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Sustainability paradox of platform companies: mediated legitimacy in public discourse

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how sustainability claims of a platform company are constructed, contested, and evaluated through mediated public discourse. Drawing on a qualitative media analysis of Estonian media coverage, reader comments, and corporate sustainability communications related to the Estonian mobility platform company Bolt between 2019 and 2024, the paper adopts a sustainability paradox perspective to analyze tensions between corporate narratives and public legitimacy judgments. The findings reveal three interrelated paradoxes. First, environmental sustainability initiatives framed as contributions to green mobility are frequently interpreted as symbolic or cosmetic, generating accusations of greenwashing. Second, social sustainability claims emphasizing flexibility and opportunity are contradicted by lived experiences of platform workers and users, producing friction between responsibility rhetoric and everyday service realities. Third, governance-related sustainability narratives are undermined by perceived accountability gaps, as platform self-positioning clashes with public expectations of regulation and responsibility. Together, these findings demonstrate that sustainability in platform companies is not assessed solely through performance indicators but is continuously negotiated in public discourse, where media framing and reader-commenters play a constitutive role in shaping legitimacy. The study contributes to sustainability and platform economy research by highlighting mediated legitimacy as a central discursive process through which sustainability paradoxes emerge and persist.

Introduction

Sustainability has become a central yet contested imperative for platform companies operating in urban service ecosystems (Zarra et al. 2019; Kolk and Ciulli 2020; Beverland et al. 2022). Digital platforms increasingly frame themselves as contributors to environmental efficiency, social inclusion, and responsible governance, positioning sustainability as a core element of corporate identity rather than a peripheral concern (Wang et al. 2023; Plugge et al. 2025). At the same time, these claims are subject to intense public scrutiny, particularly in media environments where platform practices intersect with everyday experiences of work, mobility, and urban life (Reilly and Hynan 2014; Ben-David and Soffer 2019; Reimer et al. 2023). This tension raises a fundamental question: how is sustainability legitimacy constructed and challenged when platform companies' narratives encounter public interpretation and evaluation?

Prior research on corporate sustainability has emphasized the strategic integration of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) principles into organizational practices, often focusing on performance indicators, reporting frameworks (European Union 2022), or managerial intent (Elkington 1998; Luo et al. 2020; Celone et al. 2022; He et al. 2022; Hellemans et al. 2022; Sinkovics et al. 2022; Plugge et al. 2025). However, such approaches tend to underplay the discursive and mediated nature of sustainability legitimacy. Sustainability claims do not operate in a vacuum; they circulate through media representations, journalistic framing, and public commentary, where they are interpreted, contested, and re-signified (McCombs 2002; Dawkins 2005; Meijer and Kleinnijenhuis 2006; Kiousis et al. 2007; Signitzer and Prexl 2007; Reilly and Hynan 2014; Kelley and Thams 2021; Beverland et al. 2022; Reimer et al. 2023). This is particularly salient for platform companies whose business models externalize risks and responsibilities across dispersed users, workers, and municipalities, making accountability both diffuse and publicly visible (Hein et al. 2020; Vallas and Schor 2020).

From a paradox perspective (Jay et al. 2017; Smith et al. 2017), sustainability in platform firms is inherently tension-laden (Acquier et al. 2017; Beverland et al. 2022;

Bunders and De Moor 2024). Environmental efficiency may coexist with increased consumption; flexibility and autonomy narratives may conflict with experiences of precarity (Schor et al. 2020); and claims of innovation-driven responsibility may clash with public expectations of regulation and accountability (Lanamäki and Tuvikene 2022). Rather than being resolved, these tensions persist and are continuously reproduced through public discourse. Media coverage and reader commentaries thus function not merely as observers of sustainability practices but as arenas in which legitimacy is actively negotiated.

Despite growing interest in platform sustainability, limited attention has been paid to the role of mediated public discourse in shaping how sustainability claims are evaluated and legitimized. Existing studies have largely examined sustainability from the perspectives of firm strategy, regulation, or stakeholder management, leaving underexplored how public counter-discourses challenge, reinterpret, or delegitimize corporate narratives (Meijer and Kleinnijenhuis 2006; Kiousis et al. 2007). Addressing this gap is particularly important in small, digitally advanced societies, where platform companies are deeply embedded in everyday life and public debate.

