ontological foundation of the company. However, this condition of "zero-ness" applies only from the moment the vehicle leaves the factory and enters use. From a critical perspective, it becomes evident that the reports engage in a form of sophisticated discursive engineering aimed at managing the massive carbon debt generated by battery production.

For example, in its 2021 Impact Report (p. 135) the company is compelled to make the following admission: "*At the moment, the manufacturing process of a Model 3 results in slightly higher GHG emissions than an equivalent combustion engine vehicle*." However, this statement is not framed as an act of self-criticism; rather, it functions as the opening sentence of a broader legitimizing argument. The graphs and accompanying texts that follow immediately argue that this "additional" pollution will be "offset" over the vehicle's lifetime during the use phase and will even generate environmental benefits over time.

The discursive mechanism at work here is "Temporal Displacement." Within this mechanism, the consumer is presented with the following message: "Yes, we pollute now (during production), but we will clean up in the future (during use)." In the graphics included in the 2020 Report (pp. 12, 18-22), the production emissions of a Tesla Model 3 are visualized as significantly higher than those of an average gasoline vehicle. However, within the overall composition of the chart, these bars are rendered comparatively insignificant when placed alongside the columns representing "lifetime savings." In this way, the concrete and immediate pollution generated during the production phase is effectively "purchased" through the promise of a future, potential, and abstract environmental benefit, and is thereby morally neutralized.

3.2.2. Strategic Use of Life Cycle Assessment (LCA)

Tesla employs Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) data not as an instrument of scientific transparency, but as a form of "technology of persuasion." The LCA comparisons presented in the reports are consistently constructed so as to position Tesla as the "less harmful" option.

• **Construction of the Other:** In order to substantiate its own "cleanliness," Tesla consistently requires a "Dirty Other": Internal Combustion Engine (ICE) vehicles. The life cycle analyses presented in the 2023 Report (p. 25) indicate that the total greenhouse gas emissions of Tesla's electric vehicles are lower than those of ICE vehicles. However, this comparison is not made against genuinely low-carbon alternatives such as public transportation, cycling, or "de-automobilization," but rather against the worst-case scenario of fossil-fuel vehicles. This constitutes what Chen (2016) identifies as a strategy of "naturalization," whereby individual car ownership is taken as a given, and the debate is confined solely to the type of engine.

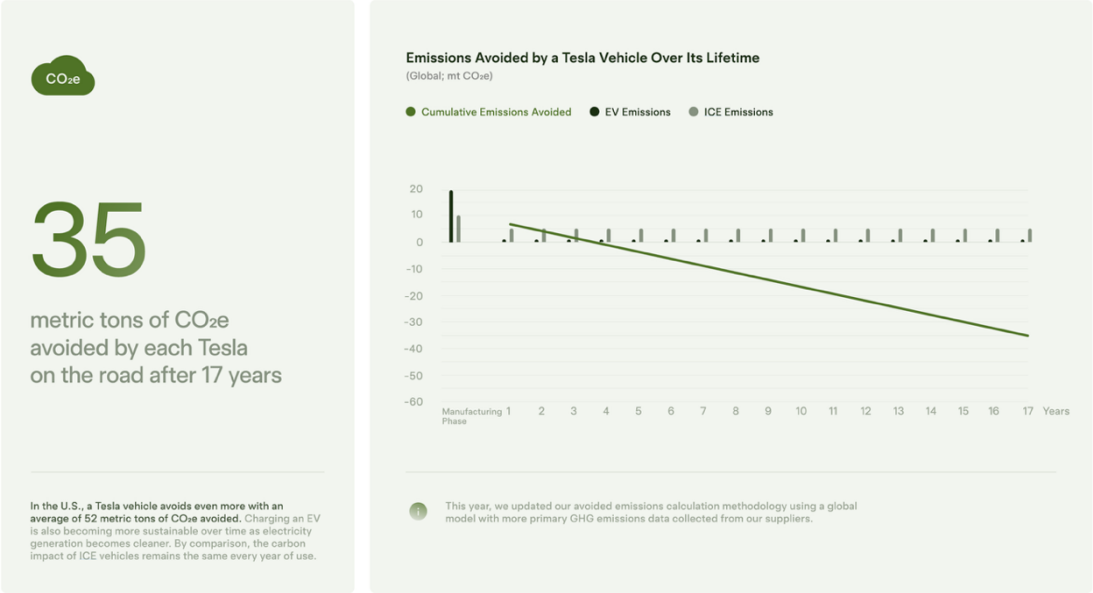
• **Optimistic Assumptions:** Tesla's LCA calculations are based on the assumption that vehicles are charged using the prevailing electricity grid mix. In the 2022 report (p. 35), by presuming that electricity grids will progressively "green" over time, it is implied that Tesla's carbon footprint will "naturally" decline in the future. This represents a typical instance of technological optimism (techno-optimism), in which the existing carbon-intensive energy infrastructure is not treated as an empirical constraint but is instead assumed to "inevitably" improve.

