

**[Interdisciplinary Studies]**

Sustainability Narratives and Corporate Identity in the Shipping Industry: A Corpus-Assisted Discourse Study

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Abstract: The shipping industry, a cornerstone of global trade, faces escalating demands for sustainable practices and corporate social responsibility (CSR). This study employs a Corpus-Assisted discourse analysis (CADS) to explore how leading shipping companies, COSCO and Maersk, construct their corporate identities through sustainability narratives. By analyzing sustainability reports from 2017 to 2023, we uncover the underlying themes and strategies that shape their CSR communications. Our findings reveal that COSCO emphasizes operational excellence and alignment with national policies, reflecting collectivist values and China's development goals. In contrast, Maersk focuses on customer-centric initiatives and environmental leadership, resonating with individualistic values and Western market demands. The study highlights the influence of cultural contexts on CSR strategies and the importance of stakeholder expectations in shaping corporate identity. We conclude that a nuanced understanding of CSR practices, which considers socio-political and economic contexts, is essential for companies to align their operations with global sustainability goals and stakeholder perceptions. This research contributes to the broader discourse on CSR by providing insights into the complex dynamics of corporate identity construction in the maritime sector, emphasizing the importance of context in shaping sustainability narratives.

Keywords: sustainability; corporate identity; shipping industry; Corpus-Assisted discourse study

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1. Introduction

The shipping industry, a fundamental component of global trade, is pivotal in transporting approximately 80% of the world's goods (Statista, 2024). By 1 January 2024, the global shipping fleet's capacity, measured in dead weight tons, had expanded to 2.35 billion dwt, an increase of 77 million dwt from the previous year (UN Trade & Development, 2024). This expansion not only highlights the industry's critical role in facilitating international commerce and economic welfare but also underscores its growing impact on the global economy. Consequently, the importance of CSR within the industry has been elevated. Companies in this sector are increasingly expected to demonstrate their commitment to sustainable practices and social accountability, especially as they navigate the complexities of environmental concerns and stakeholder scrutiny.

Marine connectivity is pivotal for economic development. Efficient shipping operations improve access to markets, bolster supply chains, and reduce transportation costs, thereby enhancing competitiveness (Container News, 2024). The economic implications of the shipping industry are profound, as it supports millions of jobs globally. According to a report by the International Chamber of Shipping, the sector contributes over \$380 billion annually to the global economy, demonstrating its potential to drive sustainable growth and development (International Chamber of Shipping, 2024). However, the industry is not without challenges. The environmental impacts of shipping—such as greenhouse gas emissions, air and marine pollution, and habitat destruction—are significant concerns (International Maritime Organization, 2009). The maritime transport sector significantly contributes to global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, with estimates suggesting it accounts for approximately 2–3% of global CO₂ emissions (Grzelakowski et al., 2022). Recent issues, including oil spills and the exploitation of seafarers, have sparked debates within the industry about the need for more robust CSR practices (Tang & Gekara, 2020). Various organizations have called for enhanced CSR initiatives to address these challenges and promote sustainable practices within the industry (Drobetz et al., 2014). The International Maritime Organization (IMO) has set ambitious targets to reduce GHG emissions, highlighting the need for the industry to align its operations with sustainability goals (Aktas et al., 2023). Given these pressures, there is a growing recognition that effective CSR strategies can enhance brand reputation and foster trust among stakeholders (Jones et al., 2019). Accordingly, many shipping companies have begun to adopt sustainability frameworks and disclose CSR activities to improve their operational transparency and stakeholder engagement (Zhou et al., 2021).

The significance of CSR in the shipping industry extends beyond compliance with regulations; it offers broad benefits, including improved stakeholder perception, enhanced corporate reputation, and increased customer loyalty (Shin & Thai, 2015). As shipping companies adopt CSR practices, they not only mitigate risks associated with negative public perception but also position themselves as leaders in sustainability (Lu et al., 2009). The trend towards proactive CSR adoption is evident, with many companies moving beyond mere



compliance to integrate sustainability into their core business strategies (Feng & Ngai, 2020; Tang & Gekara, 2020).

Despite the increasing emphasis on CSR within the shipping sector, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding comprehensive studies that utilize Corpus-Assisted discourse study to examine how leading shipping companies articulate their sustainability narratives. Most existing research has focused on case studies or region-specific analyses, leaving a need for large-scale, comparative investigations into the corporate identities constructed through sustainability reporting. This study aims to address these gaps by analyzing the language used in sustainability reports to uncover the underlying narratives and strategies that shape corporate identity in the shipping industry. By employing a Corpus-Assisted discourse study (CADS), this research will provide a nuanced understanding of how COSCO and Maersk construct their corporate identities through sustainability narratives, ultimately contributing to the broader discourse on corporate responsibility and identity in the maritime sector. The findings will illustrate how contextual factors, including cultural norms and market dynamics, influence the discursive practices of these two leading shipping companies, highlighting the significance of context in shaping corporate identity.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Shipping industry and corporate social responsibility*

The shipping industry, a vital facilitator of global trade, is increasingly scrutinized for its environmental impact and the urgent need for sustainable practices. Research indicates that effective CSR practices can significantly enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty, ultimately improving financial performance (Shin & Thai, 2015). Furthermore, CSR initiatives serve as powerful marketing tools, enabling companies to differentiate themselves in a highly competitive market (Lu et al., 2009). For instance, Lu et al. (2009) found that shipping companies actively engaging in CSR not only bolster their public image but also gain a competitive edge by attracting environmentally conscious customers. This aligns with the broader literature suggesting a positive correlation between CSR disclosure and financial performance, indicating that socially responsible behavior can enhance a firm's reputation and competitiveness (Drobetz et al., 2014). As the industry faces mounting scrutiny regarding its environmental footprint, understanding how shipping companies construct their corporate identities around sustainability becomes essential.

