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Using sustainability reporting as a business communication tool to reshape social relations in times of turmoil

Abstract

This paper investigates the adaptation of sustainability reporting (SR) amidst turbulent political and social environments, shaping novel social dynamics. Building upon Phillips and Brown, (1993), our study employs Thompson's (1990) critical hermeneutic framework to longitudinally analyse SR across three corporations, spanning periods before and after a significant socio-political upheaval, notably the Egyptian revolution. Through a comprehensive examination comprising 29 sustainability and management reports, interviews with eight key stakeholders, analysis of 488 corporate social media posts (Facebook and Twitter), and scrutiny of 213 news media articles spanning six years (2009-2014), we uncover the role of SR in constructing and navigating social relations amid instability. Our findings reveal that SR functions to construct social connections during periods of uncertainty by crafting narratives that symbolically link corporations to newly empowered communities. Consequently, SR becomes a mechanism for reshaping corporate identity, portraying corporations as courageous and aligned with youthful aspirations, aligning their operations with the evolving socio-political landscape. This study offers a nuanced understanding of how SR serves as a tool for corporate communication, enabling corporations to manage their image and relationships with emerging stakeholders while (re)shaping a political identity that signifies continuity and stability. Grounded in the context of the pre-and post Egyptian revolution, our analysis highlights the adaptive nature of corporate communication amidst shifting social and political landscapes.

1. Introduction

Sustainability Reporting (SR) contribute to building corporate trust, managing reputation, and addressing stakeholder concerns, though it also carries the potential for greenwashing (Albitar & Hussainey, 2023; Nwagbara & Belal, 2019; O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2020; Torelli et al., 2020), questioning its potential to foster greater corporate accountability and responsibility (Andrew & Baker, 2020). Through SR, corporate narratives utilise symbolic constructs to shape impressions and navigate social tensions (Bhuiyan et al., 2023; Contrafatto, 2014; Killian & O'Regan, 2016; Passetti et al., 2014). This evolving discourse, as recognised by Deegan (2019) and others, highlights the need to examine how corporate narratives function within dynamic socio-political contexts, aligning with calls from scholars (see, for example, Gray, 2013; Owen, 2008; Adams & Larrinaga, 2019; Andrew & Baker, 2020; Eitrem et al., 2024) for more in-depth, critical examinations of SR practices. While much literature focuses on SR's role in transparency and stakeholder engagement, its capacity to act as a political tool during periods of upheaval remains underexplored (see for exception Uddin et al. (2018)). We address these concerns, recognising that understanding SR as a strategic communication tool and transformative means in politically unstable environments is essential, as it extends beyond traditional environmental and social disclosures. Examining this dimension enhances our understanding of how SR is strategically leveraged as a transformative tool to reshape corporate identity, operations and social relations in the face of political transitions.

To develop an understanding of SR functions within politically volatile environments, we draw on Phillips & Brown's (1993) conception of corporate narratives in SR as not simply informative but as transformative communication. By employing Thompson's (1990) critical hermeneutic approach, we longitudinally analyse SR across periods preceding, during, and following significant political and social transitions. This approach views SR as a strategic corporate attempt to link ideas and symbols in ways that (re)establish a desirable pattern of social relations with stakeholders (Unerman & Zappettini, 2014). Through this lens, SR is understood as more than a mechanism for disclosure; it becomes a process of symbolic communication that shapes how stakeholders perceive the corporation and its place within shifting socio-political landscapes (Phillips & Brown, 1993).

The use of Thompson's framework has been validated in accounting research by scholars such as Oakes et al. (1994) and Arnold (1998), who stress the importance of analysing the institutional structures surrounding texts and how stakeholders receive them. By integrating this framework into our study, we respond to the call of Uddin et al. (2018) and Al Mahameed et al. (2021) to pay greater attention to the broader social and political dynamics influencing corporate disclosures. This approach ensures that our analysis extends beyond a surface-level examination of the content of sustainability reports. It situates these reports within their socio-political context, considering how they are produced, transmitted, and received in a politically

unstable environment. We explore how SR adapt to facilitate the construction of new social relations between corporations and their communities, particularly in the aftermath of political upheaval. This demonstrates how SR can be strategically leveraged to establish credibility, allowing corporations to navigate uncertain and unstable environments (Owen, 2008). Thus, our study is grounded in a theoretically sound and methodologically robust framework, making it relevant for examining corporate communication during political transition.

This study examines three Egyptian corporations and their communicative interactions with NGOs, political entities, business consultancies, institutional clients, and local communities. These corporations initially aligned their SR with the Mubarak regime but shifted post-revolution to establish new connections with the local community. The 2011 Egyptian revolution altered the socio-political landscape, increasing demands for transparency, accountability, and social justice. In this context, SR became a tool for corporations to navigate the turbulence and realign their strategies with stakeholders' evolving expectations. This research investigates how Egyptian corporations adapted their SR practices in response to these socio-political changes. By analysing 29 sustainability, eight stakeholder interviews, 488 social media posts and 213 news articles spanning 2009-2014, we show how corporations used sustainability narratives to reshape their identities and engage with newly empowered communities amidst uncertainty. The study, therefore, addresses the following question: ***How did SR practices adapt to socio-political changes during times of upheaval, and what role did these reports play in shaping corporate identity and stakeholder relationships?***

Our analysis suggests that SR shapes new social relations during political and social instability. By crafting narratives symbolically linking corporations to newly empowered communities, SR allows corporations to realign their identity and adapt to shifting power dynamics. In these contexts, SR is not just a tool for reporting corporate activities; it constructs narratives that position corporations favourably by influencing their perceived actions. This process enables corporations to restructure their relationships with stakeholders, particularly in unstable environments where they must demonstrate their ability to function in the new socio-political landscape to international partners and local communities. These corporations had to distance themselves from former political alliances and forge connections with new power structures to remain relevant.

This paper contributes to the social and environmental accounting literature in several ways. First, it offers insight into how SR operates as a transformative tool for redefining corporate identity in volatile political contexts. Our findings reveal that corporations use SR strategically to portray themselves as resilient, dynamic, and aligned with the aspirations of the newly empowered groups. This advances our understanding of how corporations adapt their public image in response to shifting socio-political

conditions (Bebbington & Unerman, 2018; Killian & O'Regan, 2016; Kuruppu et al., 2019). Second, the study highlights the role of SR as a communication channel through which corporations engage with stakeholders, particularly international partners who may doubt their ability to operate amidst socio-political upheavals. By leveraging symbolic language and imagery associated with events such as the Egyptian revolution, corporations build a new identity that conveys stability and adaptability, reinforcing their ability to navigate uncertainties (Ferguson et al., 2016; O'Dochartaigh, 2019). Finally, the paper explores how corporations use symbols, slogans, and visual elements to craft new identities that align with the evolving socio-political dynamics. These strategic communication tools help corporations reposition themselves within the changing landscape, enabling them to maintain relevance and credibility (Beelitz & Merkl-Davies, 2019; She & Michelon, 2019). Our multifaceted analysis highlights the importance of understanding how SR can be a powerful tool for influencing stakeholder perceptions and adapting to complex political environments. This deepens our understanding of SR as a vehicle for managing corporate image rather than solely a mechanism for disclosing environmental and social information (Bebbington & Unerman, 2018; Beelitz & Merkl-Davies, 2019; Ferguson et al., 2016; Killian & O'Regan, 2016; Kuruppu et al., 2019; O'Dochartaigh, 2019; She & Michelon, 2019; Andrew & Baker, 2020).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: The next section references the literature on SR and positions the paper in that context. Section three summarises the background and context of the cases. Section four defines the data, research, and analytical approach that form the basis of the study. Section five applies the critical hermeneutic approach to the SR of the three examined corporates. Section six concludes with a discussion of the findings.

2. Sustainability reporting: Literature review

This section reviews the literature on SR, examining how SR serves as a communication tool that employs symbols, narratives, and visual elements to construct corporate identity and manage stakeholder perceptions. This foundation sets the stage for the critical hermeneutic approach, discussed in Section 4, which provides a structured method for analysing these dynamics in practice. In doing so, we reveal the SR's dual role as a proxy for corporate environmental practices and a strategic tool for businesses (see, for example, (Bhuiyan et al., 2023; Demastus & Landrum, 2024; Ida et al., 2024; Kotzian, 2024; Tsetse et al., 2024)).