3.2.3. The Visual Rhetoric of "Carbon Debt"

From a multimodal (visual) analysis perspective, the "Emissions per Mile" (grams of CO_2e/mile) graphs presented in the reports are particularly noteworthy. In these graphs, the line representing Tesla vehicles begins at a high point—corresponding to production-phase emissions—but then declines rapidly. By contrast, the line representing internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicles is positioned consistently at a higher level and remains relatively flat throughout (*See Fig. 4*.).

Figure 4

Calculation of Life-Cycle Emissions Reductions in Tesla Vehicles, Tesla 2024 Impact Report



As shown in the 2024 Report, this visual narrative constructs the myth of a "break-even point" and conveys the following story to the consumer in visual terms: "After a certain period (for example, two years or 15,000 km/miles), you will be absolved of your sins." These graphs render invisible the "non-compensable" local ecological destruction caused by lithium mining, water consumption, and chemical waste generated during the production process by reducing these impacts to a single "carbon" parameter. In doing so, ecological devastation is transformed into a simple accounting exercise—an input–output calculation.

In conclusion, Tesla's "Zero Emissions" discourse functions as a simulation that substitutes the heavy ecological burden of the production phase (material reality) with a virtual cleanliness located in the use phase (meaning). By eliminating the "tailpipe," the company has not eradicated pollution; it has merely displaced it to factories and mining sites—into the "backyards" that remain outside the consumer's field of vision.

3.3. Theme 3: The Blurring of Responsibility in the Supply Chain (Mining and Water)

One of the central paradoxes of green capitalism is that the transition away from fossil fuels is itself dependent on intensive mineral extraction. The battery of a Tesla vehicle is composed of elements such as lithium, cobalt, nickel, and graphite, whose extraction entails significant ecological and social costs (Sharma et al., 2023). Tesla's reports cannot entirely conceal this "dirty" background; instead, they recontextualize it by transforming it into a technical and ethical management procedure under the label of "Responsible Sourcing."

3.3.1. The Sterilization of Mining: Discourses of "Ethics" and "Oversight"

Tesla's supply chain discourse conceals the severe ecological devastation caused by mining behind a bureaucratic language of oversight and compliance. Frequent references in the 2021 (p. 98, 100, 102, 114) and 2023 (p. 12, 106, 132) reports to the OECD Due Diligence Guidance function as a strategy through which the company seeks to distance itself from human rights violations occurring at mining sites.

The language used in the reports frames mining not as a dirty or destructive process, but as a logistical operation that merely requires optimization. For example, the statement that "*While cobalt, nickel and lithium go through multiple processing steps by different companies, some of the more important environmental and social risks in this supply chain are present at mine sites*" (Tesla Impact Report, 2021, p. 100) is presented as an indicator of transparency; however, its primary function is to absolve the company by shifting blame onto "intermediaries." Structural problems at mining sites—such as child labor or water pollution—are thus constructed as issues for which Tesla itself bears no responsibility. This goes beyond what Chen (2016) describes as "de-contextualization" and constitutes a clear case of "responsibility shifting" (greenshifting): the problem is not mining per se, but the fact that it is not done "properly," while Tesla is consistently positioned as the actor that always does its part "correctly."