Kronfeld-Goharani (2018) conducted a discourse analysis of 396 ocean industry companies, revealing that only 61 provide commitments to and reporting on sustainability. This study highlights a significant shift from voluntary to mandatory sustainability commitments, driven by stakeholder pressures to mitigate environmental harm and comply with international regulations. Companies are increasingly reframing these challenges as entrepreneurial opportunities to optimize efficiency, reduce costs, and enhance their public image. This reframing is a critical aspect of corporate identity construction, where sustainability efforts are discursively presented as integral to the company's core values and strategic objectives.

Zhou et al. (2021) employed a text-mining approach to establish a unified framework for sustainability disclosure in container shipping, encompassing employee training, sustainable business management, and

sustainable shipping operations. Their study provides a structured evidence base for the content of sustainability disclosures in the container shipping sector, offering insights into how companies construct their corporate identity through public narratives related to sustainability performance. However, a significant gap remains in understanding how these disclosures shape corporate identity. Tang & Gekara (2020) highlight the selective focus of shipping companies on certain CSR elements based on anticipated customer expectations, yet they do not delve into how these expectations are articulated in corporate communications. Additionally, the existing literature often emphasizes environmental issues over social factors, such as labor rights and seafarer welfare, which are equally critical (Sampson, 2016). Sampson (2016) argues that while environmental sustainability is vital, the neglect of social dimensions in CSR discussions can lead to incomplete assessments of corporate responsibility in the shipping sector. This imbalance suggests a need for more comprehensive analyses that consider the full spectrum of CSR practices in the shipping sector.

Moreover, the literature often treats CSR as a uniform concept, overlooking the nuances of how different companies respond to regulatory pressures and market demands. For example, while some companies adopt a proactive stance towards environmental sustainability, others may engage in “greenwashing”, presenting a façade of responsibility without substantive action (Lund–Thomsen et al., 2016). Lund–Thomsen et al. (2016) emphasize that the shipping industry is particularly susceptible to greenwashing due to the complexity of its operations and the challenges in measuring sustainability outcomes. Understanding the contextual influences on corporate identity is crucial for analyzing how shipping companies communicate their sustainability efforts. Liu & Wu (2015) emphasize that corporate identity is not a static property but a dynamic construct influenced by the socio–cultural contexts in which companies operate. This perspective is particularly relevant in the shipping industry, where local practices and global standards intersect. The ways in which companies like COSCO and Maersk articulate their sustainability initiatives may differ significantly due to their distinct cultural backgrounds and market positioning.

2.2 A discourse analytic approach to corporate social responsibility

CSR has emerged as a critical area of study within organizational discourse, reflecting the evolving expectations of stakeholders and the growing importance of sustainability in business practices. With the advent of globalization and the increasing scrutiny on businesses’ social and environmental impacts, CSR has become a pivotal aspect of corporate identity (Kramer & Porter, 2006). The construct of corporate identity has been a central theme in the field of business and communication studies, traditionally understood as the image an organization projects to its stakeholders, encapsulating its values, philosophy, and culture (van Riel, 1995). Recent scholarship, however, has emphasized the dynamic and multifaceted nature of corporate identity, recognizing it as a construct that is discursively negotiated and performed (Balmer et al., 2007). In this context, CSR discourse serves as a strategic tool for organizations to align their communicated identity with their desired image, often within the constraints of stakeholder expectations and societal norms.

Discourse analysis provides a robust framework for understanding how language constructs social realities, including corporate identities. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) emphasizes the relationship between discourse and social power, highlighting how language reflects and constructs social realities (Fairclough, 1995). According to Gee (2014), discourse is not merely a reflection of reality but a means of constructing it. This



perspective is particularly relevant in CSR, where companies use language to frame their social and environmental commitments. A discourse analytic approach provides valuable insights into how corporations construct their identities through CSR reporting. By examining the linguistic and rhetorical strategies employed in these reports, researchers can uncover the underlying narratives that shape corporate identity and stakeholder perceptions.

The discourse of CSR has expanded to encompass a broader range of stakeholders, including organizational, community, regulatory, and media stakeholders (Zappettini & Unerman, 2016). This expansion has led to a more complex discourse, where corporations must engage with multiple parties, each with their own expectations and interests. The evolution of CSR from a narrow focus on businessmen's obligations to a broader engagement with societal roles reflects the maturing understanding of the multifaceted nature of corporate responsibility and its implications for corporate identity. This shift underscores the importance of discourse analysis in understanding how corporations communicate their CSR efforts and the impact of these communications on the construction of their identities in the eyes of various stakeholders.

As corporations navigate complex social expectations and stakeholder demands, the language they use to construct their identities becomes crucial. A growing body of literature highlights the role of discourse in shaping corporate identity, emphasizing that CSR communications are not merely informative but are instrumental in constructing and negotiating corporate identities (Gotti, 2011; Zappettini & Unerman, 2016). This discourse is not static; it evolves with the changing definitions and implementations of CSR, which vary across contexts (Bhatia, 2013). Early definitions emphasized a businessman's obligation to society, which progressed to include more formalized understandings of a corporation's role in society (Davis & Blomstrom, 1975).

In the realm of CSR reporting, there is a discernible trend towards hybridity, where promotional and reporting discourses intersect. As Bhatia (2013) examines PetroChina's Sustainability Reports, revealing a blend of promotional elements within the reporting genre. This hybridity is further explored by Zappettini & Unerman (2016), who note that Integrated Reporting (IR) often merges financial information with social and environmental impacts, leading to a semantic bending of sustainability towards financial viability and profitability. Such reports serve not only to inform but also to legitimize corporate actions and strategies, often prioritizing the corporation's image and interests.

The intertextuality within CSR discourse is a critical dimension, where corporate texts reference and build upon one another, shaping the meanings and identities of corporations (Ngai et al., 2020). Ngai et al. (2020) compare the intertextual links in corporate leaders' messages from the US and China, highlighting the cross-cultural differences in referencing practices. While Chinese corporations often utilize direct quotations from government policies and business achievements, their American counterparts lean towards indirect quotes and industry-specific phrasing, reflecting a more individualistic and succinct communication style. This divergence further underscores the importance of understanding the socio-cultural factors that shape corporate narratives and identity construction. The interplay between language and culture in CSR discourse reveals how corporations strategically position themselves within their respective contexts, thereby influencing stakeholder perceptions.

