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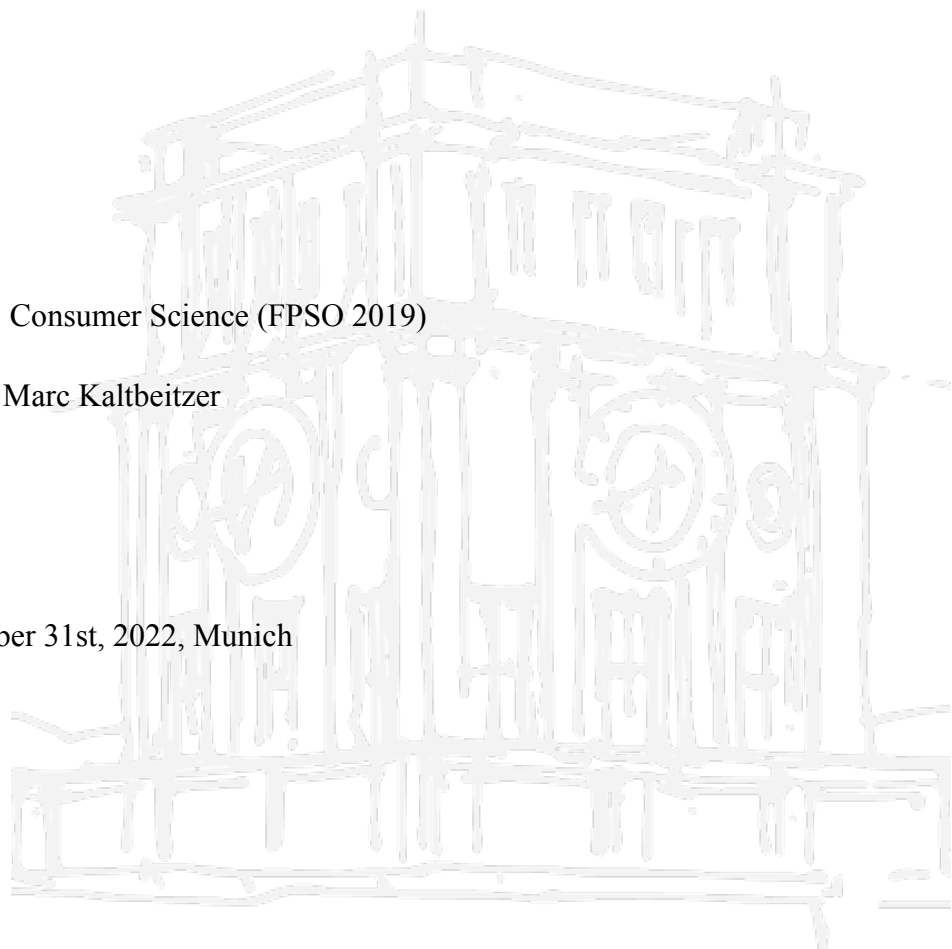
## **Constructing green consumption choices?**

Brand communities and their potential in sustainability marketing  
for automotive and beyond

Course of studies: Master: Consumer Science (FPSO 2019)

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## **Abstract**

Building on the assumption that brand communities foster attitude-behavior congruence, sustainability marketing practice may profit from the investigation of a brand community's distinct understanding of sustainability. By means of a Foucauldian approach to discourse theory, the present thesis aims to analyze the consumer conversation among e-mobility enthusiasts in order to discover which reality is constructed and how collective knowledge is legitimized. As thematic hook serves Tesla's recent realization of the Gigafactory Berlin-Brandenburg, or respectively how the associated discourse – which was mainly characterized by sustainability concerns – is structured by the *Tesla Fahrer & Freunde (TFF)* community. Thus, 452 contributions extracted from the *TFF* online forum are analyzed and put into context according to the discourse analytic framework. The study finds that the brand community under investigation holds a sustainability understanding that blends economic and environmental concerns with the latter mainly being present in a long-term perspective. Suggestions include that marketers should consider to enrich the currently 'myopic' sustainability marketing practice by an economic dimension in order to promote sustainable consumer behavior more efficiently.

## **Acknowledgements**

As this thesis marks the end of my academic path, I would like to dedicate it to my parents as well as to my grandma – the most beautiful and loving people on earth. I am deeply grateful for your never-ending support over all the years and the possibility to freely develop without having to worry anytime.

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# 1. Introduction

“Berlin rocks! [...] I love Berlin!” – with these words Elon Musk continued his official announcement to build Tesla’s first production site on European grounds after receiving the *Golden Steering Wheel* award on November, 12<sup>th</sup> in 2019 (Senft, 2019). Having already voiced sympathy for Germany as a suitable location in summer 2018 (Neuerer, 2022), the owner of the electric vehicle (EV) manufacturer, who is also known as the richest person alive (Dolan & Peterson-Withorn, 2022), now chose a community in the south-eastern surroundings of Berlin – the Grünheide (Hoffmann, 2019; s. *Fig. 1*).

*Fig. 1:* Concept of Tesla’s Gigafactory Berlin-Brandenburg



Source: © Tesla (2022a)

Roughly two and a half years later, on March, 22<sup>nd</sup> in 2022, the Gigafactory Berlin-Brandenburg opened its gates and the first models were handed over to its new owners in the presence of German chancellor Olaf Scholz and federal minister Robert Habeck (Poppendieck, 2022). What seems like a trouble-free project at first, in fact turned out to be criticized over the course of its realization by various stakeholders (Hägler, 2022; Wollner, 2022). Having signed the contract for the terrain in the outskirts of Berlin on January 29<sup>th</sup> in 2020 (Schicketanz, 2020), Tesla begins with a first deforestation of more than 200 acres of pinewood on February 13<sup>th</sup> (Metzner, 2020). On the next day, however,

two environmentalist associations are able to stop the felling by enforcing a legal process which is decided for the car manufacturer one week later (Ismar & Heigl, 2020). The dispute continues as Tesla obtains a provisional approval for the clearance of a similar-sized woodland in winter – resulting in a second halt of the deforestation from December 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> (Salmen & Metzner, 2020). Shortly before, another main point of criticism gained momentum. The local water association, environmentalists and residents express concerns about the factory's water consumption which is expected to equal the yearly needs of a city with 40,000 citizens (Hajek, 2020; Löhr, 2020). Their argumentation is twofold: on one hand, the required and contractual amount of 1,4 million cubic meters may exceed the limits of supply in the region which is already subject to aridity (Richter, 2022), on the other the stakeholders fear a potential contamination of groundwater as the production site is built in a drinking water protection zone (Neuerer, 2021). An episode of ZDF's Frontal21 in March 2021 marks the temporary climax of the controversy around Tesla's Gigafactory in Brandenburg because the previous critique is focused and condensed (Esser & Heise, 2021). On April 7<sup>th</sup>, Tesla reacts with a counterattack on the German bureaucracy which would slow down the realization of environmental friendly projects and therefore paralyze the fight against climate change (Schulze, 2021; Tesla, 2021a). While repeatedly postponing the planned production start in July 2021, discussions on the environmental influence of the factory proceed (Neuerer, 2022). In autumn, Tesla faces more than 800 objections when being confronted with critical voices in Grünheide, Brandenburg (Von Riegen, 2021). On October 16<sup>th</sup>, the local water association officially warns of drinking water shortages in the region (Kersting & Neuerer, 2021a). The company still hands in the complete paperwork for the authorization of the Gigafactory Berlin-Brandenburg which is finally approved by the state office for the environment (LfU) on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022 – three weeks prior to the rescheduled launch of the production site (Barnstorf, 2022a).

Regarding Tesla's practices to achieve their mission statement of "accelerating the world's transition to sustainable energy" (Tesla, 2022b), the company was not only criticized in Germany but also on the global stage when it was ejected from the S&P 500 ESG-index on May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2022 (Groth & Schwerdtfeger, 2022). The popular stock index aims to map sustainable firms. Reasons for Tesla's exclusion comprise the lack of a

carbon-reducing strategy, poor working conditions within factories as well as the handling of partly deadly accidents caused by Tesla's autopilot (ibid.). The company later stated in its Impact Report 2021: "Current ESG evaluation methodologies are fundamentally flawed [...] [and do] not measure the scope of positive impact on the world" (Tesla, 2021b, p. 2).

The problem statement of the present thesis arises from our society's need to drive forward a sustainable lifestyle in order to mitigate the consequences of climate change. Over the course of the past years, this need evolved from a moral to a legal obligation. Exemplary, the European Commission (in service 2019-2024) took on the responsibilities from the *Paris Agreement* (UN, 2016) and the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN, 2015) and introduced several binding policies for its member states. The latter includes the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with SDG 12 (Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns). According to Eurostat (2021), households account for 20% of total greenhouse gas emissions within the European Union (EU). Measures counteracting unsustainable consumption patterns entail, inter alia, the *European Green Deal* (EU, 2019), the *New Circular Economy Action Plan* (EU, 2020a), the *New Consumer Agenda* (EU, 2020b), as well as an initiative for *Empowering Consumers for the Green Transition* (EU, 2022). Besides the regulatory perspective, there is broad consensus on the importance of a more sustainable lifestyle among consumers, too. In a study on attitudes towards the environment, 94% of the European participants state environment protection is very or fairly important to them personally, 78% indicate they expect environmental issues to directly affect their daily life and health, and 68% agree their consumption habits have adverse effects on the environment (Eurobarometer, 2020). These findings are underscored by recent market research incorporating the effect of Covid-19 on global consumption habits. A study by Roland Berger (2021) finds that sustainability gained even more relevance throughout the pandemic while in a purchase decision both ethics and sustainability are considered the most important brand values after high quality. Still, the study also shows there is present inertia when it comes to the realization of associated behaviors as free delivery and free returns are among the main factors increasing consumers' willingness to shop online (ibid.). Another study carried out by McKinsey & Company (2020) contradicts peoples' good intentions as well. Even



though 55% of US consumers are extremely or very concerned about the environmental impact of product packaging, findings suggest that overall sustainability of the same is ranked relatively low as an actual buying criterion (ibid.).

It seems that society is yet struggling to adapt to the changed circumstances. Scholars from interdisciplinary backgrounds refer to this social dilemma as attitude-behavior gap while continuously searching for explanations and, most importantly, solutions. From a consumer science perspective, one is “not only [interested] in how attitudes are formed and can be changed but also in knowing whether, when and why attitudes will predict behavior” (Hoyer, MacInnis, & Pieters, 2018, p. 144). Thus, the discrepancy may be explained due to the interference of various other factors (s. chapter 2.1.1). Peattie and Belz (2010) argue that traditional marketing is “increasingly unable to cope with the ecological, social and commercial realities that confront mankind” (p. 8). While classical thinking implies to continuously increase consumption, the approach of sustainability marketing takes ecological limits to growth into account (Peattie & Peattie, 2009) and actually is able to reduce the attitude-behavior gap in sustainable consumption (White, MacDonnell, & Elland, 2012; s. chapter 2.1.2). However, since the field seems to be mostly engaged in self-discovery by now, marketers are struggling to communicate sustainability as an added value for consumers (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019). This study examines a brand community as potentially underrated resource for sustainability marketing practice. According to Muniz and O’Guinn (2001), a brand community depicts a segregated and structured collective of people centering around a brand. The authors further ascribe them unique properties, such as “shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility” (ibid., p. 412). Brand communities imply far-reaching interferences in everyday lifestyles while drawing on several factors responsible for attitude-behavior incongruence (s. chapter 2.1.3). As such, they are assumed to be a promising object of investigation as regards the problem statement.

For the past two decades, brand communities could commonly be observed in the automotive sector (Heun, 2014). Besides, the industry has proven to be a key driver of the ideological change demanded by the EU’s regulatory framework. Europe is considered the only market that continued to grow in terms of electric vehicle (EV) sales despite the recent crises (McKinsey & Company, 2022). Tesla is considered the best-selling EV

manufacturer within Europe (Carsalesbase, 2021), even though all of its cars have been produced beyond European borders so far. On its website, the firm not only highlights its sustainable brand core but also links to its brand communities (i.e., 'owners clubs') which should be "committed to advancing Tesla's mission to accelerate the world's transition to sustainable energy" (Tesla, 2022c). *Tesla Fahrer & Freunde (TFF)* represents the most vibrant brand community including the greatest online forum among German-speaking countries (TFF, 2021a).

This research project joins the scientific canon in consumer research as the societal and discursive construction of consumer realities within a brand community is under investigation. Findings may contribute to the promotion of sustainable consumer behavior when applied in sustainability marketing practice and ultimately help to bridge the attitude-behavior gap. Accordingly, the research question of the qualitative discourse analysis reads:

**Which discursive rules determine the understanding of sustainability among e-mobility enthusiasts drawing from the discourse on Tesla's Gigafactory Berlin-Brandenburg in its German owners club Tesla Fahrer & Freunde e.V.?**

The discursive rule-system will be decoded by means of four subordinate questions. It is initially asked about the position of the brand community's reality construction within the holistic discourse. Building upon this point of reference, the study questions which self-conception the subjects in the brand community hold, how the discourse is positioned in their reality configuration, and which strategies are used for legitimization. It is expected that a distinct interpretation of sustainability is reflected in the community's conversation insofar that contributions to the Gigafactory discourse within the *TFF* forum are characterized by a strong default of values, topics and one-dimensional perspectives.

In the following chapter, the work at hand discovers the existing literature on the attitude-behavior gap, sustainability marketing and brand communities before introducing conceptualizations of discourse theory wherefrom a tailored categorical system is derived. With the theoretical foundation laid, the third chapter focuses on the methodological

decision and sheds light on the procedures surrounding data collection and analysis. In the results section, the individual categories are fanned out in sub-chapters and analyzed against the background of discourse theory. This also involves the presentation of different perspectives from which one could approach the concept of sustainability in the context of Tesla's Gigafactory in order to mark out the field of sayability upfront (Foucault, 2005). Like this, it is aimed to decode the discursive rule-system of reality construction within the brand community. Hereafter, the findings are discussed regarding the previously made assumptions and potential methodological flaws. Within the implications chapter, the study makes an attempt to propose an efficient sustainability marketing strategy based on the study's findings. Finally, a conclusion with reference to the introduction summarizes the basic results. An appendix contains further resources.

## 2. Theoretical Foundation

### 2.1 Literature review

The upcoming paragraphs serve to clarify the interrelations between present attitude-behavior inconsistencies in sustainable consumption, how sustainability marketing may be able to reduce the gap and why brand communities depict a suitable resource for sustainability marketing practice. This involves presenting the current state of research as well as drawing attention to shortcomings in the associated literature stocks. Subsequently, the research gap the study tries to fill is outlined.

#### 2.1.1 Attitude-behavior gap in sustainable consumption

The presented studies by Eurobarometer (2020), Roland Berger (2021) and McKinsey & Company (2020) depict only a selection of countless inquiries displaying the discrepancy between consumers' claims and their actual behavior. These claims express individual attitudes which can be seen as learnt and enduring evaluations of (dis-)likability of things (Petty, Unnava, & Strathman, 1991). The present thesis relies on El Haffar, Durif and Dubé's (2020) definition of the attitude-behavior gap as "inconsistency between what the individual says regarding his/her growing concern about the environmental problems and what he/she does in terms of actions, behaviors, and contributions to lessen the consequences of these problems" (p. 6).

A considerable body of research has shown that attitudes alone may be able to explain consumers' behavioral intention but are not good predictors of actual conduct (Hoyer et al., 2018). In fact, the relationship between attitudes and behavior is affected by various factors which should be looked at more closely. Hereby, two general types of mediating and moderating influences can be differentiated, one relating to the individual, the other to the situational context (ibid.). Based on this categorization, the following section introduces the intervening variables which are considered most important in the present context<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See also the papers by Glasman & Albarracín, 2006; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006; Bonini & Oppenheim, 2008; Gupta & Ogden, 2009; Litvine & Wüstenhagen, 2011; White, Habib, & Hardisty, 2019; Hosta & Zabkar, 2020; Park & Lin, 2020, each of which subsuming several factors that are outlined in the following.

Starting on the individual level, research suggests that the gap shrinks with an increasing *level of involvement* dedicated by the consumer (Claudy, Peterson, & O'Driscoll, 2013; Grimmer & Miles, 2017; Wei, Chiang, Kou, & Lee, 2017; Anisimova & Weiss, 2022). Due to distinct routes of mental processing, the attitude of a cognitively highly involved person is more enduring and predictive of subsequent behavior as vice versa (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983). Besides, Chaturvedi, Kulshreshtha and Tripathi (2022) observe the same effect for affective involvement. A person's *emotional attachment* ranks quite high in importance among the factors responsible for the limited informative value of attitudes, too (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010). Research found that emotionally committed consumers are more likely to pay a price premium (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005) and rather stay loyal to a company during crises (Johnson, Herrmann, & Huber, 2006). Also, they are more easily aroused by negative information which motivates them to search for refutations in order to justify their behavior (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000; Raju & Unnava, 2006). Marketers should align the brand's personality and the consumer's actual self-image if they want to draw on consumers' emotional strings more strongly (Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Nyffenegger, 2011). Next, the predictive power of attitudes may also depend on *personal norms* and *values* which influence behavioral conduct as they provide individual orientation in terms of what is considered right or wrong (Godin, Conner, & Sheeran, 2005; Barber, Taylor, & Remar, 2016). Exemplary, Goldstein, Cialdini and Griskevicius (2008) show that people are more likely to engage in sustainable behaviors when presented with a normative rather than a functional argument. Furthermore, many authors suggest that consumption choices are prone to be biased by *individual* and *group identification* (Moraes, Carrigan, & Szmigin, 2012). It is argued that consumers engage in sustainable behaviors in order to come closer to – or avoid deviating from – their self-actualized alter-ego (Champanis, Wilson, Macdonald, & Dimitriu, 2016), but also to signal status to social collectives (Zabkar & Hosta, 2013). Moreover, peoples' *habits* are able to automate decision-making and disable rational consideration biasing them to keep the status quo (Maréchal, 2010). Hence, a few studies have already illustrated how to nudge people into sustainable behaviors with default choices (Theotokis & Manganari, 2014; Momsen & Stoerk, 2014). Consumers' *confidence* about attitudes is seen as

potential barrier to sustainable consumption practices (Berger, 1992; Priester, Nayakankuppam, Fleming, & Godek, 2004) as the stability of behavioral intentions depends on whether a person holds salient beliefs or not (Peter & Olson, 2010). This also relates to the *trust* a consumer feels regarding subsequent behaviors (Tung, Shih, Wei, & Chen, 2012; Kalkbrenner & Roosen, 2016; Anisimova & Weiss, 2022) as the perceived risk of a sustainable action is reduced (Durif, Roy, & Boivin, 2012). Quick attitude *accessibility* within the set of linked associations is said to strengthen the attitude-behavior relationship. (Berger & Mitchell, 1989; Fazio, Powell, & Williams, 1989). A number of studies evidence that product knowledge and, thereby, accessibility is increased by *direct experience* (Smith & Swinyard, 1983; Wright & Lynch, 1995; Hamilton & Thompson, 2007). Further, the actual behavior is influenced by a consumer's *perceived effectiveness* of the conduct (Mishal, Dubey, Gupta, Luo, 2017; Nguyen, Nguyen, & Hoang, 2019) as well as *perceived control* which refers to the degree to which the individual feels capable of executing a behavior (Grimmer & Miles, 2017).

Continuing on the contextual level, it is argued that *social norms* (e.g., conveyed via peer pressure) may motivate consumers to engage in socially responsible behaviors (Vringer, Vollebergh, Van Soest, Van Der Heijden, & Dietz, 2015; Kalkbrenner & Roosen, 2016). This finding is replicated in various studies demonstrating that consumers are more likely to buy sustainably advertised products in the presence of others (Green & Peloza, 2014) or rather comply with eco-friendly behaviors if common practice in the neighborhood (Graziano & Gillingham, 2015). Concordant with peoples' habits, the decision-making process is also guided by general *availability* which is why consumers are less willing to opt for a sustainable choice if it is not convenient to do so (Buder, Feldmann, & Hamm, 2014; Nguyen et al., 2019). *Specificity* also plays an integral role in the prediction of behavior (Weigel, Vernon, & Tognacci, 1974; Heberlein & Black, 1976). It is argued that predictability increases if a consumer's attitude and conduct are measured in a congruent (i.e., exactly as precise) way (Peter & Olson, 2010). *Information type* and *source* depict two further variables affecting the adoption of sustainable practices. As regards the former, Neubig et al. (2020) find differences in the effect of action-related versus system information on consumers' intention to engage in sustainable behavior. For the latter, Goodarzi, Masini, Aflaki and Fahimnia (2021) propose that neither generic nor

commercial, but only unbiased third-party information may translate a consumer's attitude into the desired action. It is also worth mentioning that *intervening time* weakens attitude confidence leading to inconsistencies between intention and choice (Peter & Olson, 2010). Krishnan and Smith (1998) demonstrate that attitude confidence is less likely to decline over time when based on actual trial rather than on mere advertising. Lastly, *price* is expected to exert an influence on the execution of behavior as the immediate costs of a sustainable option may outweigh ethical considerations (Weisstein, Asgari, & Siew, 2014; Chowdhury & Samuel, 2014; Buder et al., 2014). Naturally, this effect is amplified for households with relatively lower *income* (Cayla, Maizi, Marchand, 2011; Moser & Kleinhüchelkotten, 2017).

With the social dilemma persisting to date, it seems quite obvious that existing attempts to explain the attitude-behavior gap in sustainable consumption lack a holistic understanding (El Haffar et al., 2020). Although versatile influences are known to affect actual consumption choices, the vast majority of studies relies on small-scale modeling techniques with limited explanatory power (ibid.). Recent literature typically follows a rational rather than a behavioral research paradigm and, in turn, falls back on the ever same theoretical foundations<sup>2</sup> (ibid.). Subsumed, this trend paints an incomplete picture of what gives rise to specific behaviors as relatively few variables are abstracted from complex consumption situations (Jackson, 2005).

### 2.1.2 Sustainability marketing

When Perreira Heath and Chatzidakis (2012) asked highly educated consumers, they indicated to rather blame the marketing system for their overconsumption levels than taking any own responsibility (s. also Kjellberg, 2008). These findings are controversial but, in fact, ignite a debate on the role of marketing for solving the before mentioned dilemma. With overconsumption being only one of many negative consequences induced by mainstream 'marketing myopia' (Levitt, 1960), the field's scholarship increasingly tried to align marketing philosophy with socio-environmental concerns (Peattie, 2015).

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<sup>2</sup> Mostly theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), but also e.g., norm activation theory (Schwartz, 1992), motivation-ability-opportunity model (Ölander & Thøgersen, 1995), value-belief-norm theory (Stern, Dietz, Abel, Guagnano, & Kalof, 1999) or attitude-behavior-context theory (Stern, 2000).