3.3.2. The Relativization of Water Consumption

Tesla's "Gigafactories" located in regions exposed to water scarcity, such as Berlin and Texas, have attracted criticism from local communities and environmental groups due to their intensive water consumption (Carlson, 2025; Krantz, 2024; Roessler et al., 2025). In its reports, the company responds to these critiques through a strategy of "relativization."

In the 2021 (p. 123) and 2023 (p. 148) Tesla Impact Reports, the infographics present the amount of water used during vehicle production not in terms of its absolute ecological impact, but through relative metrics such as "water consumption per vehicle" and "increasing efficiency over time." The implicit message conveyed beneath these graphics is as follows: "Yes, we consume water; however, as our production scale expands, the amount of water used per vehicle is decreasing."

This discourse constitutes a demagogic rhetoric based on contextual narrowing and scale shifting. The intense, simultaneous, and localized impact of an automobile factory on a specific watershed is reduced to temporal efficiency charts and globally abstracted indicators such as "cubic meters per vehicle." Through this strategy, Tesla masks the local ecological pressure created by water extraction in the regions where its factories are located by foregrounding internal performance metrics and narratives of relative improvement. As a result, water is displaced from being a matter of a vital right and local ecological justice and is instead reframed as a technical parameter within a broader competition over industrial efficiency and optimization.

3.3.3. Whitewashing Through the Future Tense: The Promise of Recycling

Tesla mitigates existing public unease surrounding mining through the promise of a "circular" future, for instance by emphasizing battery recycling technologies in its corporate Impact Reports (2020, p. 25; 2021, pp. 95-96; 2022, p. 162; 2023, p. 50; 2024, p. 41). In this context, the company conveys the message that "in the future, mining will no longer be necessary; we will rely on used batteries instead." This constitutes a clear example of '*greenlighting*'.

However, this constitutes a typical techno-utopian discourse. For a company whose production capacity is expanding and whose demand for raw materials is therefore certain to increase substantially (Tesla Master Plan 3, 2023), meeting material requirements solely through recycling is mathematically impossible. Consequently, the emphasis on recycling functions as a discursive mechanism that normalizes today's aggressive mining practices through a logic of deferred compensation. The implicit message conveyed to the consumer is thus: "We are extracting nature now, but we promise that we will stop in the future."

3.4. Theme 4: Visual Discourse and the Myth of Technology–Nature Harmony

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) maintains that visuals are at least as constitutive as words in the construction of meaning within texts (Jancsary et al., 2016). In Tesla's Impact Reports, an intensive visual language—comprising photographs, infographics, and diagrams—is employed throughout. These visual elements elevate the rational persuasion established through the reports' technical language to an affective and aesthetic register, thereby visually articulating and reinforcing the ideology of Green Capitalism.

3.4.1. The Aestheticization of Nature as "Background" (De-contextualization)

Chen (2016, p. 5) notes that in automobile advertising, nature is frequently deployed as a passive "backdrop" or as a "stage" to be conquered, serving to showcase the vehicle's performance. A similar, albeit more sophisticated, strategy is pursued in Tesla's reports as well.

The vehicle photographs in the reports are typically presented within depopulated, pristine, and unspoiled natural landscapes, stripped of urban contexts (*See Fig. 5. & Fig. 6.*); likewise, on the covers and throughout the interior visuals of the reports, factories and vehicles are depicted as existing in a state of seamless harmony and tranquility.

Figure 5

Tesla Model Y, Tesla 2022 Impact Report.

Figure 6

Tesla Model 3, Tesla 2024 Impact Report.