Moreover, the analysis of stance markers in CSR reports provides insights into how companies assert their identities and engage with stakeholders. Fuoli (2018) highlights the importance of linguistic markers that convey certainty, commitment, and responsibility, suggesting that these choices are instrumental in building trust and

credibility with audiences. This focus on linguistic choices underscores the significance of language in constructing corporate identity and fostering stakeholder relationships. For instance, the use of metaphors and narrative structures in CSR reports plays a crucial role in shaping how companies present their initiatives. By employing metaphors related to sustainability and community engagement, corporations position themselves as responsible and ethical entities.

The literature reveals notable differences in CSR practices across various cultural and economic contexts (Bhatia & Makkar, 2019; Yu & Bondi, 2017). For example, CSR reporting in the United States is often voluntary and driven by market forces, while in China, it is frequently mandated for state-owned enterprises (Bhatia, 2012). This divergence illustrates the influence of regulatory frameworks and cultural expectations on corporate communication strategies. Research by Yu & Bondi (2017) employs corpus-based methodologies to analyze CSR reports from different countries, revealing how linguistic choices reflect national values and corporate strategies. These studies demonstrate that the construction of corporate identity is not solely a matter of individual corporate strategy but is also shaped by broader socio-political contexts (司, 2024; 胡 & 周, 2024).

Despite the growing body of research on CSR discourse, several challenges remain. The lack of universal standards for CSR reporting complicates the analysis, as companies often adopt flexible reporting practices that may not adequately address stakeholder concerns (Jaworska, 2018). Furthermore, the hybrid nature of CSR reports, which blend promotional and informative discourses, can obscure the genuine intentions behind corporate communication (Bhatia, 2013). This complexity necessitates a critical examination of the narratives corporations construct and the implications for stakeholder trust and engagement.

While traditional discourse analysis has significantly contributed to our understanding of CSR communications, the application of Corpus-Assisted discourse studies (CADS) in this field remains underexplored. CADS offers a systematic and quantitative approach to analyzing large corpora of texts, enabling researchers to identify patterns and trends that may not be readily apparent through qualitative analysis alone. The integration of CADS into CSR discourse analysis can enhance the examination of CSR discourse by providing insights into the frequency and distribution of specific linguistic features, thereby enriching our understanding of how corporate identities are constructed across different contexts.

3. Data and Methodology

3.1 Data

The data for this study consists of the sustainability reports of COSCO and Maersk from 2017 to 2023. These reports provide insights into the companies' commitments to sustainability, corporate social responsibility, and their strategic approaches to environmental challenges. The selection of this time frame is particularly relevant due to significant organizational changes, such as the merger of COSCO with China Shipping in 2016, which reshaped its corporate identity and strategic focus. Analyzing reports from 2017 onwards allows for a comprehensive understanding of how these changes have influenced COSCO's sustainability practices.

COSCO and Maersk are two prominent players in the global shipping industry, each with distinct corporate identities shaped by their operational contexts and cultural backgrounds. Analyzing these companies allows for a



comparative examination of how corporate identity is constructed and communicated in different cultural settings. COSCO, as a state-owned enterprise in China, reflects the collectivist values prevalent in its operational context, while Maersk, rooted in a Western context, embodies individualistic and stakeholder-oriented principles.

3.2 Methodology

Corporate identity is a multifaceted concept that encompasses the visual, verbal, and behavioral aspects of an organization, shaping how it is perceived by stakeholders. According to Balmer & Podnar (2021), corporate identity is the unique set of associations/characteristics that stakeholders hold about a brand. From a social constructionist perspective, corporate identity is not merely a static representation but is actively constructed through interactions and communications among various stakeholders. Gioia et al. (2000) emphasize that corporate identity is “a dynamic and evolving construct that reflects the interplay between organizational actions and stakeholder perceptions” (p. 63). This understanding highlights the importance of context and communication in shaping corporate identity.

Building on these theoretical foundations, we adopt an analytical framework that integrates the Discourse-historical Approach (DHA) by Reisigl & Wodak (2016) to examine the discursive construction of corporate identity within sustainability reporting. DHA, a branch of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), emphasizes the examination of discourse in its socio-historical contexts (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016). The DHA explicates the dialectic relations between discourse and society, recognizing that discourse is both a reflection and a shaper of social reality. This approach is crucial for understanding how corporate identity is constructed and communicated within the shipping industry.

The framework is visualized as a conceptual map (as visualized in Figure 1) adapted from the analysis of Integrated Reporting by Zappettini & Unerman (2016), illustrating the process by which organizations create and sustain a sustainable identity through their language resources and discursive strategies. Central to this framework is the “Sustainable Identity”, which is informed by the “Triple Bottom Line” principles, integrating economic, social, and environmental dimensions. This identity is expressed through the organization’s language resources, which communicate its commitment to sustainability.

The process of constructing a sustainable identity starts with the “Organization WE”, which is responsible for “Creating” and “Sustaining” value. This process involves the “delivery”, “pursuit”, and “generation” of “sustained benefits” that enhance “performance” and foster “long-term growth”. The organization’s activities are designed to generate value that extends to a broad spectrum of stakeholders. The framework recognizes the impact of various “contexts”, including cultural, social, and economic factors, which are pivotal in shaping the sustainable identity. These contexts are interwoven with the “value” that the organization aims to create and communicate. The “language resources” are analyzed across three levels:

Macro Level: This level focuses on identifying the overarching themes and topics related to sustainability that dominate the discourse.

Meso Level: At this level, attention is given to the “discursive strategies” that the organization employs to frame and present these themes, including argumentative patterns, narrative structures, and rhetorical devices.

Micro Level: The micro level examines the “linguistic devices and means” used to implement the discursive strategies, such as word choice, phrases, and grammatical structures that influence the message and its reception by the audience.

The framework also identifies key “stakeholders” as the target audience for the organization’s sustainability narrative, including “shareholders”, “customers”, “employees”, “owners”, and “communities”. The organization’s communication is customized to meet the diverse concerns and expectations of these groups.