Sustainability marketing represents a recent stream that enriches modern thinking with elements of relationship, ethical and eco-marketing (Peattie & Belz, 2010). It further encompasses a “transformational force” (ibid., p. 13) with the potential to change the institutional framework. More precisely, the new approach seeks to develop “long-term, sustainability-oriented value relationships with customers” (Peattie, 2015, p. 102; Belz & Peattie, 2012). Sustainability marketing may be seen as multifaceted concept as it is attributed an economic, environmental, social, ethical and technological dimension (Lim, 2015). Kemper and Ballantine (2019) further differentiate three directions: *auxiliary* sustainability marketing is limited to building an eco-friendly image of goods or brands, the *reformative* approach aims to promote sustainable consumer lifestyles whereas the *transformative* understanding tries to make adjustments on a broader institutional level. Yet, the majority of sustainability marketers rely on the traditional ‘4P’ (product, price, place, promotion) marketing mix model (McCarthy, 1960) in order to position goods to the targeted customer segments. In line, parallel research is also based on this rather *auxiliary* understanding (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019). The scholarship focuses on specific product features or benefits (Chen, 2001; Fuller & Ottman, 2004), consumers’ willingness to pay price premiums (Michaud & Llerena, 2011; Bolderdijk & Steg, 2015), physical distribution channel design (Kirchoff, Koch, & Satinover Nichols, 2011; Jones, Hiller, & Comfort, 2011) and different ways of advertising the offering, for instance via eco-labelling (Thøgersen, 2009; Leonidou, Leonidou, Palihawadana, & Hultman, 2011; Noblet & Teisl, 2015).

Some argue that the producer-focused ‘4P’ model does not fit the underlying principle of customer centricity in recent marketing theory anymore (Peattie, 2015). Instead, Belz and Peattie (2012) propose a marketing mix model of ‘4C’s’ which seems more suitable in a sustainability context. According to them, effective sustainability marketing should provide satisfying ‘customer solutions’ to distinct needs, pay tribute to the total ‘customer costs’ including non-financial expenses throughout all consumption stages, respect consumers’ ‘convenience’, as well as it should encourage a two-way ‘communication’ in which a certain grasp of sustainability is to be integrated seamlessly into peoples’ everyday life (ibid.).



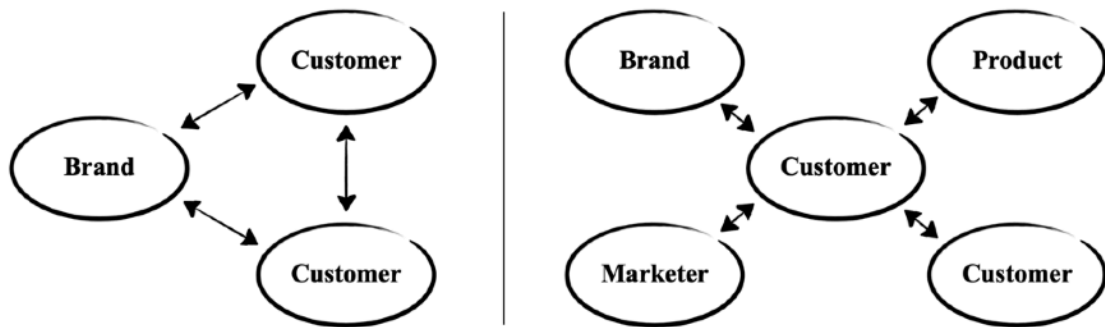
Speaking of shortcomings in sustainability marketing research, Kemper and Ballantine (2019) attest the field to be “overwhelmingly understudied” (p. 5) and mostly limited to the *auxiliary* perspective which traditionally relies on consumers’ attitudes towards sustainability. The discipline’s publications yet seem to be of subordinate importance within mainstream marketing journals (Purani, Sahadev, & Kumar, 2014). Prothero et al. (2011) further criticize the particular focus on packaged goods and low-involvement decisions which underscores Peattie’s (2015) argument of a field that is “heavily biased towards [the] purchasing aspects of consumer behavior” (p. 104).

### **2.1.3 Brand communities**

In this thesis, it is assumed that brand communities foster attitude-behavior congruence by drawing in various ways on the introduced factors responsible for the attitude-behavior gap in sustainable consumption (s. chapter 2.1.1). In this regard, their investigation could ultimately assist in bridging the discrepancy when findings are applied in sustainability marketing practice.

In the foundational article by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001), a brand community is denoted as “specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (p. 412). The authors carve out three distinct markers which generally characterize such collectives: first, ‘shared consciousness of kind’ classifies the sense of belonging to the brand and to one another (e.g., visible when the legitimacy of members’ identification is questioned or relationships towards opposing brands are disclosed); second, ‘rituals and traditions’ constitute processes in which meaning is produced and transferred within and outside the community (e.g., apparent when the brand’s history is celebrated or common stories or myths are shared); third, ‘moral responsibility’ refers to the sense of obligation to the collective (e.g., manifests in the integration of new members or assistance of existing ones) (ibid.). Despite Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) emphasis on the social and cultural origins, commercial implications did not take long to arrive (Hartleb, 2009). Hence, McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig (2002) continue the new research stream by proposing a customer-centric extension of the original triadic model which seems to be suitable to build a long-term bond with a firm (Wirtz et al., 2013; s. *Fig. 2*).

Fig. 2: Comparison of the triadic & customer-centric brand community model



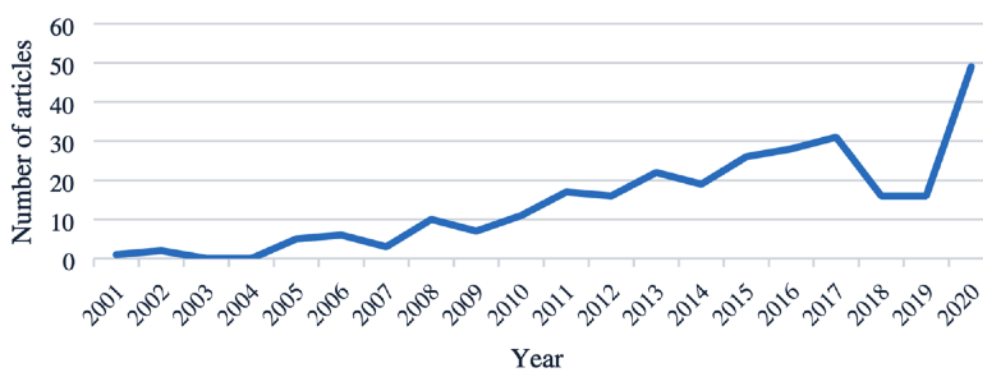
Source: own illustration (based on Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002)

Within the past two decades, scholars showed that brand communities prove useful in increasing intended and actual purchases (Wu, Huang, Zhao, & Hua, 2015; Kumar & Nayak, 2018), adopting new products (Gruner, Homburg, & Lukas, 2014) and forcing innovation via knowledge sharing (Nørskov, Antorini, & Jensen, 2016). Moreover, they foster the spread of positive word-of-mouth, resistance towards negative information (Mousavi, Roper, & Keeling, 2017), brand trust (Akroun & Nagy, 2018) and brand loyalty (Kumar & Kumar, 2020), as well as the acquisition of new customers (Popp & Woratschek, 2017). They can be found offline involving face-to-face interaction and online where members mainly congregate in virtual discussion forums (Bhattacharjee, Pradhan, & Swani, 2021). They may be initiated by consumers themselves or companies in order to encourage consumers' interaction with the brand (Nuttavuthisit, 2019). Reasons to participate in brand communities are manifold. They include cognitive and affect-based variables, such as the perception of derived benefits (Lim & Kumar, 2019; Kumar & Kumar, 2020) and the fulfillment of needs, like enjoyment, self-expression, belongingness, autonomy and caretaking (Baldus, Voorhees, & Calantone, 2015). Social identification exerts remarkable influence on brand community engagement, too (Marzocchi, Morandin, & Bergami, 2013). In addition, other community-related variables, such as informational and emotional support (Zhu, Sun, & Chang, 2016), social cohesion (Lin, Wang, Chang, & Lin, 2019) and communal socialization (Liao, Yang, Wei, & Guo, 2019) affect if an individual chooses to be part of a brand community or not. Thus, brand communities create value for consumers in a functional, social and personal manner (Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009; Hartleb, 2009).

Within a highly involving and directly experienceable environment, brand communities are able to reduce complexity in the decision-making process (e.g., by lowering perceived risk and intensifying trust) and, simultaneously, satisfy basic human needs and wants (e.g., group affiliation, extrinsic recognition, emotional attachment) (Bhattacharjee et al., 2021; Hartleb, 2009). According to the conformity principle, the normalization of behaviors – which is said to be a promising strategy in sustainability marketing – is encouraged as well (Rettie, Burchell, & Riley, 2012). Likewise, perceived consumer effectiveness and control during a consumption situation should be increased. As such, brand communities hold potential to incorporate sustainability deeply, naturally and meaningfully into members' consumption practices (Ottman, Stafford, & Hartman, 2006).

Assessing the state of research, Hellmann (2011) observes that current studies still build upon the nearly uncontested considerations of Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) and McAlexander et al. (2002). Bhattacharjee et al. (2021) find that the scholarship mostly bases its studies on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), uses-and-gratifications theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973) and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). Overall, one has to acknowledge the young history of the field together with its remarkably late upswing. Broken down to the publication trend, it becomes apparent that brand community research only gained traction slowly and particularly blossoms since 2020 (s. Fig. 3). In fact, this could explain why to date there is only a negligible amount of attempts examining brand communities in a sustainability-related context. Nevertheless, they are all favoring the assumptions which have been made so far (Champniss et al., 2016; Svenson, Mäschtig, & Meier, 2018; Svenson, 2018, 2019).

Fig. 3: Year-wise distribution of number of articles on brand communities



Source: Bhattacharjee et al. (2021)

#### 2.1.4 Research gap

So far, the gravitational centers of research in the respective sub-chapters were outlined as well as shortcomings in the literature stock indicated. The particular research gap has yet to be derived. It was argued that recent work on the attitude-behavior gap generally lacks a more holistic view on sustainable consumer behavior. In particular, a paradigm shift, an all-inclusive theoretical framework as well as in-depth qualitative research are needed to complement the current findings (El Haffar et al., 2020). Sustainability marketing could play an integral role in encouraging attitude-behavior congruence (Belz & Peattie, 2012), but is still confined due to the predominant application of the *auxiliary* perspective both in practice and research (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019). In contrast, the *reformative* approach respects the context in which consumers operate in and takes intervening variables into account (ibid.). Through this lens, brand communities are assumed to be an underrated resource for sustainability marketing practice as they draw on many factors responsible for the attitude-behavior gap. Bhattacharjee et al. (2021) advise upcoming research to further examine the “underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions” (p. 3) of brand communities.

Taking these shortcomings into account, this thesis borrows the ‘interpretive’ stance identified by Caruana, Carrington and Chatzidakis (2016). The authors claim that as regards attitude-behavior inconsistencies in the closely related field of ethical consumption another ideological position recently entered the scientific canon (ibid.). Here, the paradigm departs from the consumer as rational decision-maker and understands individuals as “socially-connected beings that establish shared meaning systems and construct complex consumption identities” (ibid., p. 215, as cited in Carrington, Neville, & Canniford, 2012). Of particular interest are influences on the societal reality construction which may translate into different understandings of ‘the same’ concept (Caruana et al., 2016). In order to follow this constructivist school of thought, this thesis relies on the concept of ‘discourse’. This perspective has already been highlighted by Fitchett and Caruana (2015) who argue for an application in marketing and consumer research (s. also Elliott, 1996; Sitz, 2008; De Rezende Pinto & Batinga, 2020). A discourse represents a “specific ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorizations that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices and through

which meaning is given to physical and social realities” (Hajer, 1995, p. 44). Thus, the qualitative analysis of discourses aids to gain insights into different interpretations of, for instance, sustainability (Hugé, Waas, Dahdouh-Guebas, Koedam, & Block, 2013). According to Fitchett and Caruana (2015), this approach also “offer[s] useful descriptions about how the roles, relations and functions of [traditional] marketing in society have been contested, destabilised, integrated and reformed in discourse” (p. 2).

Based on discourse theory (s. chapter 2.2), this study claims there is not one but many consumer realities each of which leading to different consumption decisions. It is further argued that brand communities may encourage attitude-behavior congruence. As the *TFF* community is centered around a company with a sustainable brand core, it is aimed to decipher the discursive rules of reality construction among members and, thus, get to the grounds of their particular grasp of sustainability. Findings may be used in sustainability marketing practice in order to bridge the discrepancy. In accordance with the discourse theoretical perspective, firms might elicit sustainable behaviors by providing consumers with information which they, in turn, again use to construct their lived realities.

## **2.2 Discourse theory**

In the following, the theoretical foundation of this thesis will be laid. On the basis of Foucault’s (1966, 1969, 1971) fundamental considerations, it is first aimed to build an understanding for the discourse theoretical gateway into the analysis of consumer conversation. Afterwards, two more recent continuations of Foucault’s poststructuralist line of thought are introduced, namely Keller’s (2019) *Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (SKAD)* and Jäger and Jäger’s (2007) *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)*. Ultimately, a categorical system which is tailored to the research interest will be deduced.

### **2.2.1 Paul-Michel Foucault as founding father of modern discourse theory**

Discourse theory according to the Frenchman Paul-Michel Foucault, who is considered one of the most important thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is initially based on the philosophical concept of social constructivism (Willig, 2016). More precise, he claims that human thinking takes place in an anonymous, compelling system of thought (Foucault, 2005) whereby all behavior is controlled by a theoretical structure (Foucault,

2001). This system of thought can be traced back to so-called discourses which represent the totality of all effective statements about an object (Foucault, 1988). A statement is further understood as an atom of the discourse (ibid.) and does not mean ‘sentences’ in a grammatical sense, but rather common denominators in terms of content (Jäger, 2019). Within a discourse, objects are formed based on certain rules formulated by the subjects (Foucault, 1988) which means: without discourses there is no constructed reality. In the following, a subject is defined as supra-individual form of human reflection within a discursive context (Diaz-Bone, 2006). Foucault (2012) himself argues that human beings are made subjects due to the logic of the discourse. In this sense, discourses contribute to the production of societal knowledge inventories under the influence of power structures (Wiedemann, 2019). From here on, contributions in the *TFF* forum are understood as carriers of discourses which itself entail knowledge stocks providing community members with thematic frameworks (Jäger, 2019).

In the course of his work, Foucault establishes two core areas – the archeology and genealogy of knowledge (Wiedemann & Lohmeier, 2019). In the *archéologie du savoir* (archeology of knowledge; Foucault, 1969, 1988), the French philosopher devotes himself fundamentally to the discursive practice, that is the laws according to which reality is produced in discourse (ibid.). He describes the four classical discursive formation rules as the *formation of objects* (what is spoken about in which content-related context?), the *formation of enunciative modalities* (who speaks where from which perspective?), the *formation of concepts* (how are objects spoken about?) and the *formation of strategies* (what is the purpose of what is said?) (ibid.). These rules determine the space of what can be thought and said as well as what is considered true and false (Foucault, 2005). Here, the idea of contingency refers to the multiplicity of potential possibilities in the constitution of meaning (Struwe, 2019). Since a discourse cannot be depicted in its totality of all effective statements (Foucault, 1988), this thesis is limited to the reality construction among consumers, or in particular, within the brand community of *Tesla Fahrer & Freunde (TFF)*. In order to open up the space of the think- and sayable as much as possible, the discourse will be flagged out against the background of further perspectives in chapter 4.1.1.

In his second core area, the *généalogie du savoir* (genealogy of knowledge; Foucault, 1966, 1974), Foucault is interested in the reciprocal relationship between knowledge and power which manifests itself in struggles for interpretive sovereignty of legitimacy of knowledge orders (Diaz-Bone, 2017). According to Foucault (1983), power is a complex strategic situation in a society. However, discourses not only develop power themselves, but are also regulated by power structures in so-called truth games (Wiedemann & Lohmeier, 2019). Thus, truths would be produced and disseminated under the predominant control of a few large political and economic apparatuses (Foucault, 1978). Hereafter, Tesla might be understood as such an institution because its own understanding of sustainability is meant to be institutionalized by the *TFF* community. Consequently, it is assumed that the brand community's forum contributions express societal power structures and their constructed realities represent the result of a struggle over legitimate patterns of meaning (Wiedemann, 2019).

Paul-Michel Foucault laid the foundation for discourse theory being particularly interested in what Wiedemann and Lohmeier (2019) call power-knowledge complexes. Nevertheless, he often remains vague in the specifics of investigating discourses which is why several scholars concretized his thought construct after his decease in 1984. In the following, two of the most popular approaches are outlined. Paying respect to the research interest, Keller (2019) especially focuses on the analysis of societal knowledge stocks, while Jäger and Jäger's (2007) perspective highlights the role of power within the discourse.

### **2.2.2 Reiner Keller's Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (SKAD)**

Combining Foucault's initial considerations with Berger and Luckmann's (1966) conceptions of sociology of knowledge, Keller (2019) suggests a slightly different perspective of discourse which emphasizes the processes in the constitution of meaning. His work roots in the general assumption of a knowledge-based society in which expert knowledge, obtainable in various ways, influences all behaviors in everyday life – including individual consumption decisions (ibid.). Keller (2019) also picks up Foucault's notion of economic and political institutions describing them as expert regimes whose protagonists may undertake knowledge-political manipulations on a society's reality

configuration (Foucault, 1978). According to the German sociologist, social collectives produce and subsequently live in discourse universes each of which representing a shared system of meaning grounded in the present knowledge (Keller, 2013a). The constitution of meaning in a discourse works via interpretive schemes for elemental typification of objects (Keller, 2011). In order to be able to participate in the discourse, particular importance is attached to the competence of creating and using *symbols* which Keller (2018) denotes as symbolic interactionism. Therefore, *symbols* and *symbolic orders* may be seen as the result of a discursive constitution of meaning (Keller, 2019). Following Foucault, the SKAD sees discourses as practices of sign usage (Keller, 2010) which are institutionalized by rules and evolve, vanish, are sustained and modified over time (Keller, 2019). Moreover, discourses display themselves in various forms, such as speech, text, discussion, visuals, or symbols (Keller, 2013b). Having introduced Keller's basic understanding of discourse, the SKAD provides a number of conceptualizations which may be helpful for the interpretive analytic investigation (Keller, 2018) of collective reality construction while setting a focus on societal knowledge orders. First up, it is differentiated between *public* and *specialized discourses* – with the latter concerning a rather separated audience (Keller, 2019). Discourses generally compete with each other in social arenas called *discourse fields* (ibid.). In the case of conflicting discourses within a field, there might be discourse coalitions vis-à-vis opposing discourses (ibid.). Secondly, Keller (2012) incorporates the role of the individual by analyzing the *subjects* and their *positions*, i.e., roles, whereby he distinguishes actors and speakers. Considering both are not immune against the constituting nature of the discourse itself (Keller, 2019), actors may take different positions and articulate their own interpretations of meaning which he describes as power to act (Keller, 2012). Occasionally, actors occupy a position within a discourse from which they claim interpretative sovereignty and consolidate dominance. More frequently, they may hold a highlighted position and provide orientation for others, for instance by being discursively constituted as *model subjects* which introduce desirable or undesirable behaviors (ibid.). Thirdly, the realization of actions of any kind within a discourse is referred to as *discursive practice* for which the instructions are entailed in the collective knowledge inventory (Keller, 2019). These practices can either be related to the discourse production, executed within the discourse itself, or disseminate outside the



actual discourse (ibid.). Again, *model practices* (realized by *model subjects*) may frame exemplary actions (ibid.; Keller, 2012). Focusing on the discourse production, so-called *dispositives* provide the materialistic, personal and symbolic resources needed for *discursive practices* (Keller, 2010). Lastly, in the *symbolic orders* of present knowledge in the discourse, recurring patterns in sign usage might appear (Keller, 2019). With *interpretative patterns, classifications, phenomenal structures* and *narrative structures*, the SKAD suggests four schemes to decipher the discursive reality construction in this regard (Keller, 2011, 2013b, 2019).

### **2.2.3 Margarete & Siegfried Jäger's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**

Inspired by Foucault's thoughts, Fairclough's (1995) early elaborations along with Link's (1982, 1983) analytic framework, Jäger and Jäger (2007) introduce a particularly socio-critical and genealogical approach. At the same time, it takes the historic dimension of discourses into account. The CDA highlights and links knowledge, power relations, social identity and social organization whereby it gains an interdisciplinary character (Fairclough, 2013). Here, discourses are not to be understood as mere sum of statements formed abiding by the same rules, but rather as institutionalized and power-exerting social ways of speaking (Jäger, 2019) – comparable to a flow of knowledge or social knowledge stocks through time and space (Jäger, 2001a, 2012). Within a discourse, collective knowledge is continuously negotiated and validated by the participating actors (Jäger & Jäger, 2007). Particular attention is paid to the effects of power which influences the transported knowledge (Jäger, 2019). As power not only originates from what Keller (2019) calls expert regimes but also from the discourse itself due to its inherent rule-system, discourses on the one hand represent societal power structures, but on the other may also cause repercussions beyond and contribute to the restructuring of power relations in a society (Jäger, 2019). Concordant with the constructivist tradition of Foucault, discourses are not an expression of reality, but rather determine reality by producing *subjects* which, in turn, communicate social realities on the basis of discourse-specific guidelines (Jäger & Jäger, 2007). As regards this thesis, it is aimed to decode the subjects' knowledge stocks, and hence their reality configuration, by means of their forum contributions. Jäger (2019) further characterizes *subjects* as actors who are unconsciously

embedded in a respective discourse and operate non-autonomously in an entangled net of discursive relations. They constitute the discourse and simultaneously are constituted by it themselves (ibid.). Similarly to Keller's (2012) understanding, *subjects* may hold different *positions* within the discourse and knowledge stocks are directly linked to actions as long as they are legitimized by the discourse (Jäger, 2001a). Finally, Jäger and Jäger's (2007) comprehension includes two concepts stabilizing a discourse, namely *normalism* and *collective symbolism*. Hereby, the former refers to what is and is not perceived as the standard within the discourse as well as how to reach and sustain this state (Jäger, 2019). The latter is defined as cultural stereotypes that are collectively transmitted and used (Drews, Gerhard, & Link, 1985). Due to their visual logic, such symbols suggest certain *discursive practices* and provide orientation in a society (Jäger, 2019). They might appear in various forms, such as shared images or metaphors in a linguistic sense (ibid.). The CDA draws on six further categories for the examination of a discourse's structure. According to Jäger and Jäger (2007) a discourse can be broken down into different *discourse strands* which are synonymous to thematically unified strings. These strings entail the statements of the discourse and flow on different *discourse levels* depending on the social context from which is spoken (ibid.). Therefore, discourse analysis tries to capture the greatest possible field of sayability, or respectively the totality of statements on different *discourse levels* in the sense of Foucault (2005; s. chapter 4.1.1). Moreover, *discourse fragments* build the elements of a *discourse strand* and, for instance, are represented as different kinds of text corpora dealing with a particular topic. In the case of overlapping *discourse strands* within a *discourse fragment*, Jäger and Jäger (2007) speak of so-called *discourse entanglements*. In addition, *discursive events* decisively influence and change the direction of a discourse (ibid.). As such, the authors assume that such happenings are particularly suitable for the analysis of discourse as the space of the think-and sayable is stirred up (ibid.). Finally, the question about a discourse's structure also involves asking about the *discourse position* which describes the *subject's* articulated perspective or, more accurate, the ideological standpoint of a person participating in the discourse (ibid.; Jäger, 2001b). As such, it goes beyond Keller's (2019) understanding of positioning which rather focuses on a *subject's* role within the discourse.