To address this gap, this study examines how sustainability claims of a platform company are constructed, contested, and evaluated in mediated public discourse. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of Estonian media coverage, reader comments, and corporate communications related to the platform company Bolt, the paper adopts a sustainability paradox (Jay et al. 2017) lens to explore tensions between corporate narratives and public legitimacy judgments. By foregrounding mediated legitimacy, the study contributes to sustainability and platform economy research by demonstrating how sustainability paradoxes emerge not only from organizational practices but also from their interpretation within public discourse.

Theoretical background

This study draws on three complementary theoretical perspectives to examine how sustainability claims of platform companies are constructed and contested in public discourse. First, sustainability is approached as a paradoxical phenomenon characterized by persistent tensions rather than resolvable trade-offs. Second, legitimacy is understood as socially and discursively constructed, with media and public commentary playing a constitutive role in shaping how corporate sustainability claims are interpreted and evaluated. Third, the analysis foregrounds authenticity and greenwashing as key evaluative dimensions through which sustainability narratives are morally assessed. Together, these perspectives provide an integrated framework for analyzing how sustainability legitimacy in platform companies emerges, destabilizes, and is renegotiated through mediated public discourse.

Sustainability as paradox

Sustainability is increasingly conceptualized as a paradoxical phenomenon, characterized by persistent tensions between competing yet interrelated demands rather than resolvable trade-offs (Jay et al. 2017). Drawing on paradox theory, such tensions are understood as contradictory yet interdependent elements that coexist over time and resist resolution, requiring ongoing management rather than elimination (Smith and Lewis 2011). In organizational contexts, sustainability initiatives often generate contradictions between environmental ambitions, social responsibilities, and economic imperatives, which coexist over time without stable resolution (Reilly and Hynan 2014; Jay et al. 2017). From a paradox perspective, such tensions are not temporary challenges to be managed away but enduring conditions that require ongoing navigation. This lens is particularly relevant for platform companies whose business models amplify interdependencies across multiple stakeholder groups while externalizing costs and responsibilities, thereby intensifying sustainability-related tensions (Zarra et al. 2019; Kolk and Ciulli 2020; Plugge et al. 2025).

Mediated legitimacy and public discourse

Legitimacy refers to the perceived worthiness of an actor, institution, or governance arrangement to be recognized as appropriate and acceptable, grounded simultaneously in normative justifications and empirical evaluations by relevant audiences (Wiesner and Harfst 2022; Buelow et al. 2025). It is not reducible to formal legality or compliance alone but emerges through social interpretation, evaluative judgment, and ongoing public assessment of authority, responsibility, and outcomes. Sustainability legitimacy refers to the extent to which sustainability-related claims, practices, and governance arrangements are perceived as credible, authentic, and justified by relevant stakeholders over time (Silva 2021; Buelow et al. 2025). It emerges through mediated public discourse in which environmental, social, and governance commitments are continuously evaluated against perceived impacts, lived experiences, and expectations of responsibility. Sustainability legitimacy is therefore inherently dynamic and paradoxical, as initiatives intended to strengthen legitimacy may simultaneously intensify scrutiny, skepticism, and contestation.

Organizational legitimacy is not solely derived from formal compliance or performance outcomes but is socially constructed through communication and interpretation (Kostova and Zaheer 1999; Dawkins 2005; Deephouse and Carter 2005; Johnson et al. 2006; Golant and Sillince 2007). Media discourse plays a central role in this process by framing corporate actions, attributing meaning, and shaping public expectations (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Koller 2005; Liu and McConnell 2013; He et al. 2022). In digitally mediated environments, reader comments and online discussions further extend this process by generating counter-narratives that challenge, reinterpret, or reinforce corporate claims (Ben-David and Soffer 2019; Lodhia et al. 2020; Bontempi et al. 2023; Reimer et al. 2023; Larios-Hernandez 2025). Mediated legitimacy refers to the discursive construction and evaluation of organizational legitimacy through media framing and public interpretation, where legitimacy emerges as an outcome of communicative interaction rather than direct organizational control. For platform companies embedded in everyday services, mediated public discourse thus functions as a key arena in which sustainability legitimacy is continuously negotiated rather than passively received.