To operationalize our analytical framework, we employ a Corpus-Assisted discourse study approach, utilizing KH Coder and Wmatrix as primary analytical tools. KH Coder is a text mining tool that facilitates qualitative and quantitative analysis of textual data. It generates Co-occurrence networks by calculating the frequency of Co-occurrence between terms, allowing for the visualization of relationships between key terms within the sustainability reports. The logic behind the Co-occurrence network generation in KH Coder involves the use of Jaccard similarity coefficient to filter words that are strongly co-occurring, with a value close to 1 indicating high similarity between sets.

Wmatrix is a corpus analytic tool that focuses on semantic categorization and frequency analysis. It allows researchers to analyze key semantic categories, providing a deeper understanding of the discourse surrounding sustainability in the reports. Wmatrix generates semantic tags that categorize words into various semantic domains. Specifically, Wmatrix classifies English vocabulary into 21 major semantic fields, which are further subdivided into 232 category labels. These fields include, but are not limited to, economy, society, environment, technology, law, and health. By performing automatic semantic tagging on the text, Wmatrix helps to produce detailed information about the specific use of different semantic categories within the text and compares a corpus with a parallel or general reference corpus to identify key semantic categories that are statistically more frequent in the subject corpus.

The selection of KH Coder and Wmatrix is grounded in their complementary strengths. KH Coder facilitates the exploration of textual data through visual representations, enabling the identification of prominent themes and relationships. Wmatrix, on the other hand, offers a robust framework for semantic analysis, allowing for the categorization of terms and the identification of key themes within the discourse. Together, these tools provide a comprehensive methodology for analyzing corporate identity in sustainability reports. To interpret the findings, we apply the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) theory, which emphasizes the balance of economic, social, and environmental dimensions in corporate practices (Elkington, 1999). This holistic approach is crucial for understanding how COSCO and Maersk address sustainability challenges and communicate their commitments to various stakeholders. Additionally, we consider cross-cultural variations to recognize how cultural contexts influence corporate identity construction (Kunxue & Mingkun, 2023).

The integration of the DHA with the corpus linguistics using KH Coder and Wmatrix provides a comprehensive methodology for analyzing corporate identity in sustainability reports. The DHA’s emphasis on context and the social practice of discourse enriches our analysis by highlighting how language use in sustainability reporting is a product of and an influence on social reality. The corpus tools enable us to systematically explore and quantify the linguistic features and discursive strategies that construct sustainable identities.

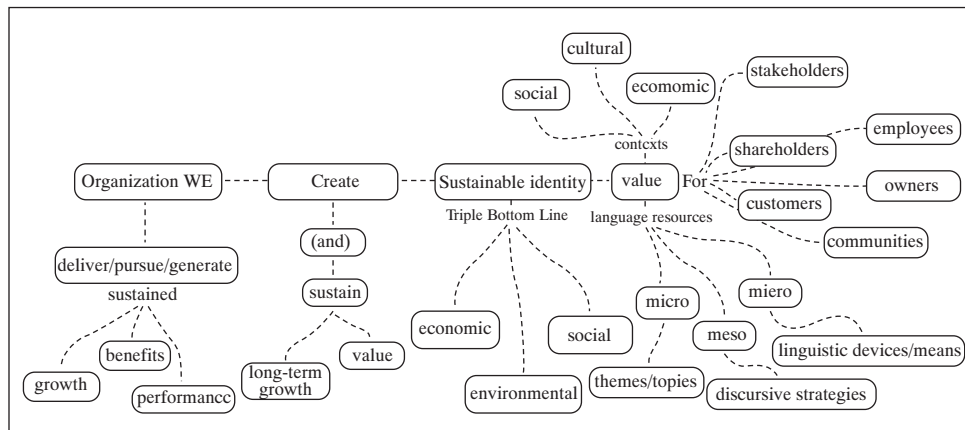


Figure 1 Analytical framework

4. Findings

4.1 Thematic analysis

Figure2 visualizes the prominent themes of COSCO. Theme 1 highlights COSCO's focus on its **core business operations**, showcasing its pivotal role in global container transport. Key terms such as *shipping, lines, port, ship, terminal, container, transport, world* underscore the company's extensive involvement in the maritime sector. Additionally, the frequent appearance of terms like *China, Party, and Group* indicates a strong alignment with **national policies**, positioning COSCO as a key player not only in the shipping industry but also within the broader context of China's economic ambitions. Theme 2 foregrounds the company's **sustainable development**, highlighting its commitment to corporate governance, social responsibility, and environmental protection. This theme is illustrated by terms such as *cooperation, sustainable, and green transformation*, reflecting COSCO's efforts to transition towards greener practices and protect marine environments. Theme 3 addresses **logistics and supply chain management**, where COSCO emphasizes optimizing operations to reduce emissions and resource consumption. The presence of terms like *logistics, supply, build, transportation, energy, reduce, emission, fuel, vessel, resource, global, business* indicates a strategic approach to building a more sustainable and efficient transportation network. Theme 4 concerns with **safety and quality service**. The company prioritizes operational safety and customer satisfaction. The use of terms such as *ensure, safety, work, operation, risk, control, management, system, improve, provide, support, more, quality, customer, service, product* highlights the company's focus on providing reliable services. Theme 5 is about **employee training and community development**, showcasing COSCO's value for talent nurturing, technology innovation, poverty alleviation, and involvement in international trade and logistics, which can be seen from words *employee, training, local, area, people, poverty, activity, technology, innovation, research, project, power, international, Maritime, Road*. Theme 6 highlights **collaboration and enhancement**.