Sustainability reporting has emerged as a key mechanism for organisations to communicate non-financial information, including environmental, social, and governance (ESG) performance. Scholars highlight its role in fostering transparency, managing reputation, and addressing stakeholder concerns (See, for example: (Albitar et al., 2023; Al-Shaer et al., 2022; Garzoni et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2024)). In doing so, they have investigated various dimensions of corporate SR within their stakeholder relationships (Ida et al., 2024;

Sharma et al., 2024; Yin, 2024). Additionally, research has explored how SR influences and is influenced by stakeholder experiences, perceptions, and behaviours (Albitar et al., 2023; Shahid et al., 2024; Tsetse et al., 2024; Momin & Parker, 2013) and contributes to competitive advantages for organisations (Bhuiyan et al., 2023). However, criticism has been directed at the potential symbolic use of SR by corporations as a form of 'impression management' to bolster or restore their legitimacy (Hyatt & Berente, 2017; Talbot & Boiral, 2021; Torelli et al., 2020).

In volatile socio-political contexts, SR is often adapted to address new stakeholder demands for accountability and transparency. Research shows that organisations use SR to navigate shifting power dynamics, rebuild trust, and realign their identities with emerging socio-political realities (Al Mahameed et al., 2021; Albitar et al., 2021; Beelitz & Merkl-Davies, 2019; Rahman et al., 2024). Such events subject corporations to public scrutiny, leading them to react to these events to meet stakeholder expectations. In contrast, Momin and Parker (2013) argue that companies deem disclosure unnecessary if the perceived risk of such events, or the social expectations, are low. Corporations provide disclosure here strategically to strengthen and garner support for their operations. Therefore, it is in the organisation's best interest to disclose social information to maintain a positive relationship with stakeholders (Momin, 2013). This view, according to Momin (2013), leads stakeholders to perceive corporate social and environmental disclosure as an "ad hoc and no more than a public relations exercise" (p.150), offering an incomplete image of the corporation's negative practices while highlighting "positive corporate advertisement-type material" (p.158) which raises questions about SR's capacity to promote corporate accountability and responsibility (Andrew & Baker, 2020).

SR serves as a tool for engaging stakeholders by crafting narratives that align corporate objectives with societal expectations. Studies indicate that SR can bridge gaps between corporations and their stakeholders, particularly during crises (King & Mackinnon, 2002; Scherer & Smid, 2000; Momin, 2013). For example, NGOs, among other stakeholders, influence corporations by producing counter accounts, exposing poor company practices in the media, lobbying with other pressure groups, and encouraging more regulation. (Tilt, 2007, Denedo et al., 2017 Momin, 2013). Deegan and Blomquist (2006) examined the influence of the Worldwide Fund (WWF-Australia) on the environmental reporting practices of the Australian minerals industry. They demonstrate how WWF-Australia pressured the Minerals Council of Australia to revise their industry code and reporting practices. They conclude that lobby groups are a significant source of pressure on corporate social disclosure. Similar findings were presented by O'Dwyer, Unerman, and Bradley (2005), who illustrated the demands of NGOs for more social disclosure by corporations driven by the desire to hold firms accountable.

Studies have shown varying influence patterns by internal and external stakeholders, particularly in the context of multi-national companies' (MNCs) social and environmental disclosure. For instance, Newson and Deegan (2002) suggest that MNCs in Australia, Singapore and South Korea often respond to the expectations of the national stakeholders rather than 'global expectations'. Conversely, Momin and Parker (2013) illustrate that subsidiaries in Bangladesh and their parent companies face pressures from global stakeholders, such as consumer groups and international NGOs, to enhance their SR. Therefore, such disclosure is necessary for those companies to maintain their global reputation (Momin & Parker, 2013; Islam & Deegan, 2010). This view aligns with Surroca et al. (2013), who suggest that social responsibility in local countries will likely be driven by external factors and the desire to maintain a good image for foreign investors. This has led researchers to suggest that external drivers are behind social and environmental reporting development in emerging economies (see, for example, Belal and Roberts, 2010). Nevertheless, it is still argued that corporations must address local stakeholder expectations to survive, even symbolically, since company disclosures and narratives are how a company is perceived by its stakeholders (Momin & Parker, 2013).

SR is a dynamic corporate communication tool that shapes and reshapes corporate realities and stakeholder perceptions by strategically using texts, images, and omissions (Deephouse & Carter, 2005; Kamla & G. Rammal, 2013; Achilli et al., 2023). SR narratives construct corporate culture internally and present an external image as a cultural artefact within specific socio-political contexts (Kamla & Roberts, 2010; Hyatt & Berente, 2017; Talbot & Boiral, 2021). These discourses incorporate social, cultural, and political elements to redefine corporate ideology and align it with broader institutional frameworks (Alawattage et al., 2023; Riaz et al., 2023).

On one hand, SR serves as a symbolic tool, creating myths and symbols that blend modernity with local traditions, managing impressions, and addressing societal contradictions (Kamla & Roberts, 2010; Perkiss et al., 2021; George et al., 2023). On the other hand, it organises and reproduces corporate narratives to structure social interactions within unstable socio-political contexts (Parfitt, 2024; Dhanani, 2019). These reports gain meaning through shared codes and conventions between producers and recipients (Thompson, 1990). While SR can foster positive perceptions and demonstrate compliance with global standards, it often institutionalises practices such as greenwashing, framing profit as a moral facilitator of sustainability, and avoiding critique of business practices (Alawattage et al., 2023; Michelon et al., 2015). This dual nature— promoting a "caring capitalist" image while potentially masking contradictions between sustainability and profit motives—underscores the complex role of SR in managing corporate legitimacy (Albitar & Hussainey, 2023; Alawattage & Fernando, 2017).

This view has been motivated by the complex nature of SR at different levels within a corporation while offering fertile ground for using diverse approaches to help further understand why and how organisations develop such practices (Bebbington & Thomson, 2013). For instance, drawing upon Laclau and Mouffe's (1987) discourse theory, Tregidga et al. (2014) examined how organisations under the same contextual conditions use SR practices to construct collective identities and how this corporate practice has changed. Applying this theoretical framework helped create abstract evidence showing how sustainable identities evolved over the study period, split into three phases. First was the 1990s, when organisations constructed their identities via the presentation of organisational compliance with environmental regulations. Then, in the early 2000s, organisational sustainable identities were constructed based on providing leadership to further sustainability. Finally, in the late 2000s, sustainable identities transformed to portray an economically successful organisation that delivers social and environmental benefits. Thompson's (1990) approach in this paper helps build societal conceptions of how corporations should be self-presented while not challenging many of the corporate world's unsustainable processes.

To this degree, effective SR occurs in social contexts (Al Mahameed et al., 2023; Contrafatto, 2014; Killian & O'Regan, 2016). The products (i.e., sustainability reports) of this practice bear properties of their production whilst also producing meanings affected by the context in which they are received (Thompson, 1990). Such meanings are conditioned by the environment of the socio-political context in which they happen (Osman et al., 2021). This view of SR is equipped to deal with problems of power and social conflicts (see, for example, (Al Mahameed et al., 2023; George et al., 2023; Killian & O'Regan, 2016; Li et al., 2018; Nwagbara & Belal, 2019). In understanding SR as symbolic, but to a lesser degree emphasising the contradictory social resources of diverse actors, social and environmental accounting literature lacks a central aspect of the process by which SR is produced and sustained by the empowered groups (Brown et al., 2015; Semeen & Islam, 2021; Momin & Parker, 2013; Eitrem et al., 2024). For instance, Thomson & Bebbington, p. (2005, p. 524) argue that sustainability reports "do not create spaces for individuals and communities to deal creatively and critically with their problems or allow them to participate in the transformation of their world". Although different groups are participating in creating and maintaining SR, not every party participates equally (George et al., 2023; Gray, 2013; O'Dwyer & Owen, 2005; Semeen & Islam, 2021). For example, in our study of Egyptian corporations post-2011, it was evident that the most powerful entities, deeply entrenched in the Mubarak regime, had greater control over the narrative within their sustainability reports. They strategically downplayed past political affiliations while emphasising economic recovery and community engagement, thus shaping the reports to align with the expectations of the new socio-political order. In contrast, less powerful stakeholders, such as local communities, had minimal influence over the content and framing of these reports. Without a module dealing with the

relationship between SR and power, the symbolic conception of this process would fall short of elucidating the impact of manipulation by the powerful.