Authenticity, greenwashing, and evaluative judgment

Sustainability claims are not evaluated solely on their technical merits but through moral and authenticity-based judgments regarding intent, credibility, and responsibility (Ha-Brookshire 2017; Carrier 2018; Lengyel et al. 2019; Ahsan 2020; Tripp et al. 2023). Public assessments often hinge on whether sustainability initiatives are perceived as substantively embedded in organizational practices or merely symbolic gestures aimed at reputation management (Boiral and Heras-Saizarbitoria 2020; Moreno and Kang 2020; Xiao and Shailer 2022). Accusations of greenwashing emerge when discrepancies between communicated commitments and perceived impacts become salient, particularly in highly visible platform contexts. These evaluative judgments intensify sustainability paradoxes by transforming corporate sustainability narratives into potential sources of legitimacy loss rather than gain.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative media discourse analysis (Stemler 2001, 2015; Harwood and Garry 2003) to examine how sustainability claims of a platform company are constructed and contested in public discourse. The empirical material consists of articles from four major Estonian outlets, *ERR*, *Postimees*, *Delfi*, and *Äripäev*, as well as reader comments and corporate sustainability-related communications concerning Bolt published between 2019 and 2024.

The media corpus was constructed through systematic keyword-based searches in the Estonian news outlets, focusing on sustainability-related themes such as environmental impact, labor conditions, urban mobility, and platform responsibility. From the initial pool of 4951 articles, texts were retained for detailed analysis if they contained explicit references to sustainability-related issues. This filtering resulted in a focused corpus of 428 articles. Reader comments were included where available and selected based on their relevance to sustainability evaluations, rather than volume or representativeness. The final dataset thus consists of a purposive sample of media texts and associated public commentary that directly engage with sustainability-related legitimacy claims.

Bolt originates from Estonia, remains headquartered in Tallinn, and functions as a nationally salient platform firm. As a result, Estonian media offers unusually dense, continuous, and critical coverage, making it a privileged site for observing how legitimacy expectations evolve as a firm grows. Crucially, media attention prior to 2019 – when the firm operated under the Taxify brand – was limited and largely instrumental, focusing on funding rounds, market entry announcements, and competitive positioning. Following the 2019 rebranding to Bolt, media coverage has expanded sharply in volume, thematic scope, and critical scrutiny. This shift has coincided with Bolt's transition into a mature multinational enterprise, service diversification, and explicit sustainability positioning. Accordingly, the data collection period spans March 2019 to August 2024, capturing the phase in which sustainability paradoxes have become empirically visible through intensified media and public scrutiny.

The analysis followed an iterative, multi-stage qualitative coding procedure designed to trace how sustainability claims are constructed and evaluated across discursive layers. The unit of analysis was not the article as a whole but meaningful text segments (e.g., paragraphs, statements, or individual reader comments) that explicitly addressed sustainability-related claims, evaluations, or controversies. This approach was necessary because media texts frequently contain multiple themes, and sustainability-related content often appears in dispersed and context-dependent fragments.

In the first stage, corporate communications were analyzed to identify recurring sustainability claims across environmental, social, and governance dimensions. These claims served as sensitizing concepts guiding subsequent analysis. In the second stage, media articles and associated reader comments were coded inductively, focusing on how sustainability claims were framed, supported, questioned, or contested. Codes were assigned to segments capturing distinct evaluative or interpretive patterns rather than entire documents. In the third stage, first-order codes were iteratively compared and grouped into higher-order categories by identifying recurring tensions between corporate narratives and public interpretations. These tensions were not treated as isolated discrepancies but as persistent patterns across the dataset. In the final stage, these patterned tensions were theorized as sustainability paradoxes, interpreted through a paradox theory lens as enduring and interdependent contradictions rather than resolvable inconsistencies.

Table 1 presents an illustrative excerpt of the hierarchical coding structure, showing how first-order empirical codes were systematically aggregated into second-order analytical categories and subsequently into overarching theoretical dimensions. First-order codes reflect recurring expressions and evaluations identified in the data, preserving the language and meanings present in media texts and reader comments. These were grouped into second-order themes that capture broader patterns of interpretation and evaluation. Finally, these themes were aggregated into three overarching dimensions corresponding to environmental, social, and governance sustainability paradoxes. This structure illustrates how the analysis moves from dispersed empirical observations to theoretically grounded interpretations.

