

How Covid-19 Has Changed *Safety* in the Car Transportation Sector: A Corpus-Assisted Analysis of Non-Financial Reports

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Abstract

The importance of people's safety during Covid-19 has resulted in greater attention to this aspect in CSR and ESG disclosures, especially in the field of transport. The relevance of this topic is also reflected in the recent publication of linguistic studies that investigate how companies in some sub-sectors communicate their commitment to passengers' safety (Rossato & Nocella, 2022; Bondi & Nocella, 2023). This paper explores how safety is discursively constructed and communicated in the car rental and ride sharing sectors, both before and during the pandemic. Working along the lines of corpus-assisted discourse studies (Partington et al., 2013), the research analyses a corpus of English CSR and ESG reports published by international American companies in the above-mentioned fields of transport. Findings suggest a great concern for safety issues and a more inclusive approach to both customers' and employees' safety during the pandemic. Additionally, car rental companies show more attention to vehicle safety, while ride sharing operators put more emphasis on road safety. Evidence also suggests that the companies largely employ commissive statements and vague linguistic choices that signal a general lack of transparency on the practices and initiatives enacted to ensure customers' and workers' safety.

Keywords: safety, CSR, ESG, car transportation, transparency, corpus-assisted discourse studies

1. Introduction

Safety is broadly defined as the state of being free from danger or harm. In the transport sector, it involves monitoring activities and the implementation of measures to protect individuals from various risks, including physical and psychological harm. This encompasses ensuring vehicle maintenance, adhering to safety regulations, and maintaining specific hygienic conditions. The focus is on safeguarding all individuals, both passengers and employees, emphasizing the prevention of accidents and the protection of public health, thereby creating a secure and reliable environment for all (Note 1).

Although the issue of safety has always been important, it has gained even greater significance with the outbreak of Covid-19. The virus's high contagiousness and the significant number of deaths during the early stages of the pandemic called for stringent measures to protect public safety, including physical and social distancing, and rigorous cleaning and sanitation procedures. The field of transport was greatly affected by these changes, since following these protocols was essential to reduce the risk of contagion between passengers and operators. In this scenario, companies in this sector have responded to the challenges posed by Covid-19, through the development of strategies for maintaining or regaining the credibility of their stakeholders regarding their safety on different means of transport.

Like most transportation fields, the car rental and ride sharing sectors were greatly affected by Covid-19. Both the lockdown and the reduction in passenger capacity to comply with physical distancing measures caused economic harm to these companies. More specifically, major operators such as *Hertz*, *Avis*, *Europcar*, *Uber*, and *Lyft* experienced significant rating downgrades and losses in share value, although the negative impact was less severe in the ride sharing sector (Nhamo et al., 2020, p. 159). Consequently, demonstrating the commitment to developing strategies and enacting practices to ensure client safety was crucial to win back customers and restore their trust in the companies.

Given the significance of safety in the field of transport, particularly during this specific historical period, many companies of this sector highlighted this issue in their non-financial disclosures, including CSR (Corporate and

Social Responsibility) and ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) reports, press releases, and specific web sections. However, there is still a paucity of linguistic research on the communication of safety in these texts. Set against this background, this paper considers the car transportation sector as a case study and explores how companies in this field discursively communicated the issue of safety in their non-financial reports before and during the pandemic. Given that enterprises are also expected to be transparent in disclosing information relevant to CSR to positively shape stakeholders' perceptions, a complementary aim of this research is to assess whether safety-related information is provided in a transparent or vague way.

In terms of the structure of this paper, Section 2 briefly reviews the linguistic studies on CSR reports and safety CSR communication in the field of transport, and also discusses the notion of transparency and vague language. Section 3 illustrates the research questions (Sub-section 3.1), contextual information about the car transportation sector and the dataset (Sub-section 3.2) and explains the methodological procedures (Sub-section 3.3) adopted to address the research questions. The following section presents the main quantitative (Sub-section 4.1) and qualitative (Sub-section 4.2) results of the research. Section 5 makes some concluding remarks and provides suggestions for further research.

2. Background

Although there is no universally accepted definition of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), the concept is generally understood as the integration of environmental, social, and economic issues in a company's business strategies and practices (e.g., Carrol, 1979; Dahlsrud, 2008). CSR communication has evolved significantly since the 20th century, encompassing a variety of genres such as CSR reports, news releases, and corporate websites. These channels are used by companies to demonstrate their ethical and social responsibilities. CSR reports, in particular, provide information about corporate policies and practices on social issues, addressing stakeholders such as investors, employees, and customers (Breeze, 2012). Recently, many companies have transitioned from CSR to ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) reports. This change reflects a shift from a philosophical focus on responsibility to a more quantifiable approach, incorporating measurable sustainability practices, though both CSR and ESG reports cover primarily social issues and ethical practices. Linguistic studies on CSR reports have concentrated on the discursive construction of trust (e.g., Fuoli, 2018; Bondi & Nocella, 2023), and themes such as sustainability (e.g., Lischinsky, 2015; Fuoli & Beelitz, 2023) and diversity, equity and inclusion (Malavasi, 2023; Nocella, 2023).