The relationship between social responsibility reporting and power becomes transparent. Through managing the process of SR, and therefore the communication aspect, corporates legitimate their positions (Kamla, 2009; Michelon et al., 2015). Legitimising their positions can produce particular social arrangements taken naturally (Killian & O'Regan, 2016; Semeen & Islam, 2021). According to (Hopwood, 2009), corporations may adopt disclosure practices to build a new, legitimate image while reducing questions asked and retaining secrecy. Such disclosure may, therefore, not improve what is known about a corporation's objectives and social and environmental impact but rather aim to protect it from societal pressures. However, this kind of practice is central for power relations and management but is only required when control is lost and when the 'taken-for-granted' and routine practices become dysfunctional and unacceptable (Al Mahameed et al., 2021; Clegg & Dunkerley, 2013; Perkiss et al., 2021; Swidler, 1986). The management of the corporation's image is an important task when it targets stakeholder groups who are dissatisfied with the corporation, thus ensuring their continual support of the corporation while oppressing opposition and conflict (Miles & Ringham, 2019; Perkiss et al., 2021; Semeen & Islam, 2021). For example, (Perkiss et al., 2021) indicate that companies performing poorly regarding their social and environmental impacts usually endeavour to construct a solid external image. Examining the discourse surrounding Nestlé's cocoa operations in the Ivory Coast, they provide insights into the use of impression management through CSR disclosures to repair cocoa companies' damaged legitimacy.

While existing literature extensively explores the technical and symbolic aspects of SR, there is limited research on its transformative potential in politically unstable environments. This gap underscores the need for methodological frameworks that analyse SR within its cultural and institutional contexts. The literature highlights the importance of understanding SR as a dynamic tool that reflects and shapes corporate-stakeholder relationships. To investigate this further, Section 4 introduces the critical hermeneutic approach, which provides a structured framework for analysing how SR narratives are produced, transmitted, and interpreted within specific socio-political contexts (Achilli et al., 2023; Kamla & Roberts, 2010; Phillips & Brown, 1993).

Drawing on the critical hermeneutic methodology, the paper addresses some of the shortcomings in the existing social and environmental accounting literature that alludes to the above; predominantly, the context in which SR is produced and deployed determines the framing of research. Therefore, the distinctive nature of the Egyptian revolution, primarily during its uprising, invites an analytical framework that considers these unstable contextual elements. Thompson's (1990) critical hermeneutic methodology examines the process that shapes social behaviour and decision-making through cultural elements. This framework fits

with the contextual developments addressed in this study. It considers different contextual elements that may influence social behaviour while associating these elements with the degree of stability in this context. It, therefore, constructs SR as a social behaviour and decision-making process framed via a selection of cultural elements simultaneously influenced by the degree of stability of the context in which the sustainability reports are produced and deployed.

3. Research context and background

Egypt's socio-political and economic landscape just before and after the 2011 revolution provides a critical backdrop for understanding the transformation in SR, which began to emerge in the early 2000s, primarily driven by global trends promoting corporate responsibility, transparency, and social accountability (Al Mahameed et al., 2021). Egyptian corporations were quintessential examples of influential family enterprises. Deeply intertwined with the Mubarak regime. These corporations held commanding positions across various vital sectors, including cotton, tobacco, automotive, steel, and cement, employing an average workforce of over 38,000 individuals. They epitomised the Egyptian private sector, predominantly characterised by family-owned enterprises, with a minority of their ventures being publicly traded (Cammett & Diwan, 2018). Before the revolution, the Egyptian private sector was primarily controlled by two classes of local families. The first class consisted of ordinary families overseeing mainly Small and Medium Enterprises that managed to sustain their operations despite political and economic upheavals, albeit with limited expansion opportunities. The second class comprised influential families, such as the Ahmed Ezz and Mansour families, who presided over larger enterprises and maintained close ties with the state. In these cases, the state-business relationship was personalised rather than institutionalised, with state authorities and business proprietors interconnected through exclusive networks.

The rise of international frameworks like the United Nations Global Compact and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) criteria put external pressure on Egyptian corporations to adopt these practices. Before the 2011 revolution, SR practices were relatively superficial in Egypt. Corporations used SR primarily as a tool for signalling compliance with minimal focus on genuine social responsibility. Their reports reflected the interests of the Mubarak regime, with little regard for transparency or stakeholder engagement, and lacked formal regulatory guidance. Nonetheless, the corporations in this study exemplified the Egyptian private sector's familial dominance, intertwined with military affiliations, yielding significant economic influence within a landscape shared by political and economic entities. The socio-political upheaval that began on January 25, 2011, with widespread protests in Cairo demanding President Hosni Mubarak's resignation, significantly altered the corporate landscape. These protests led to Mubarak's ousting after 18 days, despite various governmental measures such as arresting activists, appointing the first vice president, and increasing salaries and pensions. Subsequently, the Muslim Brotherhood won the

presidential election. However, their administration was short-lived, as they were overthrown by the military leader, Sisi, in July 2013, who assumed the presidency in May 2014 (BBC, 2019). Many companies sought to express support for the 'new Egypt' in response to these political changes. These corporations also articulated their political stances regarding the uprising across different communication platforms.

Following the revolution, SR practices shifted dramatically. The newly empowered communities and increased societal demands for transparency and accountability created an environment where corporations had to realign their narratives. In this period, corporations began using SR as a strategic tool to distance themselves from the previous regime and construct new images aligned with social justice, transparency, and local engagementvalues. Regulatory influences also grew after the revolution. The Egyptian Financial Supervisory Authority (FRA) introduced formal guidelines mandating ESG disclosures for companies listed on the Egyptian Stock Exchange. These regulations, alongside global frameworks like the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) and Task Force on Climate-Related Financial Disclosures (TCFD), encouraged more rigorous SR practices.

While local stakeholders played a role in demanding more transparent reporting, the most significant pressures came from global business partners and foreign investors (see Surroca et al., 2013). International stakeholders, particularly those in Western markets, pushed for compliance with global ESG standards, making SR essential for maintaining competitiveness in global markets. This created a space for corporations to use SR strategically for local engagement and to enhance their image and credibility in the eyes of international investors. The combination of local societal change and global pressures positioned SR as a tool for navigating the post-revolution institutional context in Egypt, particularly in constructing corporate identity and responding to emerging demands. In the new socio-political landscape post-2011, the corporations faced a market that valued low-cost products and raised concerns about their ties to the previous regime. Partners, including the interim government, distanced themselves from any associations with Mubarak and his affiliates. The new interim government had access to extensive files and knew the public's anger towards these corporations and their corruption levels, leading to lawsuits against their shareholders and executives.

4. Critical hermeneutic approach: Scope and sources

This section outlines the methodological framework used in the study, drawing on the critical hermeneutic approach. It explains the three analytical moments—socio-historical, formal, and interpretation-reinterpretation—and how they guide the analysis of sustainability reporting (SR) within its socio-political context. We draw on John B. Thompson's sociological framework (1990), which has influenced accounting research (Al Mahameed, 2018; Ferguson et al., 2016; Milne et al., 2009). However, fewer researchers have embraced the critical hermeneutic approach proposed by Phillips and Brown (1993), which provides a

structured framework for analysing organisational phenomena. This approach begins by highlighting the intricate relationship between culture, communication, and power across various levels, from macro-culture to organisational and professional sub-cultures. It acknowledges researchers' necessity for interpretive creativity, fostering dialogue and critique rather than obscuring interpretative processes. Incorporating context enables the integration of diverse qualitative techniques, enhancing the understanding of how texts shape social relations. Furthermore, it views the relationship between objectifying and subjective moments as dialectical rather than dichotomous, recognising their interdependence. Lastly, by adopting a critical stance, the approach acknowledges the inherent value-laden nature of social science research, promoting reflexivity and critical examination of assumptions.

