The Dynamics of Employee-Led Climate Activism and Corporate Response in Big Tech: A Media-Based Case Study of Amazon

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ABSTRACT,
Employee-led climate activism has become an increasingly influential force within corporations, especially in the Big Tech sector. While prior research studied employee activism as isolated events, how these movements evolve over time and interact dynamically with corporate response is still underexplored. The present thesis aims to address this gap by analysing the longitudinal interaction between employee activism and corporate response, using Amazon as a case study. Focusing on Amazon Employees for Climate Justice, events from 2018 till late 2024 will be traced. Using a qualitative case study approach and implementing the Gioia methodology, 101 media articles were dissected and coded to map cyclical patterns of activism and response. The findings reflect a dynamic feedback loop, where employee activism progresses from internal mobilization to public protests and media engagement, while Amazon's response cycles between defensive framing, symbolic or partially substantive concessions and retaliation. These interactions are then further shaped by external actors, such as the media, NGOs and regulators. This thesis provides an empirically grounded processual framework to better understand employee activism and corporate response interactions over time, providing practical insights for both activists and organizations, as well as policymakers, to navigate climate accountability within large corporations.

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During the preparation of this work, the author used AI tools (ChatGPT, Grammarly) to revise grammar, improve sentence flow, and assist in the initial duplication removal during data collection. After using these tools, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the work.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Recent years have shown a rise in employee-led activism (EA), defined as organized, collective action by employees to influence their employer's policies and practices (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Manokha, 2020). While initially, leaders invited employees to speak up on issues that concern them as part of internal feedback and participatory management systems, they are now faced with a more demanding and assertive engagement (Reitz & Higgins, 2022), as employees are now publicly challenging their companies on a range of issues. This transformation reflects a growing willingness among employees to speak out publicly on ethical, political, and environmental concerns, pushing beyond traditional feedback mechanisms and into collective, reputationally significant actions. In return, this often provokes companies to respond in a tactful or defensive manner.

The trend is especially pronounced in the Big Tech sector. Companies such as Amazon, Google and Microsoft have come under growing internal pressure from employees demanding stronger commitments to climate responsibility, social equity, and transparency (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016). These demands are typically expressed through petitions, walkouts, and open letters, reflecting a shift in workplace power dynamics and employee expectations. Environmental activism has become a key focus of this trend, as employees increasingly position themselves as stakeholders in their companies' climate impact and demand more than symbolic gestures (Hug & Zhang, 2024). An example are movements such as Amazon Employees for Climate Justice (AECJ). This organization has planned walkouts, issued open letters, and mobilized shareholder activism to demand climate accountability from their employers (AECJ, 2025).

In firms with large-scale emissions from global logistics and data infrastructure, such as Amazon, the gap between internal operations and external sustainability narratives has created ongoing reputational tension (Cook et al., 2017). Media plays a critical role in shaping how both activism and corporate responses are interpreted, framing internal dissent either as a threat or a credible call for accountability (Entman, 1993; Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007).

While corporate leaders have responded with high-profile sustainability initiatives and pledges to reach carbon neutrality, these efforts are often seen by insiders as reputational rather than substantive (Khan et al., 2021; Gaim et al., 2019). The symbolic gestures from corporations often lead to a loss of trust from insiders and an amplification of further activism. This pattern is described in literature as a cycle of action and response (King & Pearce, 2010). In this landscape, it is imperative to understand how this back-and-forth dynamic illustrates the interactive nature or employee-led activism and corporate reputation management.

Much of the existing research on employee-led climate activism examines isolated events or individual campaigns, offering limited insights into the extended dynamic interplay between such movements and corporate responses (CR). While interest in this phenomenon has grown in recent years, studies that adopt a systematic and structured approach to examining these interactions over time remain scarce. For example, Gautam & Carberry (2020) explore the emergence of employee activism in the high-tech sector, identifying organizational conditions that support or suppress it, but omit examining the temporal evolution and dynamics of these movements. Briscoe and Gupta (2016) provide a valuable typology of activist strategies in and around organizations but largely emphasize snapshots of activism rather than sustained sequences of engagement over time. Studies such as Rao et al. (2000) and Soule (2009) likewise tend to analyse the impact of discrete moments, such as shareholder proposals, walkouts, or media interventions, without tracing how these actions develop longitudinally or how they influence and interact with internal dynamics and corporate responses, beyond the immediate aftermath. Even empirical work on AECJ (e.g., Tabuchi, 2019) tends to centre on landmark events like the 2019 Climate Walkout, while overlooking the broader process by which such movements unfold, escalate, and provoke evolving organizational reactions. As Cloutier and Langley (2020) argue, a process perspective is essential for capturing how change occurs within organizations, not just at one moment, but through sequences of action, response, and feedback over time. Despite this, longitudinal studies on employee climate activism remain scarce, leaving open important questions about the cumulative impact of these movements and how corporations adapt, resist, respond or absorb internal dissent. Considering the need to investigate the interactive dynamics between employee climate activism and corporate response through a longitudinal lens, this research will focus on answering the following research question:

How do employee-led climate activism and corporate response interact over time in Big Tech?

This study aims to investigate how climate EA has interacted with and influenced CR over time, using Amazon as a case study. Amazon serves as a strong example for examining this phenomenon due to its high-profile presence in the Big Tech sector and its complex environmental reputation, as well as its vast timeline of employee dissent. As a company with significant global operations and a sizable carbon footprint, Amazon has made public sustainability pledges that have been met with scepticism, particularly from within (Amazon, 2023). The formation of AECJ illustrates a well-documented case of internal activism that has been unfolding since 2018, where employees have challenged leadership through coordinated actions (AECJ, 2019; Tabuchi, 2019). This internal pressure offers a unique opportunity to trace how activism evolves and how corporations respond over time to reputational and organizational demands (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016).