To enhance analytical transparency, the findings section presents illustrative excerpts from media coverage and reader comments that exemplify how sustainability claims are communicated, reframed, and contested. These examples are not intended as isolated cases but as representative instances of broader discursive patterns identified through the coding process. The aim of the analysis is not to quantify frequencies

Table 1. Excerpt of the hierarchical coding structure

First-order codes (data-driven)	Second-order themes (analytical categories)	Aggregate dimensions (theoretical)
Electric scooters reduce urban transport emissions compared to cars.	Sustainability as technological solution	Environmental sustainability paradox
Adding more rental cars to the streets leads to increased traffic.	Contestation of environmental impact	
Platform work provides flexible additional income opportunities for workers.	Autonomy and opportunity framing	Social sustainability paradox
Users express distrust and frustration toward sharing-economy practices (e.g., misuse, inconvenience, lack of responsibility).	Limiting the sovereignty of clients	
Platform positions itself as a neutral intermediary between users and service providers.	Platform neutrality narrative	Governance sustainability paradox
Platform engages in active lobbying and attempts to influence regulation.	Platform lobbying narrative	

of opinions but to identify recurring discursive patterns through which sustainability legitimacy is constructed and contested.

Findings

The findings present an interpretive synthesis of dominant patterns and recurring tensions in mediated public discourse surrounding platform sustainability. Rather than offering an exhaustive account of all sustainability-related coverage, the analysis focuses on how corporate sustainability claims are framed, evaluated, and contested across media reporting and reader commentary. By tracing how environmental, social, and governance narratives circulate between corporate communication, journalistic framing, and public counter-discourse, the findings reveal sustainability not as a stable organizational attribute but as a contested legitimacy construct. Empirical excerpts referenced throughout the findings are indicated by numerical identifiers in parentheses, with corresponding source details provided as supplementary material. The following subsections examine how these dynamics manifest across three analytically distinct yet interrelated sustainability dimensions, each characterized by a specific paradoxical tension.

Environmental sustainability

Environmental sustainability emerged in public discourse primarily through highly visible initiatives framed by Bolt as contributions to green mobility and reduced urban emissions (9, 10) (Bolt Technology OÜ 2024). Media coverage frequently highlighted the company's promotion of shared mobility (1, 3, 9, 12, 119), electrification efforts (4, 12, 13, 75), and environmental commitments (5, 11, 14, 15, 16), often positioning these initiatives as part of a broader transition toward more sustainable urban transport (6, 126) (e.g., media coverage emphasizing emissions reduction, fleet electrification, and climate responsibility) (5, 13). In these representations, environmental sustainability functioned as a forward-looking narrative that aligned technological innovation with ecological progress (7, 8, 14, 15, 126).

> *"We work every day to move towards energy-efficient modes of transport – whether that is making electric cars, scooters, or other yet-to-be-invented modes of transport more accessible," he said. Villig hopes that Bolt's example will also motivate other companies to set ambitious goals for reducing their carbon footprint. "Bolt is in a unique position – we can act independently and show others the way. We hope that our initiative will act as an encouragement," he said. The company's goal of reducing carbon emissions is part of an initiative called Bolt Green Plan, which aims to reduce Bolt's carbon emissions in the European transport sector by at least five million tons by 2025; reduce carbon emissions in the European transport sector by providing people with new opportunities for more sustainable urban transport; make cities more sustainable by expanding the availability of electric scooters to new cities and allowing Bolt users to donate to sustainable initiatives. To achieve these goals, Bolt is cooperating with the international environmental expert National Capital Partners, which has developed a carbon neutrality protocol. The protocol provides companies with a transparent opportunity and assurance to meet climate goals in both business operations and products.* (10)

However, reader comments and critical media interventions repeatedly challenged the substantive impact of these initiatives (17, 18, 19, 20, 24, 30, 31, 32, 37). Public discourse questioned whether promoted environmental measures produced meaningful reductions in emissions or primarily served reputational purposes (26, 33, 34, 38, 39, 40, 91). Commentators frequently juxtaposed sustainability claims with concerns about increased traffic density (23, 36), short vehicle life cycles (21), battery waste (27, 28), and the indirect environmental costs of platform-based mobility (29, 35). These critiques reframed environmental initiatives as partial, selective, or insufficient when assessed against broader ecological impacts.