Our starting point is that SR can serve as a strategic communication tool that reshapes corporate narratives and aligns them with evolving social and political expectations. It is not merely a neutral or transparent reflection of corporate activities but a means of constructing corporate identity, credibility, and stakeholder relations. Through language, imagery, and narratives, SR communicates the corporation's alignment with newly empowered communities' values or global standards and frameworks (Phillips & Brown, 1993). The critical hermeneutic approach provides a conceptual foundation for analysing how SR narratives reflect and shape corporate identity during political upheaval. By examining SR through the lens of communication (as transformative rather than merely informative) and hermeneutics (as shaped by its socio-political context), this study offers a framework for understanding the creation and management of corporate narratives and social relations. This approach enables a deeper exploration of how SR mediates the relationship between corporations and their stakeholders, particularly in volatile environments.

The theoretical considerations advanced by John B. Thompson (1990) and the critical hermeneutic approach developed by Phillips & Brown (1993) are well-established and deeply embedded in the business and management literature, offering a comprehensive and contextually sensitive framework for analysing SR. Thompson's "depth-hermeneutical" framework, applied in various business and management contexts, emphasises the importance of expanding analysis beyond the text to include the broader socio-historical context in which these texts are produced, distributed, and received. This approach is particularly relevant in the analysis of SR within post-revolutionary Egypt, where understanding the social and political forces at play is essential for a nuanced interpretation of corporate communication.

Ferguson et al. (2016) provide an example of the application of Thompson's framework in examining corporate communication strategies related to climate change. The study explores how corporations participating in voluntary and mandatory schemes framed their narratives to align with institutional demands. This framework reveals how linguistic strategies were employed to navigate power structures and reshape corporate identities during a critical socio-environmental transition. This emphasis on the

reception and appropriation of texts is particularly pertinent in the context of SR, where the impact of corporate reports cannot be fully understood without considering how they are interpreted and used by various stakeholders. This approach aligns closely with the objectives of this study, which seeks to explore how SR practices are shaped by and, in turn, shape the evolving socio-political landscape in Egypt.

The critical hermeneutic approach of Phillips & Brown (1993) further enhances this analysis by providing a structured methodology for interpreting texts within their specific cultural and institutional contexts (see Table 1). This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the meanings that corporate actors and their audiences ascribe to SR practices. It offers insights into how these practices are tools for managing corporate image during political and social upheaval times. By focusing exclusively on these frameworks, this study leverages their strengths in addressing the unique challenges posed by the post-revolutionary Egyptian context, ensuring a coherent and theoretically rigorous analysis that remains tightly focused on the symbolic and interpretive dimensions of SR. Therefore, we argue that the combined use of Thompson's and Phillips & Brown's frameworks provides a robust and sufficient theoretical foundation for this study. These frameworks offer a comprehensive toolset for analysing the complex interplay between communication, power, and socio-political change, making them ideally suited for understanding the dynamics of SR in a post-revolutionary context.

To this extent, this approach enables us to explore the interplay between communication and power within the context of corporate SR through a three-phase analysis. It unfolds in, first, the social-historical moment, through which we examine the production, transmission, and reception contexts of sustainability reports. Second, we focus on structural and conventional elements in the formal moment using the semiotic analysis developed by Barthes (1988). Finally, we synthesise these elements in the interpretation-reinterpretation phase to uncover how SR shapes corporate understanding and social relations. In this multi-method approach, we incorporate semi-structured interviews, social media analysis, and archival research, providing a rich, triangulated data set that captures the complexity of corporate communication during the Egyptian revolution.

Moment	Objective	Key Activities	Data Sources
Social-Historical Moment	Analyse the socio-political environment shaping SR practices	• Analyse the socio-political context of Egypt before, during, and after the 2011 revolution. • Identify how political and social changes influenced corporate SR.	○ Historical data (e.g., Egypt's political landscape, corporate ties to Mubarak).
Formal Moment	Analyse the structure, language, and visual elements of SR reports	• Perform semiotic analysis of language, visual elements, and report structure. • Focus on structural elements like report format, imagery, and symbolism.	○ 29 sustainability and management reports (2009–2014). Visual elements (e.g., images, slogans,

		• Examine the denotation and connotation of terms and symbols.	organisational charts).
Interpretation-Reinterpretation Moment	Synthesise findings to interpret how SR reshaped corporate identity and social relations	• Analyse how SR impacted corporate-stakeholder relationships post-revolution. • Assess how SR narratives aligned corporations with new socio-political forces. • Explore how stakeholders received and interpreted SR in the context of political changes.	○ 8 semi-structured interviews. ○ 488 social media posts (Facebook, Twitter). ○ 213 news media articles (2009–2014).

Table 1: Critical hermeneutic framework across three moments (adapted from Phillips & Brown 1993)

The first phase scrutinises SR from diverse angles: producers' affiliations with the Mubarak regime, target audiences, global references, and archival research complementing this phase. The three corporations examined in this paper, AA, BB, and CC, entrenched in the Mubarak regime, maintained market dominance amid political turbulence. On the other hand, the recipients included stable international stakeholders, the fluctuating Egyptian authorities post-2011 and the local society. Transitioning to referential analysis, we explored narrative portrayals shaped by reporting practices, particularly regarding post-2011 Egypt. This laid the groundwork for the contextual exploration in which further investigation was performed on the Egyptian context, considering socio-political influences on corporate behaviour and audience reception. This analysis spanned pre- and post-revolution temporal distinctions, highlighting socio-economic stratifications.

Abbreviation	**Details**
SP1	Business Consultant
SP2	Business Consultant
SP3	Marketing Supplier
SP4	International NGO Partner
SP5	International NGO Partner
SP6	Politician
SP7	Politician
SP8	Institutional Client

Table 2: interviewees table

The selection of interviewees and data sources was strategic and purposive, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the socio-political and economic landscape. Interviewees included business consultants, marketing suppliers, international NGO partners, politicians, and institutional clients, chosen for their diverse perspectives and roles within the socio-economic and political environment (See Table 2). This diversity allowed for a holistic view of how different stakeholders perceived and were affected by corporate sustainability practices. Social media posts were analysed to capture real-time public sentiment and corporate communication during the revolution, reflecting the dynamic and immediate responses to socio-political changes. News articles provide contextual and historical continuity, essential for understanding

the evolving narratives. This integration of interviews, social media, and archival data ensured a robust analysis, revealing the multifaceted nature of corporate SR and its impact on stakeholder relations during political instability.

The formal moment employs Barthes' semiotic approach (Barthes, 1968, 1973, 1988) to analyse structural and conventional dimensions within sustainability reports, elucidating meanings conveyed through words and their interrelations. We conducted a formal analysis of these dimensions. Consequently, our analysis emphasises the functions of words and their interrelations with other components within the sustainability reports to convey meaning.

The interpretation phase synthesises findings, revealing how SR constructs understanding favouring corporations, identifying omissions, and delineating interpretive frameworks. Insights from cultural and communication studies enrich our analysis, highlighting the multifaceted nature of corporate communication (Al Mahameed et al., 2021; Swidler, 1986; Tregidga et al., 2014). This final analysis stage addresses how SR structures understand and are in favour of corporations. In other words, we scrutinise the information presented in the reports and identify omissions. Subsequently, we delineate the interpretive framework developed within corporate SR practices, highlighting conflicts arising from specific report aspects. Finally, we explore how the analysed information and interpretive frameworks contribute to a deeper comprehension of evolving social relations.