Figure 3 displays the Co-occurrence network of Maersk. Theme 1 underscores Maersk's emphasis on **customer needs** and its **leadership role in the shipping industry**. The frequent use of terms such as *customer,*

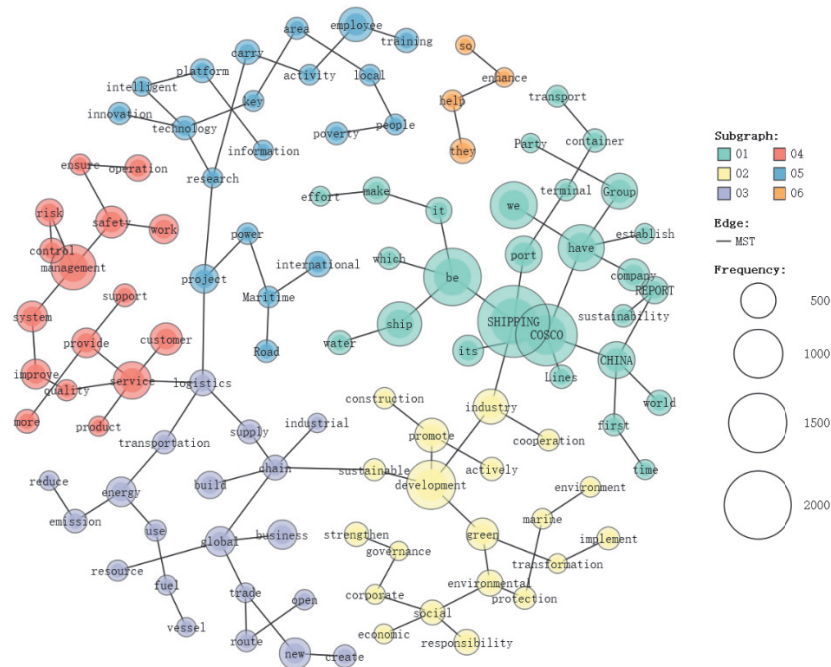


Figure 2 Co-occurrence network of COSCO

leadership, climate, and change indicates a strategic focus on addressing climate change through innovative practices and customer-centric initiatives. This positions Maersk as a proactive leader in the industry, responding to the growing demand for sustainable shipping solutions. Theme 2 centers on **stakeholder engagement**, particularly concerning human rights and labor issues. The presence of terms like *stakeholder, engage, engagement, labor, employee, human, rights* highlights Maersk's commitment to addressing social issues within its operations. This focus aligns with global CSR standards, such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, reflecting a broader understanding of corporate responsibility that extends beyond environmental concerns. Theme 3 concerns **ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) performance**, emphasizing data governance and strategic initiatives. Key terms such as *data, governance, strategy, ESG* illustrate Maersk's commitment to transparency and accountability in its sustainability efforts. Theme 4 emphasizes **risk management and responsible business practices**. The use of terms *business, practice, risk, assessment, compliance, management, system, responsible, procurement, sustainable, development* indicates Maersk's proactive approach to managing risks associated with sustainability. Theme 5 foregrounds its emphasis on **safety, health, and environmental initiatives**, with an emphasis on reducing emissions and developing green solutions. Terms such as *environment, safety, health, ocean, green, fuel, emission, increase, energy, develop, new, solution* highlight Maersk's commitment to enhancing its environmental performance. Theme 6 focuses on **global trade and company's value**, which can be seen from *trade, container, vessel, global, logistics, supply, service, chain, value, share, create*. Theme 8 is a specific mention of the **company's brand** and sustainability report.

Both COSCO and Maersk construct their corporate identities through themes that reflect their commitments to the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of the Triple Bottom Line. In the economic dimension,

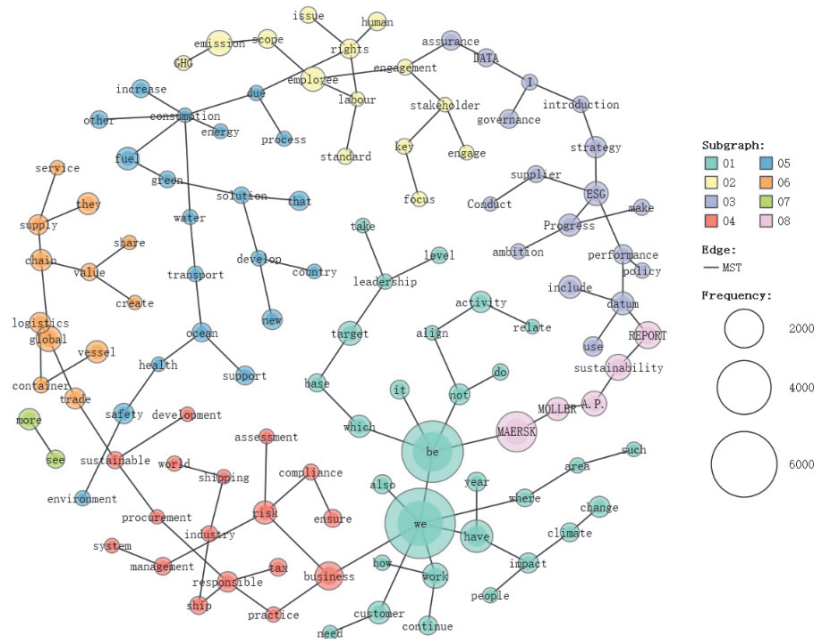


Figure 3 Co-occurrence network of Maersk

COSCO emphasizes its operational significance and efficiency, focusing on logistics and supply chain management to enhance its competitive edge. In contrast, Maersk prioritizes customer-centric initiatives and industry leadership, positioning itself as a responsive player in the market. This distinction highlights how COSCO leverages its operational capabilities to drive economic performance, while Maersk emphasizes adaptability and customer engagement as key drivers of its economic strategy.

When examining the social dimension, COSCO's focus on employee training and community development reflects its commitment to nurturing talent and addressing socio-economic issues. This approach fosters a sense of corporate responsibility that resonates with local communities. Conversely, Maersk's emphasis on stakeholder engagement and human rights underscores its proactive stance in addressing social issues within its operations. This difference illustrates how COSCO seeks to build community ties through direct engagement, while Maersk focuses on broader ethical practices that enhance its corporate reputation and stakeholder trust.

In terms of the environmental dimension, both companies prioritize sustainability, but their approaches differ significantly. COSCO's commitment to sustainable development and green transformation indicates a proactive approach to environmental stewardship, supported by its focus on reducing emissions in logistics. This reflects a strategic alignment with global sustainability trends and stakeholder expectations. On the other hand, Maersk's emphasis on ESG performance and environmental initiatives showcases its commitment to transparency and accountability, highlighting its efforts to enhance environmental performance through innovative solutions. This distinction reveals how COSCO integrates sustainability into its operational framework, while Maersk positions itself as a leader in corporate governance and environmental responsibility.