> *So in real life, rental cars tend to end up the same way as electric scooters – instead of three nicely parked private cars, there are now five vehicles lying around the city. Instead of three drivers and three vehicles, there are now six drivers, and those who are late will go without.*

And surely those worn-out rental cars will eventually be sold off as private vehicles to someone. (21)

Accusations of greenwashing (24) were a recurring feature of this discourse. Environmental sustainability claims that relied on symbolic markers – such as green branding, offsetting schemes, or pilot projects – were often interpreted as visibility-driven strategies rather than indicators of systemic environmental responsibility (17, 24, 25, 26, 38, 40). In this context, heightened public visibility amplified scrutiny: the more prominently sustainability initiatives were communicated, the more intensively they were evaluated for authenticity and coherence.

Greenwashing. (24)

It seems like a blatant BOLT DRIVE advertisement. (38)

Bolt could start offering grave digging services, a herd of cyclists and everyone with a shovel named Bolt on their shoulder and a hole ready with almost zero CO emissions. (40)

This dynamic reveals an environmental sustainability paradox. While environmental initiatives are intended to strengthen legitimacy by signaling responsibility and innovation, their public visibility simultaneously exposes perceived inconsistencies between communicated commitments and lived environmental realities. As a result, environmental sustainability narratives operate as a double-edged discursive dynamic: they generate legitimacy claims while also creating discursive conditions under which those claims are contested and potentially delegitimized.

Social sustainability

Social sustainability in public discourse was predominantly articulated through narratives emphasizing flexibility, opportunity, and user-centered service provision (41, 43). Media coverage frequently reflected Bolt's framing of platform work as offering autonomy to drivers and couriers (43, 54) while highlighting the convenience (47, 50), safety (45, 48, 49, 73), accessibility (44, 51), and affordability (76, 77, 78) of platform-mediated services for users. These representations positioned social (53, 61, 62, 64) and environmental sustainability (46) as a function of individual choice and technological enablement rather than as a collective labor or welfare concern.

The company's goal is to provide customers the opportunity to order food from their favorite restaurants and shops in smaller cities as well. In all the cities, local residents can choose from a dozen shops and restaurants. (47)

Bolt is launching a global campaign worth 2.5 million euros aimed at encouraging more women to offer ride services and helping them earn extra income. (53)

In contrast, reader comments and critical reporting foregrounded everyday experiences that challenged these narratives (20, 22, 25, 31, 37, 74, 80, 81, 84, 85, 89, 106, 107). Platform workers were frequently described as operating under conditions characterized by income instability (58), algorithmic control (56, 59), and limited avenues for recourse, undermining claims of autonomy and flexibility (88, 90, 92). User experiences also entered social sustainability evaluations (63, 67, 83, 111), with discussions linking service quality (66, 116), safety concerns (69, 72, 79, 82, 83, 87, 113), and urban disorder (65, 67, 71, 86, 109, 114, 115) to the working conditions of platform labor (108, 140). In this sense, social sustainability was assessed not through policy statements but through lived encounters with platform services (52, 56, 70, 97, 98, 105, 110).

Sell your house or apartment to us and we will give you a rental apartment in return :) (20)

Bolt's food couriers organized a protest in Georgia because the company changed the terms to their disadvantage, reports Georgia 1TV. (58)

Scooters left on the street cause headaches every day for the visually impaired, parents with strollers, and those using wheelchairs. (65)

A recurring theme in public discourse concerned the asymmetry of responsibility (83, 102, 103, 104) and algorithmically enabled power asymmetry (56, 57, 59) embedded in platform arrangements. While social sustainability claims emphasized opportunity and inclusion, commentators questioned the distribution of risks between the platform, its users, and its workers, particularly in relation to insurance, social protection, and accountability in cases of conflict or harm (93, 94, 95, 96, 99, 100, 101, 112). These critiques reframed flexibility as conditional and unevenly distributed, benefiting the platform while transferring uncertainty to workers (55, 58).

Bolt's taxi drivers in London are protesting today, accusing the Estonian technology company of unfairly low pay and manipulation of the ride-sharing app's algorithms, which mocks drivers. (56)

This pattern reveals a social sustainability paradox rooted in experience. Corporate narratives seek to establish legitimacy by framing platform work and services as socially enabling, yet public evaluations are grounded in concrete, everyday interactions that expose tensions between promised autonomy and perceived precarity. As a result, social sustainability legitimacy is continually negotiated through experiential judgments that challenge abstract responsibility claims.