Year	AA	BB	CC	No. of Reports	Description	Visual Elements
2009	1	1	1	3	Initial sustainability reports primarily focused on essential compliance and minimal stakeholder engagement.	Formal photographs of products, company buildings, senior executives, and individuals representing the regime or featuring the President.
2010	1	1	1	3	Reports like 2009 had slight enhancements in reporting content but were still conservative.	Like 2009, with a few additional infographics on performance.
2011	2	1	3	6	Significant increase in reports, reflecting heightened engagement due to socio-political changes. AA and CC increased their reporting frequency to address the growing demand for transparency.	Photos from the Egyptian revolution, infographics on social impact, and diagrams illustrating historical and projected performance.
2012	2	2	2	6	Continued high reporting frequency, with more detailed governance and economic performance sections. Reports started to integrate more visual elements related to the socio-political context.	Extensive use of photos from community engagement activities, charts showing governance structures, and visual narratives of economic challenges.
2013	1	2	2	5	BB increased its reporting frequency, aligning with the trend	Visuals, including organisational charts, photos from employee

					of detailed governance and sustainability initiatives.	events, and infographics on sustainability metrics.
2014	2	2	2	6	Reports became more structured and comprehensive, focusing on aligning corporate strategies with new socio-political realities.	High-quality images from social projects, detailed graphs on performance, and multimedia elements like video links to company initiatives.
Total	**9**	**9**	**11**	**29**		

Table 3: Corporate Reports Analysed

5. Findings: Analysing SR through socio-historical, formal, and interpretative lenses.

This study's findings are presented using the critical hermeneutic framework's three analytical moments: socio-historical, formal, and interpretation-reinterpretation. This structure allows for a nuanced analysis of how sustainability reporting (SR) reflects and shapes corporate narratives in response to socio-political changes.

5.1. Socio-Historical Moment

This section examines how the socio-political context shaped SR, focusing on how corporate narratives evolved to address shifting stakeholder expectations and societal values. By analysing the historical and political environment, we contextualise the transformation of SR practices within the broader socio-political dynamics of post-revolutionary Egypt.

AA, BB, and CC, the anonymised corporations analysed in this study, represent influential family enterprises closely intertwined with the Mubarak regime. These entities dominated key sectors of the Egyptian economy, employing an average workforce of over 38,000, and operated through a blend of local, regional, and global partnerships, including licensing agreements with prominent international brands. As emblematic figures of the Egyptian private sector, their operations highlighted the deeply personalised state-business relationships that defined this era. Unlike institutionalised systems, these relationships relied heavily on exclusive networks connecting state authorities with business elites. One interviewee, a former senior political figure, described the dual nature of these business relationships:

> "*We did not have a healthy economy … this is due to the excessive authority interference in many of life's aspects, including businesses. …. [these interferences] imposed two types of business relations: the simple but limited ones, and the second, the unnatural relationships that benefited from being affiliated with authority*" (SP7).

The three examined corporations in this study were representative of the Egyptian private sector, characterised by familial dominance closely intertwined with military affiliations, yielding significant economic influence within a landscape shared by political and economic entities. This convergence of political and economic forces was evident in pre-2011 sustainability reports, wherein the corporations featured on the front pages of their reports political figures such as ministers, prime ministers, and parliamentarians, as well as quasi-political figures like the president's family members and the head of state

himself. These depictions indicated political endorsement of the corporations and communicated, particularly to international stakeholders, the extent of power and influence held by these entities within Egypt.

> "*The corporates were deliberately showing their meetings with governmental and political figures either in photos in their reports or even televised reports ... and the target was not necessarily the Egyptian people, but mainly the foreign suppliers and clients who may have perceived them [the political connections] as a sort of power and influence, especially in a region that he [the foreign suppliers and clients] may have considered unstable and unsafe*" (SP3).

However, the 29 examined sustainability reports encompassed diverse areas such as human resources, environment, society, and products and services (refer to Table 4), utilising established reporting frameworks such as GRI and the UN Global Compact. Consequently, they appeared to target various audience segments, including regulators, employees, shareholders, and communities, albeit with varying levels of detail contingent upon their respective influence over the corporation. The reports explicitly acknowledged the presence of stakeholders while implicitly delineating their significance to the corporation, shaping the content and format of these reports. The transition in SR of AA, BB, and CC highlights a marked shift in focus post-2011 (refer to Table 4). The proportion of report sections dedicated to economic performance and governance increased, reflecting a strategic pivot towards transparency and accountability. For instance, AA's post-2011 reports incorporated detailed economic impact statements, aligning their corporate narrative with the broader national economic recovery agenda. Similarly, BB introduced comprehensive governance frameworks, using visual tools such as organisational charts and infographics to communicate stability and continuity to stakeholders. This prioritisation became evident when comparing reports issued before and after the Egyptian revolution (see Table 4). The corporates sought to portray these reports as technical tools facilitating informed decision-making in social, environmental, and investment spheres within the broader business and local societal context. For instance, corporate AA noted in their 2013 report:

> "*... The purpose of this report is to update the public and our stakeholders about our results and achievements, and the challenges that we faced during the past two years (2011-2012). The report presents these updates against the measures and indicators of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI-G3.1), level B.*" (AA, 2012)

Our analysis of the reports, as summarised in Table 4, reveals that AA, BB, and CC employed their sustainability reports as dynamic tools tailored to different stakeholders according to their respective levels of power and influence, aiming to craft a specific corporate image.

Many companies sought to express support for the 'new Egypt' in response to these political changes. Notably, a prominent figure in corporate CC posted on Facebook, advocating for an end to both protests and police brutality.

> "*Four years after our revolution, it does not make sense and it is unbearable that Egyptians continue to die while trying to peacefully voice their opinions.*" (CC, Facebook 2014)

The corporates responded to the January revolution with varying degrees of engagement, employing diverse reporting strategies. The profound political, economic, and societal upheavals accompanying the event swiftly influenced the examined sustainability reports, leading to immediate but superficial changes. Concurrently, these corporations appeared to articulate their political stances regarding the uprising across different communication platforms. It is imperative to acknowledge that Egypt's challenges mirror those of other regions, necessitating broader political representation, which can only be achieved through equitable economic opportunities to precipitate a significant transformation in the Arab political economy.

> "*Already, we can see a distinct state emerging. But it has not been accepted ... who would?!... The offspring of Egypt's middle and political ruling classes, those who no longer enjoy a variety of social and economic benefits, including exclusive access to gated communities, exclusive schools, and locations for social gatherings. They can hear their parents muttering as well because they have been losing mega-project bids to the military and its affiliated businesses.*" (SP6)

The military now controls most economic resources and oversees the political transition, solidifying its power and reinstating a military-led dictatorship. At this point, the examined corporations had halted their privileged access to economic resources. SP3's observation of how corporate licenses and contracts were awarded before January 2011 proves this.

> "*The director of 'BB' never competed for a licence or a contract ... before 2011 these just existed on his desk, and in case they were missed, during a dinner party they can be arranged*" (SP3).

Hence, reliant on these privileges, the corporations explored options such as leveraging existing supply chains or relocating operations. However, success requires stable demand and convincing international suppliers to maintain support. They engaged in joint ventures with other influential families as family businesses without formal structures. These ventures distributed costs and revenues without retaining earnings. SP1 noted inconsistencies in joint ventures involving AA and pre-2011 governments.