In CSR communication, it is also crucial to address the question of safety, as it contributes to social well-being. Based on this premise and on the relevance of the topic during the pandemic, recent linguistic studies have investigated how companies, especially those in the field of transport, communicate their approach to this issue. Rossato and Nocella (2022) conducted a corpus-assisted analysis of American and Italian cruise-line companies' websites during the Covid-19, finding that they used promotional language to create a dialogic relationship with passengers, emphasizing care and encouraging compliance with safety measures. Using the same methodology and relying on Fuoli and Paradis' (2014) framework of trust-repair strategies, Bondi and Nocella (2023) examined Health & Safety and CSR webpages of UK and Italian rail companies during the pandemic, discovering that UK companies focused on passenger care, while Italian operators highlighted expertise and regulatory compliance. Both studies noted the use of promotional strategies, with UK companies using commissive statements to emphasize benevolence and Italian companies stressing competence and integrity.

The mere communication of an organization's approaches to issues relevant to CSR, including safety in the context of this study, is not sufficient to maintain a positive image with its various stakeholders. It is also important that a company communicates this information transparently. Transparent information cannot be simply openly shared, but needs to be complete, clear, accurate (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016), accessible, and should not display vague language (Turilli & Floridi, 2009). Transparent practices and disclosures positively affect stakeholders' perceptions about a company's commitment and adherence to shared principles (Kim & Lee, 2018). Conversely, providing untruthful, inaccurate, or incomplete information leads to a loss of credibility (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004). However, whether communication is truly transparent depends both on the writer's intention and on the perception of the recipients. Therefore, as the degree of transparency of information also depends on the interpretation of different individuals, it is difficult to recognise the linguistic choices conveying transparency. Consequently, linguistic vagueness can serve as one of the tools through which non-transparent linguistic and communicative choices may be identified.

Jin (2022) analysed CSR reports from the cosmetics industry and identified and classified a set of vague linguistic items. These comprise those associated with quantity, time and frequency, degree, and softening stance-taking. Vague items associated with quantity include words and expressions such as *more than*, *many*, *various*, and *some*,

that are used to avoid “revealing a specific numerical value to define the exact quantity level” (p. 85). In a similar way, vague expressions associated with time and frequency, such as *early*, *recent*, *often*, *by the end of*, and *always*, are exploited in the absence of specific time data and information (p. 90). Vague degree items, such as *important*, *well*, *significant*, *better*, *appropriate*, *effective*, and *good* are used by companies to positively assess the quality of their practices and construct a positive corporate image in the absence of data quantifying or revealing the effective improvements made (pp. 88–89). In addition, softening stance-taking expressions include, for instance, perspective-taking verbs (*suggest*, *think*) and possibility indicators such as *possible* and *may* (p. 92) that are used to leave “space for negotiations in the case of unforeseen circumstances or negative evaluations” (p. 93). Finally, although her study focus was the language reproduced by L1 and L2 speakers in educational settings and not CSR communication, Zhang and Le (2018) also identified terms used with generic meaning (for instance, words such as *thing* and *stuff*) among vague linguistic choices. It is also important to note that, although the use of vague language may reveal a lack of information transparency, it can be used strategically to “provide an appropriate amount of information, demonstrate solidarity enhance persuasion, and self-protection” (Jin, 2022, p. 77).

3. Research Questions, Data and Methods

3.1 Research Questions

Drawing on this background and considering that no research has been conducted on the car rental and ride sharing sectors, this paper addresses three research questions: (1) How did the discursive construction of *safety* change before and during Covid-19 in the car transportation sector? (2) How did car rental and ride sharing operators linguistically communicate their approach to safety issues to their stakeholders? (3) Did the companies’ communicative choices convey transparency or vagueness?

3.2 Data Background and Corpus

In recent decades, the car transportation sector has seen the development of the car rental sub-sector and the more recent emergence of ride sharing companies. This type of mobility is not as popular as trains, airplanes, and ships. However, car rental operators represent a “significant segment of the tourism economy” (Nhamo et al., 2020, p. 160). Ride sharing has gained popularity for passenger mobility due to its flexibility and affordability (Rabbitt & Ghosh, 2013).

This study is based on the *Car rental and sharing corpus* (henceforth, *CarRS corpus*). This is a corpus that brings together English non-financial reports issued by international North American companies operating in the sectors of car rental and ride sharing. *Avis Budget Group*, *Enterprise Mobility*, and *Hertz* were selected for the first sector, as they are among the largest car rental companies in the United States (Note 2). Following the same logic, *Lyft* and *Uber* were chosen for the second sector (Note 3). The table below illustrates the structure of the corpus and provides information about the texts selected for each company, with their number of tokens.