Governance sustainability

Governance-related sustainability claims in public discourse centered on the platform's positioning as a technologically innovative intermediary rather than a conventional service provider (42, 120). Media coverage frequently reflected Bolt's framing of itself as a neutral platform that connects users and workers, emphasizing innovation, efficiency, and regulatory adaptability (118, 120, 121). Within this narrative, governance sustainability was implicitly associated with compliance (117, 139), self-regulation, and cooperation with public authorities (119, 122, 126, 138, 140, 142), rather than with direct responsibility for service outcomes or *platform labor* conditions, as HQ labor-related highlights were presented from the positive side (55, 60, 144).

Villig noted that full unlocking of the potential of shared transport solutions requires cooperation between service providers, legislators, and cities, enabling a significant *reduction in the use of private cars and a considerable acceleration of sustainable urban planning.* (119)

Reader comments and critical media perspectives, however, consistently challenged this framing by foregrounding perceived accountability gaps (42, 123, 124, 125, 145). Public discourse questioned who bears responsibility when conflicts arise – whether related to worker protection, user safety, pricing practices, or urban externalities (79, 82, 86, 88, 89, 90, 92, 95, 96, 112, 132). Commentators frequently highlighted the tension between the platform's economic centrality and its claims of limited responsibility, interpreting this asymmetry as a deliberate governance strategy rather than a neutral organizational characteristic (146, 148, 149).

The taxi company Bolt confirms that it does not organize taxi transportation in Estonia. Bolt has established mandatory ride tariffs for taxi drivers and their clients in its mobile application, pays taxi drivers for providing rides, provides its own branded leased vehicles for taxi rides, offers customer information services, and enters into client contracts with companies. Nevertheless, it believes that all this does not constitute organizing taxi services. (42)

The Latvian tax office demands that Bolt pay unpaid taxes in the amount of 1.4 million euros, reported the Latvian news program De Facto *on Sunday. This is Bolt's second fine for tax evasion in Latvia. The previous fine was 200 000 euros.* (124)

Riding on the street with such small-wheeled equipment at a speed of 25 km/h is life-threatening both for the rider themselves and for others. (79)

Regulatory debates further intensified this dynamic. Media discussions of lobbying activities (127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 161), legal classifications (134), and negotiations with municipalities (136, 137, 141, 143) were often interpreted by commenters as attempts to shape governance conditions in the platform's favor while avoiding corresponding obligations (93, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 158, 160). In this context, governance sustainability claims were evaluated not by formal compliance alone but by perceived fairness, transparency, and willingness to assume responsibility proportionate to the platform's societal impact (133, 135, 147, 153, 154, 155, 156, 157, 159).

*Since 2021, Bolt founders Markus Villig and Martin Villig have consistently (*Eesti Ekspress*) donated money to the parties that currently form the governing coalition. In the fourth quarter of 2022, the two donated a total of 100 000 euros to the parties forming the government (*Postimees*), and in the first quarter of this year, Martin Villig donated nearly 50 000 euros to the new coalition parties (*Delfi*). The three parties supported consistently by the Villig brothers quickly began to devise the car tax plan that clearly helps fulfill Bolt's grand mission and advance their business interests.* (127)

It is dear that Bolt's drivers in their homeland all agree that any driver who does not speak the local language is perfectly okay. And the authorities nod in agreement. (147)

The point of the party financing law is not about paying taxes. The purpose of the law is to prevent corruption, so that companies cannot buy favorable laws for themselves... (148)

This is called lobbying. You don't always have to order something directly. Once again, the people are being treated like fools. (152)

This pattern reveals a governance sustainability paradox characterized by an accountability deficit. While platform self-positioning emphasizes innovation-driven legitimacy and regulatory flexibility, public evaluations increasingly demand clearer responsibility structures and stronger institutional accountability. As a result, governance-related sustainability narratives intended to stabilize legitimacy instead become focal points of contestation, reinforcing skepticism toward the platform's broader sustainability claims.

