



How does Apple portray its environmental ‘responsibility’ in their Environmental Progress Reports from 2013 and 2023?

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Background

- Sustainability reports are a key tool for companies to communicate their environmental and social responsibility.
- However, they are often criticized for greenwashing, as many reports focus on rhetorical persuasion rather than concrete actions.
- The term ‘responsibility’ is frequently used as a key concept to signal sustainable practices.

This study examines the **semantic and pragmatic** use of the term ‘responsibility’ in Apple’s **Environmental Progress Reports** from 2013 and 2023.

Research Question

How does Apple use the concept of ‘responsibility’ in its Environmental Progress Reports from 2013 and 2023 to portray its environmental accountability, and what changes can be observed over time?

Results I

Responsibility in 2013 Report: **General Responsibility**

- Responsibility framed mainly **with self-attributions**.
- Language emphasizes **general responsibility**.
→ “Support and promote sound scientific principles and fiscally responsible public policies that enhance environmental quality, health, and safety.”
- More about being an economically reliable partner to stakeholders, than being environmentally sustainable.

Conclusion

Apple’s shift from general accountability to direct and shared responsibility aligns with systemic challenges. While this reflects commitments, it also risks diluting accountability through ambiguous framing. ‘Responsibility’ becomes more distributed and less measurable.

Limitations

Focus on textual analysis; no empirical evaluation of implementation (e.g., supplier compliance, carbon neutrality progress). Progress toward net-zero or carbon neutrality goals cannot be accurately assessed due to vague definitions and shifting scopes between the 2013 and 2023 reports, making direct comparison unreliable.

Methods

Corpus: Apple’s Environmental Progress Reports (2013, 2023).

Analysis Focus: Semantic and pragmatic analysis of the lemma “responsibility” and variations (responsible, responsibly).

- Attributions of responsibility (who is responsible and what for?).
- Changes in framing between 2013 and 2023.
- Linguistic strategies (e.g., presuppositions, accountability vs. greenwashing).

Results II

Responsibility in 2023 Report: **Direct & Shared Accountability**

- Responsibility framed **with frequent self-attributions**.
- **Responsibility expanded to include partnerships** with suppliers and global initiatives.
→ “As we focus on responsible sourcing and the use of recycled content, we continue to engage with multiple industry initiatives. These include our role on the steering committee of the Responsible Minerals Initiative (RMI).”
→ “We collaborate with groups, including AWS and the Responsible Business Alliance (RBA) [...]”
- **Aspirational language** (e.g., “we envision”, “we strive”) **emphasizes collaboration but dilutes clarity**.
→ “In the future, we envision, our products are made solely from responsibly sourced recycled and renewable materials [...]. We’re working with leading recyclers and academic institutions to realize this future through researching new technologies [...]”