### 2.3 Synthesis and derivation of the categorical system

In order to get a deeper insight into the reality construction within the brand community, it is necessary to reconstruct the discursive system of rules. The categorical system used for this thesis is fundamentally based on Foucault's (1988) discursive formation rules, but was extended by elements and the terminology of the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (SKAD) according to Keller (2019) as well as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) according to Jäger and Jäger (2007). Moreover, it was adapted to the specific use case as regards the subordinate categories. Basically, the categorical system distinguishes four main dimensions of analysis. The first two of which can be described as text-transcendent as their investigation requires the researcher to look beyond the mere forum contributions. The remaining two dimensions are considered text-immanent. A subordinate research question is assigned to each dimension that itself contains a number of subcategories supporting a focused analysis (s. *Tab. 1*).

First, the *discourse field* (Keller, 2019) entails two layers and is based around the subordinate question of what position the brand community's reality construction occupies in the holistic discourse. On one hand, it asks for the particular *discourse level* (Jäger & Jäger, 2007) on which the *discourse strand* (ibid.) of interest takes place. Therefore, it is focused on the *medium*, its *institutional framework* and its *audience*. On the other, it considers the environment in which the string is entangled. Here, the subcategory *discourse strand on other levels* tries to open the space of the think- and sayable according to Foucault (2005) and forms an overarching interpretative point of reference of this thesis.

Second, the dimension *subjects of discourse* takes a closer look at the protagonists responsible for the discourse production within the forum by asking which self-conception the subjects in the brand community have. This dimension originally traces back to Foucault's (1988) *formation of enunciative modalities* but also incorporates references to SKAD and CDA. In specific, it is interested in the *speakers* (Keller, 2012) themselves, their *position* (ibid.) or role in the community, as well as in further accessible characteristics which are summarized under *profile information*.

Third, *discursive statements* revolve around what Foucault (1988) would have called *formation of objects* and Jäger (2001b) denotes *discourse position*. It raises the question of how the discourse strand is constituted in the brand community's reality configuration. The text-immanent subcategories include the *date* of the contribution, its *main topic* and its *evaluation* which measures the appraisal by the community in form of 'likes'. Within the category *context*, contributions will be examined in terms of potential sub-topics entailed in the statements. *Discourse entanglements* (Jäger & Jäger, 2007) disclose overlapping *discourse strands* in the present *fragment*. By means of *discursive events* (ibid.), it is aimed to capture instances that trigger decisive changes in the discursive formation of statements. This could, for instance, include knowledge-political interventions from external sources.

Fourth, the *discursive practices* entail the strategies of statement justification and link to Foucault's (1988) *formation of concepts* and *formation of strategies*. Under the guidance of the subordinate question which strategies are used in the brand community to justify one's discourse position, this dimension tries to identify patterns in sign usage (Keller, 2010) that are applied for legalization of one's own or delegitimization of others' discursive statements. In this regard, potential *references* to others' contributions, the *length* and *resources* of the individual contribution represent rather formal features. By means of the latter, any evidences supporting the subject's *discourse position* (Jäger, 2001b) such as sources, citations, links, or images are collected. The used *key terms* and *tonality*, i.e., choice of words, record anomalies in a more linguistic sense. With *stabilizing concepts*, it is aimed to extract any words or phrases in relation to the discourse-carrying notions of *normalism* and *collective symbolism* (Jäger & Jäger, 2007; Jäger, 2019). In addition, the subcategory *stylistic devices* is to be understood as 'reservoir' for the analysis. These could include spins, contrasts, analogies, as well as similar rhetorical figures (Fairhurst, 2011). As it is common practice in qualitative research, the categorical system leaves room for potential extension by inductively derived subcategories if the analysis suggests to do so.

Tab. 1: Categorical system for decoding the discursive rule-system

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Subordinate category</b>	<b>Findings</b>
<b>Discourse field</b>	<i>What position does the brand community's reality construction occupy in the discourse?</i>	
	Medium	s. chapter 4.1.1
	Institutional framework	
	Audience	
	Discourse strand on other levels	
<b>Subjects of discourse</b>	<i>Which self-conception do the subjects in the brand community have?</i>	
	Speaker	
	Position	
	Profile information	
<b>Discursive statements</b>	<i>How is the discourse strand constituted in the brand community's reality construction?</i>	
	Date	
	Main topic	
	Evaluation	
	Context	
	Discourse entanglements	
	Discursive events	
<b>Discursive practices</b>	<i>Which strategies are used in the brand community to legitimize one's discourse position?</i>	
	Reference	
	Length	
	Resources	
	Key terms	
	Tonality	
	Stabilizing concepts	
	Stylistic devices	

Source: own table (based on Foucault, 1988; Jäger & Jäger, 2007; Keller, 2019)

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Qualitative category-guided discourse analysis

The present thesis draws from discourse theory in order to explore the “underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions” (Bhattacharjee et al., 2021, p. 3) as regards the *TFF* community’s understanding of sustainability. This theoretical framework essentially goes hand in hand with a qualitative discourse analysis by which it is aimed to decipher the discursive rules of reality construction.

Qualitative consumer and marketing research looks back on a tradition of contestations from the quantitative camp which mainly criticizes the lack of representativeness, i.e., the impossibility to draw statistical inferences, and potential researcher biases leading to forfeits in validity and reliability (Nuttavuthisit, 2019). Detailed insights into consumers’ behaviors and experiences are still needed as consumption contexts are subject to continuous change. Consequently, this school of thought recently finds more and more appreciation (ibid.). Generally speaking, non-standardized methods do not try to verify assumed relationships, but rather aim to observe and interpret new phenomena in order to understand them (Kühn & Koschel, 2022). Qualitative consumer and marketing research takes an explorative stance that roots in distinct philosophical assumptions that build the foundation of the pursued interpretive paradigm (Nuttavuthisit, 2019): ontologically, it considers the nature of reality to be manifold depending on the respective perception (Berger & Luckmann, 1966); axiologically, it favors rich understanding over exact prediction of behavior (Rubinstein, 1981); epistemologically, it aims to generate context-dependent and phenomenological insights (Geertz, 1973). As such, the qualitative approach offers a lens that “can help illustrate socially constructed meanings and experiences from individuals’ perspectives and provide a holistic view of the situation” (Nuttavuthisit, 2019, p. 2).

Discourse analysis depicts a particularly subjectivist (Morgan & Smircich, 1980) and process-oriented (Giesler & Thompson, 2016) qualitative methodology that is often overlooked as a gateway to understand the antecedents of behavioral responses. Even though it enjoys wider application in other disciplines, academic work in consumer and

marketing research yet made comparatively little use of the discourse-based research design. According to Fitchett and Caruana (2015), this can be traced back to traditional marketing ideology rejecting to accept the social constructivist ontology and generally underestimating the power of language. An early but enduring focus on the analysis of advertising messages may have also posed a barrier to a broader utilization of discourse-based approaches in other contexts (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, Thompson (2004) highlights marketing and consumer researchers' dependence on shared discourses as they form, order, spread and strengthen societal knowledge. Moreover, he creates awareness for the potential to "infuse products with culturally powerful knowledge and meaning" (Fitchett & Caruana, 2015, p. 1, as cited in Thompson, 2004). Besides his pioneering role in providing a more general view on what discourse analyses are capable of in these fields, several other voices repeatedly argue in favor of the methodology (e.g., Elliott, 1996; Sitz, 2008; Fitchett & Caruana, 2015; De Rezende Pinto & Batinga, 2020).

Discourse analysis basically borrows features from the qualitative research traditions of hermeneutics (i.e., philosophy of interpretation and comprehension) and semiotics (i.e., philosophy of sign systems), but actually reaches beyond these perspectives (Elliott, 1996; Sitz, 2008). In fact, this approach is interested in how language builds and transports different kinds of realities based on the assumption that the particular use of semantic units constitutes a variety of meanings in peoples' experiences of the world (Willig, 2013). This makes it not only suitable for the general investigation of spoken and written statements (Foucault, 1988), it further builds a bridge between language and societal structures (Fraas & Pentzold, 2016) or as Fairclough and Wodak (1997) put it: "discourse is not produced without context and cannot be understood without taking context into consideration" (p. 277). Against this background, discourse analysis aims to disentangle the multiplicity of discursive statements (Jäger, 2019) in order to enable an unmasking view of the regularities in the process of sense making through conversation (Keller, 2019). The thesis's unit of analysis are therefore considered words (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). In contrast to traditional content analyses, this openness allows structures and strategies of texts to be described and conceptualized on the one hand (Wiedemann, 2019) and interpreted against the background of prevailing orders of knowledge and power on the other (Wiedemann & Lohmeier, 2019).

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Since the analysis of discourses is considered more of a methodological position than a step-by-step manual (Diaz-Bone, 2006; Willig, 2013), its informative value strongly depends upon the systematization of the process (Keller, 2019). In contrast to the purely inductive nature of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), this study relies on a previously deduced categorical framework which shall guide the analysis of the discourse fragments. As discourse analyses rate as more labor-intensive and time-consuming compared to other methodologies (Kajetzke, 2008), this concurrently frees up the researcher's capacity and streamlines the analysis since he does not have to keep in mind several abstract questions parallel to investigating the material line-by-line (Willig, 2013). Through anchoring a profound theoretical foundation from social psychology (Elliott, 1996) in the system of categories upfront, the entire research process gains transparency and systematics making the results interdisciplinary comprehensible and generalizable within the respective context (Maxwell & Chmiel, 2013; Wiedemann, 2018). The correct translation of the theory into the categorical system may be considered the most decisive point prior to the analysis as otherwise research quality cannot be assured (Fraas & Pentzold, 2016). Finally, the meaningfulness of results is often confined due to conceptual confusion regarding the term 'discourse' among disciplines and in the general public beforehand (Classen, 2008).

Having the the concept of discourse extensively characterized, this thesis tries to reveal the potential of the discourse-theoretical framework and aims to enrich the scientific canon in consumer research by another insightful and flexible way to examine consumer behavior. The discourse-analytic approach was ultimately chosen since only by means of reconstructing the discursive rule set responsible for the brand community's understanding of sustainability it is possible to enlighten the power-knowledge complexes expressed in the forum contributions. As indicated before, results could be integrated in future sustainability marketing practice and, hence, contribute to the promotion of sustainable consumer behavior in order to comply with the regulatory framework set up by the EU.



### 3.2 Data collection: period and material of investigation

Kajetzke (2008) states that the relation between initial research interest and chosen discourse strand, i.e., the venue of the dispute over legitimate patterns of meaning, has to be made clear in order to ensure interdisciplinary comprehensibility. Reasons that led to the selection of the automotive industry, the European market, Tesla and consequently *Tesla Fahrer & Freunde* have already been outlined in chapter 1. The *TFF* community comes with the greatest online forum among German-speaking countries (TFF, 2021a) and therefore is attributed an opinion leading position with high relevance and impact in the discourse. In line with the discourse-theoretical perspective, Vidal, Ares and Jaeger (2018) understand an online forum as “collaborative project [...] [focused] on the joint creation of knowledge” (p. 129). At this point, specifics on the *TFF* forum are nevertheless displaced to the results section since its examination is part of the analysis of the *discourse field* (s. chapter 4.1).

The collected data generally depends on the respective dimension of analysis. All relevant information for the text-transcendent categories *medium*, *institutional framework* and *audience* was gathered from the *TFF* website itself, whereas the examination of the *discourse strand on other levels* required to look beyond the forum and search the internet for other perspectives towards the Gigafactory discourse (s. chapter 4.1.1). As regards the two text-immanent dimensions, the discourse analysis studied a distinct venue within the forum where brand community members exchanged their views on the discourse strand. The following paragraph will expand on the decisions regarding the selected time and place of the discussion in more detail. The dimension *subjects of the discourse* marks an in-between case as its evaluation arises from the analyzed venue, but still refers to text-transcendent ‘user profile’ subpages within the online forum.

Having reviewed the chronology of events in the course of the factory’s build-up (e.g., Neuerer, 2022, s. chapter 1), it was found that various points of critique evolved and perpetuated in parallel while occasionally blending into each other. An initial distanced observation carried out in netnographic fashion within the forum (Kozinets, Dolbec, & Earley, 2013) disclosed the mere amount of forum contributions and threads covering the Gigafactory discourse. Thus, it was required to differentiate a delimited but uniform thematic string in which brand community members discussed the project’s sustainability.

The 45-minute TV episode of Frontal21 (Esser & Heise, 2021) – airing on March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021, at 9 p.m. on ZDF and Youtube<sup>3</sup> – can be considered a discursive event which stirs up the field of sayability and has decisive influence on the further discourse structure (Foucault, 2005; Jäger & Jäger, 2007). About one year in the construction of Tesla's Gigafactory Berlin-Brandenburg, the report entails journalistically edited and focused accusations on the project subsuming all major points of criticism heretofore (Esser & Heise, 2021; s. chapter 4.1.1). Simultaneously, members of the *TFF* community created a new thread<sup>4</sup> where the episode's arguments were discussed for the following three weeks, from March 16<sup>th</sup> to April 4<sup>th</sup>, until the channel was closed and the key issues were relocated to and pursued in separate threads (TFF, 2021b). Theoretical saturation suggested to concentrate on the initial place of discussion and neglect the continuations in other channels (Rapley, 2013). It was decided against keyword search or other sampling techniques within the thread of interest due to the intertwined and context-bound nature of the forum posts (Vidal et al., 2018). In accordance, 452 contributions by 113 brand community members constitute the study's material as regards the text-immanent dimensions – representing a full investigation of the respective thread (TFF, 2021b). For retrieving the data stock from the forum the browser add-on *Awesome Screenshot* (2022) was used which enables to capture and save an entire webpage in a portable document format (PDF). The file was further processed via the application *PDFify* (2022) in order to allow for optical character recognition (OCR) which facilitated the subsequent evaluation. The material needed for the analysis of *discourse field* and *subjects of the discourse*, i.e., of 60 subpages of the forum, underwent the same procedures prior to the analysis.

By relying on secondary data that is for the most part already situated within the online forum, the spontaneity and flexibility coming with the researcher's active involvement in other collection techniques (e.g., interviews, focus groups, participatory ethno- or netnographies) was sacrificed (Kühn & Koschel, 2022). However, it is not only regarded time- and labor-saving (no need to develop an interview guideline as well as to transcribe

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<sup>3</sup> Link to Frontal21 report: <https://www.zdf.de/politik/frontal/dokumentation-turbo-tempo-tesla-elon-musk-in-brandenburg-english-100.html#xtor=CS3-162> (Esser & Heise, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Link to thread: <https://tff-forum.de/t/turbo-tempo-tesla-im-zdf-tesla-in-brandenburg/106457> (TFF, 2021b).

the material), but also as quality-enhancing advantage in the specific context as the gathered data is not prone to social desirability effects, self-report limitations or other related biases induced by the scientist's presence or an artificial research setting (Vidal et al., 2018, as cited in Köster, 2003, 2009).

### **3.3 Data analysis: procedure of investigation**

According to Mayring (2020), qualitative analysis aims to gain insights of an individual's subjectively perceived reality via the interpretative processing of textual material. Foucault (1988) himself rather provides a general perspective than a stringent formula by means of which it is possible to disentangle the discursive net (Keller, 2019; Jäger, 2019). In order to reveal the discourse's structure and, hence, make it analyzable, Keller (2019) and Jäger and Jäger (2007) introduce a number of conceptions which have already been incorporated in the system of categories. Again, the analysis differs with regard to the respective dimension. Since the *discourse field* represents a contextual dimension which findings apply to the whole data corp, the information relevant for the subordinate categories was not examined for peculiarities but rather accumulated in the results section. Acknowledging limitations in time and space, this thesis adopted Jäger's (2019) suggestion to further differentiate detail and structure analyses. While the former draws from the categorical system presented in chapter 2.3, the latter required the framework to be shortened without limiting its explanatory power too much (s. *Tab. 2*). Structure analysis aims to identify statements and their recurrence by focusing on general content and formal aspects of texts (Jäger, 2019). Once typical discourse fragments are found, these are subject to the detail analysis in which the in-depth structure of the statements is under investigation (*ibid.*). Ultimately, both flow into the overall analysis where findings are reflected and solidified to a condensed result proposition (*ibid.*). The differentiation not only helps to filter out rather meaningless postings with regard to the research question, but is also supported by the concept of centrality (Trappmann, Hummell, & Sodeur, 2011) according to which the importance of statements increases the more prominent they appear within the discourse. Two criteria justified a structure analysis: low visibility of the subject in the thread and below-average popularity of discursive statements among the community.

Tab. 2: Categorical system for decoding the discursive rule-system (structure analysis)

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Subordinate category</b>	<b>Findings</b>
<b>Subjects of discourse</b>	<i>Which self-conception do the subjects in the brand community have?</i>	
	Speaker	
	Position	
<b>Discursive statements</b>	<i>How is the discourse strand constituted in the brand community's reality construction?</i>	
	Date	
	Main Topic	
	Evaluation	
<b>Discursive practices</b>	<i>Which strategies are used in the brand community to legitimize one's discourse position?</i>	
	Reference	
	Length	
	Resources	

Source: own table (based on Foucault, 1988; Jäger & Jäger, 2007; Keller, 2019)

Like common practice in studies based on the interpretative paradigm, this thesis also relied on a successive and sequence-analytic investigation (cf. close reading) meaning that the data was examined line-by-line (Keller, 2019). It was intentionally opted against automated text-analysis or text-mining algorithms known from social media research (Vidal et al., 2018) as it would jeopardize the profound findings evolving from the discourse-analytic approach. For the examination of the text-immanent dimensions the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software *ATLAS.ti* (2022) was used. The pre-defined set of categories was initially replicated as coding tree within the program (s. appendix 1). On one hand, this study follows Kajetzke (2008) who suggests the use of qualitative coding in discourse analyses to analyze the large body of material in an organized, transparent and integrated fashion and, in turn, enhance research quality by systematizing the procedure (s. also Nuttavuthisit, 2019; Kühn & Koschel, 2022). On the other, it departs from earlier discourse analyses in not pursuing the purely inductive coding according to grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), but relying on a theoretically deduced categorical framework instead. Coding generally involves labeling and ordering unstructured chunks of data to identify emerging patterns or themes as well as their relations (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2018). Based on Saldaña's (2013) dyadic distinction, both detail and structure analyses required two separate cycles of coding each:

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first cycle coding was performed deductively based on the priorly derived system of categories; the second cycles involved inductive coding in order to classify similarities within each category and summarize them with higher order concepts drawing from descriptive, in vivo and process coding techniques (Miles et al., 2018).

In specific, the subsequent analysis of the forum thread of interest proceeded as follows: at the outset, all 452 contributions underwent structure analysis. Every post was coded according to the eight subcategories of the reduced categorical system. Typical discourse fragments were determined by reviewing and evaluating the coded material in light of the two criteria mentioned before. While searching for general themes, new codes were assigned in a second round of coding. At this point, undefinable contributions that lack subject-related content were filtered out as they are considered irrelevant to answering the research question. In total, 26 subjects and 126 forum contributions qualified for further examination. Next, detail analysis was performed whereby the codes of the remaining subcategories of the original categorical system were again allocated in deductive fashion. As regards the subcategory *profile information*, it was referred to the related subpages within the forum. Another cycle of inductive coding then aimed to conceptualize emerging patterns in the deep structure of the *discursive statements* and *practices* as well as regards the *subjects*.

Qualitative analysis always requires the subjective reconstruction of meaning from the collected data via what Kühn and Koschel (2022) call the art of sense-making or interpretation. In order to attain high-quality findings it was aimed to control this iterative process by actively reflecting the researcher's own subjectivity in the course of evaluation, substantiating the results on the basis of the available material and making transparent when the analysis reaches beyond the descriptive level (ibid.).

## 4. Results

The findings of the analysis's main dimensions *discourse field*, *subjects of the discourse*, *discursive statements* and *discursive practices* will now be presented one after the other, thus answering one sub-question each. The first dimension and particularly chapter 4.1.1 provide an overarching reference point for the other categories. In the following, every section comprises one result thesis upfront which is then argumentatively supported on the basis of the central findings.

### 4.1 Discourse field

Despite its size the *Tesla Fahrer & Freunde* community depicts a rather reclusive entity in the holistic discourse. Reality construction mainly takes place in an online environment which encourages the exchange among like-minded. Outside events also offer the possibility to educate the general public about the company and electro mobility. However, the *TFF* community's behavior is also subject to confines that enable Tesla to regulate the construction of realities. On that basis, it may be argued that Tesla itself uses the *TFF* community as marketing instrument in order to enforce its own sustainability agenda. With regard to the discourse strand, the overall field of sayability includes an environmental, economic and social grasp of sustainability.

This dimension was interested in the position of the brand community's reality construction within the discourse. In particular, the venue of discussion is a delimited channel of their associated online forum. The *medium* itself is ascribed a decisive influence on the consumer conversation and, hence, the discourse's structure. Compared to face-to-face communication it entails a different logic. The *TFF* forum most generally classifies as social medium. It enables individuals to create and share user-generated content anytime from anywhere facilitating social aggregation of people while conserving an authentic atmosphere (Nuttavuthisit, 2019). Users spread own ideas or comment on others' contributions, use emojis to express how they feel and underscore their argumentation by supporting material (ibid.). The *TFF* forum was initiated in 2011 and led to the idea to establish a registered non-profit club, the *Tesla Fahrer & Freunde e.V.*,

in 2014 (TFF, 2022a). It is regarded the greatest German-speaking Tesla community counting approximately 47,500 users and overall three million posts in around 68,000 threads to date (TFF, 2022b). Members are enabled to open up own threads in which they discuss up-to-date occurrences, monitor ongoing developments, plan brandfests or just ask questions on product usage or e-mobility in general (TFF, 2022c). Forum contributions appear in chronological order, may be edited after posting and evaluated by fellows with ‘hearts’ (ibid.). The platform further functions as marketplace for Tesla cars and related services as well as it comprises a closed sphere only accessible for people actually owning a Tesla (ibid.). With regard to the Gigafactory Berlin-Brandenburg, a multiplicity of public threads was found (s. *Tab. 3*).