Navigating paradoxical tensions

Table 2 summarizes the reconstructed narrative categories through which sustainability claims, media framings, and public counter-discourses interact, highlighting the para-

Table 2. Reconstructed narrative categories of sustainability discourse

Sustainability dimension	Corporate sustainability narrative	Dominant media framing	Public counter-narratives (comments)	Core paradoxical tension
Environmental sustainability	Green mobility, electrification, emissions reduction, innovation-driven environmental responsibility	Future-oriented transition narrative emphasizing technological solutions and climate goals	Skepticism toward actual environmental impact; critiques of symbolic actions, production and traffic increase, and greenwashing	Environmental initiatives enhance legitimacy claims while simultaneously intensifying scrutiny and accusations of symbolic sustainability
Social sustainability	Flexibility, autonomy, opportunity for workers; affordable and convenient services for users	Individualized responsibility framing focusing on choice, efficiency, and service accessibility	Experiential accounts of precarity, income instability, safety concerns, urban disorder, and uneven risk distribution between platform and workers	Abstract responsibility narratives conflict with lived experiences that shape social sustainability evaluations
Governance sustainability	Platform neutrality, innovation, regulatory adaptability, self-regulation	Procedural compliance framing emphasizing legality and cooperation with authorities	Perceived responsibility avoidance, lobbying skepticism, demands for clearer accountability and regulation	Governance narratives undermine legitimacy when public expectations of responsibility remain unmet

doxical tensions that structure sustainability legitimacy in the platform context. Corporate narratives originate from company communications (in media), media framing reflects journalistic interpretation, and public counter-narratives capture audience evaluation. These are analytically distinct but dynamically interconnected layers of mediated discourse.

Table 2 synthesizes the reconstructed narrative categories by illustrating how corporate sustainability narratives, dominant media framings, and public counter-narratives interact to produce distinct paradoxical tensions. While the table presents dominant patterns, each discursive layer contains internal variation and competing viewpoints; the table abstracts from this plurality to highlight recurring and analytically significant configurations. Together, the three categories demonstrate that sustainability legitimacy in platform contexts is shaped less by isolated initiatives than by the interaction between scrutiny and contestation, lived experience, and accountability expectations. This synthesis highlights how sustainability narratives intended to stabilize legitimacy may simultaneously generate skepticism and contestation, reinforcing the paradoxical nature of sustainability in platform-mediated environments.

Discussion

This study set out to examine how sustainability claims of a platform company are constructed, contested, and evaluated in mediated public discourse. By applying a sustainability paradox lens to media coverage, reader comments, and corporate communications related to Bolt, the findings demonstrate that sustainability legitimacy in platform contexts is neither stable nor exclusively performance-based. Instead, it emerges through ongoing public interpretation, where corporate narratives encounter journalistic framing and readers' counter discourses that actively reshape their meaning. While this discursive construction of legitimacy is likely characteristic of platform-mediated environments more broadly, its specific expression in this study is shaped by the Estonian media context and Bolt's position as a prominent national platform.

Across environmental, social, and governance dimensions, the analysis reveals a common underlying dynamic: sustainability initiatives intended to strengthen legitimacy simultaneously create conditions for intensified scrutiny and contestation. This tendency – where increased visibility generates heightened public evaluation – is likely applicable across platform companies. However, the particular forms of critique identified here, including the framing of green initiatives as symbolic, the emphasis on local labor conditions, and concerns about governance and accountability, are shaped by Estonia's regulatory environment, media practices, and Bolt's role as a nationally significant firm. These dynamics illustrate sustainability paradoxes not as organizational dilemmas to be resolved but as enduring tensions reproduced through public discourse.

Theoretically, the study contributes to sustainability and platform economy research by foregrounding mediated legitimacy as a central discursive process through which sustainability paradoxes emerge and persist. While prior research has often treated sustainability paradoxes as internal organizational challenges or strategic tensions (Jay et al. 2017; Luo et al. 2020), this analysis shows that paradoxes are co-produced externally, in arenas where media and publics interpret, evaluate, and morally assess corporate claims. This shift toward discursive interaction as a site of paradox formation is analytically transferable beyond the focal case, even though the empirical manifestations observed here remain context-dependent. This shifts analytical attention from managerial intent to discursive interaction, highlighting the constitutive role of public communication (Liu and McConnell 2013; Boiral and Heras-Saizarbitoria 2020; Moreno and Kang 2020) in shaping sustainability outcomes.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that sustainability communication in platform companies entails inherent reputational risks. Increased transparency and visibility do not automatically enhance legitimacy; instead, they amplify evaluative scrutiny and expose inconsistencies between narratives and perceived realities. This dynamic is likely relevant across platform firms operating in highly visible digital environments, although its intensity may vary depending on national media systems and institutional contexts. For platform firms, this implies that sustainability strategies cannot rely solely on symbolic initiatives or communication efforts but must be aligned with experiences and accountability structures that resonate with public expectations.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study focuses on mediated discourse within a single national context and does not assess sustainability performance or public opinion quantitatively. Reader comments reflect active and often polarized voices rather than representative populations. Nevertheless, these limitations are consistent with the study's interpretive aim, which is to illuminate discursive dynamics rather than measure impact. Future research could extend this approach by comparing mediated sustainability discourses across platform sectors or national contexts, or by integrating ethnographic or survey-based methods to further explore how sustainability legitimacy is experienced and internalized.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that sustainability in platform companies is not a fixed organizational attribute but a contested and publicly negotiated phenomenon. Sustainability paradoxes arise not only from competing strategic demands but from the interaction between corporate claims and mediated public evaluation. Recognizing mediated legitimacy as a central dimension of platform sustainability is therefore essential for understanding why sustainability efforts often generate both support and skepticism simultaneously.