Table 1. The *CarRS corpus*

Period	Sectors	
	Car Rental (<i>Rental</i>)	Ride sharing (<i>Sharing</i>)
Pre-Covid	- Avis Budget Group 2019 CSR Report (2018 results)	- Lyft 2020 ESG Report (2019 and early 2020 results)
	- Enterprise Mobility 2019 Sustainability Report (2019 results)	- Uber 2020 ESG Report (2019 and early 2020 results)
	- Hertz 2019 CSR Report (2019 results)	
Covid	- Avis Budget Group 2020 CSR Report (2020 results)	- Lyft 2021 ESG Report (2020 results)
	- Avis Budget Group 2021 ESG Report (2020 results)	- Lyft 2022 ESG Report (2021 results)
	- Avis Budget Group 2022 ESG Report (2021 results)	- Uber 2021 ESG Report (2020 results)
	- Enterprise Mobility 2020 Sustainability Report (2020 results)	- Uber 2022 ESG Report (2021 results)
	- Enterprise Mobility 2022 ESG Report (2022 results)	- Uber 2023 ESG Report (2022 results)
	- Hertz 2022 Sustainability Report (2022 results)	
Number of tokens	Pre-Covid: 23,334	Pre-Covid: 33,924
	Covid: 73,293	Covid: 122,137
	Total: 96,627	Total: 156,061

As can be noted, the corpus is subdivided into two sub-corpora corresponding to the specific sub-sectors, namely the *Rental* and *Sharing* sub-corpora. For each of these two sub-corpora, a further subdivision was made between the documents covering the results obtained by the companies in the years before the pandemic, and those covering the years of the pandemic (until 2022). Consequently, the final corpus is structured into four sub-corpora.

The first criterion adopted during data collection was to select documents that, despite showing different titles,

have a structure similar to CSR reports. The second criterion was the availability of data. In this respect, several challenges to corpus homogeneity emerged because each company decided differently on whether or not to provide information about the results achieved in specific years. Nonetheless, it may be argued that the corpus, thanks to its structure and composition, is representative of CSR communication in the two transportation sub-sectors, both in the period immediately preceding the pandemic and during it.

As for the phase of data collection, all texts were manually downloaded in .pdf format, saved as .txt files, and cleaned and formatted for whitespace, characters, HTML, links, duplicates, and others. Due to the research focus on the discursive construction and communication of *safety*, the visual and non-linguistic components of texts such as images, tables and graphs were disregarded to concentrate on language use.

3.3 Methods

The corpus was investigated using the tools of corpus-assisted discourse studies (Baker, 2006; Partington et al., 2013; Marchi & Taylor, 2018) and the analysis involved two phases, quantitative and qualitative.

The first phase of the quantitative analysis consisted in generating and investigating the lists of the keywords. Due to their nature of unusually frequent words in a corpus compared to another corpus of larger or equal size (Baker et al., 2006), keywords are useful to identify both the “aboutness” of its texts (Phillips, 1989), its salient discourses (Baker et al., 2006), and its key topics. The analysis of keywords made it possible to identify the prevalent themes covered by car rental and ride sharing companies in their CSR reports. Thus, they served as a tool to understand whether the issue of *safety* played a key or marginal role in these disclosures. Since the comparison between the pre-pandemic and pandemic periods was the focus of this research, lists of lexical keywords of each sub-corpus were generated through the corpus software *AntConc 4.2.0* (Anthony, 2022), comparing Pre-Covid and Covid sub-corpora against each other and following this procedure for each sector.

To investigate the companies’ commitment to *safety* across time, I then conducted an analysis of the frequencies of *saf** in each text. These are reported with their normalised frequency, expressed per ten thousand words. For a visual simplification of the data, these frequencies are illustrated through a graph in Subsection 4.1. This phase was immediately followed by the calculation of the collocations of *saf**, as the repeated use of strong lexical patterns around specific objects, people, or concepts may unveil “the most salient and obvious lexical patterns surrounding [them], from which a number of discourses can be obtained” (Baker, 2006, p. 114). From a practical point of view, collocations were calculated using the same corpus software, selecting a 5L-5R span of co-text and setting the minimum frequency at 5 items. The collocates were then inspected preliminarily in their immediate linguistic context to identify consistent collocates (Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008) and discard those non-relevant, i.e., “[those being triggered] by particular events rather than being representative” (Alessi & Partington, 2000, p. 8)—these include, in this case, the repeated use of a word in the titles of report sections or project names.