In summary, the comparative analysis of COSCO and Maersk reveals the complexities of corporate responsibility in the shipping industry and the nuanced ways in which each company addresses sustainability challenges. The insights gained from this thematic analysis set the stage for a deeper understanding of the specific

language used to convey these themes. The subsequent analysis using Wmatrix will further elucidate the key semantic categories that underpin these themes, providing a granular understanding of the discourse surrounding sustainability in the reports of COSCO and Maersk. By linking the thematic insights from KH Coder with the semantic categories identified through Wmatrix, we can gain a comprehensive view of how language shapes stakeholder perceptions and corporate identities in the context of sustainability.

4.2 Analysis of shared key semantic categories

Building on the thematic insights from KH Coder, the subsequent analysis using Wmatrix reveals specific semantic categories that further illuminate the discourse surrounding sustainability in the reports of COSCO and Maersk. This section examines the top 20 key semantic categories (SMCs) identified in the sustainability reports of COSCO and Maersk, as compared to the British National Corpus (BNC) Sampler written corpus. The analysis reveals 11 shared key SMCs, including **Z99** (“unmatched”), **M4** (“sailing, swimming, etc.”), **S8+** (“helping”), **W5** (“green issues”), **I2.1** (“business: generally”), **A2.1+** (“change”), **A1.1.1** (“general actions/making”), **A15+** (“safe”), **I2.2** (“business: selling”), **I3.1** (“work and employment: generally”), and **A15-** (“danger”).

The presence of these categories across both corpora indicates significant thematic similarities that characterize the discourse of sustainability reports for both companies. For instance, the theme of sustainability, as identified in the Co-occurrence network analysis, is reinforced by the presence of **W5** (green issues) and **A2.1+** (change), which highlight the companies’ commitments to environmental stewardship and innovation.

(1) As a massive state-owned enterprise directly managed by China’s central government, COSCO SHIPPING stays true to its mission, closely links its development with the advancement of the shipping industry, the national destiny and the great rejuvenation of China, unswervingly shoulders economic, social and environmental responsibilities and strives to achieve sustainable and healthy development. (COSCO)

(2) We hope other shipowners will join us in transforming the entire Alang ship recycling industry by demanding high standards for safety, human rights and the environment, and by supervising implementation on the ground on a daily basis. (Maersk)

Table 1 Top 20 Key Semantic Categories in COSCO and Maersk

Rank	COSCO			Maersk		
	Tagset	LL	SMCs	Tagset	LL	SMCs
1	Z99	6876.94	Unmatched	Z99	4245.53	Unmatched
2	M4	5405.5	Sailing, swimming, etc.	X2.2	3003.94	Knowledge
3	S8+	3741.94	Helping	M4	2629.56	Sailing, swimming, etc.
4	M2	3345.95	Putting, pulling, pushing, transporting	N1	2414.79	Numbers
5	W5	2027.13	Green issues	I2.2	2370.46	Business: Selling
6	I2.1	1573.53	Business: Generally	A1.1.1	2148.27	General actions /making

续表

Rank	COSCO			Maersk		
	Tagset	LL	SMCs	Tagset	LL	SMCs
7	A2. 1+	1435. 06	Change	A2. 2	2018. 1	Cause&Effect/Connection
8	A1. 1. 1	1242. 72	General actions/making	I2. 1	1900. 15	Business: Generally
9	A15+	1152. 15	Safe	T2++	1899. 05	Time: Beginning
10	I4	1135. 91	Industry	X7+	1705. 17	Wanted
11	I2. 2	929. 17	Business: Selling	A15–	1527. 23	Danger
12	S5+	882. 18	Belonging to a group	A15+	1461. 07	Safe
13	A5. 1+	859. 1	Evaluation: Good	W5	1360. 54	Green issues
14	S7. 1+	762. 85	In power	I3. 1	1239. 42	Work and employment: Generally
15	I3. 1	688. 38	Work and employment: Generally	A1. 8+	1227. 08	Inclusion
16	S1. 2. 5+	632. 33	Tough/strong	O1	1215. 31	Substances and materials generally
17	A15–	608. 51	Danger	A11. 1+	932. 36	Important
18	X5. 2+	604. 44	Interested/excited/energetic	O1. 3	823. 64	Substances and materials: Gas
19	A5. 1	577. 2	Evaluation: Good/bad	A2. 1+	751. 91	Change
20	Y1	514. 34	Science and technology in general	S8+	712. 42	Helping

The analysis of these shared key semantic categories reveals critical insights into how both COSCO and Maersk construct their corporate identities. Categories such as **M4** (sailing, swimming, etc.), **I2. 1** (business: generally), and **I2. 2** (business: selling) reflect a focus on industry-specific activities, essential for defining the operational scope of a shipping company. The presence of semantic categories **I3. 1** (work and employment: generally) and **A15+** (safe) indicates a commitment to employee relations and safety, essential for fostering a positive corporate image. Furthermore, **W5** (green issues) highlights both companies' engagement with environmental concerns, while **S8+** (helping) suggests an ethical corporate identity aimed at supporting various stakeholders, which can be seen from typical tokens *support, services, assistance, help, enabling, enable*.

(3) COSCO SHIPPING has also established a customer feedback system to respond promptly to and earnestly handle customer feedbacks and opinions, improveservice quality in a targeted manner, and maintain customer satisfaction. (COSCO)

(4) Wesupport and commit to contribute positively to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, while also reducing our potential negative impact on the goals. (Maersk)

Categories **A2. 1+** (change) and **A1. 1. 1** (general actions/making) emphasize both companies' commitment to development and innovation, showcasing their proactive stances in adapting to industry changes. Conversely, the category **A15–** (danger) underscores the inherent risks associated with the shipping industry, known for its hazardous working environments and significant environmental impacts.