Area of Report	Space occupied		Target audience		Nature of presentation	
	Prior 2011	Post-2011	Prior 2011	Post-2011	Prior 2011	Post-2011
Corporate-related information (e.g., CEO letter, about the company, about the report)	30.5%	25%	Local, regional and global business audience	Local, regional and global business audience	Formal, supported with product, company and political connection photos. It features long messages from CEOs and limited estimated and historical figures.	Semi-formal, supported with photos from the Egyptian revolution, estimated and historical figures, presented in diagrams and charts.
Sustainability (mainly focusing on the sustainability of the company and its operations)	3%	7%	Local and regional business audience	Local governing bodies	It is formal and short, presenting a limited number of projects and success stories with little support from historical and comparative figures.	Semi-formal, supported with the Egyptian revolution's photos, stressing security and operational issues, costs, and losses due to 'Egypt's post-revolution instability'.
Stakeholder engagement (e.g., value, engagement policies, strategies)	7%	0.5%	Local and global governing bodies	Not applicable	The formal stand-alone section in the report covers NGOs, Media, and international partners with political connection photos.	Little and, in many cases, no mention of stakeholder engagement.
Economic performance	0.5%	7%	Local governing bodies	Local, regional, and global business/ non-business audience	There is little or no mention of the company's economic performance, although some reports mention 'payment to the *government*'.	Formal shows the negative impacts of the context's 'uncertainty and volatility' on the company's economic performance.
Governance	0.5%	13%	Not applicable	Local and global business/ non-business audience	There is little or no mention of corporate governance.	Semi-formal, the structure and names of the board members aligned with photos from the Egyptian Revolution.
Employees	10.5%	10%	Current/ potential employees	Current/ potential employees and local community.	Formal shows a comprehensive profile of HR with a focus on human rights, policies and procedures.	Formal shows the structured employee system with the benefits, demographics and diversity of employees.
Society	18%	10%	Local community and governing bodies.	Local community and governing bodies.	Formal and extensive, listing several social support projects, shows, supported photos and historical figures.	Formal, shows a timeline of community-related work, supported with estimated and historical figures.
Environment and product responsibility	5%	10%	Local, regional and global business audience	Local, regional and global business audience	Formal, technical information that shows control of the operation.	Formal, technical information that shows waste, water and energy management and operation control.
Reporting guideline	13.5%	18%	Local, regional and global business audience	Local, regional and global business audience	Formal, using standard tables.	Formal, using standard tables.

Table 4: Technical analysis of the corporate Sustainability reports prior to and post-2011

> "*If you look at some of those projects from a corporate financial perspective, they were not really proper ventures … as if there was no financial separation between the accounts of these projects and the individuals and families. The income will be deposited directly to the accounts of these individuals*" (SP1).

Before 2011, this format was advantageous for corporations with minimal costs and guaranteed income. However, the new conditions post-January 2011 forced partners, including the interim government, to distance themselves from any associations with Mubarak and his affiliates. Despite this, some local, regional, and global partners continued engagements while uncertainty surrounded the future of these corporations. SP8 noted a critical period immediately after January 2011, where socio-political factors heavily influenced certain business relations.

> "*There was a general feeling in some of these business meetings that it is more important to look right in front of Tahrir Square than closing a deal. It was a period of avoiding being suspicious … No one wanted to look like they were betraying the revolution, even companies*" (SP8).

These corporations symbolised explicit connections to the previous regime for the new interim government, necessitating decisive action to address public outrage and evident corruption. Consequently, the interim government initiated lawsuits against the corporations' shareholders and executives. SP6 highlighted the interim government's strategy, noting,

> "*The new government had access to all the files… and they knew how people were angry at these corporates and of course the level of corruption, so to respond and show engagements, lawsuits were filed by the new government.*"

This response highlights efforts to distance the current political regime from the previous one. Meanwhile, international partners monitored the situation from far, anticipating the potential collapse of these corporations. Despite existing contractual obligations, these companies were wary of losing their foothold in the Egyptian and MENA markets due to political associations. SP2 recounted a consultation case where an international client expressed concerns about their Egyptian supplies, stating,

> "*Not only this client, many international companies, which operated with (CC) were looking actively for new partners… they were worried… their market here 'Egypt' is worth four billion US dollars.*"

In response, BB's CEO publicly declared the corporation's disconnection from the former regime and endorsed necessary changes to support the new government and the Egyptian economy. The sustainability reports post-2011 reflect these shifts to reshape corporate image and align with the expectations of newly empowered and politically aware stakeholders.

5.2. Formal moment: Forming new social relations

This section examines the structural and visual elements of SR, focusing on how report design, language, and imagery evolved before and after the Egyptian revolution. The findings reveal significant adaptations in corporate communication strategies driven by the time's socio-political, economic, and societal upheavals. These adaptations reflect corporations' efforts to realign their narratives with the expectations of newly empowered stakeholders and the changing political landscape. The Egyptian revolution impacted SR practices, prompting corporations to adopt varied reporting methods. These shifts were marked by notable changes in reporting patterns, including introducing new topics while omitting others, engaging with emerging stakeholders and disengaging from previous ones, and finally, linguistic adjustments to reflect new societal values.

For instance, narratives on human development began to emphasise training programs, employee morale, and achievements, projecting an image of inclusive corporate culture and commitment to workforce development, regardless of hierarchy. At the content level, the 29 reports analysed primarily employed textual and visual elements to convey corporate messages. Words and images were carefully selected and combined to construct specific narratives, often reflecting broader organisational strategies. Table 5 illustrates how these reports incorporated visual enhancements and linguistic shifts to communicate corporate responses to the revolution, such as greater emphasis on community engagement and governance. This analysis refrains from speculating on the broader significance of these shifts, instead focusing on the structural and formal aspects of the reports themselves. These textual and visual adjustments highlight the corporations' strategic use of SR to navigate a turbulent socio-political environment, balancing the need for transparency with the imperative to rebuild trust among diverse stakeholders.

Topic identified	Mapping topic	Literal meaning
Narrative of responsibility and accountability	(a) Endorsement of corporate responsibility and accountability, and (b) (b) Recognising SR frames.	The corporate is a responsible and accountable firm that follows an established reporting frame to communicate their sustainability, environmental and social issues.
Narrative of economic engagements	(a) Endorsement of corporate economic significance, (b) Recognising corporate economic involvement and (c) Highlighting issues in the Egyptian economy.	Corporates are a significant entity in the Egyptian economy, and their economic contributions can be measured. Further, despite the downturn in the Egyptian economy, corporations support the country.
Narrative of social developments	(a) Endorsement of corporate social position, (b) Recognising previous and past social projects, and	The corporation has been an active firm in Egyptian society, leading well-known social projects and planning to do more to overcome all the issues that the country expects after the revolution.

	(c) Highlighting the social significance of the corporation.	
Narrative of human developments	(a) Endorsement of employer responsibility, (b) Highlighting human resources development and training programmes and (c) Recognising human rights issues.	The corporation is a major employer that sustains the lives of thousands of Egyptian families while developing and training new generations for the new competitive market. However, the corporation recognises that there are human rights issues that need to be addressed.
Narrative of sustainable developments	(a) Endorsement of corporate development responsibility, (b) Highlighting international sustainable development agreements and (c) Recognising emerging sustainable development issues.	The corporation is an essential firm in Egypt's sustainable development. It signed international agreements to be implemented. However, the corporation recognises that issues after the revolution may hinder some of these agreements.

Table 5: Denotation topics in SR

Sustainability reports serve as crucial communication platforms where companies convey non-financial matters to stakeholders, a skill set often decoded through social and environmental literature (Merkl-Davies & Brennan, 2017). Companies strategically shape their corporate image and ideology by recognising these reports as environmental, social, and governance disclosure tools (McKinstry, 1996). For instance, AA's acknowledgement of post-revolution challenges reflects a deliberate effort to evoke empathy and commitment (AA, 2011). Similarly, CC emphasises ethical profit generation, moulding its corporate ethos (CC, 2014). These reports transcend mere information dissemination; they aim to persuade stakeholders to positively perceive corporate activities (Tinker & Neimark, 1987), as evidenced by AA's commitment to sustainability amidst uncertainty (AA, 2013).

As exemplified by AA and CC, corporate entities strategically create social relationships and networks through their communication practices, notably apparent in their sustainability reports. These reports serve as informative documents and instruments for shaping corporate image and ideology (Preston et al., 1996; Tinker & Neimark, 1987). For instance, AA articulates a sense of empathy and adaptability by acknowledging the challenges stemming from the January Revolution and affirming its commitment to sustainability amidst uncertainty. AA's report states,

> "*The revolution gave birth to insurmountable challenges and uncertainties that many Egyptian businesses have had immense difficulties coping with*" (AA, 2011).

The narrative positions the corporation as responsive and resilient in societal upheaval. Similarly, CC emphasises ethical profit generation while aligning with broader societal values. According to CC's report:

> "… [CC] *has a mission and that is to generate profit, in an ethical manner while creating a differential impact*" (CC, 2014).