The second phase of the research consisted in analysing the extended concordance lines of the collocations of *saf** in order to explore the lexico-phraseological patterns around this search word (Sinclair, 2003, 2004) and identify the linguistic strategies employed by the companies to communicate about *safety*. In operational terms, the span of co-text analysed was set at 10L-10R, but patterns that could not be observed through the inspection of the immediate co-occurring lexical items were searched through a close reading of larger portions of texts. In particular, the manual close reading of a wider co-text was useful for assessing whether information about *safety* was disclosed transparently or vaguely in terms of clarity and accuracy. More in general, no attempt was made to quantify these linguistic-communicative strategies because these forms occur in many different ways, making it impossible to identify them in isolation. In other words, a quantification would have meant, to some extent, “counting the uncountable” (Hunston, 2004).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Quantitative Results

The lexical keyword lists reported in the table below suggest that during Covid-19, compared to the pre-pandemic period, both sectors manifest a great interest to environmental issues. This is signalled by keywords such as *climate* and *water* in the *Rental* sub-corpus, and *decarbonization* in the *Sharing* sub-corpus. Another key topic emerging from the keyword analysis is diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), as indicated by the keyword *DEI* in both sub-corpora. This aspect appears to have been addressed more frequently in the reports of car rental companies, as suggested by a series of related keywords, such as *black*, *equitable*, and *inclusive*. Pandemic-related keywords—such as *covid* and *pandemic*—were found mostly in the *Rental Covid* sub-corpus, suggesting a particular attention of this sector to the pandemic. Despite the centrality of the issue of safety during Covid-19, the data reveal that, compared to the pre-pandemic period, it seems to have gained more importance in the car rental sector, as

suggested by the presence of the adjective *safe* among the positive keywords of the *Rental* sub-corpus.

Table 2. Lexical keywords of the *CarRS corpus* (Covid vs. Pre-Covid).

<i>Rental: Covid vs. Pre-Covid</i>		<i>Sharing: Covid vs. Pre-Covid</i>	
Word	Keyness (Likelihood)	Word	Keyness (Likelihood)
<i>equity</i>	20.131	<i>couriers</i>	89.768
<i>Covid</i>	19.732	<i>percentage</i>	26.085
<i>DEI</i>	16.587	<i>representation</i>	21.281
<i>pandemic</i>	15.901	<i>vaccine</i>	20.101
<i>climate</i>	10.812	<i>courier</i>	17.650
<i>health</i>	10.269	<i>DEI</i>	17.650
<i>electrification</i>	9.951	<i>zero</i>	14.421
<i>advancement</i>	9.398	<i>women</i>	12.404
<i>water</i>	9.349	<i>leaders</i>	11.861
<i>targets</i>	9.141	<i>resilient</i>	12.404
<i>solutions</i>	8.491	<i>decarbonization</i>	10.295
<i>black</i>	8.293	<i>streets</i>	9.805
<i>safe</i>	8.157	<i>philosophy</i>	9.315
<i>equitable</i>	7.307	<i>racial</i>	9.093
<i>inclusive</i>	6.900	<i>progress</i>	8.947

However, a different picture could be drawn from the analysis of the normalised frequencies of *saf** illustrated in the following bar chart (Figure 1).

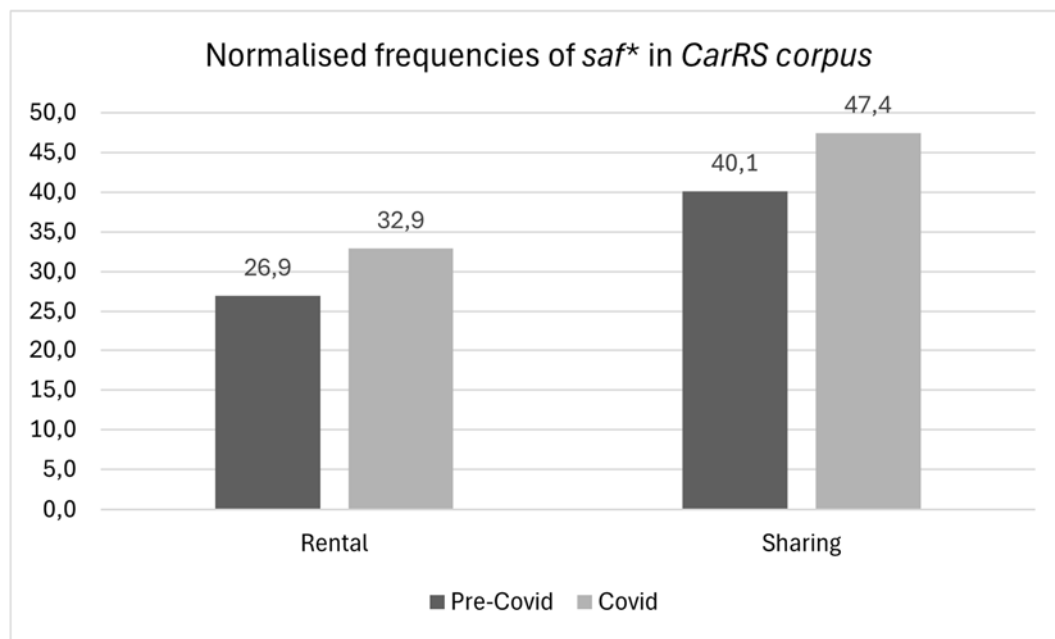


Figure 1. Frequencies of *saf** in the *CarRS corpus* (normalized per ten thousand words)

The data show that, compared to the *Rental* sub-corpus, the *Sharing* one surprisingly displays a higher number of occurrences of the word *saf**. This finding may partly be due to the higher number of tokens in the *Sharing* sub-corpus, but it nonetheless suggests that the amount of safety information disclosed by companies operating in the ride sharing sector was higher than in the car rental sector. However, compared to the pre-pandemic period, a slight increase in the normalized frequency of *saf** can be observed for both.