(5) Risk Management CSL has always adhered to the original intention of risk management, integrating

risk management into every detail of enterprise operation. (COSCO)

(6) We control the risk of spills through focusing on safe processes for HSE management. (Maersk)

Table 2 Examples for shared Key SMCs

Tagset	SMCs	Examples
Z99	Unmatched	Maersk: <i>Maersk, ESG, Moller, Maersks, GHG, decarbonisation</i> COSCO: <i>COSCO, GRI, low-carbon, LNG, Piraeus, CSL, SDGs, CSR, IMO</i>
M4	Sailing, swimming, etc.	<i>vessels, ship, vessel, port, marine, fleet, ports, ships, seafarers, crew, shipbuilding, tankers, sailing</i>
S8+	Helping	<i>support, services, assistance, help, enabling, enable, guidelines, service, benefits</i>
W5	Green issues	<i>environment, environmental, ecosystems, pollution, ecosystem, nature, ECO</i>
I2. 1	Business: Generally	<i>business, company, companies, audits, infrastructure, commercial, executives, enterprises</i>
A2. 1+	Change	<i>change, development, transition, transformation, develop, changes, developing, developed, changing, become, developments</i>
A1. 1. 1	General actions/making	<i>logistics, activities, operations, practices, labor, processes, create, committed, actions, engage, operational</i>
A15+	Safe	<i>safety, safe, safely, safeguards, guard, safety_work, safety_equipment, safety_situation</i>
I2. 2	Business: Selling	<i>customers, trade, suppliers, supply_chain, supply_chains, supplier, customer, market, trading, purchased</i>
I3. 1	Work and employment: Generally	<i>employees, work, working, employee, workers, job, role, worked, jobs, workplace, employment</i>
A15–	Danger	<i>risk, risks, high-risk, exposure, hazardous, hazards, at_risk, unsafe, dangerous</i>

4.3 Analysis of preferential key SMCs

Table 3 displays the top 20 preferential key SMCs, representing distinct themes that are statistically significant in the two comparable corpora. The analysis reveals distinct topic preferences and communication styles between COSCO and Maersk. While COSCO emphasizes education, poverty, and information technology, Maersk places greater significance on sustainable production and emissions. This differentiation can be observed through key SMCs such as **P1** (education in general), **I1. 1–** (lack: money), and **Y2** (information technology and computing) in COSCO, compared to **T2++** (time: beginning) and **O1. 3** (substances and materials: gas) in Maersk.

The presence of terms related to poverty (I1. 1–) indicates COSCO's focus on socio-economic issues pertinent to its operational context, reflecting a broader commitment to social responsibility (Bhatia & Makkar, 2019; Kvasničková Stanislavská et al., 2023). In contrast, Maersk's emphasis on sustainability (T2++) and emissions (O1. 3) aligns with its proactive approach to addressing environmental challenges, demonstrating a commitment to transparency and accountability in its sustainability practices.

I1. 1–: *poverty* (189), *poor* (38), *impoverished* (18), *in_need* (8), *needy* (7)

P1: *training* (168), *education* (113), *students* (31), *philosophy* (26), *teaching* (23), *university* (21), *study*



(20), *educational* (20)

Y2: *digital* (101), *online* (51), *program* (34), *internet* (27), *connectivity* (18), *website* (17)

T2++: *sustainability* (841), *sustainable* (331), *continue* (224), *continued* (136)

O1.3: *CO₂* (172), *air* (170), *gas* (108), *gases* (22), *gasses* (9), *methane* (9)

COSCO's focus on industry-specific actions is evident in the prevalence of SMCs such as **M2** (putting, pulling, pushing, transporting) and **M4** (sailing, swimming, etc.), which portray the company as actively engaged in global operations. This emphasis resonates with stakeholders interested in operational excellence and leadership within the shipping industry. Conversely, Maersk's use of **Z8** (pronouns) reflects a more personal and relatable communication style with its stakeholders. The frequent use of first-person plural pronouns such as *our* (3678, 1.75%) and *we* (2930, 1.39%) in Maersk's reports fosters a sense of inclusivity and connection with its audience, while COSCO's more formal approach, characterized by less frequent use of pronouns *we* (683, 0.51%), *its* (353, 0.26%), *it* (250, 0.19%), and *our* (202, 0.15%) and more self-references to *COSCO* (1482, 1.1%) or *Company* (298, 0.22%), indicates a preference for maintaining a hierarchical relationship with stakeholders. Maersk shows a lower frequency of self-mentioning *Maersk* (1746, 0.83%) or *Company* (193, 0.09%). The frequent use of first-person pronouns can shorten the distance between the author and its audience (Gotti, 2011) and personalize the communication (Degano, 2010), while the particular way of self-reference in COSCO indicates its preference for maintaining the distance between the company and the client to show its respect for its stakeholders (Gotti, 2011; Liu & Wu, 2015).

Another notable difference lies in the tone of CSR-related information presented by the two companies. COSCO tends to produce positive narratives, emphasizing its competencies and proactive efforts. This is reflected in key SMCs such as **S1.2.5+** (tough/strong), **A5.1+** (evaluation: good), and **X9.1+** (able/intelligent), which highlight positive evaluative language such as *strong*, *competent*, *intelligent*, *efficient*, *high-quality*, *good*, *great*. This proactive communication style suggests an intention to shape stakeholder perceptions and mitigate potential criticisms before they arise.

(7) It will provide a strong guarantee for the major business segments of the Group. (COSCO)

(8) Taking this opportunity, we continuously optimized business content and processes with the help of big data and the Internet to provide customers with more intelligent and convenient services. (COSCO)

(9) It is committed to becoming a better performer of national policies, a better service provider for customers, a better partner for suppliers and a better career development platform for employees. (COSCO)

In contrast, Maersk adopts a more reactive communication strategy, focusing on addressing immediate stakeholder concerns and issues that pose threats to its corporate image. This is evident in its emphasis on categories such as **A2.2** (cause & effect) and **Z6** (negative) and the voluntary disclosure of **N1** (Numbers) and **N5** (Quantities), which indicate a focus on mitigating risks associated with its operations. Maersk's reporting preferences reflect a defensive approach, responding to external pressures for transparency and accountability by addressing negative aspects of its operations and providing detailed quantitative information.