This visual preference functions as a form of de-contextualization. The automobile is detached from the urban congestion and traffic problems it produces, while nature is reduced not to a living ecological entity in need of protection, but to an aesthetic landscape to be experienced "silently" (via the electric motor) by the Tesla owner. At this point, the tension (conflict) between technology and nature is visually erased and replaced by an artificial "myth of harmony."

3.4.2. The Techno-Sublime and Sterile Factories

In the visual language of Tesla's reports, the factory is as dominant a motif as nature itself. Yet these factories (Gigafactories) are not depicted as smoke-emitting, polluted industrial sites. They are instead represented as futuristic laboratories with bright white surfaces, cleansed of human error and contamination (*See Fig. 7.*)

Figure 7

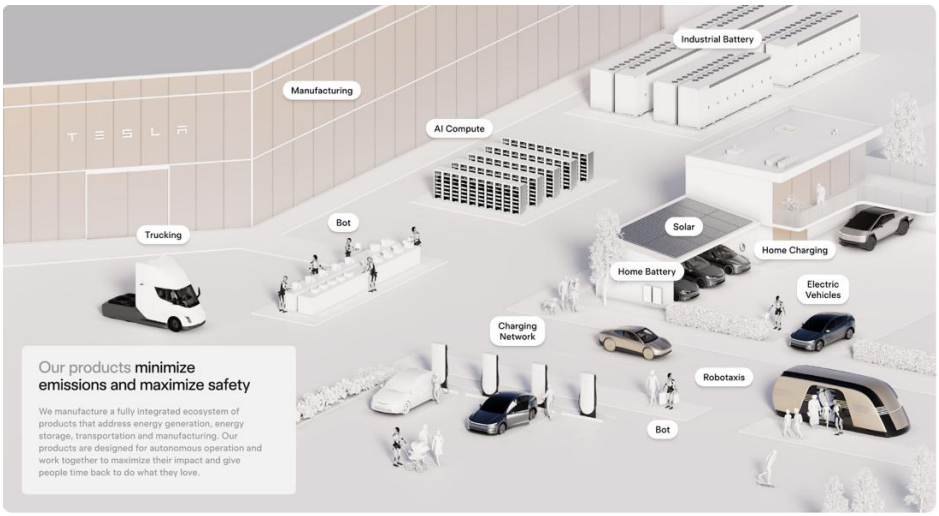
Tesla Gigafactories, Tesla 2021 Impact Report.

The visuals of the "Optimus" robot and autonomous production lines in the 2024 Report reflect an aesthetic of the Techno-Sublime (*See Fig. 8.*). In these images, the labor process (workers) and the

waste process (scrap materials, chemicals) are kept outside the frame; the factory is presented not as a site that transforms matter through pollution, but as a clean space that creates matter in a sterile manner. This visual sterilization facilitates the cognitive denial of the environmental burden generated during the production phase.

Figure 8

Tesla's Ecosystem, Tesla 2024 Impact Report.