Moving on to the strongest collocates of *saf**, Table 3 below shows the ten strongest collocates in each sub-corpus. Compared to the other sub-corpora, in the *Rental Pre-Covid* only two lexical collocations of the search word were obtained.

Table 3. Collocates of *saf** in the *CarRS* corpus

Collocates of <i>saf*</i> in the <i>CarRS</i> corpus (with likelihood values)							
<i>Rental Pre-Covid</i>		<i>Rental Covid</i>		<i>Sharing Pre-Covid</i>		<i>Sharing Covid</i>	
<i>vehicle</i>	26.053	<i>health</i>	207.300	<i>incidents</i>	42.495	<i>incident</i>	127.375
		<i>vehicle</i>	40.022	<i>health</i>	36.372	<i>road</i>	99.884
		<i>security</i>	28.379	<i>user</i>	31.470	<i>health</i>	80.625
		<i>training</i>	27.322	<i>priority</i>	23.062	<i>features</i>	74.046
		<i>protect</i>	23.506	<i>metrics</i>	20.242	<i>user</i>	70.344
		<i>employee</i>	22.307	<i>features</i>	18.814	<i>incidents</i>	67.159
		<i>customer</i>	22.282	<i>report</i>	17.382	<i>report</i>	43.947
		<i>customers</i>	22.124	<i>incident</i>	13.150	<i>education</i>	42.554
		<i>processes</i>	19.649	<i>trust</i>	9.205	<i>improvement</i>	37.344
		<i>procedures</i>	19.183	<i>riders</i>	8.430	<i>promote</i>	36.893

These quantitative findings suggest that the topic of *safety* is closely connected with *health* in both time periods and sectors. Other prominent discourses that emerge in both time periods are *vehicle* safety in the *Rental* sub-corpus and road safety in the *Sharing* sub-corpus. An additional topic is the safety of customers and employees. In the *Pre-Covid* sub-corpora, this was found exclusively in the *Sharing* sub-corpus, as suggested by the lexical items *user* and *riders*. Conversely, in the *Covid* sub-corpora, this discursive link to both stakeholders was apparently stronger in the *Rental* sub-corpus, as indicated by the collocates *employee* and *customer(s)*, and the sole presence of the collocate *user* in the *Sharing* sub-corpus. Another significant finding is the strong mutual association between *saf** and the word *incident(s)* in the *Sharing* sub-corpus in both time periods. Finally, an additional change observed in both sectors, compared to the pre-pandemic period, is the presence of the collocates *training* and *education*, which apparently suggests a particular focus on the importance of specific learning with regards to the topic of safety.

The following section expands on these quantitative and preliminary findings, exploring *saf** in the co-text of these collocations.

4.2 Qualitative Results

4.2.1 Health and Safety

The analysis of the word *health* in the co-text of *saf** revealed the tendency of the two words to frequently co-occur together in the whole corpus, as shown by most of the extracts below. However, by examining their extended concordance lines, several changes could be also observed in the construction and communication of *safety* and *health* over time and across the two sectors.

In the *Rental Pre-Covid* sub-corpus, it was found that, despite the construction of health and safety as a value, the car rental companies emphasised *safety* and *health* as a priority for customers. An example of this discursive strategy can be observed in an extract from the 2019 CSR Report of *Avis Budget Group* reported below. The company presents health and safety as their goal (*core belief*) and acknowledges that employees' adherence to appropriate safety practices benefits them personally, but it primarily places the responsibility on employees to ensure safety for the company stakeholders. This communicative choice implicitly foregrounds the safety needs of customers while backgrounding those of workers.

- (1) Our core belief is that **Health** and **Safety** is every employee's responsibility, not only for our employees but for our customers, vendors, and all community stakeholders. [...] It is imperative that our people bring their best selves to work every day. This is why we take their **health, safety** and well-being so seriously. (Avis Budget Group – 2019 CSR Report)

In the *Sharing Pre-Covid* sub-corpus, a manual inspection of the concordance lines revealed only instances where *health* was used with reference to Covid. This finding is due to the companies' inclusion of information related to the first months of 2020. Nonetheless, it suggests that in this specific sector, the discursive association between the concepts of *safety* and *health* emerged exclusively with the outbreak of the pandemic. (2) from *Lyft* clearly refers to the safety measures taken to deal with Covid-19, as signalled by the temporal reference *May 2020* and the expression *important time for public health*. The reference to Covid-19 in (3) from *Uber* is made evident through *wearing a mask*, one of the precautionary measures that had to be adopted at that time.