*Tab. 3:* Threads related to Gigafactory Berlin-Brandenburg in the *TFF* forum

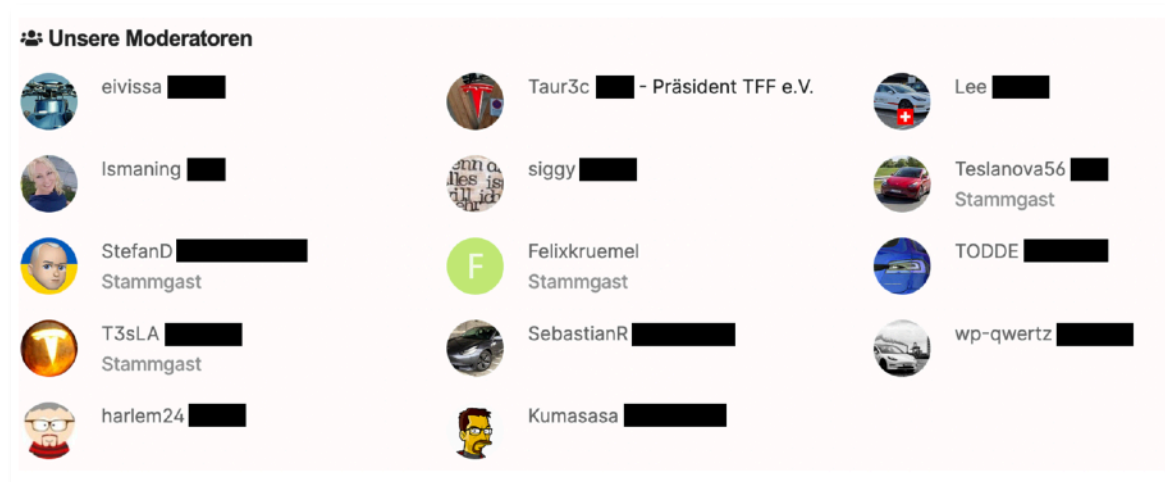
No.	Title	Date	Posts
1	<u>GF 4 – Giga Berlin bis 12.02.2021</u>	19.06.18 - 12.02.21	7,022
2	<u>Model Y aus der GF 4 (Giga Berlin)</u>	23.07.20 - 15.07.22	611
3	<u>Tesla – Willkommen in Deutschland – Sternfahrt zur Eröffnung der Giga Berlin</u>	04.09.20 - 04.03.22	482
4	<u>GF 4 – Zellenproduktion</u>	15.01.21 - to date	269
5	<u>GF 4 – Giga Berlin-Brandenburg (Baufortschritt)</u>	12.02.21 - to date	3,529
6	<u>'Turbo, Tempo, Tesla' im ZDF: TESLA in Brandenburg</u>	16.03.21 - 04.04.21	452
7	<u>GF 4 – Wasserbedarf</u>	05.04.21 - to date	778
8	<u>GF 4 – Genehmigungsverfahren</u>	17.04.21 - to date	1,545
9	<u>GF 4 – Baufortschritt in der Kritik</u>	29.08.21 - 05.09.21	33
10	<u>Metadiskussion zum GF 4-Genehmigungsverfahren, der Bürokratie und dem ganzen Rest</u>	11.02.22 - 08.09.22	15
11	<u>GF 4 – BB -&gt; Diskussion, Fragen und Antworten zur Produktion</u>	20.03.22 - to date	172

Source: own table (based on TFF, 2022c)

Alone due to its mere dimension, the community is surrounded by an *institutional framework* streamlining its behavior. It can be differentiated between boundaries within and beyond the online forum. Starting with the former, community members are conditionally permitted to participate in the forum only if they consent the binding terms of use (TFF, 2022d). Here, one can also find the note that the community is not only expected but required to follow the ‘netiquette’ for a civilized and open discussion culture

(ibid.; TFF, 2022e). In order to assure this the *TFF* forum is based on a user trust system which automatically assigns different rights according to the four respective trust levels (candidate, member, regular, leader; for detailed description of each set of rights see Atwood, 2018). In addition, *Tesla Fahrer & Freunde* representatives choose a number of moderators who structure the discourse by deciding whether a post is admissible or not on a single-case basis (TFF, 2022d; s. Fig. 4).

Fig. 4: List of moderators in the *TFF* forum



Source: TFF (2022b) (actual names were censored unless part of the public user name)

Besides the forum's inherent framework, there are some external factors that influence the discourse creation within the community, too. With Tesla's growing popularity – especially after introducing the Model S in 2012 – the absolute number of global fans and fan clubs increased. This did not remain unnoticed by the car manufacturer that saw the opportunity for collaborative efforts. In 2016, they introduced the 'Tesla Owners Club' program in which brand communities could get officially accredited and licensed to use the brand's name (Haudenschild, 2021). To date, there are more than 150 owners clubs all over the world (ibid.). Tesla (2022c) itself states on its website:

“The Tesla Owner Club is a community of owners and enthusiasts committed to advancing Tesla's mission to accelerate the world's transition to sustainable energy. Club members help advocate for Tesla by supporting legislative efforts, offering test-drives, volunteering at shows, educating new and prospective owners, hosting social events and passionately referring friends and family to explore Tesla ownership for themselves.”



Tesla is able to control the compliance with an agreed-upon set of rules in quarterly video calls and irregular physical meetings with board members of the owners clubs (Haudenschild, 2021). A company contact is situated in Tesla's headquarter in Palo Alto, California, and directly reports to Elon Musk (ibid.). Gruner et al. (2014) suggest three archetypes of firm-hosted online brand communities (OBC). According to the present level of influence, the *TFF* community classifies as "discerning OBC" (ibid., p.33) as community access and activity control are moderate, but host integration and member engagement is rather high. The authors further confirm that this archetype is able to predict new product success (ibid.). However, some criticize that Tesla requires its owners clubs to engage in lobbying for the firm if requested (Ayre, 2016).

The *audience* of the brand community's contributions is twofold. On one hand, it comprises the members itself, on the other, the public beyond *Tesla Fahrer & Freunde*. Findings from an analysis of a US insurance comparison service reveal that Tesla drivers are mostly male (83 percent), young (70 percent  $\leq$  34 years), highly educated with a technological focus (a third hold a master's degree or Ph.D.) and earn an above-average income (avg. 85,000 \$; a third with own property) (Jerry, 2022). Most commonly, they are occupied as engineers, software engineers or operational managers (ibid.). *TFF* members engage in a series of events, such as yearly general assemblies, communal car trips, driving trainings, drive-in cinema evenings, Tesla light shows (TFF, 2022f) or even gatherings at the Gigafactory construction site to congratulate Elon Musk for his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday (Teslamag, 2021; s. Fig. 5).

Fig. 5: European Tesla owners congratulating Elon Musk



Source: © Tobias Lindh (2021)

The main purpose here is to create opportunities for Tesla drivers to connect with like-minded, receive first-hand information or support for particular problems. The events are mainly reserved for Tesla drivers who pay the annual club fee of 100€ (TFF, 2022g), but might also be open for other e-mobility enthusiasts who consider joining the community. As written down in the clubs's statutes (s. appendix 2 § 2), the community aims to make a contribution to shape a sustainable and more environmentally sound world. Therefore, the *TFF* particularly engages in public relations work to educate the society about the advantages of electric mobility (TFF, 2022a). Starting in 2018, the community publishes the *T&Emagazin* in cooperation with the *Tesla Owners Club Helvetia (TOCH)*. The printed magazine appears quarterly with a minimum circulation of 40,000 units and contains practical tips, expert articles and experience reports from the community (T&Emagazin, 2022a). The two owners clubs also offer expert talks, the *T&Etalk* series, which are streamed monthly on Youtube, Twitch or as podcast and functions as education format for people interested in e-mobility and renewable energy (T&Emagazin, 2022b). In addition, the community demonstrates the everyday suitability and performance of electric vehicles by participating in national and international events or organizing meetings and exhibitions directed towards the broader population (TFF, 2022a). Exemplary, the *TFF* was recently present at the renown e-mobility trade fair *e4 TESTIVAL* and offered test drives on the Hockenheimring with Tesla automobiles on October 29<sup>th</sup> in 2022 (TFF, 2022f).

#### **4.1.1 Reality spectrum of the discourse strand**

According to Lim (2015), 'sustainability' is a multilayered concept without a clear-cut definition. Therefore, the upcoming paragraphs serve to approach the discourse strand of interest from a number of different perspectives. Taking into account a spectrum of potential realities in the analysis allows to better assess the brand community's reality construction within the holistic discourse. Thus, the discourse strand is fanned out against the background of three further discourse levels, namely media, economy, and politics.

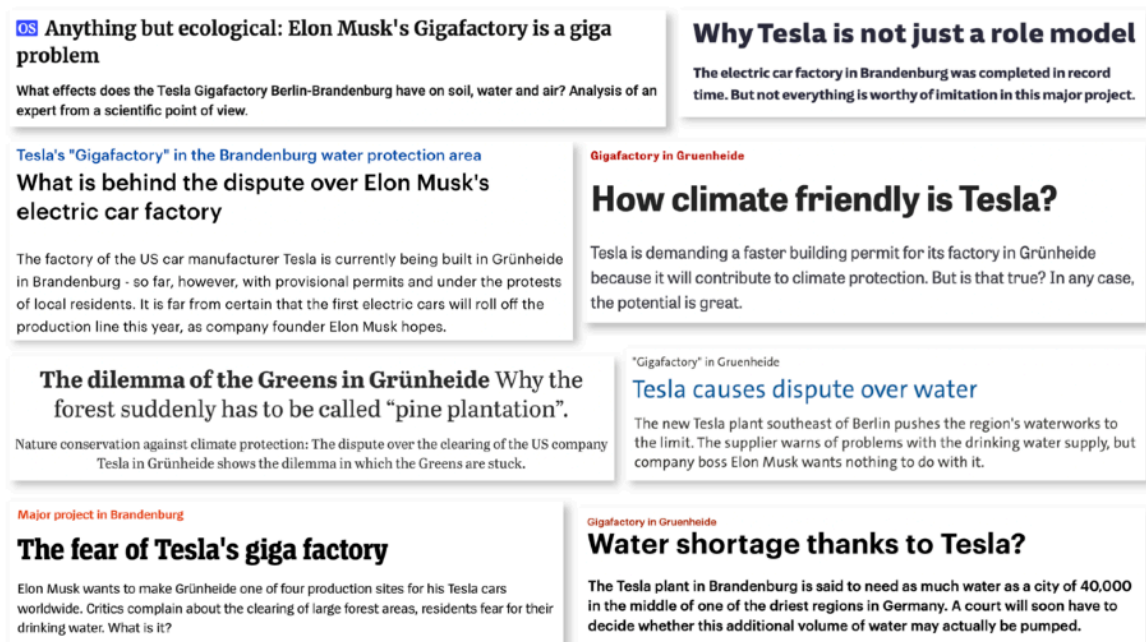
Starting with the media's view, it seems reasonable to first summarize the Frontal21 episode at this point. It is focused on the journalists' voiceovers as the interviewed stakeholders represent views from other discourse levels. These are, inter alia, referred to

in their respective paragraph. In general, Esser and Heise (2021) draw a critical picture of Tesla's Gigafactory in Grünheide, Brandenburg – especially as regards its environmental impact. After a short prologue (s. appendix 3, no. 1-9), the course of events during the siting decision are introduced (ibid., no. 10-27) while the supersized project is contrasted with the image of Grünheide as pristine and “tranquil municipality of 9,000 inhabitants” (ibid., no. 14). This is followed by the major points of criticism in terms of the factory's environmental impact in the area (ibid., no. 28-58). Apart from the deforestations and the potential contamination of groundwater, this mainly involves the plant's water demand and potential water shortages for local residents (ibid.). The journalists then criticize Tesla's dealing with the local authorities during the approval process questioning the independence of those responsible for authorization (ibid., no. 59-78). Exemplary, it is not only referred to Tesla's illegal piling in the groundwater table for which the company obtained an exemption retrospectively, but also to their massive infrastructure demands overstraining local politicians (ibid.). After addressing the subsidies Tesla receives from the state, it is described how the firm fights off all objections regarding the environmental concerns in a multi-day public inquiry (ibid., no. 79-88). The next chapter deals with the working conditions in Tesla's Gigafactories (ibid., no. 89-106). An epilogue closes the report and stresses the political will to bring the gigafactory to Germany (ibid., no. 107-117). All in all, the authors emphasize multiple times that Tesla has not yet been granted an official building permit (ibid., no. 28, 57, 59, 67, 79, 89) but is nevertheless “setting precedence” (ibid., no. 117).

It seems reasonable that it is journalism's obligation to criticize and control the proceedings in other societal areas due to its role as functional subsystem in society (Blöbaum, 2016). This would explain why the general tenor towards the Gigafactory in other public service and quality journalism publications is critical, too. Similarly to Esser and Heise's (2021) report, other media outlets mostly draw the reader's attention to the factory's impact on the environment (s. *Fig. 6*). It is typically referred to the clearances of woodlands, the potential pollution of soil, groundwater and air, the relocation of resident animal species, as well as to the already prevailing desertification in the region (e.g., Wollner, 2022). The statements are often underscored by citations of local residents, the local water association, environmental activists, scientists or other experts (e.g., Richter,

2021; Ismar & Heigl, 2020). In this light, the consequences on the ecological system contradict Tesla's image of a sustainable firm. Exemplary, Schulze (2021) writes in *Zeit Online*: "It's part of Musk's marketing strategy to see himself and his employees as pioneers in the environmental movement. In order to stop climate change, the expansion of e-mobility cannot go fast enough. [...]. Tesla did not answer a question about whether the sustainability of the factory can be proven with numbers". Journalists further emphasize that Tesla itself is downplaying the ecological concerns regarding the Gigafactory Berlin-Brandenburg (e.g., Köppe, 2020). Moreover, many of them argue that those concerned or directly affected would be forced to buckle due to prevailing power asymmetries (e.g., Esser & Heise, 2021). Högler (2022) subsumes in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: "Above all, the citizens and their parliamentarians have too often been sidelined by the company of the richest man on the planet and the government that made his cause possible".

Fig. 6: German media outlets criticizing Gigafactory's environmental impact



Source: [f.l.t.r.] Wollner (2022), Högler (2022), Richter (2021), Schulze (2021), Ismar & Heigl (2020), Brannahl & Djalilevand (2021), Köppe (2020), Richter (2022)

The media's perspective suggests a rather environmental understanding of sustainability. Sustainable actions seek to minimize the negative consequences on the ecological system caused by human behavior. Accordingly, brand community members would be expected to take a critical stance towards the proceedings in Brandenburg, too. Despite being eager for Tesla to produce in Germany, they could even appreciate the ecological concerns voiced by critics as these generally reflect the company's brand core. It is also thinkable that the community searches for solutions in order to enable a project realization that is as climate-friendly as possible.

Approaching the discourse strand from an economic perspective, other arguments could arise. The German automobile industry is traditionally said to be the backbone of the national economy (BMWK, 2022). Up until recently, German firms have been the forerunners in terms of innovation and disruptive technologies in the automotive sector (Creutzburg, 2018). But local car makers fall back to companies like Tesla when it comes to new forms of propulsion (Zwick, 2021). Consequently, a production plant of the market leader in e-mobility near Berlin allows for two different conclusions. On one hand, this could negatively affect the national economy as the domestic industry is further weakened and loses market share to an international competitor that plans to produce half a million cars per year in the first expansion stage (Barnsdorf, 2022a). On the other, it seems reasonable that the positive externalities of Tesla's Gigafactory predominate. These imply, for example, a series of third-party investments in the region associated with Tesla's settlement leading to general industrial growth (Kersting, Neuerer, Specht, 2022). The local industry could further benefit from Tesla's planned battery factory which is already subsidized with around a billion euros (Metzner, 2021). Knowledge diffusion suggests that domestic car makers are encouraged to learn from the new market entrance and adapt their business models. Brandenburg's Minister of Economic Affairs Jörg Steinbach states: "Germany's economy is in a sort of slumber mode, because it doesn't believe things can happen this fast. It's in for a rude awakening once the plant has been completed" (s. appendix 3, no. 64). Former Federal Minister of Economic Affairs Peter Altmaier reinforces: "If the plant doesn't come, it would be damaging for Germany as a whole" (Neuerer, 2022). In fact, the economic impact of Tesla's project reaches beyond national borders influencing the world economy, too. With its existing Gigafactories in

the US and China, the company now aims to serve the global market. As e-mobility is already determined to coin future mobility (Bundesregierung, 2022), Tesla anticipates and tries to skim of first-mover profits. In the meantime, it counters environmental concerns by either arguing with the factory's overall positive net effect for the environment (s. Fig. 7) or mitigating the forfeits that have to be made. Exemplary, Musk answers those concerned on water shortages in Brandenburg: "These trees wouldn't be growing if there was no water, you know. I mean, we are not in the desert" (s. appendix 3, no. 52). With regard to the deforestation he refers to the relatively low ecological value of the cleared pine plant (s. Fig. 7).

Fig. 7: Elon Musk mitigating environmental concerns as regards Gigafactory



Source: Twitter (2020)

From an economic standpoint, it can be expected that the brand community structures the discourse according to a rather rational approach to sustainability. Fundamentally, this perspective is grounded in the claim that effective climate action could only be implemented by healthy economies in the first place. As regards the Gigafactory, long-term economic interests outweigh immediate environmental concerns in the overall analysis. In order to justify these, members could aside from mere economic arguments also refer to Tesla's reforestation of mixed woodland (Teslamag, 2020) or the provisional reduction of the factory's water consumption in the first expansion stage (Brien, 2020).

Finally, the discourse strand is outlined considering the political context. Two politicians responsible for economic affairs, namely Steinbach and Altmaier, have already been cited. They hope that the project is realized in Germany in order to sustain the national

economy. There are further political arguments in a rather societal sense. Thus, the Gigafactory in Grünheide creates up to 40,000 new jobs (Kersting & Neuerer, 2021b). This implies infrastructure developments, such as new roads, railway stations, accommodation, schools etc., from which the area would profit as well (s. appendix 3, no. 71, 76). According to local Minister President Dietmar Woidke, this development is particularly needed in Brandenburg as the state is yet regarded “the extended workbench of the West” (Brannahl & Djalilevand, 2021). Chancellor Olaf Scholz sees in the settlement a good signal for formerly East Germany in terms of a united nation (Bundesregierung, 2022). It is argued that politicians act as moderators between economic and societal interests as they are elected by the public and therefore committed to pursue actions in its best interest (Andersen & Wichard, 2021). From this perspective, it should be tried to understand environmental issues, weigh them against the background of other interests and set up the legislative rules for a responsible realization. Moreover, politicians are obliged to secure the society’s basic needs, such as the water supply in the Grünheide region (ibid.). Green Party politician Axel Vogel, who is Brandenburg’s Minister of the Environment (LfU, 2021) and responsible for the authorizing the Gigafactory, highlights that the ecological footprint of the factory would be thoroughly inspected. He assures: “It’s my job to make sure that our people have enough time to conduct the formal permit approval process in the correct way” (s. appendix 3, no. 60). The reportedly bad labour practices within other Gigafactories should also be a concern from this viewpoint as the promotion of fair working conditions is a popular topic during political campaigning (e.g., SPD, 2020).

It remains to be noted that an interpretation of the brand community’s reality construction in a political light suggests a rather socially focused grasp of sustainability. Members would generally appreciate the economic significance of the project. Still, its realization wouldn’t be tolerated at any expenses. They would respect the counterarguments voiced by local residents, environmentalists or former workers and make their judgement dependent on the common interest and welfare.

## 4.2 Subjects of the discourse

Even though the majority of subjects is relatively new to the community, they are nevertheless highly active. *TFF* members split into Tesla owners who already exemplify their brand attachment and people who are not yet driving a Tesla car. Still, both bond due to their common technological bent. By means of the forum's inherent logical system, subjects may earn badges and eventually become opinion leaders. These not only appear as prominent figures in structuring the discourse but are also respected by the community.

In this dimension, it was asked for the brand community's subjects and their self-conception. Structure analysis reveals that the 452 contributions to the discourse were made by 113 *speakers*. However, two posts have been completely moved to other threads in the forum leading to a total of 450 contributions by 112 subjects. Some of the speakers shared their views way more frequently than others. In fact, the 15 most active speakers make up for nearly half of all contributions within the whole thread. The most prominent voices in the discourse are *TheStig* (30 contributions) and *Mathie* (28 contributions).

In terms of the subjects' *position*, it becomes evident why the club is called *Tesla Fahrer & Freunde* (engl.: *Tesla Drivers & Friends*). In sum, 81 members (ca. 70%) of the speakers indicate to be actual Tesla-drivers (which are enabled to access the forum's closed sphere), the remaining 31 members are either interested in the brand and in e-mobility in general or have not specified any further information. Eight members are so-called 'regulars' of which there are only 253 users in the whole community (TFF, 2022h). Still, there seems to be uncertainty among users about when this status – that comes with additional rights (s. appendix 4) – is granted (TFF, 2020). Moreover, five of the overall 14 moderators (*harlem24*, *Lee*, *StefanD*, *T3sLA*, *Teslanova56*) were present in the discussion highlighting the role of the ZDF report as major discursive event stirring up the field of sayability (Foucault, 2005) in the Gigafactory discourse.

Subsequently, detail analysis was conducted on the basis of all subjects that contributed more than five times to the thread. Thus, user *profile information* (s. Fig. 8 for exemplary profile) of the remaining 26 speakers underwent further examination. These main subjects of the discourse stand representative for two thirds of all posts in the respective thread.



Fig. 8: Exemplary TFF member profile (TommyP)

(Picture)

**TommyP** (Speaker)

Tommy, aus der grünen Heide 🌿

Hervorgehobenes Thema [GF 4 - Giga Berlin-Brandenburg \(Baufortschritt\)](#) (Further information: e.g., occupation, referrals)

(Tesla-driver) 📍 [Grünheide \(Nähe GF4\)](#) (Local resident)

MX75D 2016/17, silber, 6-Sitzer, AP3 und bin glücklich 😊  
FW 2022.40.4.1

**Land:** Deutschland (Country)

**Fahrzeug:** Tesla Model X (Car type)

(Entry date) (Regular)

Beigetreten 23. Jan. '18 Letzter Beitrag 3 Minuten Zuletzt gesehen gerade eben Aufrufe 3310 Vertrauensstufe Stammgast

Gruppen [Tesla-Fahrer](#), [TFF-eV ...](#) (Profile impressions)

(Badges)

Zusammenfassung Aktivität **Abzeichen**

**STATISTIKEN** (Statistics)

886 Besuchstage 36 d Lesezeit 3 d aktuelle Lesezeit 5,0 T. betrachtete Themen 149 T. Beiträge gelesen 3,6 T. ❤️ gegeben

**23,5 T.** ❤️ erhalten **47** Themen erstellt **6,6 T.** Beiträge erstellt

(Received hearts) (Created threads) (Created posts)

**TOP-KATEGORIEN** (Top categories)

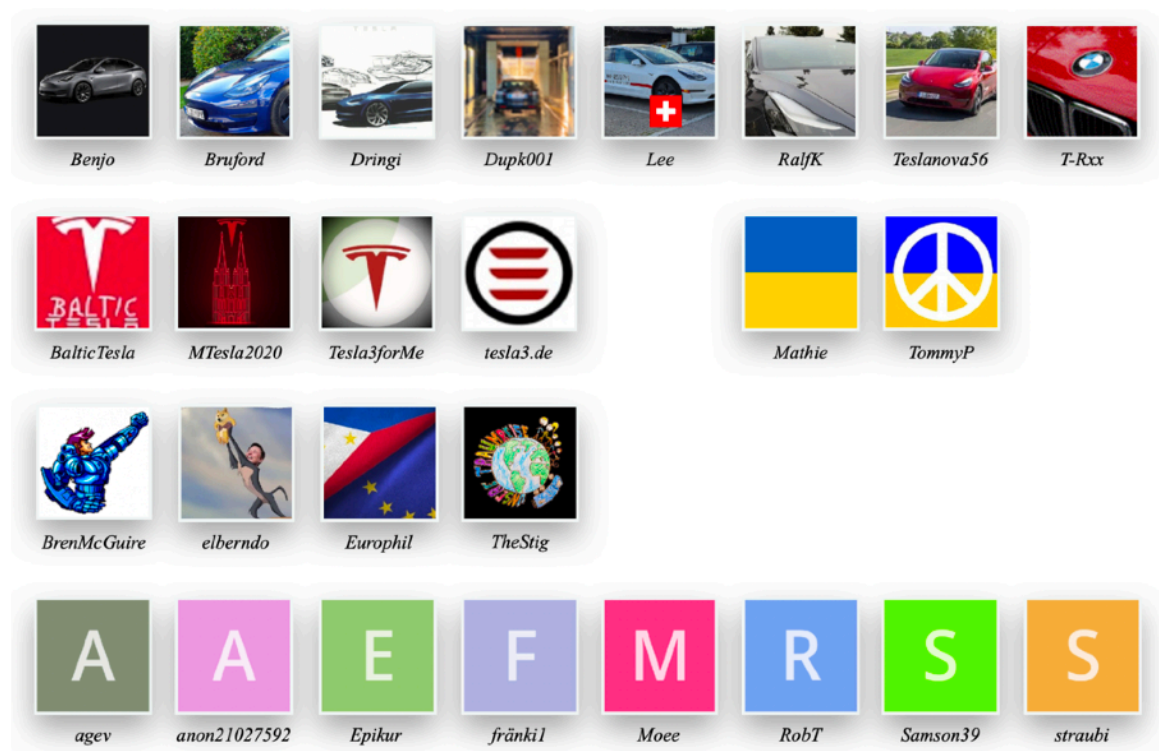
	Themen	Antworten
■ Gigafactory	3	2965
■ Off Topic	7	833
■ Firmware	-	304
■ Unternehmen und Aktie	-	184
■ Tesla Supercharger	1	158
■ Feedback	-	142

Source: TFF (2021b)

First, it is possible to extract some personal information from the profiles. Beginning with the profile picture, it can mainly be differentiated between users with an image of their own or any other Tesla car (*Benjo, Bruford, Dringi, Dupk001, Lee, Teslanova56, RalfK, T-Rxx*), the brand logo or an interpretation of it (*BalticTesla, MTesla2020, tesla3.de,*

*Tesla3forMe*), a political message (*Mathie*, *TommyP*), an unrelated (*BrenMcGuire*, *elberndo*, *Europhil*, *TheStig*) or a standard picture (*agev*, *anon21027592*, *Epikur*, *fränki1*, *Moe*, *RobT*, *Samson39*, *straubi*) (s. Fig. 9). This trend also proves true considering the images of the other speakers in the thread. *TFF* members definitely feel a strong emotional bond towards their cars as well as to the company. Some users even personalize the same by painting it in a custom design (*Lee*) or designating it a name (*Lee*, *Teslanova56*). It might also be argued that having one's car or the Tesla logo as profile picture expresses an own identification with the automobile or the brand.