(10) Seven fatalities and anegative development in the frequency of lost–time injuries in half of our businesses is a deeply unsatisfactory development. (Maersk)

(11) Keeping harmful substances in check Oil spills constitute arisk which could potentially have a very high negative impact on both people and the environment. (Maersk)

The differences in the communication styles and thematic emphases of COSCO and Maersk can be attributed to their distinct cultural contexts. COSCO, as a state–owned enterprise, aligns closely with the collectivist values prevalent in Chinese culture, which emphasizes hierarchy, stability, and national pride. This is reflected in its formal communication style and focus on industry leadership, reinforcing its role as a key player in China’s economic ambitions. The emphasis on socio–economic issues, such as poverty and education, may also be rooted in China’s ongoing development goals, where corporate responsibility is increasingly tied to national development objectives.

Conversely, Maersk operates within a Western context, characterized by individualism and a strong emphasis on stakeholder engagement. This cultural backdrop encourages a more personal and relatable communication style, as seen in its frequent use of first–person pronouns. Maersk’s focus on sustainability and emissions reflects a growing awareness of environmental issues in Western societies, where corporate accountability and transparency are paramount. The emphasis on addressing immediate stakeholder concerns aligns with a broader expectation in Western cultures for companies to be responsive and responsible in their operations.

Overall, the contrasting approaches of COSCO and Maersk highlight how cultural factors shape corporate communication and stakeholder engagement strategies, influencing the construction of their respective corporate identities.

Table 3 Top 20 preferential key SMCs

Rank	COSCO			Maersk		
	Tagset	LL	SMCs	Tagset	LL	SMCs
1	M2	1482.3	Putting, pushing, transporting, pulling,	Z8	2643.56	Pronouns
2	S8+	853.91	Helping	A3+	665.08	Existing
3	Z2	688.99	Geographical names	N5	629.16	Quantities
4	Z99	472.07	Unmatched	A2.2	542.68	Cause&Effect/Connection
5	M4	466.64	Sailing, swimming, etc.	N1	451.93	Numbers
6	H1	350.12	Architecture, houses and buildings	X2.2	396.79	Knowledge
7	S7.1+	332.06	In power	X7+	391.36	Wanted
8	I1.1–	299.28	Money: Lack	Z3	283.36	Other proper names
9	I4	284.79	Industry	Z6	179.18	Negative
10	P1	209.93	Education in general	X3.4	171.81	Sensory: Sight
11	K2	155.12	Music and related activities	A6.1–	162.55	Comparing: Different
12	S1.2.5+	153.13	Tough/strong	A1.7–	161.02	No constraint



续表

Rank	COSCO			Maersk		
	Tagset	LL	SMCs	Tagset	LL	SMCs
13	M7	151.77	Places	T2++	160.99	Time: Beginning
14	S5+	148.9	Belonging to a group	A7+	153.77	Likely
15	Z1	132.14	Personal names	Q2.2	151.15	Speech acts
16	Y2	131.77	Information technology and computing	A1.8+	124.52	Inclusion
17	A2.1+	129.77	Change	A1.5.1	116.93	Using
18	O4.4	122.05	Shape	O1.3	107.37	Substances and materials: Gas
19	Z5	119.26	Grammatical bin	H3	100.31	Areas around or near houses
20	X9.1+	114.09	Able/intelligent	N5++	99.66	Quantities: many/much

5. Conclusion

The discourse analysis of COSCO and Maersk's sustainability narratives has shed light on the multifaceted construction of corporate identity within the shipping industry. This study has demonstrated that COSCO and Maersk, despite their global operations, construct their identities in ways that are deeply influenced by their respective cultural contexts and stakeholder expectations. COSCO's narrative, with its emphasis on operational significance and alignment with national policies, reflects the collectivist values and the integration of corporate responsibility with national development goals that are prevalent in China (Liu & Wu, 2015). In contrast, Maersk's focus on customer – centric initiatives and industry leadership, along with its proactive stance on environmental challenges, resonates with the individualistic values and the demand for transparency and sustainability in Western markets (Gotti, 2011).

The implications of these findings are particularly relevant to the broader context of CSR in the shipping industry. The regulatory frameworks within which these companies operate have a significant impact on their CSR strategies. While COSCO's alignment with national policies and socio – economic issues mirrors the regulatory pressures and development goals in China, Maersk's emphasis on transparency and environmental performance aligns with stricter environmental regulations and sustainability reporting standards in Western markets (Jaworska, 2018). This underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of CSR practices that considers the broader socio-political and economic contexts.

Furthermore, market dynamics play a crucial role in shaping CSR strategies within the industry. COSCO's focus on operational excellence appeals to stakeholders interested in the efficiency and reliability of shipping services, while Maersk's customer – centric approach reflects a market demand for greener shipping solutions and ethical business practices, particularly among environmentally conscious customers (Shin & Thai, 2015). The findings suggest that companies must navigate the complex interplay of regulatory frameworks, market dynamics, and stakeholder expectations when constructing their sustainability narratives.

In terms of stakeholder expectations, the study reveals how COSCO and Maersk manage these through their

sustainability narratives. COSCO's formal communication style and focus on national development goals appeal to stakeholders who value stability and alignment with national interests. Conversely, Maersk's personal and relatable communication style, along with its emphasis on addressing immediate stakeholder concerns, fosters a sense of inclusivity and responsiveness, which is valued in individualistic cultures (Gotti, 2011). This insight is crucial for companies aiming to communicate their CSR efforts effectively, considering the cultural and market-specific factors that influence stakeholder perceptions.

By understanding the nuances of corporate identity construction through sustainability narratives, companies can better align their operations with stakeholder expectations and global sustainability goals. This alignment is not only crucial for the companies' reputations and competitiveness but also for contributing to a more sustainable and responsible maritime sector. The study's findings emphasize the need for a strategic approach to CSR that is responsive to the cultural, economic, and regulatory contexts within which companies operate, ultimately contributing to the broader discourse on corporate responsibility and identity in the shipping industry.

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