Corporations like AA symbolically align themselves with societal movements and values through strategic imagery and rhetoric. They convey solidarity with newly empowered communities by featuring images of protest sites and revolutionary slogans in their reports. AA's report says:

> "*In the middle of all of this uncertainty, we stand committed more than ever to improving our sustainability performance*" (AA, 2013).

This figurative engagement signifies a shift in power dynamics and social relations, distancing themselves from pre-revolution associations. Moreover, the narratives presented in these reports reinforce the perception of corporate responsibility and accountability, economic contribution to national recovery, and social integration within the Egyptian context. The portrayal of employees as integral to the corporation's mission, above mere economic interests, underscores a commitment to human development amidst societal change. Ultimately, the overarching narrative of sustainable development positions corporations as agents of positive societal transformation. Beyond financial performance, they emphasise their role in fostering a better society, human capital, and environmental stewardship, thus redefining their place in post-revolutionary Egypt. This strategic narrative construction not only shapes external perceptions but also cultivates a sense of belonging and partnership with emerging social forces.

5.3. Interpretation-Reinterpretation moment: new society and new SR

This section explores how SR narratives were reimagined and reinterpreted in the aftermath of the Egyptian revolution. It examines how corporations strategically utilise visual and linguistic elements to align their identities with the values of a transformed society while distancing themselves from prior political affiliations. These reports framed corporations as integral contributors to the nation's socio-economic reconstruction by incorporating evocative imagery, inclusive language, and thematic shifts. The analysis highlights how SR became a tool for fostering new stakeholder relationships, navigating legal and reputational challenges, and reshaping corporate identities to reflect the aspirations of a post-revolutionary Egypt.

The pronounced use of photos and slogans depicting the January Revolution facilitated subsequent communication about the corporations (see Table 5). Empirical analysis shows that visual texts, photos, and slogans were crucial in redefining corporate identity. For example, AA's sustainability reports post-2011 featured images of employees participating in community service projects, juxtaposed with slogans like '*Building Together for a Brighter Future*.' These visual elements were designed to evoke a sense of unity and shared purpose, aligning the corporation's image with the revolutionary spirit of collaboration and progress. Social media posts reinforce the notion of unity and shared purpose in post-revolution Egypt. One of AA's social media posts put it:

"*… we stand united with the people, working hand-in-hand to create a brighter future for all Egyptians.*" (AA, Facebook, 2011)

Changes in design aesthetics further reinforced this visual and linguistic transformation. Reports post-2011 employed vibrant colour schemes and dynamic layouts, contrasting with the conservative, monochromatic designs used before the revolution. For example, CC's 2012 sustainability report adopted a bright green and red colour palette, symbolising hope and renewal, while pre-revolution reports primarily featured corporate blues and greys. This shift modernised the visual appeal of the reports and symbolised the companies' adaptation to the new socio-political environment.

The strategic deployment of such images and slogans elicited a sense of presence, positioning the reader as an active participant in the revolution. An analysis of social media posts from these corporations between 2011 and 2013 revealed a significant increase in posts referencing the revolution and the companies' roles in rebuilding the nation. This can be illustrated by CC's message posted on Facebook during this period.:

> *"The revolution has changed our society and how we do business. We are committed to sustainable development and ensuring our environmental and social responsibilities align with the new Egypt we are building together." (CC, Facebook, 2012)*

This engagement framed recipients of these reports as discerning readers and evaluators, ready to absorb information on corporate contributions to Egypt's evolving landscape. Despite previous associations with the Mubarak regime, these corporations strategically aligned themselves with the ethos of the January Revolution, as indicated by a total reduction in references to former political affiliations and a corresponding increase in mentions of "*new partnerships*" with local communities and NGOs. For example, BB highlighted these new collaborations in a Facebook post, stating:

> *"Together with the community, we are redefining what it means to be a responsible corporate citizen in Egypt. Our partnerships with local NGOs are helping to drive real change and support the voices of a new generation." (BB, Facebook, 2012)*

This strategic narrative construction not only elevates corporations to societal stakeholders but also situates them within political and societal exigencies, thereby supplanting erstwhile associations with the pre-2011 regime and its attendant legal entanglements. Evocative imagery and thematic content bridge erstwhile disconnections within Egyptian society and represent a goodwill initiative to nurture corporate-stakeholder relations. Consequently, the rephrasing and redesigning of sustainability reports, coupled with the integration of relevant imagery and slogans, may be construed as an underlying motive to cultivate a more engaged and empathetic corporate persona attuned to the socio-political fabric of Egypt.

This linguistic and visual recalibration reflects a shift in corporate aspirations towards greater societal relevance and resonance, exemplified by the re-contextualisation of employee relations as partnerships and a broader, more inclusive engagement with stakeholder groups previously marginalised before January 2011. Furthermore, a comparative examination of reporting areas reveals a deliberate semantic shift towards more inclusive and participatory language, indicative of corporations' endeavour to foster deeper connections with stakeholders and the broader community. This recalibration is exemplified by the transition from referring to employees simply as "*employees*" to the more inclusive and humanising epithet of "*our people*" or "*our partners*." Similarly, there is a discernible shift from referencing environmental responsibilities in abstract terms to a more personalised and action-oriented discourse emphasising "*our environment*" and "*product responsibility*."

This linguistic pivot reflects a conscious effort on the part of corporations to cultivate a renewed sense of communal ownership and stewardship vis-à-vis societal and environmental concerns, thereby fostering a more symbiotic relationship with stakeholders. This dimension of these sustainability reports, encapsulating the constructed corporate image, can be synthesised into several key points. Firstly, corporations are depicted as proactive agents navigating the evolving socio-political landscape of post-revolutionary Egypt, steadfast in their commitment to advancing economic conditions and societal progress. Secondly, they are portrayed as integral components of a burgeoning democratic society, symbolically tethered to the revolutionary ethos of Tahrir Square and espousing principles of corporate citizenship and social responsibility. Thirdly, corporations exhibit heightened awareness of their social and ethical obligations, underscoring their embrace of new economic and social imperatives post-2011. This heightened social consciousness is epitomised by the emergence of societal myths within sustainability reports, wherein corporations actively align themselves with symbols of political and social change, thus reinforcing their societal relevance.

Examples of reporting areas	Prior to January 2011	Post January 2011
Human Resource	**Employees**. E.g., *"Employees are constantly motivated and their capacities are periodically expanded"(AA, 2009)*	**Our People**. E.g., "*… we recognize that our people are the building blocks of our success*" (AA, 2012)
Social Involvements	Community. E.g., *"… maintains open dialogue with stakeholder groups and communities where it operates or plans to operate"* (CC, 2008)	Our Community. E.g., *"… and will continue to pursue an active role in advancing the welfare of our community.*" (CC, 2012)
Environment	Environmental Responsibility. E.g., "*…These performance indicators include at least one from each of economic, environment, human rights, labour, society,*	Our Environment and Product Responsibility. E.g., "*The aspects of our environmental performance that might be of high materiality to our operations are,*

and product responsibility indicators." (BB, 2009)	essentially, our waste and transportation activities." (BB, 2013)

Table 6: Examples of title changes in SR changing topics

Furthermore, the reports underscore the economic indispensability of corporations within the post-revolutionary milieu, wherein their economic contributions serve as a cornerstone of societal understanding, transforming their role within the emergent socio-political order. Additionally, corporations are depicted as stalwart contributors to Egypt's economic and societal fabric, both pre-and post-revolution, underscoring their adaptive capacity and enduring commitment to national development. Finally, corporations reaffirm their intrinsic Egyptian identity and vested interest in the nation's future trajectory, symbolised by the appropriation of national iconography and the invocation of patriotic sentiments. Corporations endeavour to position themselves as profit-seeking entities and custodians of Egypt's collective destiny, thereby forging a narrative of shared purpose and mutual prosperity.

While alluding to their desire for dissociation from previous political affiliations, the corporate entities did not explicitly disclose their strategies for achieving such disassociation within their sustainability reports. However, a nuanced examination of the reports unveils underlying themes and omissions that offer insights into their positioning within the newly transformed societal landscape.