Fig. 9: Profile pictures of the thread's main speakers



Source: TFF (2021b)

Some users optionally specify further information – such as their job or an affiliate link – staged at the top of their profile. Occupational information is mostly consistent with Jerry's (2022) analysis. Exemplary, members are or were employed as IT specialist (*T-Rxx*), IT consultant (*Benjo*), sales manager for a technical key account (*Bruford*), but also as managing director of a tax consultancy (*BalticTesla*). By means of referral codes it is aimed to get other users to make a conversion following the shared link. They may be

understood as word-of-mouth marketing. It is mostly linked to Tesla's own referral program (*BalticTesla*, *MTesla2020*, *tesla3.de*, *agev*, *BrenMcGuire*, *elberndo*, *RalfK*, *T-Rxx*). After a transaction is made via another's referral code, both users receive free charging loads for up to 1,500 km range. Besides, it is also referred to other services such as automobile insurance (*Teslanova56*). In terms of their country of residence, the speakers in the discourse indicate to be predominantly based in Germany. Members like *Europhil* (Luxembourg, Italy, Philippines) or *Lee* (Switzerland) depict rare exceptions. Considering Tesla's relatively small production range of only four different car types (Models S, 3, X, and Y), it is surprising that the Model Y is by far the least driven in the community even though it is the only type to be produced in Grünheide. In fact, most users indicate to drive the Model 3.

Secondly, forum-specific information and details on the members' general behavior on the platform is stated in the user profiles as well. It becomes visible that the majority joined the forum when the first considerations about a German Gigafactory started to evolve. Apart from some early members, the main entries happened to be in the summer months of 2019 – as Woidke officially advertised the Grünheide as potential production site – as well as over the course of 2020 during the building stage of the Gigafactory. Generally, it seems that members' profile impressions (i.e., quantity of profile visits by fellows) do not relate to their membership duration but rather to their position. In this regard, particularly the user *Teslanova56* sticks out as its profile exhibits way more impressions (12,787) than any other user in the thread, any other moderator in the forum and, in fact, even more than the club's president (4,879). Further investigations revealed that *Teslanova56* is not only part of the club's executive board but also the publisher of the *T&Emagazin* (T&Emagazin, 2022c). The profiles also entail further statistics on members' behavior in the forum. Hereby, it was focused on the overall creation of threads and posts as well as on the received hearts as these measures best reflect members' general participation and popularity beyond the thread of interest. In terms of overall participation, particularly the users *Mathie* (creation of 125 threads & ca. 13,400 posts), *Teslanova56* (77 threads & ca. 12,800 posts), *Dringi* (93 threads & ca. 7,300 posts), *TommyP* (47 threads & ca. 6,600 posts), and *tesla3.de* (54 threads & ca. 6,400 posts) stand out. Apart from these very active members, the user *elberndo* shows a remarkably

low participation (creation of 5 threads & 637 posts) considering he entered the forum in September 2015. As regards the reception of hearts, *Teslanova56* (ca. 30,400 hearts), *TommyP* (ca. 23,500 hearts), *Mathie* (ca. 10,700 hearts) , and *BalticTesla* (ca. 9,900 hearts) seem to be rather popular users as there is a greater cap to the other subjects. Next, the threads in the categories “Off-topic”, “E-mobility”, “Other EVs”, “Firmware”, “Company & Shares”, “Tesla Supercharger”, and “Gigafactory” attract the most attention throughout the main speakers. Concordant with the Model 3 being the dominant car type among *TFF* members, the categories “Model 3 Orders”, “Model 3 General”, and “Model 3 Charge/Range” depict the most popular topics related to a specific car type. Worth to note is the exceptional amount *TommyP* contributes in other Gigafactory-related threads (2,965 answers). His profile discloses that he actually is a local resident living in Grünheide who monitors the construction progress on site (s. *Fig. 8*). Lastly, detail analysis uncovered that *TheStig* got blocked – according to the profile upon an own request.

During the qualitative analysis another interesting field opened up. As the user profiles entail detailed information about members’ previous achievements in the forum – awarded as so-called ‘badges’ – it was decided for an additional inductively derived subcategory. Thus, the main speakers’ *profile badges* underwent further examination (s. appendix 4 for summary of badge descriptions). Badges in the *TFF* forum basically split up in five major categories which are represented by stylized icons of a user, eye, clock, heart, and certificate. Aside from the clock icon (‘Jubilee’ badge; received for every year in which at least one contribution is posted) members are able to receive bronze, silver and golden badges in each category with the latter to be the hardest to achieve. Especially a wide range of bronze certificate badges function as onboarding measure helping new members to learn the forum’s inherent logic. Other badges are assigned for particular online behaviors such as visiting the forum on a number of consecutive days, receiving a certain amount of hearts for a number of contributions, awarding one’s daily contingent of 50 hearts to other’s posts over a particular period, or for creating and sharing popular topics, answers or links. Acknowledging this thesis’s limitations, it is only focused on golden badges (s. *Tab. 4*). However, the distribution of other badges may be found in the *ATLAS.ti* data corp.

Tab. 4: Distribution of golden badges among main speakers

Badge title	Speakers	Quantity
<b>Admirer</b> (eye)	<i>agev, anon21027592, BalticTesla, Benjo, Dringi, elberndo, Epikur, Europhil, Lee, Mathie, RobT, Teslanova56, TommyP</i>	13/26
<b>Admired</b> (heart)	<i>agev, anon21027592, BalticTesla, Benjo, Dringi, Epikur, Europhil, Lee, Mathie, RobT, Teslanova56, TommyP</i>	12/26
<b>Empathic</b> (heart)	<i>agev, anon21027592, BalticTesla, Benjo, BrenMcGuire, Dringi, Dupk001, Europhil, fränki1, Lee, Mathie, RalfK, RobT, tesla3.de, Tesla3forMe, Teslanova56, TommyP, T-Rxx</i>	18/26
<b>Crazy in Love</b> (heart)	<i>Europhil, T-Rxx</i>	2/26
<b>Great Topic</b> (certificate)	<i>anon21027592 (2x), Mathie, Tesla3forMe, Teslanova56 (6x)</i>	4/26
<b>Great Answer</b> (certificate)	<i>agev, anon21027592 (2x), Benjo (3x), Dringi (2x), Epikur (5x), Lee (2x), Mathie (3x), MTesla2020, Teslanova56 (13x), TommyP (8x), T-Rxx</i>	11/26
<b>Famous Link</b> (certificate)	<i>Teslanova56 (12x)</i>	1/26

Source: own table (based on TFF, 2021b)

In sum, half of the main speakers received the ‘Admirer’ badge (365 consecutive forum visits) while nearly each of them (all except for *Dupk001*) got the ‘Supporter’ badge (100 consecutive visits). In addition, 12 members achieved the ‘Admired’ badge ( $\geq 5$  hearts for 300 posts). This is especially impressive for *Epikur* considering he counts 2,000 contributions in total at the time of his profile examination and, hence, even less in March 2021. Moreover, 18 users got the ‘Empathic’ badge (500 hearts received & 1,000 given). Again, the users *fränki1*, *RalfK* and *T-Rxx* stick out due to their low count on total contributions. Empiric observation suggests that hearts are not overused in the forum in general. *Europhil* and *T-Rxx* are the only main speakers having used their daily contingent of hearts for 20 consecutive days resulting in the ‘Crazy in Love’ badge. In contrast to the other categories, golden certificates may be achieved multiple times. Four users managed to create a thread with 50 or more hearts and, thus, got the the ‘Great topic’ badge. Among them, *Tesla3forMe* who was awarded having created only three threads in total. Besides, eleven members created an answer with 50 or more hearts earning the ‘Great Answer’ badge. *Teslanova56* is the only main speaker which was given the badge ‘Famous Link’ for sharing a link with 1,000 clicks. In fact, he received it 12 times already which may be linked to his roles as club executive and publisher of the *T&Emagazin*.

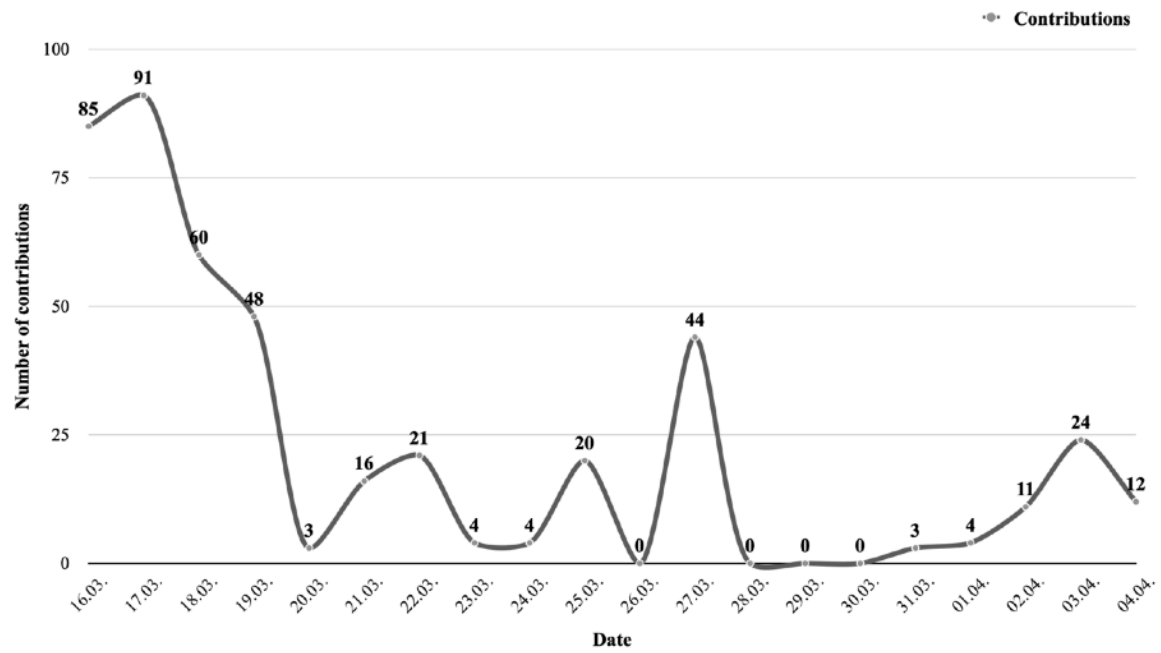
### 4.3 Discursive statements

*TFF* members formulate a wide array of media critical contributions as an immediate response to the voiced accusations. In the ongoing discussions, the brand community turns to a more general societal critique in which the origins of its sustainability understanding manifest. Members particularly mourn the present inertia and inefficiency in Germany and fear a deterioration of national economic power. Hereto, Tesla and Elon Musk represent the antitheses as they take the initiative and operate fast. The community regards environmental sustainability as key in order to ensure future prosperity. To this end, long-term goals justify short-term forfeits. Steady reoccurrence and mutual reinforcement of discursive statements suggest the venue of discussion works as echo chamber and underscore the notion of an reclusive entity. In this environment, interspersed discourse fragments from outside actors result in minor discursive events which guide the reality construction by distracting from the raised accusations.

With this first text-immanent dimension it was tried to untangle the discursive net as regards the subjects' statements. The preliminary structure analysis focused on rather formal aspects of the qualitative data. The subordinate category *date* discloses that roughly two thirds of all 450 contributions were posted within the first five days after the Frontal21 report was aired (s. *Fig. 10*). Afterwards, smaller spikes in the buzz become evident from March 21<sup>st</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup>, on March 25<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>, as well as from April 2<sup>nd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup>.

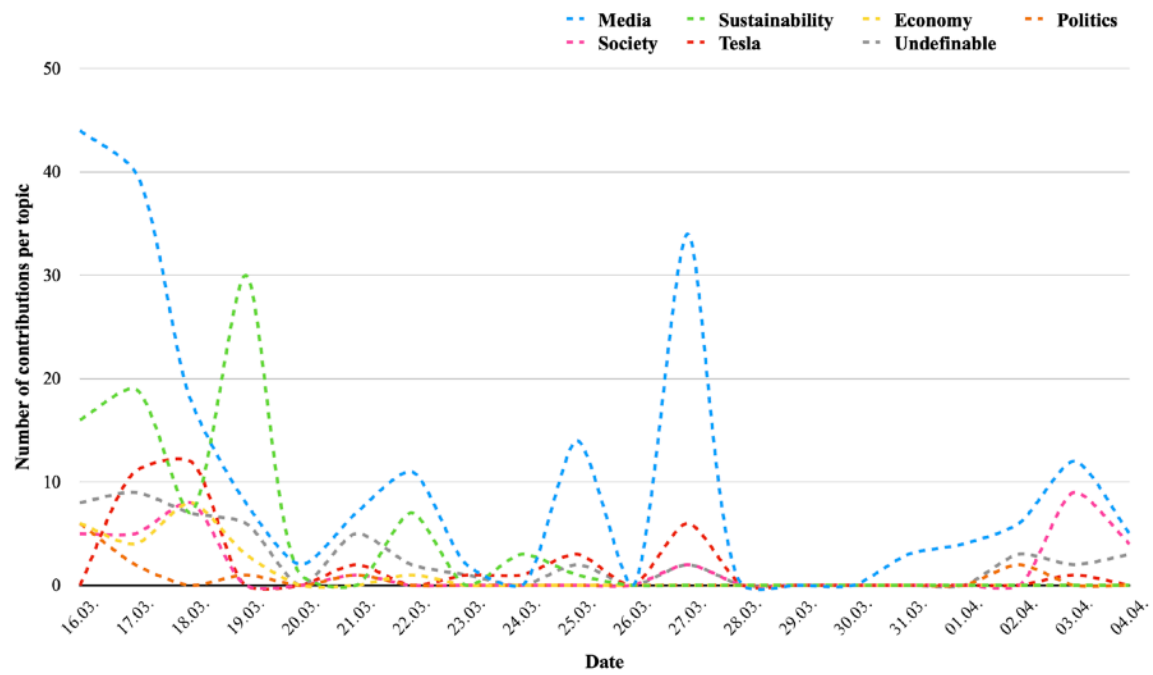
Taking a closer look at members' contributions, one may roughly classify each post into one of six *main topics*, namely media, sustainability, economy, politics, society and Tesla. In addition, there are some undefinable discourse fragments (51 contributions) which consist of completely unrelated content structures, such as intuitive expressions. These were regarded negligible for the research interest. It becomes apparent that posts about the media (211 contributions) in general dominate the discourse strand in the *TFF* community while sustainability-related considerations (84 contributions) build the second largest topic followed by relatively smaller segments. These are posts about Tesla (37 contributions), the society (33 contributions), the economy (22 contributions) and politics (12 contributions). Analysis also suggests that the main topics are present in the community's reality construction to different extents at different times (s. *Fig. 11*).

Fig. 10: Number of contributions per day of the examined period



Source: own illustration (based on TFF, 2021b)

Fig. 11: Number of contributions per main topic per day of the examined period

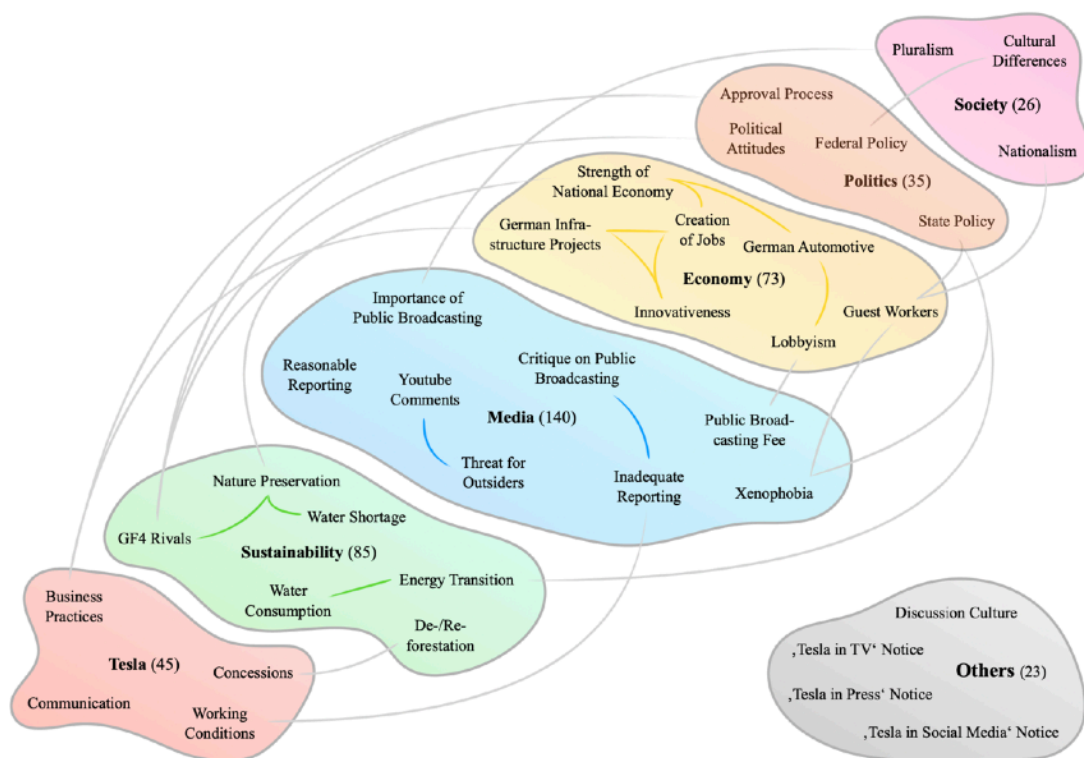


Source: own illustration (based on TFF, 2021b)

Next, it was looked at the contributions *evaluation* in the form of hearts. This sub-category further functions as criterium for the subsequent detail analysis. A post in the examined thread got four hearts on average. Still, there are 129 contributions with no evaluation at all which could be accredited to the mere amount of posts in the first days. Approximately 70% of all contributions reached up to four hearts. The remaining discourse fragments show an above-average popularity among *TFF* members which is why they were chosen for further examination. Of them, 74 posts got 5-10 hearts, another 47 posts 11-20 hearts, and eight posts reached more and up to 38 hearts. The users *Mathie* (17x), *tesla3.de* (9x), and *TommyP* (8x) happen to be most often among the creators of highly evaluated posts.

After sorting out three undefinable discourse fragments, it was now looked at the composition of 126 contributions by 59 users in more detail. The in-depth analysis brings to light that the brand community incorporates a variety of sub-topics in the *context* of their contributions to the discourse. Before turning to the most interesting findings, an attempt was made to assign each sub-topic to one of the six main topics (s. *Fig. 12*).

*Fig. 12*: Sub-topics and their most common co-occurrences in the coded material



Source: own illustration (based on TFF, 2021b)



Also, this category was analyzed for code co-occurrence which indicates the relational strength between two codes. The respective table as well as a Sankey diagram are to be found in appendices 5 and 6. The following figure summarizes the main contextual topics as well as co-occurrences with coefficients greater than 0,2. Next up, it can only be focused on the main findings arising from qualitative analysis. Citations were translated with *Google Translate* within the *TFF* forum and are marked by their respective numeration which is concordant with their order of appearance in the thread. A summary of all contributions that were subject to detail analysis can be found in appendix 7 (refer to *ATLAS.ti* document for coded versions).

Beginning with media-related subtopics, it becomes evident that more than half of the contributions include complaints about the report's inadequate reporting style. Thus, brand community detects a lack of neutrality (e.g., #7, #11, #26, #30, #76), incorrect information (e.g., #100, #128, #186, #381), as well as populist elements in terms of the report's design (e.g., #108, #126, #139, #354). Exemplary, *Mathie* speaks of "countless violations of basic journalistic principles" (#44; s. also #190, #365) and even insinuates xenophobic stereotypes as regards the portrayal of Polish guest workers in the Gigafactory (#34, #44). Later, *BalticTesla* condenses the major points of criticism: "The ZDF has posted a hate report with Frontal, which attacks Tesla's industrial settlement in Brandenburg in an unobjective manner [...] with incorrect and degrading reporting" (#410). The brand community quickly establishes a link to a more fundamental critique on Germany's media landscape, in particular on the public broadcasting system. While some just deprecate a loss of quality (e.g., #126, #128, #201, #351), others assume the system to be manipulative itself or at least influenced by other actors (e.g., #7, #100, #309, #364, #419). The justification for the system's mandatory fee (e.g., #126, #127, #199, #415, #416) as well as a complete resolution of public broadcasting are discussed (e.g., #410). Based on the opinion that the episode poses a threat for outsiders – who may not be able to judge the veracity of the report (e.g., #139, #194, #299) – the community monitors how the public responds in the comment section on Youtube where the report is uploaded, too (e.g., #299, #309, #326, #381). Apart from the mainly negative tenor, *TheStig* is the only user attributing the episode a reasonable reporting style. He asks: "However, I ask myself the question why a critical [...] documentary should give a good picture of the company

to be criticized at the moment?” (#284). Along with *Mathie* and *anon21027592*, they still highlight the importance of the public broadcasting system for a pluralistic society (e.g., #284, #365, #425, #432, #439, #441).