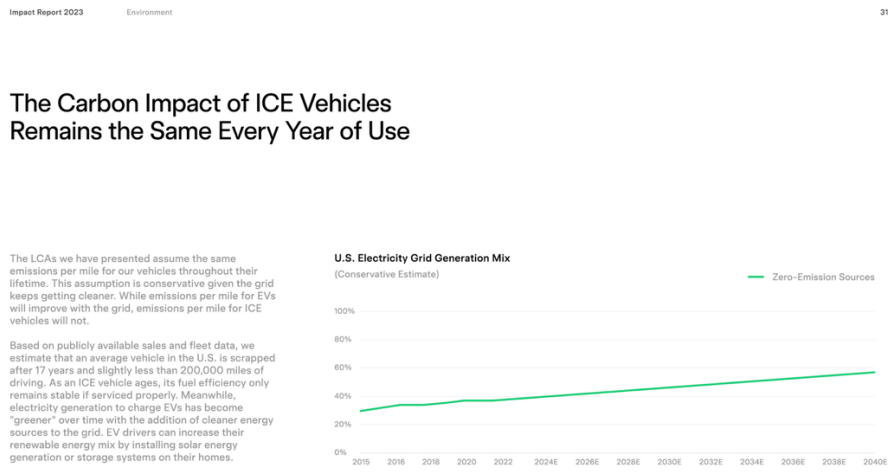


3.4.3. The Simplification of Complexity Through Graphs

The graphs used in the reports reduce complex ecological data to mere "lines." In particular, the "Cumulative CO_2 Savings" graphs visually convey the message that the world improves—or will improve—as the company grows. All graphs in the corporate impact reports reflect a logic of "contrast," transforming scientific data into a narrative of a battle between "good" and "bad."

Figure 9

An Example of Life Cycle Emissions Analysis, Tesla 2023 Impact Report.



4. Discussion

This study aims to demonstrate that Tesla's sustainability reports function as strategic texts through which capital reproduces its legitimacy in the face of the ecological crisis. The findings engage in dialogue with the existing literature along the following axes:

4.1. Beyond Greenwashing: Hegemonic Re-articulation

The analysis demonstrates that Tesla's practice cannot be reduced to simple "greenwashing", but rather constitutes a deeper process of hegemonic re-articulation. While conventional greenwashing (Delmas & Burbano, 2011) involves pretending to comply with existing standards, Tesla actively seeks to transform the standards themselves. The company shifts the definition of "sustainability" away from an axis of protection and reduction toward one of technological acceleration and "impact." This represents a more advanced phase of green capitalism, in which the very dynamics that generate the crisis—growth, technology, and consumption—are re-presented as the solutions to that crisis.

4.2. Consumption as a Zone of Moral Comfort

A substantial body of literature (Aronczyk, 2005; Budinsky & Bryant, 2013; Chen, 2016; Gunster, 2004) has demonstrated that automobile advertising and promotional discourse commodify nature. The Tesla case, however, advances these observations one step further. Whereas conventional automobile advertising promises the consumer an "escape into nature," Tesla's reports promise the consumer the act of "saving nature." This constitutes a far more powerful ideological mechanism, as it fully absolves the consumer of feelings of "environmental guilt." By purchasing a Tesla, the consumer does not merely acquire a car, but also purchases an "climate activist" identity.

4.3. Techno-Fetishism and the End of Politics

The emphasis on "Artificial Intelligence" and "Automation" in the reports—particularly in the 2024 report—confines the resolution of ecological problems to the domain of technology (engineering, optimization, and algorithmic governance) by removing it from the realm of politics (democratic decision-making, regulation, and social deliberation). This approach directly aligns with the tendency conceptualized in the literature as technological solutionism. According to Morozov (2013), technological solutionism reduces complex social and ecological problems to technical issues, while rendering invisible their political, economic, and class-based foundations.

Similarly, Swyngedouw (2010) argues that the climate crisis is increasingly framed within a "post-political" context, in which a political sphere marked by conflict, competing interests, and ideological differences is replaced by a consensual and technocratic model of governance. In parallel with this view, Tesla's "post-political" stance renders the social causes of the climate crisis—such as inequality and overproduction—invisible. For Tesla, the problem lies not in the "system" itself but in "outdated technology"; consequently, the solution is located not in systemic transformation or revolution, but in an incremental "upgrade."

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the discursive construction of "green capitalism" and "greenwashing" practices through Tesla Inc.'s Impact Reports covering the period 2020–2024. The findings demonstrate that Tesla's sustainability discourse is not merely a technical exercise aimed at reporting environmental performance; rather, it offers an ideological framework designed to re-establish the legitimacy of capitalist production and consumption relations under conditions of ecological crisis. The analysis conducted through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) reveals that these reports function not as neutral informational documents, but as hegemonic texts that present a particular worldview—one centered on technological progress, economic growth, and individual consumption-oriented environmentalism—as natural and inevitable.