Primarily, the corporations accentuated their contributions to the Egyptian economy and society, emphasising past and potential future endeavours such as tax payments, job creation, and support for local businesses. As SP3, a marketing supplier, explained,

> *" These reports were carefully written to show off the companies' economic contributions after the revolution, but what's really telling is what they don't talk about—there's no mention of the tax breaks or political benefits they used to have." (SP3)*

References to pre-2011 privileges and tax concessions, as well as an explicit acknowledgement of entrenched connections with the former political establishment, were conspicuous by their absence. This omission reflects a strategic manoeuvre to navigate the complexities of operating within a democratic framework, wherein previous affiliations may be viewed unfavourably.

Despite historical indifference to these aspects, the reports underscored the corporates' purported societal and environmental consciousness. While affirming their commitment to economic and social progress, the reports failed to elucidate how this newfound awareness translates into tangible actions within the altered socio-political milieu. Moreover, while not inherently problematic from a political standpoint, continuing corporate operations poses challenges in disentangling from previous political entanglements. SP5, an NGO partner, commented,

"*You can really see the change in their language—they talk a lot about the community and the environment now, but you don't see much action to back it up. It's obvious they want to look like they're part of the new Egypt, but how much they've actually changed is still unclear.*" (SP5)

The construction of the corporate image within sustainability reports relies on the invocation of societal understanding, notably the metaphorical resonance of Tahrir Square as emblematic of the corporation's integration into the new societal fabric. However, this integration necessitates cultivating trust among emerging stakeholders while concurrently navigating strained relations with regional and international business partners wary of political ramifications in Egypt.

Additionally, corporate management mitigates the risk of legal repercussions that could undermine both financial and societal standing. Furthermore, the reports emphasise growth and stability as aspirational qualities a populace grappling with instability seeks. They articulate visions of a prosperous economy and equitable society, projecting forward-looking narratives that eschew dwelling on the contentious past. Ultimately, corporations assert their patriotism and centrality within the new democratic Egypt, positioning themselves as indispensable components of the nation's economic and social fabric deserving support from the interim government and the populace.

6. Concluding remarks

This study has delved into utilising SR as a rhetorical tool in constructing social relations amidst volatile political and social landscapes. SR shapes perceptions and reinforces a positive corporate image by crafting narratives that symbolically link corporations to newly empowered local communities while projecting stability to external stakeholders. Adopting a critical hermeneutic approach, we examined three Egyptian corporations and their interactions with surrounding communities within the context of socio-political dynamics before, during, and after the Egyptian revolution. This methodological framework enabled us to analyse the role of communication in power dynamics and the perpetuation of power imbalances while also prompting critical reflection on the underlying social structures and normative frameworks within a given social system (Abras & Jayasinghe, 2023; Aktouf, 1992; Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Phillips & Brown, 1993; Uddin et al., 2018).

We make four contributions to the SR literature. First, the paper examines how SR can be leveraged as a transformative tool in unstable socio-political contexts, reshaping corporate identity rather than merely seeking re-legitimisation. In doing so, we move beyond the conventional application of legitimacy theory, offering a more nuanced understanding of SR as a dynamic means of corporate adaptation and identity reconstruction (Unerman & Chapman, 2014). We extend the strand of literature that debates the legitimising power of SR (Demastus & Landrum, 2024; Alawattage et al., 2023; Brooks & Oikonomou, 2018;

Contrafatto, 2014; Killian & O'Regan, 2016; Monfardini et al., 2013; Perkiss et al., 2021). generates symbolic, rhetorical narratives enable corporations to (re)shape perceptions and construct new internal and external social relations. This process allows corporations to adapt their identity and protect their interests within the newly emerging socio-political landscape (see also: Bhuiyan et al., 2023; Hopwood, 2009; Kamla & Roberts, 2010; Perkiss et al., 2021). SR was reproduced and redirected as a transformative means to craft a new corporate image that portrayed the corporations as courageous and youthful, enabling them to reshape their identity and navigate the evolving societal environment within the new 'reality.'

Second, we unpack the impact of the social and historical aspects of the corporation in the SR. We suggest that the artefacts of this process are intentional products of the corporations intended to be read by a particular group of local, regional and global stakeholders. These are attempts to re-create a particular and new image for the corporates (Kamla & Roberts, 2010; Parfitt, 2024; Perkiss et al., 2021). By engaging with the social and historical aspects of the corporates, we can show the interests behind their SR practices (see also (Bhuiyan et al., 2023; Alawattage & Fernando, 2017; Osman et al., 2021; Uddin et al., 2018; Momin & Parker, 2013)). These practices have framed the examined reports in a way that shows an interesting attempt to create a particular understanding of the corporates, their image, and their relation to the new socio-political context in Egypt post-2011, re-positioning themselves and their political identity in the new historical era. Considering the call in Gray et al., p. (2009, p. 562) for further research on "new accounts of new or different entities in different units with different notions of usefulness and accountability," this can be further studied and examined in new contexts. SR acts as a channel of communication that corporates have preferential access to. Through this channel, the three corporates appealed directly to their stakeholders - particularly international partners (see also: Momin & Parker, 2013; Islam & Deegan, 2010) who doubted the corporates' ability to continue under the new socio-political context – by constructing links between several new and widely shared images and language of the Egyptian revolution and their operations.

Third, the paper illustrates that the critical hermeneutic approach helps explicate the implicit environment of how SR operates as a transformative means to reshape identity and social relations. In this regard, SR offers a narrative to lure newly empowered communities to engage while (re)producing a new political identity without essentially admitting the underlying power relations and connections (Abras & Al Mahameed, 2023; Albitar et al., 2023; Gray, 2013; Semeen & Islam, 2021). In doing so, it provides a space for the corporates to bring together new symbols, slogans, and images to recreate a new status that presumably blends with the new socio-political context (Alawattage et al., 2023; Kamla & Roberts, 2010; Perkiss et al., 2021). According to Hopwood (2009), such tools may not improve what is known about a corporation's objectives and social and environmental impact. Instead, they aim to construct a desirable

image of the corporation, protecting it from societal pressures while reducing the questions asked and retaining secrecy (Hopwood, 2009). This sustains the power asymmetry between corporations and various stakeholders, questioning the SR's potential to foster corporate accountability and responsibility (Andrew & Baker, 2020).

Fourth, we shed light on the SR narratives in re-creating patterned social relations and the ongoing transformative process. We contribute to the accounting literature on silence and rhetorical strategies in corporate reporting (Hooks & van Staden, 2011; Li et al., 2018; O'Dwyer & Owen, 2005). We find that the transformative process is multifaceted, with a significant impact. Powerful producers of SR shape the understandings and, hence, the behaviours of recipients of the reports (Michelon et al., 2015; Semeen & Islam, 2021). These reports attempted to practise an artificial illusion by placing their readers in an ultimate future with promises of a better economy and fairer society (see, for example, Kamla and Roberts, 2010) instead of opening a window into the unwanted past to avoid judgments of undesirable facts. In this regard, corporations tried to 'silence the past' by omitting statements and images that they used to include in their sustainability reports before 2011 to disassociate their identity from the previous political regime and reshape the collective memory of the Egyptian community.

The sustainability reports were reimagined as business communication tools, reflecting political and societal changes in ways that garnered approval from the uprising community. These reports positioned corporations as active participants in societal reconstruction, fostering new stakeholder relationships while navigating the complexities of a volatile socio-political landscape. In doing so, sustainability reports build a new pattern of social relations to connect with interested and influential stakeholders. This study, however, was limited to corporates that had strong links to the previous regime. Future research may study SR in Egyptian corporations without such political ties to examine how this reporting might have experienced a change in its discourse in the new socio-political era of the country. Critical accounting scholars may also examine how SR as a corporate practice was utilised in contexts where such uprising took place but resulted in political and social reforms rather than substantial change in the regime (e.g., Jordan & Morocco) and alternatively in such a context where the uprising was faced brutally by the ruling regime that was able to stay in power (e.g., Syria).

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