Data availability statement

Translated quotes used in the study are provided as supplementary material. The analyzed media articles are publicly available, although some are accessible only behind paywalls.

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Supplementary material

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Platvormiettevõtete jätkusuutlikkuse paradoks: vahendatud legitiimsus avalikus diskursuses

Artur Toikka

Uurimus näitab, kuidas platvormiettevõtete väited kestlikkuse kohta kujunevad, saavad hinnanguid ja seatakse kahtluse alla meedia vahendatud avalikus diskursuses. Empiiriline analüüs keskendub Bolti juhtumile ning põhineb meediakajastustel, lugejakommentaaridel ja ettevõtte ametlikul kommunikatsioonil. Uurides fenomeni läbi kestlikkuse paradoksi prisma, ilmneb, et kestlikkusega seotud legitiimsus ei ole stabiilne ega tulene üksnes ettevõtte tegelikust tegevusest, vaid kujuneb pideva avaliku tõlgendamise protsessis.

Tulemused osutavad, et keskkonna-, sotsiaal- ja juhtimise valdkonnas ilmnevad pinged, kus kestlikkusele orienteeritud algatused, mis peaksid tugevdama ettevõtte legitiimsust avalikkuse silmis, loovad samal ajal tingimused ka kriitikaks ja vaidlustamiseks. Näiteks võivad keskkonnaalased algatused, mida esitletakse roheinnovatsioonina, kutsuda esile süüdistusi sümboolses kestlikkuses, paindlikkust rõhutavad sotsiaalsed narratiivid põrkuda töötajate kogetud ebakindlusega ning platvormi neutraalsust rõhutavad väited tekitada nõudmisi suurema korporatiivse vastutuse järele. Selle tagajärjel ilmnevad kestlikkuse paradoksid püsivate pingetena, avaldudes avalikus diskursuses.

Uurimuse teoreetiline panus seisneb platvormiettevõtte legitiimsuse kontseptualiseerimises vahendatud diskursiivse protsessina, mille kaudu tuvastatud kestlikkuse paradoksid tekivad ja püsivad. Kui üldjuhul uuritakse nimetatud pingete juurpõhjust organisatsioonisisese strateegia perspektiivist, siis analüüsist ilmneb, et need tekivad ka korporatiivse kommunikatsiooni, meedia tõlgenduste ja avalikkuse hinnangute vastastikmõjus. Kestlikkusele orienteeritud väljundite loomisel liigub tähelepanu ettevõttesiseselt strateegiliselt juhtimiselt avaliku diskursuse rollile.

Kuigi uurimus tugineb ühe riigi kontekstile, tuvastati mustrid, kuidas avalikkus tõlgendab ja kritiseerib platvormiettevõtete väiteid kestlikkuse kohta ning kuidas need väljenduvad püsivate pingetena. Tulemused on analüütiliselt ülekantavad ja rakendatavad muudes platvormide vahendatud kontekstides. Samal ajal jäävad spetsiifilised kriitika ja interpreteerimise vormid sõltuma konkreetsest kontekstist ja tingimustest, sh meediasüsteemidest, regulatsioonidest ja platvormiettevõtete avalikust positsioneerimisest. Ka selle uurimuse tulemusi mõjutavad suurel määral Eesti-spetsiifiline meediakeskkond ja Bolti positsioon rahvusliku eduloona. Vahendatud legitiimsuse käsitlemine platvormiettevõtete ühe kestlikkuse mõõtmena aitab mõista, kuidas kestlikkuse püüdlused, tekitades avalikkuses samal ajal nii toetust kui ka skepsist, mõjutavad ettevõtte legitiimust.