The brand community also draws the attention to rather sustainability-related contexts. Here, it is often referred to the factory's opponents whose unjustified arguments are suggested to be based on certain influences. Exemplary, environmentalists would only push their own political agenda (e.g., #175, #178, #289) and the cited lawyer in the report would not intend to sincerely assess the situation as he already represented rival parties in legal processes (e.g., #44, #76, #141, #190, 401). Moreover, compassion to local residents is limited (e.g., #62, #76, #294, #307). *TommyP*, who is affected himself, finds: “The encouragement of the local residents is greater than the lack of enthusiasm. The vast majority are neutral to positive. Even environmentalists don't agree” (#95). Some also imply that “the environmentally concerned have everything, but not the protection of the environment in mind” (#289) which is why they would intentionally slow down the approval process (e.g., #76, #175, #178). Besides, the community regards nature preservation in the protection zone as relatively less important considering the factory's net value for the environment (e.g., #84, #95, #138). They nevertheless refer to the inspection by authorities assuring environmental compatibility (e.g., #90, #138, #319) and support their view with the ‘low’ ecological value of the deforested area (e.g., #37, #88, #178, #354). While some *TFF* members voice doubts on the region's water shortage (e.g., #76, #249), others acknowledge the problem which, however, is to be solved by exploiting resources outside the groundwater protection zone (e.g., #25, #39, #97, #288). Accordingly, *tesla3.de* argues that “the water may have to come from somewhere other than the local municipal utility” (#37) and is joined by *JHBLN* who refers to how Stuttgart receives its water from Lake Constance (#97). The plant's water consumption is downplayed by comparisons to other firms (e.g., #50, #97, #140) as well as – when broken down to one lithium battery – to other consumer goods (e.g., #156, #234). Additionally, it is often referred to the excessive water demand of unsustainable lignite mining (e.g., #16, #83, #195, #239, #252). Clearly, the brand community sees the bigger picture here. The factory is regarded an essential part in the country's energy transition (e.g., #39, #220, #252) or as *Epikur* puts it: “Only such a giga approach fits our time with

the goal of environmental protection. One size smaller would mean that we would not be able to switch to sustainable energy and mobility” (#223).

Next up, also a variety of economic sub-topics emerge from the qualitative analysis. *TFF* members emphasize the project’s role for the national economy. It is argued that Tesla’s industry settlement in Brandenburg implies major benefits, such as infrastructure extension and tax revenue (e.g., #90, #95, #138, #203, #326). Conversely, it would harm the economy if not realized (e.g., #7, #54, #88, #90, #145) making future climate action even more challenging (e.g., #223). According to *Tesla3forMe* the “business location D [Germany] is finished” (#113) if Tesla did not get a final approval. *Dupk001* reinforces: “This is shameful for Germany and is extremely damaging to us on an international level” (#403). The brand community assumes that critics especially mind the settlement of a foreign investor because it would pose a threat to the domestic car industry (e.g., #17, #84, #90, #203). It is therefore reasoned that German automotive is involved in political and medial lobbying efforts in order to harm the new competitor (e.g., #54, #76, #123, #203, #239). Exemplary, the user *enerbee* concludes: “Apparently, the clients of the tendentious film contribution are afraid for their brightest minds – engineers who are leaving – frustrated by the sluggish, autocratic and concrete structures in the German automotive industry” (#124). Again, only *TheStig* articulates his doubts on his fellows’ conspirative line of thought (#284). Besides, the creation of jobs is used as another advantage from an economic standpoint (e.g., #7, #54, #88, #90, #326, #410). In general, *TFF* members pity the decay of what they regard as previous core strengths that led to the country’s economic success. These include current deficiencies in the realization of other German infrastructure projects but also a general lack of innovativeness (e.g., #7, #124). Exemplary, *citt* subsumes the users’ economic remarks:

“I have the impression that in Germany it is no longer the case that technology enthusiasts - and what we were proud of and what our prosperity was based on - are calling the shots, but rather those who are concerned about the environment. You no longer manage to realize projects within a reasonable time and planned financial framework (e.g., Elbphilharmonie, Berlin Airport, Stuttgart 21) and look with envy at an (admittedly) shirt-sleeved Ami who realizes such a gigafactory in just one year.” (#288)

Moving on to the next contextual field, a number of sub-topics are linked to Tesla as a company. This includes the reportedly bad conditions under which other Gigafactory employees work. The *TFF* community regards the accusations as inadequate and

invalidates them by referring to automatized production processes (e.g., #25, #124) and above-average wages (e.g., #97, #139). It is also noted that what had happened to interviewees would not correspond to present reality as some incidents date back up to seven years (e.g., #84, #121, #141, #309). The firm's business practices, for example the dealings with local authorities, build another sub-topic in members' contributions. Here, it becomes evident that the enterprise Tesla is inevitable tied to its main figure, Elon Musk (e.g., #7, #223, #381). Members especially value his visions, that he creates facts and does not avoid potential risks (e.g., #124, #178, #288). According to *enerbee* this represents "what is sorely lacking in Germany" (#124). Thus, the inert approval process and problems at other German infrastructure projects are seen as repercussions of this development (e.g., #7, #39). It seems reasonable that these desired characteristics combined with the urgent need to adapt the old economy justify Tesla's advances from the brand community's perspective. They still point out the company's concessions as regards the reforestation of mixed forest and decimation of the plant's water demand in the first building stage (e.g., #8, #178, #309). The community further appreciates Tesla's communication strategy which is mainly based on in-transparency and reductionism (e.g., #186, #188, #353) but criticize Musk's public statement on the water scarcity in the Grünheide region (s. appendix 3, no. 52; e.g., #139, #433, #437).

Politically, users voice sympathy for federal politicians who enabled the Tesla settlement (e.g., #88, 107, #425, #444) but are bothered by state policy which acts too lazy in terms of the approaching energy transition (e.g., #16, #83). With regard to the final approval of the Gigafactory, *TFF* members seem not to be too concerned (e.g., #39, #54, #145) especially as they know that Tesla won all existing law suits against the opposition (e.g., #44, #190, #401). Contributions addressing the influence of political attitudes are aimed both at the environmentalists (e.g., #44, #76, #178, #401) and editors (e.g., #431, #444).

Lastly, some posts entail content that may be ascribed the societal main topic. Most of them revolve around cultural differences between the United States and Germany. Ongoing discussions on the production plant would therefore originate from the clash with the inert domestic bureaucracy (e.g., #7, #61, #88, #138) as well as from a fundamentally different work mentality (#239, #254, #288, #433). Exemplary, *Häuschen* writes: "We fear the progress, the stress and the speed and we'll see what we get out of it.

I would have advised Elon not to build in Germany from the start” (#139). Not every user sees all cultural divergences that negatively (e.g., #138). Nevertheless, some community members occasionally disclose nationalistic tones. The member *raffiniert* exemplifies: “If you really believe that the final approval could still fall, [...] [this] says more about what one thinks of Germany than anything else” (#145). *Dupk001*'s statement on a “shameful” and “damaging” German behavior has been outlined before (#403).

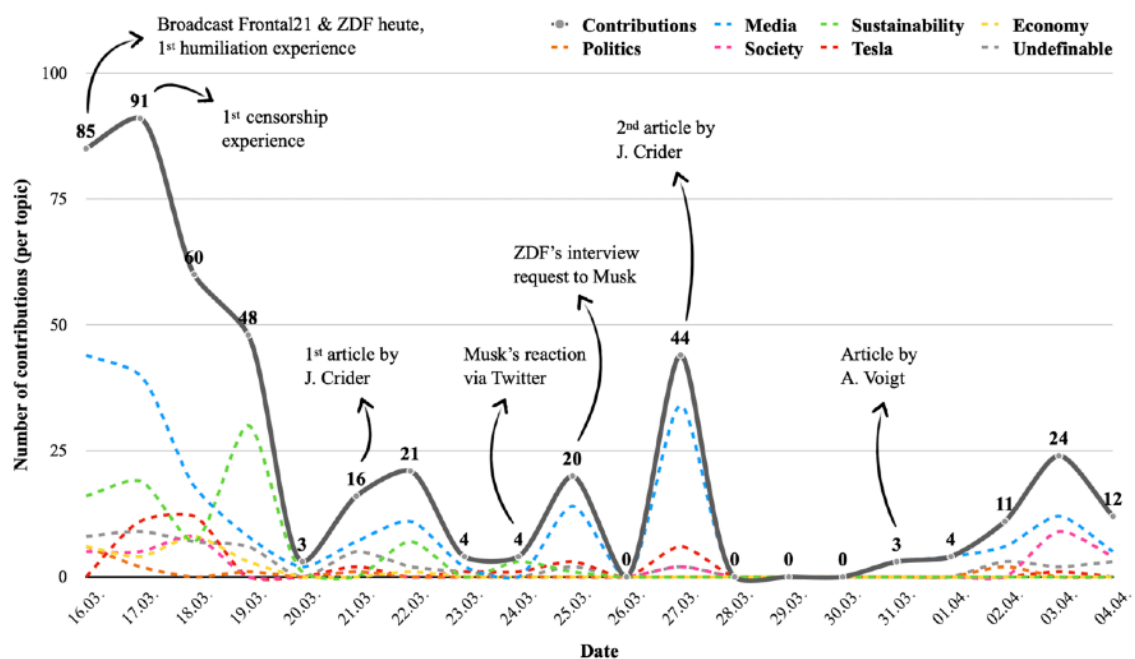
Apart from the main topics, few more codes have been assigned to other contents. Among mere notices that discourse-related information is published in TV, press articles, or social media, this also includes reminders to adhere to the forum's netiquette and ensure the desired discussion culture.

Turning to the next subordinate category in the analysis of the discursive statements, it was found that the brand community's reality construction contains a number of *discourse entanglements*. First, *TFF* members repeatedly share stories about humiliation experiences substantiating their suspect that the report represents a threat to society outside the brand community. They complain about family members, friends, or colleagues addressing the report's arguments in front of them (e.g., #30, #154, #158, #194, #288). Consequently, users feel they would have to justify their enthusiasm for the brand. Just to name a few, *RalfK* reports that “both work colleagues and relatives came up with comments” (#192), *Basti\_MA* shares that his “mom just called [...] and asked [...] if [he] knew how bad Tesla is” (#68), and *tesla-andi* confirms that he has “been approached a few times about the report on TV” (#433). *Spürmeise* had an even more drastic incident: “A diesel golf driver (without any reason) attacked me sharply – actually the first time in 30 years of lived e-mobility so aggressively” (#419). He polemically assumes that he got targeted due to his “exploitative, environmentally harmful electric car” (ibid.). Second, there is an ongoing debate on an alleged censorship of pro-Tesla Youtube comments (e.g., #195, #299). The user *likandoo*, for instance, feels that “ZDF is currently deleting a lot of justified criticism of the documentary” (#199). Other users rather caution against jumping to conclusions and argue that only insulting comments might get filtered out (e.g., #128, #365). Two more entanglements relating to the ZDF are interwoven in the brand community's reality construction. On one hand, this involves a debate on a shortened Tweet of Elon Musk which was used as a resource in the Frontal21 episode (e.g., #354,

#365, #401). On the other, members criticize that the ZDF requests an interview with the Tesla CEO in order to confront him with the accusations (e.g., #336, #338, #353, #355). On more entangled discourse is VW's emission scandal which the community uses as comparison foil for Tesla's engagement in Germany. It is argued that Volkswagen, unlike Tesla, is a convicted felon who damaged German reputation and was rightly penalized (e.g., #183, #184, #201).

Lastly, a range of minor *discursive events* were found to relate to the number of contributions per day and main topic within the investigated thread (s. Fig. 13). Moreover, some of them introduce entangled discourses. Others were to be traced back to contributions not part of detail analysis. Starting in chronological order, several members notice the initial broadcast of Frontal21 (e.g., #1, #2, #6) which obviously marks the starting point of the discourse strand. It becomes evident that this is even emphasized by the news format ZDF heute. Here, the main statements of Frontal21 are contrasted with positive news from Volkswagen (#47). On the evening of the two broadcasts, a first humiliation experience is reported (#68) seeding the grounds for the subsequent discussion. On day two, the initial allegation of censorship is voiced by *enerbee*: "By the way, comments on Youtube are eagerly deleted" (#124).

Fig. 13: Minor discursive events in the examined period



Source: own illustration (based on TFF, 2021b)

As the first spike in contributions fades out, an interesting discourse fragment enters the stage on March 21<sup>st</sup>. *Ignaz\_Semmelweis* shares an online article by the medium *EV obsession* which strongly criticizes Esser and Heise's (2021) episode (#294). In particular, the editor Crider (2021a) accuses the ZDF to have altered Musk's Tweet basing her assumptions on the blogger Alex Voigt's observations. In the next days, the topic creates a stir beyond the thread and even reach Musk himself. His response via Twitter is picked up by the community as it validates its reality construction so far (s. *Fig. 14*, #334).

*Fig. 14*: Musk's reaction via Twitter



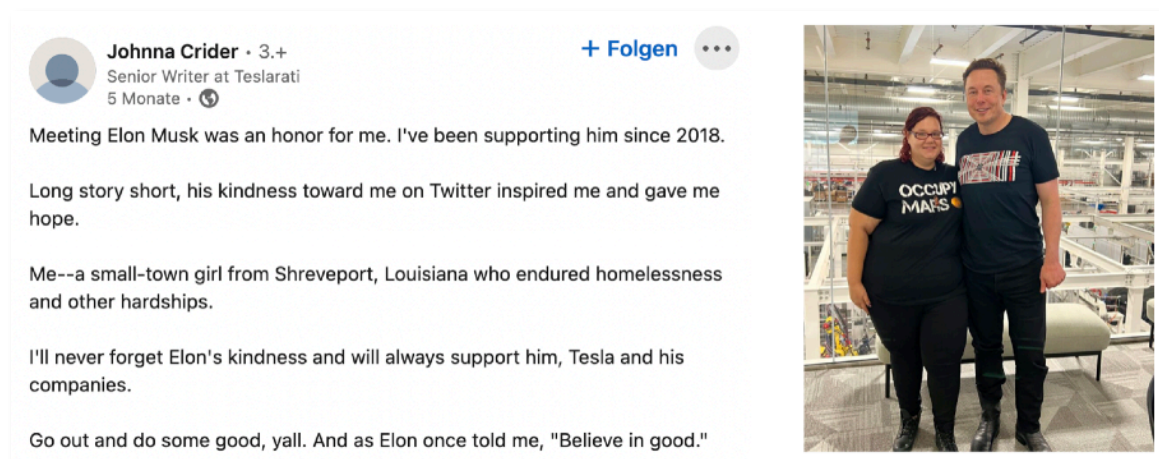
Source: Twitter (2021)

As noted by *Kielhb* (#335), the ZDF used Musk's reaction to request an interview right away. Two days later, on March 27<sup>th</sup>, the user *T3sLA* shares a second article of Crider (2021b) with the words: "Just to show everyone here what ZDF has done with this pure FUD [i.e., fear, uncertainty, and doubt] documentary. Manipulation at its best!" (#356). Crider (2021b) again highlights the "doctored tweet" and claims an apology from the broadcaster to Musk and Tesla. The editor now intensifies that "the documentary is [...] filled with a blend of facts and FUD" (ibid.). Again, she refers to Voigt multiple times (ibid.) who himself creates the last discursive event (#399). On March 31<sup>st</sup>, the blogger Voigt (2021) publishes a detailed article on *Elektroauto-News.net* summarizing any point that may support the Tesla-enthusiasts' argumentation in relation to the Frontal21 report. Afterwards, he encourages "every German citizen who wants to stand up for a public service broadcaster who informs us correctly, objectively and with facts" (ibid.) to use the

ZDF complaint form which is linked in the end. Several *TFF* members follow this instruction and share it in the forum (e.g., #400, #402, #403, #404).

Taking a closer look at the main actors responsible for creating these crucial discourse fragments, it stands out that both Johnna Crider and Alex Voigt display connections to Tesla themselves. Crider not only worked as freelance editor for platforms like *EV Obsession*, but also got employed as writer at *CleanTechnica* and senior writer at *Teslarati* – all of which rather representing professional newsblogs than journalistic mediums (LinkedIn, 2022a). Her profile makes visible that she already interviewed Musk several times, seems to really admire him and even met the Tesla CEO in person (ibid., s. *Fig. 15*).

*Fig. 15*: Crider voicing appreciation for Musk & Tesla via LinkedIn

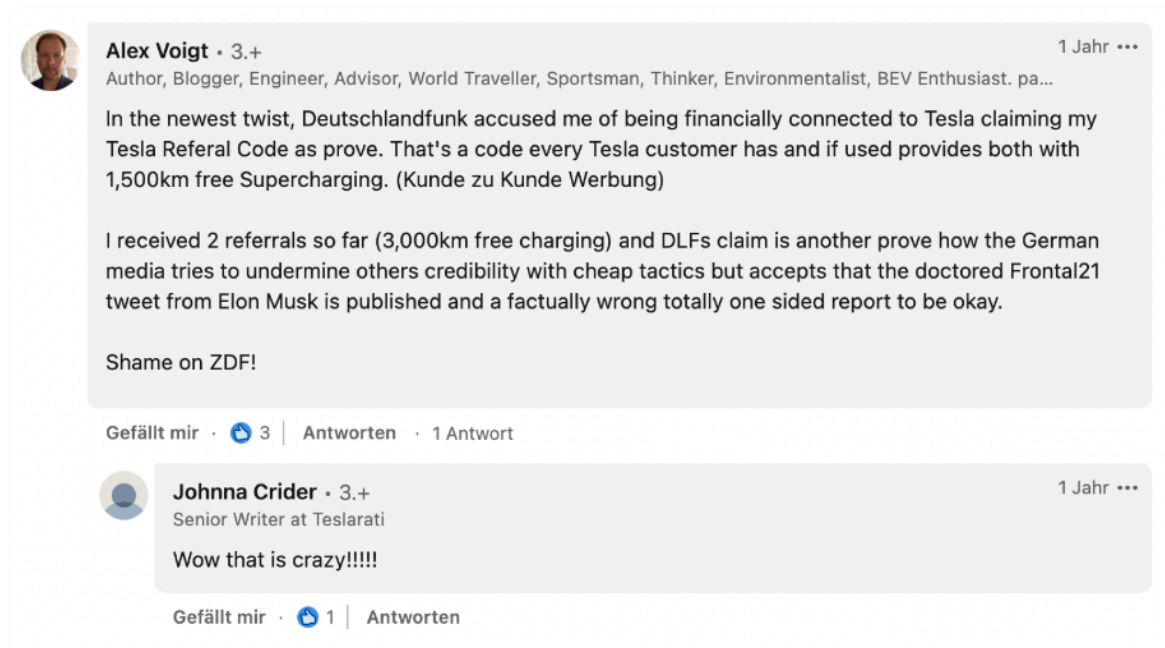


Source: LinkedIn (2022a)

In addition, she reveals: “Full disclosure: I support Elon Musk & his companies” (ibid.). Turning to Alex Voigt, it becomes evident that he sees himself as ‘EV influencer’. After unexpectedly getting “huge interest from around the globe for [...] [his] thoughts on battery electric vehicles” as author for *CleanTechnica* and *Elektroauto-News.net*, he decided to fully work as freelance blogger in January 2020 (LinkedIn, 2022b). It was also found that he is a “long-term oriented investor in Tesla” (Voigt, 2021), drives a Tesla car himself and was already accused by German media outlet *Deutschlandfunk* to be related to the company (Borgers, 2021, s. *Fig. 16*).



Fig. 16: Voigt defending himself against accusations via LinkedIn



Source: LinkedIn (2022a)

In the article mentioned by Alex Voigt (LinkedIn, 2022a), Manka Heise – one of the authors of the Frontal21 report – justifies and reinforces the critical view on Tesla and is cited that she got information from other US journalists about “online armies that take over the defense work and information policy for Elon Musk” (Borgers, 2021).

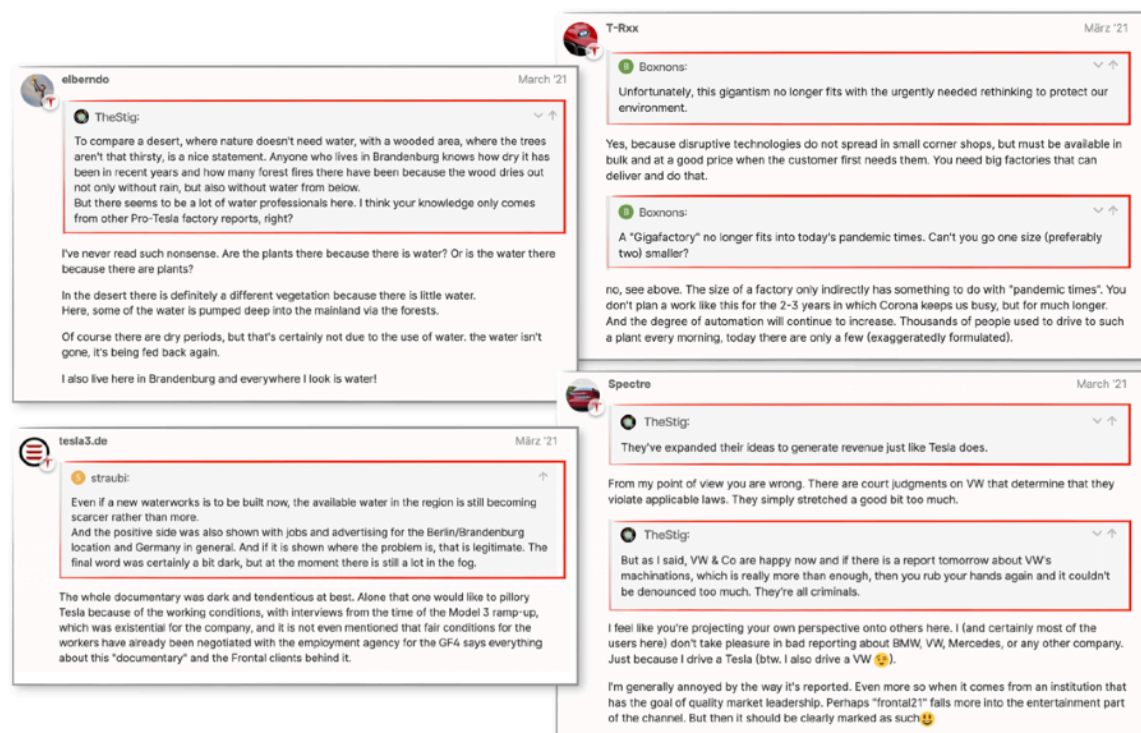
#### 4.4 Discursive practices

As the brand community is highly confident in their own views on the discourse strand it does not allow itself to be unsettled. In order to legitimize knowledge stocks within the online forum, members provide extensive counterarguments which are often substantiated with confirmatory resources. Critical voices from the in- and outside are delegitimized step-by-step until they correspond to the majority opinion. In a rather linguistic sense, the community insinuates its expertise, already implies a certain direction of interpretation, and trivializes the accusations. Personalization of the relevant actors increases specificity and serves to ultimately position Tesla and oneself as victims.