- (2) In May 2020, we launched Lyft's Health Safety Program, which established new **health** and **safety** requirements for ridesharing on the Lyft platform through new policies, commitments, and products designed to address the needs of our community during this important time for public health. (Lyft – 2020 ESG Report)
- (3) Putting safety first, Uber rolled out a global mask mandate for riders and drivers, redesigned the end-to-end app experience with new **safety** and **health** precautions, and implemented new technology to verify that drivers are wearing a mask. (Uber – 2020 ESG Report)

In the *Covid* sub-corpora, the discursive construction of health and safety as key concerns for both employees and customers is much more evident. In the extracts below, the companies show their commitment to health and safety through the use of expressions projecting the companies' goals (*top priority* and *believe* in (4) and (5)), and words expressing continuity (*continue* in (6)).

- (4) Customer **health** and **safety** is a top priority at Hertz (Hertz – 2022 Sustainability Report)
- (5) We believe supporting employee **safety**, **health** and wellness should be a foundational requirement for any business. (Enterprise Mobility – 2022 ESG Report)
- (6) We have continued to invest in **health** and **safety** measures on the platform to ensure that riders and drivers are aware and in compliance with Lyft's policies. (Lyft – 2021 ESG Report)

In the example from *Avis Budget Group* below, the responsibility of ensuring the safety of service users is no longer given solely to the workers; instead, the company expresses its proactive commitment to ensuring hygienic conditions and sanitized spaces to safeguard the health safety of both workers and customers.

- (7) Introduced the Avis Safety Pledge and Budget Worry-Free Promise, designed to enhance the cleanliness and disinfection of our rental facilities and vehicles, ensuring the **health** and **safety** of our employees and customers. (Avis Budget Group – 2020 CSR Report)

These examples suggest that, contrary to the quantitative analysis of collocations, the concern for worker safety from the outbreak of the pandemic is present not only in the *Rental* sub-corpus, but also in texts produced by ride sharing operators. Additionally, the analysis of the word *riders* in the co-text of *saf** in the *Sharing Pre-Covid* sub-corpus further supported this evidence. Indeed, it revealed instances referring to the pandemic where companies in this sector emphasize their commitment to the safety of their drivers and riders. The example below is a case in point.

- (8) In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we paused Shared rides across all of our markets as a precautionary **safeguard** for both drivers and **riders** using the Lyft platform in March 2020. (Lyft – 2020 ESG Report)

The close reading of the extended concordance lines of most of the collocates of *saf** also revealed the use of statements of practices and methods (Yu & Bondi, 2017) to safeguard stakeholders' health. (9) and (10) refer to precautions and techniques introduced to verify if Covid-19 safety measures are followed, and campaigns raising awareness about the use of masks.

- (9) New safety features: Putting safety first, Uber rolled out a global mask mandate for riders and drivers, redesigned the end-to-end app experience with new **safety** and **health** precautions, and implemented new technology to verify that drivers are wearing a mask. (Uber – 2020 ESG Report)
- (10) We also launched a number of campaigns aimed at popularizing the use of face covers and other **health safety** tips, including: • No Mask, No Ride • We Protect Each Other • Wash, Wear, Air (Uber – 2021 ESG Report)

4.2.2 Vehicle Safety

The analysis of the word *vehicle* in the surrounding context of *saf** revealed a strong commitment by car rental companies to this issue in both the *Pre-Covid* and *Covid* sub-corpora. In (11) the expression *strong emphasis* conveys the idea of an effort taken by *Avis Budget Group* to regularly do vehicle maintenance work. Similarly to the instances about health and safety, (12) shows the use of the adverb *continually* expressing continuity to reinforce the commitment on vehicle maintenance.

- (11) At Avis Budget Group, we place a strong emphasis on **vehicle** maintenance for customer **safety** and satisfaction. (Avis Budget Group – 2019 CSR Report)
- (12) We continually work to keep **vehicles** and facilities **safe** by coordinating closely with vehicle manufacturers and other industry stakeholders. For example, Hertz policy is to ensure that vehicles

subject to open safety-related recalls are not made available to rent until after the recall is remedied. (Hertz – 2022 Sustainability Report)

The close reading of the extended concordance lines also revealed the use of statements of practices and methods enacted to ensure vehicle safety. The following extract, for instance, refers to measures taken to guarantee that vehicles subject to a safety recall are not made available for rental and undergo the necessary repair.

- (13) The Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards requires auto manufacturers to send a notice of any **safety** recall to **vehicle** owners. When Enterprise Mobility receives such a safety recall notice, we identify affected vehicles by their corresponding vehicle identification numbers (VIN) and then place a “mandatory rental hold” on these vehicles in our rental management system until the appropriate repair or remedy is provided by the vehicle OEM. (Enterprise Mobility – 2022 ESG Report)

4.2.3 Road Safety

The investigation of the extended concordance lines of the collocates *road* and *incident(s)* revealed a key concern of ride sharing operators for road safety. Through the analysis of *road* in the co-text of *saf**, it was found that these companies took credit for contributing to the reduction of traffic accidents, especially those caused by drunk drivers, as suggested in (14).