In Tesla's reports, sustainability is framed not through concepts such as "protection" or "limitation," but rather through progressive and growth-oriented notions such as "impact," "momentum," and "acceleration," a framing that directly aligns with the core logic of green capitalism.

By consciously opting for the title Impact Report instead of the industry-standard Sustainability Report, the company positions itself not as a passive adapter, but as an active "agent of change." Within this discursive framework, the ecological crisis is redefined not as a systemic problem of production and consumption, but as an engineering problem that can be solved through the deployment of the right technologies and the right products. In doing so, structural issues that would otherwise require political and societal transformation are reduced to the domain of "technical problems."

Moreover, on the basis of the Critical Discourse Analysis conducted in this study, the following core conclusions have been reached:

Tesla constructs its corporate mission through a messianic narrative, aligning its commercial growth objectives with the discourse of "saving the planet." This messianic framing positions the company not merely as an automobile manufacturer, but as a "catalyst" accelerating humanity's transition toward a sustainable future. Through the binary opposition of "us" versus "them," Tesla codes the traditional internal combustion engine (ICE) industry as a "dirty past," while presenting itself as the embodiment of a "clean future," thereby casting itself as the antithesis of the sector. This positioning elevates the company's commercial activities onto a plane of moral superiority and, in doing so, establishes a powerful shield of legitimacy against criticism.

The claim of "Zero Emissions" is grounded in a strategy of selective disclosure that conceals the environmental costs of production and mining processes by focusing exclusively on the use phase. This strategy temporally displaces the carbon, water, and material burdens generated over the life cycle of electric vehicles, presenting present and localized ecological damage as compensable through hypothetical future gains. The company frames the "carbon debt" incurred during the production phase as a cost to be repaid over time as the vehicle is driven, and through its visualizations, it effectively sells consumers a promise of future purification. In this way, ecological harm is stripped of its character as irreversible destruction and reconstituted as a calculable, manageable technical problem.

Ethical and ecological problems within the supply chain (such as water use and cobalt extraction) are deferred through a bureaucratic language of auditing and promises of "future technological solutions" (recycling). Particularly with regard to water use, a strategy of relativization is employed, through which the industrial pressure exerted on local water basins is rendered insignificant. Rather than being subjected to critical scrutiny, key areas such as mining activities and water consumption are detached from their political context through appeals to advanced technological futures. This approach shifts the source of the problem away from the production system itself and reduces it to the level of a manageable operational detail.

Visual discourse, in turn, masks the material realities of industrial production by portraying technology as sterile and harmonious with nature. Factories are depicted not as smoke-emitting industrial sites but as futuristic laboratories imbued with a techno-sublime aesthetic and cleansed of human error. The visuals employed in the reports render invisible the real tensions between technology and nature, replacing them with a narrative of seamless compatibility. This visual aesthetic reinforces the idea that technological progress is both inevitable and harmless, thereby narrowing the space for critical reflection. Through this logic of "inverted quarantine," consumers are encouraged to seek personal redemption by purchasing clean technological products that promise isolation from a toxic world.

In conclusion, Tesla's reports generate a simulation that portrays existing consumer culture and an automobile-centered lifestyle as sustainable, rather than providing genuine transparency. A substantive ecological transformation requires not merely a change in engine technology, but a fundamental reorganization of transportation and production relations in accordance with social and

ecological needs. Tesla's articulation of "green capitalism," by contrast, functions as a mechanism of distraction grounded in technological optimism, one that obscures or postpones the necessity of such a structural transformation.

6. Recommendations

Future research may extend this analysis by incorporating consumer perception studies to examine how Tesla's hegemonic discourses are received and interpreted by its target audiences. In addition, comparative analyses between the discourse constructed by Tesla as a "pure-play" electric vehicle manufacturer and the sustainability narratives of traditional automotive giants transitioning from internal combustion engines (e.g., Volkswagen, Ford) or emerging Chinese competitors (e.g., BYD) would be productive for understanding the diverse rhetorical strategies through which green capitalism is articulated.

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