It was aimed to get more profound insights into the strategies of knowledge legitimization within the brand community in this last analytical dimension. Again, structure analysis of

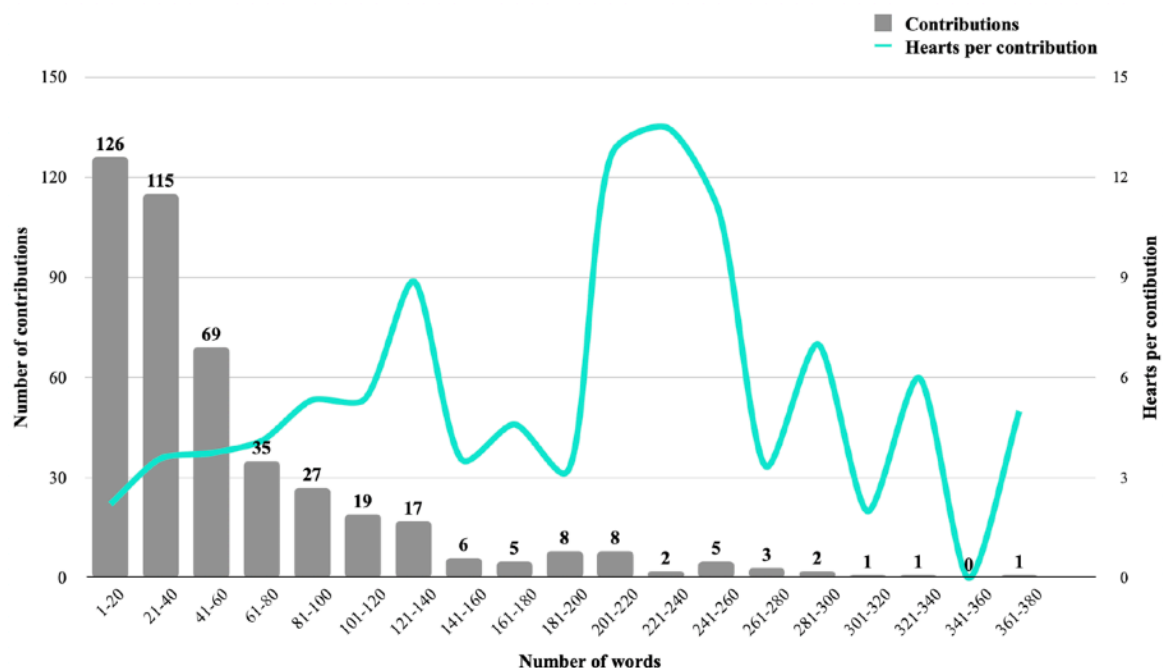
all 450 discourse fragments marks the start of investigation. The subordinate category *references* comprises both direct answers beneath as well as citations within a contribution. The data suggests that *TheStig* (31 references), *Mathie* (20 references), *Epikur*, *Boxnons* (both 13 references) and *straubi* (10 references) depict the users whom are most referred to. This allows for two interpretations. On one side, *TheStig* (31 contributions) and *Mathie* (20 contributions) constitute the most prominent speakers within the thread. In the same regard, *Epikur* (13 contributions) places sixth. It can be argued that these subjects represent the most referred to speakers due to their mere sum of contributions alone. On the other side, it becomes evident that *straubi* (7 contributions) and particularly *Boxnons* (1 contribution) display a rather low or very low participation. The review of the subjects' contributions reveals that *TheStig*, *straubi*, and *Boxnons* may be considered voices that contradict the general tenor and polarize the community. Other speakers often use extracts from those contributions in order to subsequently delegitimize the opposing view (s. Fig. 17). It seems imaginable that *TheStig* was ultimately blocked from the forum due to his extraordinary views on the discourse strand which he shares by means of 30 contributions within the respective thread and period.

Fig. 17: Deconstruction of criticism by referring to opposing speakers



With regard to the next category, *length*, it is to be noted that it was oriented at the average German words per sentence for classification. According to Wortliga (2022), a typical sentence comprises approximately 15 words in news articles, 15-20 words in basic literature, and 25-29 words in scientific literature. Based on an empiric observation upfront, it was opted for an estimated 20 words per sentence for consistency reasons. It is found that roughly half of all contributions entail less than 40 words, while around 80 percent are based on less than 100 words. A total of 55 contributions range between 101-200 words, 23 posts show even more (s. Fig. 18). Somewhat surprising considering his already high participation, *Mathie* creates seven of those 23 contributions (e.g., #44, #190, #325, #365, #379, #425, #444). Furthermore, a conspicuity in relation to a post's evaluation suggests that post length is used as legitimization strategy, too. The average number of hearts per contribution gradually rises with increasing word count until a temporary extremum at 140 words is reached (1-20 words: 2,2 hearts/post; 121-140 words: 8,9 hearts/post). After dropping again, another spike can be noticed for contributions entailing 200-260 words. At the maximum (221-240 words), a contribution gets on average 13,5 hearts (s. Fig. 18).

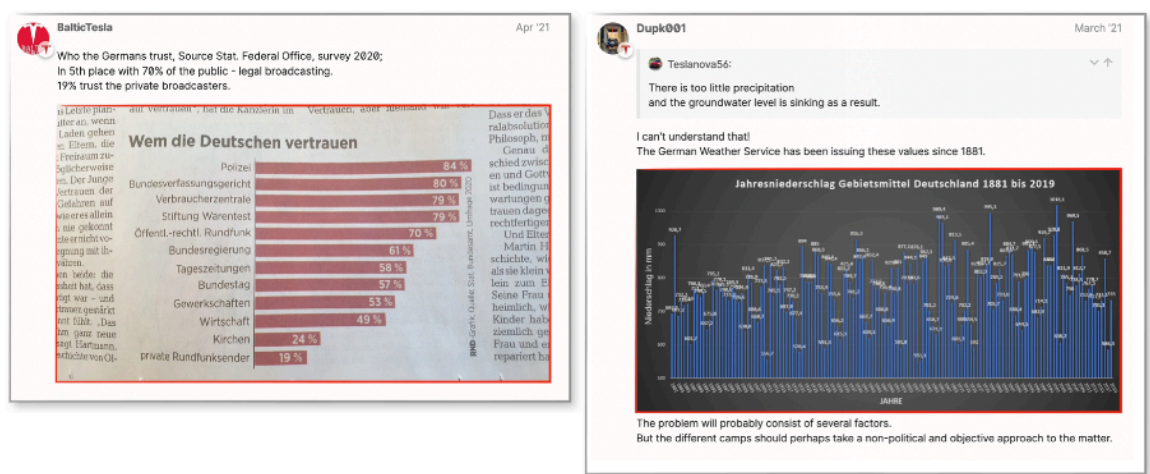
Fig. 18: Number of contributions & hearts per contribution per number of words



Source: own illustration (based on TFF, 2021b)

In order to support their discursive statements, subjects incorporate a range of *resources* over the course of the three weeks. Apart from 139 forum citations (s. *references*), 21 general citations, 15 linked threads, 13 social media posts (s. exemplary *discursive events*), this includes two PDF-documents (#109, #444), seven images and eleven videos. Images are for example used to locate surrounding water resources (#268, #276) or to underpin one's position with statistics (s. *Fig. 19*).

*Fig. 19: Supporting one's arguments by underpinning statistics*

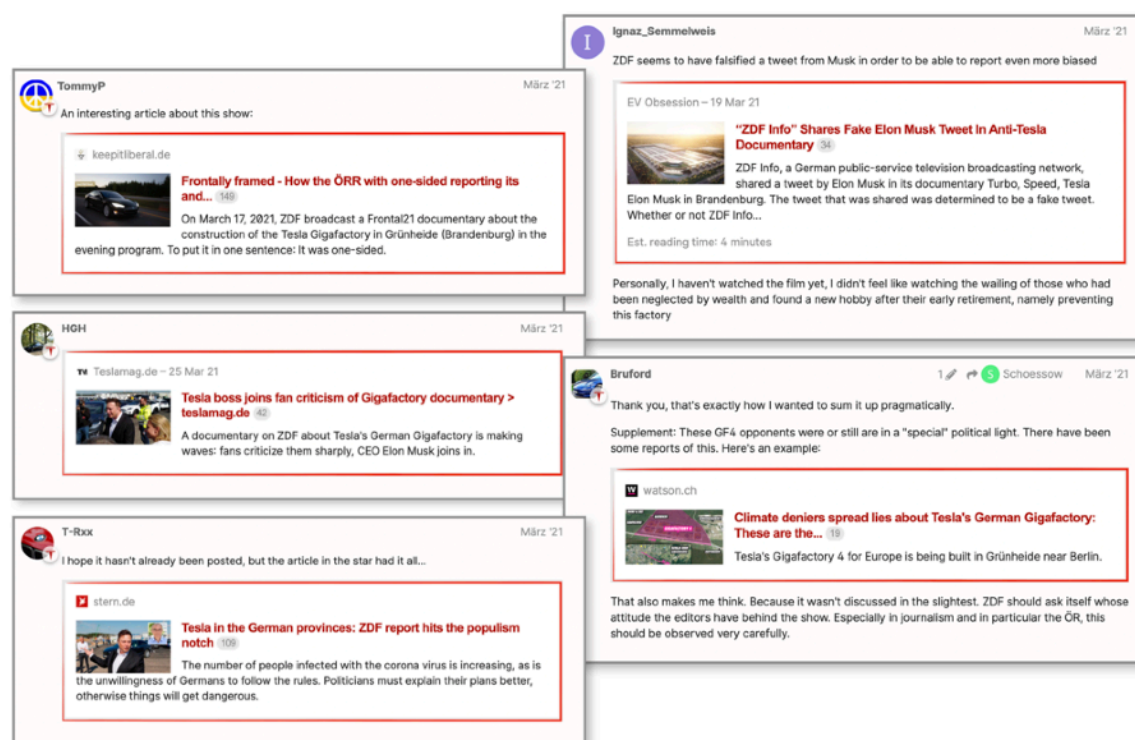


Source: TFF (2021b, #271, #421)

Linked videos include the German Frontal21 episode on Youtube (#76, #199, #420), an English version of the same (#359) as well as the ZDF heute news report (#94). For comparative reasons, it is also referred to other programs that resemble rather 'fair' reports based on members' view (#283, #303). Some of the contributions entail further links to webpages and online articles. Webpages often serve as additional information source by which the discussion shall be enriched (e.g., #198, #252, #432) but are also used to embarrass the opposite side. Exemplary, *Mathie* accuses a local resident to be less affected than pictured in the report after finding out he would only live in a neighboring municipality (#44). Also, *Epikur* shares a Wikipedia article while mocking one of the responsible journalists: "By the way, with Christian Esser they have assigned one of their top people to Tesla" (#78). The user *Spectre* furthermore uses the ZDF's guiding principles as evidence for the report's infringements (#146). Online articles depict the most common external resource in the brand community's reality construction. Articles broadly fulfill two distinct purposes based on whether their contents contradict or

emphasize the general tenor. Critical ones are shared as sort of media monitoring. Like this, members observe how the report's accusations on the Gigafactory spread and the overall sentiment towards Tesla in the media changes (#48, #122, #331, #373, #382). Other articles are carried into the discourse because they confirm and reinforce attitudes that have been fostered up until then (s. Fig. 20). For the greatest part, these represent the most clicked links within the thread (e.g., #327, #329, #399). Confirmative articles usually originate from Tesla- or e-mobility-related sources such as *Teslamag* (#339, #353), *Ecomento* (#36, #124), *Electrec* (#380), *EV Obsession* (#294) or *Elektroauto-News.net* (#399). Furthermore, it is referred to alternative news platforms like *Keepitliberal* (#327), *Deleter News* (#144) or *Watson.ch* (#196) which may be characterized as less pro-Tesla but rather anti-rivals.

Fig. 20: Confirmative resources fostering the brand community's viewpoints



Source: TFF (2021b, #196, #294, #327, #329, #339)

Members yet seem to consult classical outlets as long as the tone towards Tesla is supportive (#58, #97, #307, #329) or contents are not directly related to the discourse strand (#52, #438, #444, #446). Exemplary, *Epikur* refers to articles by *Tagesspiegel*

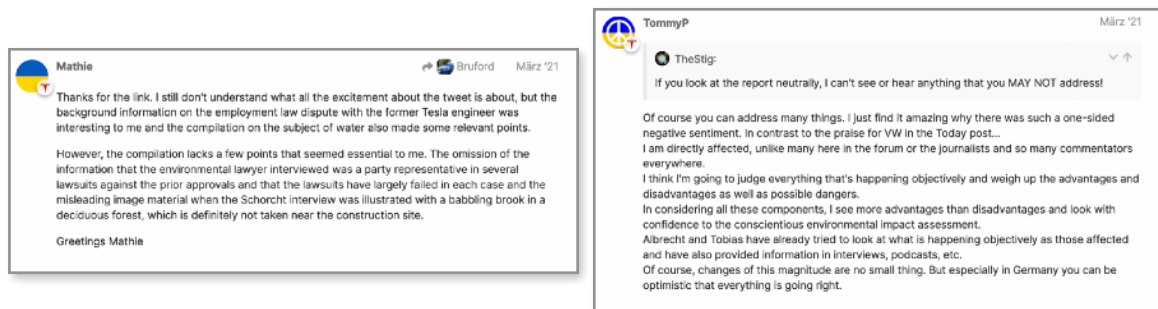
(#331), *Deutschlandfunk* (#373) and *Die Welt* (#446) after repeatedly voicing his doubts on neutrality of mainstream media (e.g., #76, #123, #375).

During detail analysis it was opted for a word cloud summarizing the most used adjectives and nouns in order to find *key terms* in the community's reality configuration (s. appendix 8). However, mere frequency was not regarded as main criterium to qualify as key term. In fact, some terms coin the discourse while appearing in variations of the same word. Exemplary, *Mathie* introduces the term 'riot' (German: "Krawall") which he regularly uses standalone (#431) or as compound, such as in "riot format" (#34, #190, #348, #425, #432), "riot contribution" (#444), and "riot maker" (#398). Thus, a certain direction of interpretation regarding the report is already implied. Among other synonyms, members utilize the term "tendentious" (e.g., #7, #37, #97, #121) as a description of the unilateral reporting style against Tesla and the Gigafactory. Since this term is mostly used in relation to journalistic work, it may be argued that the community tries to indicate their expertise and, hence, validate their statement by using the rather specialist language. Next, some users address the project's opponents as "the concerned" (#316, German: "Bedenkenträger"). Variations of the word, for example, in the "environmentally concerned" (#288, #289) or in "scruples" (#292, German: "Bedenkenträgertum") are to be found throughout the thread. In this way, one insinuates a knowledge advantage within the community. Others' concerns are yet to be waived with time or reasoning. Besides, *TFF* members frequently speak of "facts" (e.g., #43, #97, #190) which they perceive to be different from the points voiced in the report, by Gigafactory opponents, or by the few critical voices within the community. It seems reasonable the term is used to delimit one's own truth from alternative perspectives. Additionally, "bashing" (e.g., #60, #76), "manipulation" (e.g., #364, #365), "censorship" (e.g., #195, 299) and "violation" against journalistic principles (#44, #190, #365) depict terms that the brand community makes use of in order to condemn the media system for their practices. All of them imply an effect on the society which is why it is perceived as threat for outsiders from the community. Lastly, it is to be noted that nationality plays a crucial role in the club's reality construction. The terms "German" or "Germany" are not only employed in relation to various societal spheres but also loaded with discontent (e.g., #124, #139, #364). Exemplary, the user *mreal* writes:

“I don’t think Elon Musk has a particularly long line of patience. If Germany had hesitated longer, the factory would go abroad... Or if we went through all the approval procedures in a typically German way, we would be as far with the Tesla factory as with the BER airport, Stuttgart 21 or any other German infrastructure project...” (#7)

Unsurprisingly, the *tonality* of members’ contributions is often negative. In-depth analysis suggests that anger (26 contributions; e.g., #29, #76), frustration (16 contributions; e.g., #113, #124) and anxiety (5 contributions; e.g., #54, #351) manifest in the discursive practice. Another 12 contributions strike a less concerned but serious tone (e.g., #100, #129). Standing out nevertheless, the majority seems to be unimpressed by the criticism. Quite a few members argue objectively (13 contribution; e.g., #90, #138) or voice their own thoughts in a determined way (33 contributions; e.g., #95, #139). Some even make use of a sassy tonality (14 contributions) in order to express their self-confidence. Exemplary, the user *Göks* comments on the pressure Tesla reportedly puts on authorities: “It gets uncomfortable for everyone when you turn your ass and suddenly have to work for a change” (#61). Another user, *Biotechniker*, assesses regarding the working conditions at Tesla: “if you’re already waiting for the end of the day at 8 a.m., you probably shouldn’t apply there” (#218). Occasionally, the community also expresses hope (7 contributions) especially in relation to the mostly negative feedback in the Youtube comment section (e.g., #299, #326, #381) as well as when other, less critical reports appear (e.g., #303, #399). Generally, a notable difference is found between ordinary users and the thread’s opinion leaders or moderators such as *Mathie*, *Teslanova56*, and *TommyP*. The former display an angered, frustrated or anxious body of thought more frequently. The latter seem less concerned, tranquil the discussion and provide well-founded counterarguments (s. *Fig. 21*).

*Fig. 21: TFF opinion leaders calming and ordering the discourse*



Source: TFF (2021b, #138, #401)

In the next subordinate category, it was aimed to find the discourse's *stabilizing concepts*. As such, collective symbols depict commonly transmitted cultural stereotypes (Drews et al., 1985). By means of their visual logic, they suggest certain discursive practices and provide orientation in a society (Jäger, 2019). In accordance with Foucault's (1969, 1988) notion to analyze language in an archeological manner, it was achieved to 'unearth' some collective symbols within the 126 posts that were subject to detail analysis. Thus, words and phrases revolving around the semantic field of 'delict & punishment' display themselves in various forms. The *TFF* community constructs a reality in which one should "keep an eye on Tesla in terms of compliance with laws" (#90). Furthermore, "submission is expected" (#433), one would like to "pillory Tesla" (#84, s. also #234), and journalists "put their fingers in open wounds" (#154). Meanwhile, members ironically speak of the syndicated delicts as Tesla would be "robbing people of the water" (#141) and producing "exploitative [...] harmful electric cars" (#419). Moreover, "the landscape protection area is desecrated" (#84). The same symbolism is utilized when it is referred to Volkswagen as the German firm "committed crimes and [...] was fined many billions of euros and dollars" (#183) for their emission scandal (s. also #123). The collective symbol of 'eviction' somewhat links to the one of 'delict & punishment'. As Tesla represents a "foreign company" (#84) that is "moving" (#7) to Germany, it is confronted with "hate speech" (#411, s. also #410, #419) and "xenophobic resentment[s]" (#44). According to the brand community, it is tried "to corner" (#7) Tesla in order to "nip this specter in the bud" (#203, German: "dieses Gespenst im Keime ersticken"). *TFF* members also make use of words relating to the collective symbol of 'battle & war'. While the report would accuse Tesla to "destroy Germany" (#11), the community emphasizes a different angle from which the report "attacks" (#410) Tesla and hits with a "dig" (#44, German: "Seitenhieb"). Thus, the company is forced to "fight" (#203, #365). *Epikur* further assumes that a "gigantic trap has been set up for Tesla" (#54). Lastly, *TFF* members often compare the media with some kind of an 'artist'. As art links to free interpretation, this enables the community to further delegitimize the criticism. Exemplary, journalists "portray Tesla as a bad employer" (#39), "paint [negative] a picture" (#100), or try to "not showing Tesla in a positive light" (#174). The community also minds that the ZDF gives the accusations a "serious touch" (#100, German: "seriöser



Anstrich”). In a rather technical sense, a certain “image is constructed” (#141, s. also #403). Normalism is seen as another discourse-carrying concept which constitutes what is and is not perceived as the standard within the discourse (Jäger, 2019). Members legitimize their discursive statements by normalizing certain perspectives on ‘Germany’ and the ‘media’. As regards the former, hesitation and fear of progress characterize the “typically German way” (#7, s. also #139). Germans accordingly feel “uncomfortable [when one would] suddenly have to work for a change” (#61). Also, the Grünheide would have been “further cultivated into a monoculture desert” (#88) without Tesla’s settlement. The community yet states that the country would have not always been that conservative and inert – it is just “no longer the case” (#288). With regard to the media, it becomes evident that the community already expected negative reporting (e.g., #124, #128, #191). By stating that there “are always two sides of a coin” (#90) they prove one-dimensional representations as wrong. Further, imbalances and mistakes may “quickly” (#126) be found as they already represent a “pattern” (#191) throughout media outlets. The user *condo24* argues it “is well known” (#100) that misrepresentations also originate from intent. As one could “only expect limited high-quality journalism” (#126) the community is “basically skeptical” (#130) as regards the veracity of information. It is further debated whether the media may “no longer be trusted” (#351). *RobT* subsumes: “In Germany, manipulation and lies in the public service media now seem to be normal” (#364).

The utilization of *stylistic devices* is to be understood as further strategy of legitimization. This subordinate category served as ‘reservoir’ during the analysis which is why it cannot be focused on every stylistic device in detail. Beginning in a superficial manner, it was found that some members create alliterations in order to amplify key words. Some rely on German language, for instance “konservatives Krawallformat” (#34), “ZDF-Zensur” (#195), “GEZ-Gebühren” (#239) or “Framing-Fernsehen” (#416). Others also work in English, such as media’s “faulty facts” (#43) or “critical comments” (#138). Anaphoras are used to semantically link consecutive sentences or adjacent clauses (e.g., #7, #8, #44, #54). Exemplary, *Benjo* writes: “Sometimes it’s just poorly researched, sometimes it’s meant to convey a certain message, sometimes both” (#128). The brand community hardly uses emojis to express their attitude. In sum, only 20 of 126 contributions contained at least one emoticon. Short evaluative exclamations, like “omg” (#29),

“unbelievable” (#60) or “gosh” (#76), function as substitute instead. By occasionally employing technical terms, such as “hydrogeological conditions” (#34), “environmental impact assessment” (#59, #138) or “forest monoculture” (#354), members want to demonstrate that their contribution poses a valuable contribution to the discourse. Moreover, a range of neologisms is introduced and mostly aimed at specific actors. Just to name a few, community members speak about a fictional “ZDF company car fleet manager” (#239) who would be involved in the competitors’ lobbying efforts or “petrolheads” (#431) when referring to people driving non-electric cars. Besides, the concept “DDR 2.0” (#364, #365, #444) pops up in relation with the media system. Generally, a pictorial language is forced by means of a multitude of metaphors. Since some of them have already been presented as collective symbols, they will not be part of the review here. The same applies to personalizations in various forms which enable the community to attribute human characteristics to inhuman actors like Tesla, the media, the politics, or Germany as a country. Next, members use hyperboles in order to exaggerate discursive statements. Exemplary, even the “biggest Tesla critic” (#186) would be able to correctly assess the “extremely” (#30, #37) or “more than one-sided” (#26) report which was “defaming Tesla and Musk” (#195). *JHBLN* argues that one could get water from afar, so “no tree or person has to die of thirst for the GF4” (#97). With enumerations, the community further emphasizes and substantiates their statements (s. *Fig. 22*).