- (14) The growth of Lyft and ridesharing has coincided with encouraging **road safety** trends on impaired driving, as communities now have an affordable and convenient alternative to driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs. (Lyft – 2021 ESG Report)

In addition, the extract below also shows that the companies also communicated their compliance with metrics as further evidence of their commitment to road safety.

- (15) The Board of Directors’ Compensation Committee has tied executive compensation for our most senior executives to the achievement of **safety metrics**, including reducing safety incidents and increasing transparency and trust (Uber – 2020 ESG Report)

4.2.4 Safety Incidents

As mentioned above, the word *incident(s)* appeared among the strongest collocates of *saf** in the *Sharing Pre-Covid* and *Covid* sub-corpora. Interestingly, the investigation of the extended concordance lines revealed that *incident* is used also to refer to road accidents. This is further supported by the lower number of occurrences of the word *accident* in the whole *Sharing* sub-corpus (only 14 occurrences of *accident(s)*, compared to 145 occurrences of *incident(s)*). The preference for *incident(s)* over the more specific term *accident*, which would denote negative events caused by the vehicles, might be seen as a strategy by companies to preserve their positive image.

In the following instances, *Lyft* and *Uber* disclosed the practices they enacted to prevent various types of incidents occurring in their vehicles, by referring to dedicated platforms and reporting initiatives.

- (16) Both riders and drivers can report **incidents** to our dedicated Trust & **Safety** Team, which is available through the 24/7 Critical Response Line so that we can take action—including investigating and working with law enforcement when appropriate—to help to keep our community safe. (Lyft – 2020 ESG Report)
- (17) As the first comprehensive publication of its kind, it also shares data on the most serious **safety incidents** that occur on the platform, including sexual assault, motor vehicle fatalities, and physical assault fatalities. (Uber – 2020 ESG Report)

As can be seen in (17), *Uber* places importance on the act of reporting the specific kinds of incidents, including sexual assaults. Interestingly, in the *Rental* sub-corpus, there is no mention of this misconduct. This is probably due to *Uber*’s decrease in popularity following several cases of sexual assault committed by some of its drivers. *Lyft*, the company’s main competitor, experienced a rise in customers as a result of these incidents (Griffith et al., 2018). Consequently, it is not surprising that both companies emphasized their commitment to reporting incidents and creating platforms that allow for immediate intervention to ensure customer safety.

4.2.5 Learning Opportunities

In addition, the analysis of the concordance lines of *training* and *education* in the linguistic context of *saf** revealed a particular focus of the companies on providing continuous learning opportunities in safety matters during the pandemic. Extracts 18–20 below are a case in point.

- (18) As part of this commitment, we provide **safety training** through our learning management system. New employees receive core safety training as part of their onboarding process, and job-specific safety training based on their position and responsibilities. (Hertz – 2022 Sustainability Report)

(19) We worked with the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization (WHO) to create COVID-19 safety tips for ridesharing and launched an in-app resource center and a series of **education** campaigns focused on *safety* information and relevant updates. (Uber – 2021 ESG Report)

(20) To drive on the Lyft platform, all drivers must complete a community *safety education* course. (Lyft – 2022 ESG Report).

4.2.6 Transparency or Vagueness?

Moving on to the last level of analysis of this paper, namely whether the companies are transparent or vague in their communication of *safety*, very few instances with transparent linguistic choices were found. In this respect, the most frequent linguistic resource used that might convey transparency in terms of information understandability is the use of exemplification (see the expression *for example* in the extract below).

(21) We continually work to keep **vehicles** and facilities *safe* by coordinating closely with vehicle manufacturers and other industry stakeholders. For example, Hertz policy is to ensure that vehicles subject to open safety-related recalls are not made available to rent until after the recall is remedied. (Hertz – 2022 Sustainability Report)

However, the analysis also suggested a general lack of transparency in the communication of the companies' practices ensuring safety, as can be seen below in extracts displaying words used with a generic meaning. As also shown above in relation to the ride sharing operators, the word *incident* itself is a perfect example of vague and generic linguistic use. Indeed, by choosing this term, the companies avoided reporting about the specific kind(s) of negative event(s) that occurred in their vehicles. Examples like the one below make this idea even more evident. Indeed, although the use of the percentage *0.0003%* might be interpreted as a tool through which *Uber* accurately reported the number of incidents, this number still implies that at least one critical incident occurred. Additionally, *critical* is an example of a vague expression of degree, as this adjective neither provides specific information about the type or severity of the incident, nor there are any explanations of these criticalities in the documents.

(22) *0.0003%* of trips had a reported critical *safety incident*. (Uber – 2020 ESG Report)

In (23) from *Uber* 2023 ESG report, the word *investments* is vague because no quantifications or specification of such investments are provided in the immediate context.