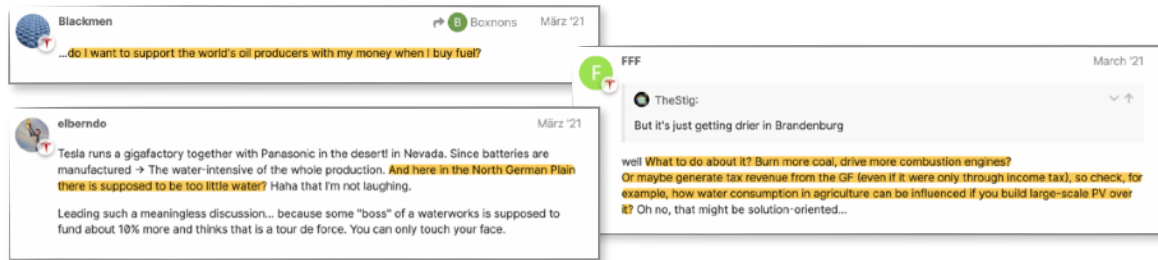
*Fig. 22*: Enumerating a multitude of counterarguments as legitimization strategy



Source: TFF (2021b, #309, #326)

With the help of rhetorical or suggestive questions, the correct answer is either assumed to be known or subsequently given by oneself (s. *Fig. 23*). It may be argued that this device comes with a reinforcing effect fostering a consistent reality construction.

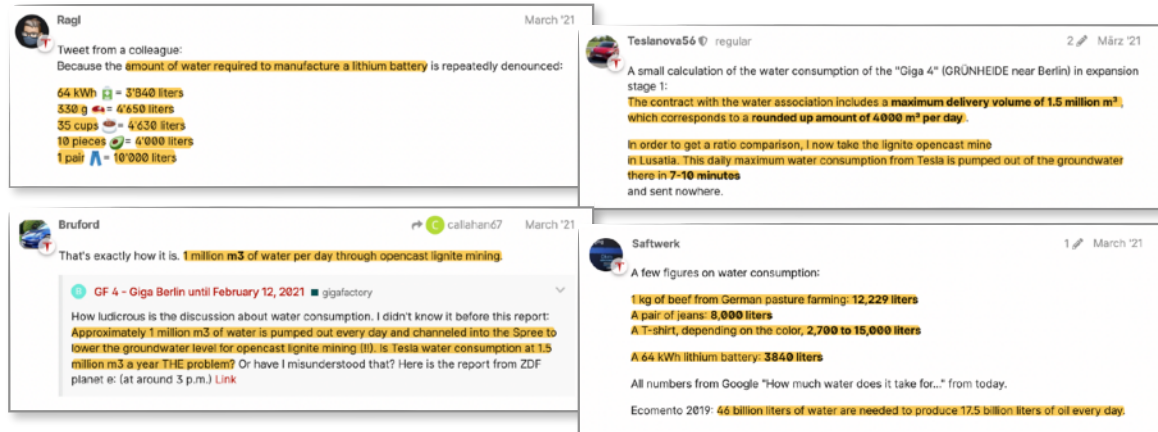
Fig. 23: Asking rhetorical or suggestive questions as legitimization strategy



Source: TFF (2021b, #220, #249, #254)

Members contrast issues they agree on with ones' they disagree with on a regular basis. *Ralf\_W* exemplifies this when referring to the working conditions at Tesla: “As far as I’m concerned, robots place the seats in the vehicle” (#25). Others reason that the cleared woodland “is not a forest but a pine plantation” (#178, s. also #37, #354) or point out that public broadcasting would position itself against Tesla which “invests honestly and creates 12,000 and later up to 40,000 jobs” (#410). Certain comparisons furthermore serve the trivialization of, for example, the factory’s water consumption (s. Fig. 24).

Fig. 24: Trivialization as legitimization strategy



Source: TFF (2021b, #83, #156, #234, #252)

Last but not least, the linguistic exclusion of dissidents through the use of the pronouns “we/us” and “they” is to be understood as legitimization strategy (e.g., #76, #100, #124, #139, #433, #442). On one hand, this constructs a united and strong image of the brand community, on the other, it creates pressure to conform, which leads rather neutral members to the majority’s discourse position and, in turn, legitimizes it.

## 5. Discussion

Based on the assumption that brand communities foster attitude-behavior congruence in sustainable consumption practices, the discursive reality construction of the *Tesla Fahrer & Freunde* owners club was examined. It was aimed to shed light on the struggle over legitimate knowledge orders in the Gigafactory discourse resolved by *TFF* members. Discourse analysis suggests that the preliminary conjectures prove true. The brand community, in fact, draws in various ways on individual and contextual factors that earlier research found to be responsible for attitude-behavior inconsistencies. In particular, the brand community's online forum allows for 24/7 availability and facilitates group identification through the exchange with like-minded. Members are able to gradually increase perceived effectiveness and control by climbing the ladder to become trusted opinion leaders. Conformity suggests that undecided members will be nudged to comply with the norm due to social pressure. Exemplary, some users updated their profiles and indicated to have bought a Tesla car in the course of this study (e.g., *Bruford*, *Basti\_MA*). Communal events create chances to directly experience the product which aids to develop an emotional bond to the brand. Members' high cognitive and affective involvement becomes evident as they project the criticism towards Tesla on themselves. It may further be argued that the brand community's reality construction takes place in an echo chamber in which prominent discursive statements are standardized and, in turn, attitude accessibility and confidence are increased. As a result, members agree upon a mostly consistent reality construction and respond to the criticism in a determined and consolidated manner.

The fact that Tesla itself advises its owners clubs to engage in activities directed towards the general public and legislators highlights the potential of brand communities in terms of communicating sustainability as added value. However, this thesis did not attempt to examine if brand communities pose valuable marketing instruments themselves but rather tries to inform future sustainability marketing practice based on the findings evolving from the discourse analysis. At this point, it seems noteworthy that there is an ongoing controversy among theorists whether marketing and sustainability will generally be compatible or if the former represents the antithesis to the latter (Lim, 2015). From a

traditionalist perspective, marketing is only considered a driving force for consumption growth which might, for example, result in overconsumption (Peattie & Peattie, 2009; Perreira Heath & Chatzidakis, 2012). Thus, marketing efforts would never elicit sustainable behaviors. For others, marketing holds the potential to provide solutions to the recent dilemma via synergy effects (Ferdous, 2010; Rettie et al., 2012). In this light, marketing efforts would be able to normalize sustainable consumption practices. This perspective was adopted for the present study.

Like any research design, discourse analyses do not come without drawbacks. Even though this thesis tried to evaluate and classify the findings within a discourse structure that is as broadly defined as possible, it should be noted that even a large-scale analysis can never map a discourse in the totality of all effective statements with regard to a discourse strand (Kajetzke, 2008). Also, it is only possible to picture a snapshot as discourses are to be understood as flows of social knowledge stocks through time and space and, thus, are in constant motion (Jäger, 2001a). Given the study's epistemological orientation, findings are tied to its context limiting replicability and transferability (Geertz, 1973). Following the logic of discourse theory it has to be acknowledged that the researcher itself is part of the discourse structure and therefore constrained due to the compelling system of thought (Jäger, 2001a; Foucault, 2005). Moreover, discourse analysis often finds its limits in informative value about peoples' motivation to use language (Willig, 2013). As discourses are invisible by nature and require interpretation in a constructive and interactive process, the researcher's subjectivity marks another point in the discussion of the findings (Elliott, 1996). With the aid of a second coder during the analytic procedure, intercoder reliability could have been measured in order to ensure consistency and further solidify the results. Yet, this was not feasible as regards the ends of the thesis. Finally, opposed to quantitative research designs the method could not rely on frequency distributions and statistically verifiable results, which, however, seems acceptable in view of the depth of analysis of this project.

## 6. Theoretical and managerial implications

Considering the extensive body of research on attitude-behavior incongruence (s. chapter 2.1.1), it seems at least surprising that – amid the international sustainability agenda – the social dilemma persists to date. This thesis contributes to the scientific canon in consumer research by offering in-depth insights into the processes of attitude formation within a brand community. Instead of the already challenged rational paradigm, it was opted for an interpretive stance in order to get a more holistic view on sustainable consumer behavior (Caruana et al., 2016). In line with Fitchett and Caruana's (2015) request, the study applied the constructivist concept of discourse in a consumption context. More specifically, qualitative discourse analysis offered a lens into a brand community's reality construction by means of which its distinct interpretation of sustainability was 'unearthed' in an archeological manner (Foucault, 1969, 1988).

This study calls for the broader application of explorative consumer and marketing research for sustainability-related interests in order to get a rich and phenomenological comprehension (Kühn & Koschel, 2022). In particular, it was tried to demonstrate how to fruitfully apply the discourse-analytic framework which is yet little known among the field's scholarship. Few existing approaches focus on the discourses of consumer independence (Caruana, Crane, & Fitchett, 2008), power (Denegri-Knott, Zwick, & Schroeder, 2006), responsibility (Pekkanen & Penttilä, 2020), healthy lifestyles (Koskela, 2014) or luxury goods (Roper, Caruana, Medway, & Murphy, 2011). Besides, De Burgh-Woodman and King (2013) commit themselves to the discourse of being "symbolically sustainable" (p. 145) by investigating Toyota's hybrid car website. The authors highlight the role of a "human/nature connection that offers explanatory purpose as to why [consumers] should care about sustainability" (ibid.). The fact that implications are drawn from the analysis of commercial contents, such as advertisements, makes De Burgh-Woodman and King's (2013) study stand representative for other related elaborations. With the present study, this producer-focused research orientation (Peattie, 2015) is enriched by an analysis that puts the consumer in the spotlight. In fact, it was found that within the respective context the understanding of sustainability reaches beyond the individuals' connection with the environment.

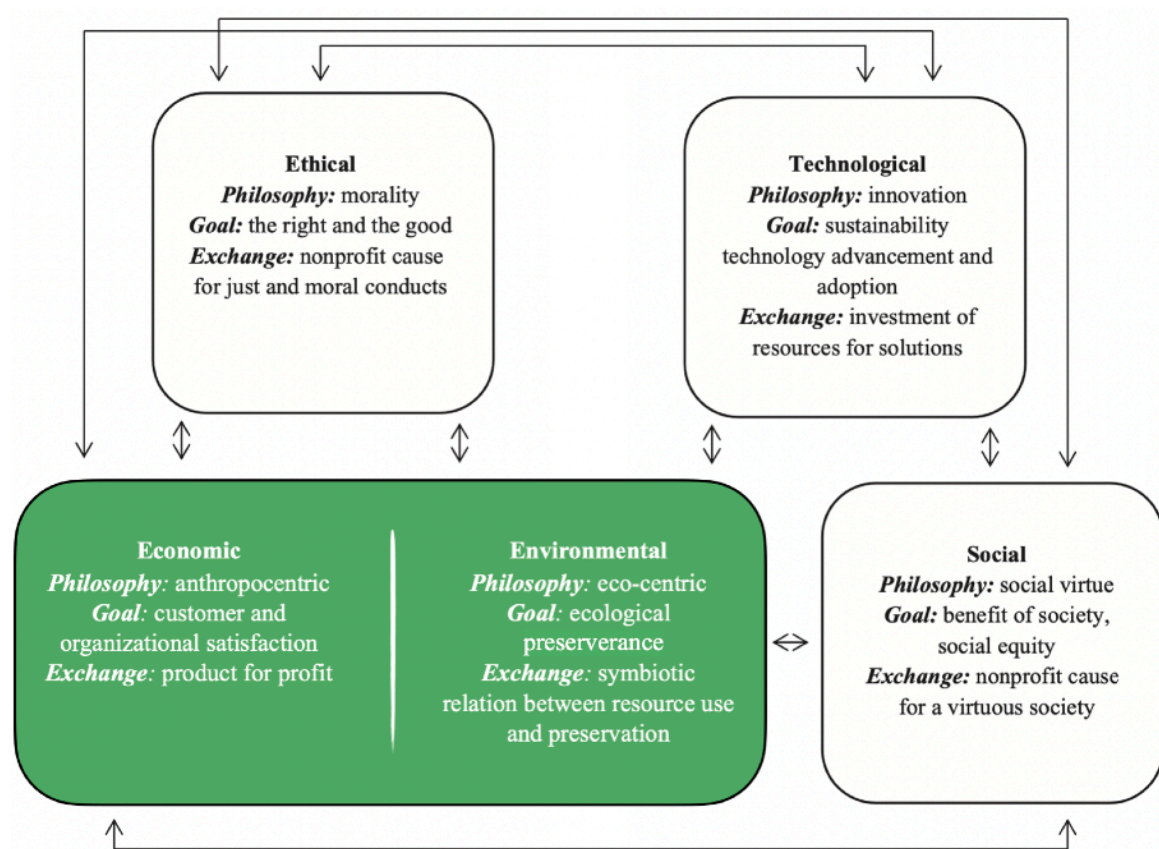
Future research might touch upon this project and aim to solidify the findings evolving from this initial study. With regard to the research question, it would surely be interesting to analyze the same discourse strand at a different venue and a different point in time. This could be based on other discursive events, such as the clearances of woodlands in February and December 2020 (Metzner, 2020; Salmen & Metzner, 2020), the official opening of the plant in March 2022 (Poppendieck, 2022) or the leakage of 15,000 liters of chemicals that endangered the groundwater table beneath the factory one month after the production start (Joswig, 2022). Besides, it seems reasonable to conduct subsequent qualitative interviews or focus group discussions with members of the *TFF* community. Due to the presence of a researcher this would allow to dig deeper into the community's sustainability understanding when appropriate. This might also imply elements of laddering in order to decompose the underlying value construct based on means-end theory (Gutman, 1982, 1991; Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). Lastly, brand communities are generally suitable for ethnographic research. While triangulating observations, in-depths interviews, life histories and documents from the field, ethnographies provide further insights into the processes of social interaction in cultural groups and, hence, into their motives to engage in certain behaviors (Reeves, Peller, & Kitto, 2013).

Given that marketing is generally compatible with sustainability, marketing can be seen as “vehicle to realize the sustainability agenda” (Lim, 2015, p. 4). The scholarship mostly agrees that traditional marketing is overstrained in synergizing the two concepts which is why sustainability marketing arose (Peattie & Belz, 2010). However, due to the predominant application of the auxiliary perspective some argue that the field's producer-focus overshadows customers' actual needs (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019). Following Levitt's (1960) notion, they attest the sub-discipline to be ‘myopic’ (e.g., Ottman et al., 2006). Belz and Peattie (2009) further define ‘sustainability marketing myopia’ as “distortion stemming from an exaggerated focus on the socio-environmental attributes of a sustainable product at the expense of customer benefits and values, thus distorting the marketing process and likely leading to product failure” (as cited in Lim, 2015, p. 7). In the course of this thesis, it was argued that findings from the discourse analysis are able to enhance sustainability marketing practice as they stem from an environment that fosters attitude-behavior congruence. In accordance with discourse theory, firms might then elicit

sustainable behaviors by providing consumers with certain informational cues which are, in turn, used again in the process of reality construction.

In order to tackle ‘sustainability marketing myopia’ in a profound way, the subsequent suggestions basically rest on a concept from business theory called the ‘triple bottom line’ (Miller, 2020). According to this framework, firms should not only focus on measuring their financial but also their social and environmental impact which, in fact, can be further broken down to the three pillars of profit, people and planet (ibid.). The attentive reader will have noticed that this conceptualization is concordant with the potential understandings of sustainability presented in this thesis. Building upon the ‘triple bottom line’, Lim (2015) proposes a sustainability marketing model that is based on the three aforementioned pillars but also comprises two further dimensions (ethical and technological) (s. Fig. 25).

Fig. 25: The five dimensions of sustainability marketing



Source: Lim (2015, modified from source by the author)



With this model, Lim (2015) introduces a generic approach to sustainability marketing which unites the common aspiration for “economic viability, ecological health, social equity, widespread moral practices, and technological advancement and adoption” (p. 10). On one hand, objectives of each of the five dimensions are integrated, on the other, this results in a network of interrelations in which dimensions have repercussions on another (ibid.). As the examined brand community disclosed a sustainability understanding that blends economic and environmental concerns, it is suggested to focus on the respective two dimensions in the model (s. *Fig. 25*). While the former were voiced more prominently, the latter became apparent in the community’s long-term orientation which sees environmental sustainability as key to future prosperity. According to Lim (2015), economic sustainability marketing is based on an anthropocentric philosophy which aims to satisfy both the producer and the consumer and seeks to convert products into profit. In comparison, environmental sustainability marketing follows an eco-centric philosophy, strives for preserving the ecological system and advocates for a symbiotic relation between resources and their origin (ibid.).

Thus, practitioners should try to reconcile the two dimensions and enforce the combined approach by adhering to Belz and Peattie’s (2012) reconfigured marketing mix model of ‘4C’s’. First, this involves presenting satisfying ‘customer solutions’ to a problem that is itself linked to a need or want (ibid.). Considering that in consumers’ minds sustainability is still associated with forfeits (Acuti, Pizzetti, Dolnicar, 2022), marketers may profit from emphasizing the hedonic aspects of sustainable consumption as these rather match the anthropocentric orientation of the economic dimension (Lim, 2015). Exemplary for the automotive industry, Martin and Väistö (2016) state that the essence of “exciting motoring experiences” consists of a combination of “beauty, fun, and power” (p. 203). It seems reasonable that by reviving those pleasuring characteristics and fortifying them with the ecological value of a product or service, consumers perceive the bundle of benefits to be full-fledged and individually satisfying. Second, total ‘consumer costs’ imply all occurred expenses including “non-financial transaction costs of time and effort” (Peattie & Belz, 2010, p. 12; Belz & Peattie, 2012). In terms of the actual price, consumers currently regard sustainable products as luxuries due to price premiums they have to pay (Peattie, 2015). Unfortunately, the present thesis only provides a glimpse into

the consumption of a good which is already positioned as high-priced luxury good (Martin & Väistö, 2016). Nonetheless, it may be argued that all sides would generally be better off if additional sustainability-related costs were internalized in such way that price politics for sustainable products corresponded to the one of conventional products. This would enable marketers to target different customer segments and position a product more sophisticatedly. Besides, it is suggested to minimize the time and effort a consumer needs to invest in order to ease up the whole process of acquisition, usage and disposition. Third, marketers should acknowledge that consumers value ‘convenience’ with regard to the place of purchase (Belz & Peattie, 2012). Establishing the online sphere as primary distribution channel for sustainable products would ensure easy accessibility and wide availability (ibid.). Exemplary for the status quo, the *TFF* member *enerbee* refers to an inconvenient experience when buying a German electric car: “It was our intention to order one [a German EV] at first, thanks to the "great" ordering portal, the lack of information about delivery times and the lack of contact with VW, despite repeated attempts, [it] was simply impossible” (#124). If applicable, practitioners may additionally stress eco-efficient aspects in the distribution channel design because eco-centric consumers strongly associate environmental impact with resource use and ecological preserverance at this stage (Peattie, 2015). Fourth, effective sustainability marketing encourages a bilateral ‘communication’ (Belz & Peattie, 2012). In this regard, a first implication results from the *TFF* community’s broad criticism on the media system. On one side, this may be explained by a ‘hostile media effect’ according to which recipients with strong preexisting attitudes towards a certain issue tend to perceive neutral reporting as biased and unfair (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). On the other, it suggests a general decline of trust in conventional communication channels. This trend is, in fact, mirrored in recent opinion polls (Muno, 2022). Firms might therefore profit from reducing extensive investments for public relations and advertising in traditional mass media and focus on alternative channels instead. As an example, Tesla itself cut all existing ties with journalism by dissolving its public relations department in 2020 (Reuters, 2020). From here on, Musk established himself as characteristic figure taking over the company’s external communication via Twitter where he reaches more than 120 million followers on a daily basis (Twitter, 2022). Besides, a second implication is that brand communities

itself may serve as trustworthy communication channels given that members engage in marketing activities directed towards the general public. Lastly, sustainability marketing communication tends to be factual and focused on the communal interest (Villarino & Font, 2015). Drawing from the *TFF* community's legitimization strategies, effectiveness could be improved by employing a more pictorial and emotional language that focuses on the individual customer.

## 7. Concluding remarks

The present thesis made an attempt to explore the discursive rules of reality construction as regards e-mobility enthusiasts' understanding of sustainability. In particular, the consumer conversation regarding Tesla's Gigafactory Berlin-Brandenburg within the German *Tesla Fahrer & Freunde* owners club was under investigation. By means of a qualitative discourse analysis it was relied on a yet underrepresented theoretical foundation in marketing and consumer research.

In the course of this thesis, it was found that the *TFF* community constitutes a reclusive entity in the holistic discourse. Reality construction mainly takes place online and is partly regulated by Tesla. Most subjects prove to be relatively new to the community but not at the expense of being less active. Some of them happen to become prominent opinion leaders after following the forum's inherent logic. Those members are not only respected by fellows but also responsible for structuring great parts of the discourse. After the Frontal21 report on Tesla's proceedings in Grünheide stirred up the field of sayability, the community first counters the accusations with media criticism and later turns it into a general social critique that reveals the origins of its sustainability understanding. Members particularly fear a decay of Germany's economic strength as the country would act too inert and inefficient in the implementation of the sustainability agenda. Hence, environmental sustainability is seen as key in order to ensure future power and wealth. The venue in which the brand community resolves the examined discourse echoes and reinforces certain discursive statements which increases the community's confidence in their own perspective. In order to further legitimize this view, members create an imbalance in which counterarguments outweigh accusations. This is further emphasized by confirmative external resources of which some also show an intent to guide the brand community's reality construction. Among other strategies, technical language is occasionally employed to demonstrate expertise, comparisons are used to trivialize Tesla's advancements and collective symbols serve to personalize the involved actors and position both Tesla and oneself as victims.

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As far as this study may tell, the preliminary made assumptions on brand communities' potential to foster attitude-behavior congruence hold true as the examined owners club draws in various ways on the factors responsible for the discrepancy (s. chapter 5). All in all, the insights originating from this thesis substantiate the research guiding expectation that the *TFF* members' contributions to the Gigafactory discourse reflect a distinct interpretation of sustainability which is coined by a strong default of values, topics and one-dimensional perspectives. Findings may contribute to the promotion of sustainable consumer behavior and ultimately help to bridge the attitude-behavior gap in sustainable consumption when applied in sustainability marketing practice (s. chapter 6). Moreover, they indicate that Tesla itself capitalizes on the intimate relationship with its owners clubs in two more ways. On one side, the company utilizes brand communities as marketing instrument. Members are expected to engage in publicly effective efforts that aid in acquiring new customers and serve to educate the society about e-mobility (Tesla, 2022c). The chairman of *Tesla Fahrer und Freunde*, Ulrich Hopp, confirms this function: "Owners of Tesla cars are the best advertising media because they really believe in them" (Schmitt, 2020). On the other side, owners clubs are required to "help advocate for Tesla by supporting legislative efforts" (Tesla, 2022c). Arguably, Tesla also harnesses its brand communities to strategically influence political decision-makers. In fact, the company recently launched a new platform, named *Tesla Engage*, which is not only set to replace the brand communities' existing online forums but is also said "to spur owners to take political action on its [Tesla's] behalf" (Kolodny, 2021). From this angle, brand communities may also be understood as public affairs instrument.

However, while brand communities without doubt hold significant potential in driving forward a sustainable lifestyle they can not conjure natural resources where there are none. As a result, Tesla announces on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2022 that due to the water shortage in the Grünheide area they will now begin to search for groundwater supplies in neighboring municipalities (Barnstorf, 2022b).

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