(23) We're proud of the investments we've made in **road safety** and the impact we've had on helping to improve the safety of our users. But we know that tech interventions and education alone won't solve the challenge. Uber is committed to making streets safer for everyone. To that end, we've joined the US Department of Transportation's Call to Action, as well as campaigns outside the US, and urge other companies to do the same. (Uber – 2023 ESG Report)

This may be due to the fact that such information is contained in more financially oriented documents, such as annual reports. However, reading that type of document often requires a more specialized knowledge that not all readers possess. In this sense, the omission mentioned here prevents various types of stakeholders from understanding the extent of these investments and suggests a lack of transparency in terms of the accessibility of the information.

Similar considerations could be made for the word *precautions* in (24). In this case, precautions are neither exemplified nor listed. Instead, what follows is a presentation of the new measures implemented by the companies and the results achieved through them. Even the use of percentages does not convey transparency, as the specific issues regarding mask usage for the remaining *0.5%* are not explicitly detailed.

(24) New safety features: Putting safety first, Uber rolled out a global mask mandate for riders and drivers, redesigned the end-to-end app experience with new *safety* and **health** precautions, and implemented new technology to verify that drivers are wearing a mask. As of the end of 2020, *99.5%* of trips had no reported mask issues. (Uber – 2021 ESG Report)

Another kind of linguistic resource identified during the analysis contributing to a lack of transparency is the use of quality assessment expressions. The superlative *highest* in (25) is not effective to quantify and assess the company's result. Furthermore, the generic use of the word *standards* does not specify which standards the company is referring to.

(25) Our current fleet consists of vehicles from the world's leading motor vehicle manufacturers, ensuring we offer our customers the highest possible standards of **vehicle safety**, air emissions control and technology. Our hybrid fleet is one of the largest in our industry with *19,000+* hybrid vehicles globally. (Avis Budget

Group – 2019 CSR Report)

Finally, in (26), the generic use of the word *compensation* and the quality assessment verbs *reduce* and *increase* do not provide any quantification of the exact amount of compensation, the number of safety incidents, or the customers' level of trust in the surrounding context.

- (26) The Compensation Committee has tied executive compensation for our most senior executives to the achievement of safety metrics, including reducing **safety incidents** and increasing transparency and trust. Privacy and cybersecurity: [...] (Uber - 2022 ESG Report)

5. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, insights have been given into the discursive construction of *safety* before and during Covid-19 in a corpus of non-financial reports of international North American companies operating in the car rental and ride sharing sectors, using quantitative and qualitative methods of corpus-assisted discourse analysis.

Quantitative findings from the keyword analysis revealed that safety was a key topic, only for the car rental sector during the pandemic. However, unlike these findings, the normalised frequencies of *saf** in both sectors revealed an increase of interest in the topic after the outbreak of the pandemic. Preliminary findings from the analysis of the collocations of *saf** suggested a strong discursive association between *safety* and *health*. The evidence from these results also suggested that in both time periods car rental companies focused on vehicle safety, whilst ride sharing operators concentrated more on road safety.

The results from the qualitative analysis supported the view that companies acknowledged the importance of safety. However, reports issued by car rental operators in the pre-Covid period focused their attention on customers, while safety and health started to be a primary concern for both employees and customers during the pandemic. As for the ride sharing sub-corpus, health safety became a priority only with the outbreak of the pandemic. During this period, both sectors showed a strong discursive link between *safety* and lifelong learning. The qualitative analysis also supported the difference between the two sectors in the greater attention to aspects related to vehicle safety – especially maintenance work – in the car rental sector, and the focus on road safety in the ride sharing sector. In particular, ride sharing operators took credit for the reduction of incidents caused by impaired driving, thanks to the introduction of their services, and also insisted on incidents reporting operations.

Evidence also suggested that the companies communicated their approach to safety largely by means of commissive statements (Bondi, 2016), quality assessment expressions, and lexical items expressing continuity and projecting the companies' goals, though also examples of statements of practices were used. The plethora of statements of commitment used to disclose health and safety measures adopted to address the pandemic may be attributed to the goal of reassuring any customers worried about the safety of their journeys. However, the general use of vague linguistic items within the statements of the companies' practices – in particular, quality assessment verbs or adjectives, and the adoption of words with generic meaning – signalled a lack of linguistic transparency concerning the practices ensuring transparency disclosed in the reports.

Given the increasing popularity of social media as tools for CSR communication (e.g., Ali et al., 2015; Capriotti, 2017; Kesavan et al., 2013), future research may investigate whether the same linguistic-communicative strategies observed in this study can be found in posts published by the companies on different social media platforms. Further suggestions also include the linguistic investigation of news releases, the application of this methodology to other fields of transport (e.g., airline companies and bus operators) and logistics, and the integration of the methods of multimodal analysis (e.g., Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001).

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No additional data are available.

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Notes

- Note 1. For an official definition of road safety, see, for instance, the one provided by Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO). Retrieved July 6, 2024, from <https://www.paho.org/en/topics/road-safety>
- Note 2. Retrieved July 24, 2024, from <https://www.nerdwallet.com/article/travel/what-is-the-best-car-rental-company>
- Note 3. Retrieved July 24, 2024, from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/top-10ride-hailing-market-companies-world-gogpf/>

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