A timeline will be traced of employee actions, media representations and organizational responses at Amazon, between 2018 and 2025. To systematically analyse how these interactions evolve over time, the Gioia methodology (GM) (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013) will be employed. This will enable inductive, grounded theory building by coding first-order concepts from empirical material and abstracting them into second-order themes and aggregate dimensions. The study will further develop a process-oriented mapping of employee and corporate response cyclicity (Cloutier & Langley, 2020) to examine how activism unfolds over time, identifying key sequences, turning points, and organizational reactions. Through focusing on how activism unfolds, the study will highlight how internal pressure can or cannot influence real change within powerful organizations. By drawing on social movement theory and using publicly available media sources as empirical material, the research aims to contribute to the growing literature on EA, organizational change, corporate environmental practices, and corporate responsiveness. This process-focused perspective can allow for a deeper understanding of how internal activism develops and becomes a meaningful driver of organizational change, as well as how organizations respond in both symbolic and substantive ways across time.

This research will offer practical insights for employee activists operating within large technology firms. By tracing how AECJ strategically escalated their actions and leveraged both internal and external pressure points over time, the study will highlight which factors helped increase activist legitimacy and challenge

corporate narratives. These findings can then support employee activists in making more informed strategic choices about how to organize, communicate, and sustain momentum. Beyond the activist community, this knowledge could also benefit journalists, civil society actors, and policy advocates seeking to understand how internal dissent contributes to broader corporate climate accountability.

2. BACKGROUND LITERATURE

In this chapter, the theoretical frameworks guiding the present study will be outlined. As recognized in the Introduction Chapter, as climate EA gains momentum within influential organizations, theoretical tools to explore this issue have become prevalent. These frameworks help capture the development, influence and implications of these movements, as well as the cycles of action and response. Through integrating insights from Social Movement Theory and reviewing the feedback loops of EA and CR, this study aims to analyse the emergence and organizational impact of internal climate advocacy efforts over time. The combination of these perspectives offers a nuanced understanding of how activism unfolds, how it is represented, and how it produces, or rather fails to produce change.

2.1 Employee Activism from The Perspective of Social Movement Theory

Social Movement Theory (SMT) offers foundational insights into how collective actors mobilize to effect change, often by opposing power structures and dominant institutional logistics (Snow & Benford, 1988; Tilly, 1995; McAdam, 1996). SMT was traditionally utilized to examine protests and activism in the large societal structures. However, recently it has shifted and adapted to the corporate context, where employees now function as "insider activists" (Meyerson, 2003). These people are described as seeking to influence organizational agendas from the inside of a company, often invoking moral authority and collective identity to push for change (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016).

In the context of SMT, concepts such as framing, repertoires of contention and political opportunity structures become imperative to understanding movements like AECJ, which often resort to using petitions, walkouts, open letters and media engagement to pressure leadership. Furthermore, these concepts help explain how activists develop resonant strategies, gaining internal and external legitimacy (Ganz, 2000; Soule, 2009).

In their research, Reitz and Higgins (2022) argue that in recent years, employee voice has transitioned from a management-invited channel, where leaders would encourage employee feedback, into a more assertive and demanding form of expression. Employees do not merely offer feedback on corporate operations but have expectations and new standards that must be fulfilled. This shift reflects the evolution from traditional employee voice to the more strategic and confrontational forms of activism. While employee voice typically refers to expressions of concern or suggestions aimed at improvement within an established managerial framework (Morrison, 2011), employee activism involves publicly challenging company practices and mobilizing for broader social or environmental change (Manokha, 2020; Reitz & Higgins, 2022). The rise of environmental activism within Big Tech reflects this evolution, positioning workers not just as contributors to innovation, but as stakeholders in ethical and environmental governance.

2.2 The Interaction Between Employee Activism and Corporate Response

SMT emphasizes that EA goes beyond internal dissent or advocacy within firms. As many scholars have argued, activist movements are part of a dynamic interaction between organizational insiders and leadership that unfolds over time. The literature strongly emphasizes the relational and processual nature of this interaction (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; King & Pearce, 2010). Instead of viewing EA and CR as discrete or linear events, a growing body of works conceptualize the two forces as mutually influential and often cyclical, involved in ongoing power struggles and legitimacy negotiations.

As highlighted earlier in this document, EA acts as a bottom-up influence within organization, challenging company practices (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016). Defined as "insider activists" by Meyerson (2003), they have not only institutional knowledge and legitimacy but also access to internal networks and communication channels. This means that their activism is harder to dismiss and more politically sensitive for leadership (McDonnel et al., 2019).

Corporate responses to EA can vary widely, from symbolic gestures to substantive organizational change. While symbolic gestures (e.g. public statements, task forces, pledges) aim to preserve reputation without altering core practices (Delmas & Burbano, 2011), substantive responses result in tangible changes (e.g. policy reforms, operational shifts, governance restructuring) (Crilly et al., 2012). Briscoe and Gupta (2016) relate that the choice of response depends on how leadership interprets legitimacy and threat of activism, as well as internal and external pressures.

In their work, King and Pearce (2010) conceptualize the relationship as a cyclical process of contention, where EA and CR develop in iterative phases. Their theory expands on the different stages of EA and how CR interact and influence it. While initially, EA might begin under the form of internal petitions, appeals, or constructive dialogue, if met with insufficient or symbolic responses, it evolves into more aggressive tactics, such as public statements, coalition-building, or protests. The morphing of EA tactics further compels corporate actors to reassess their positions, either reinforcing their resistance or resulting in concessions. Thus, each activism reaction corresponds to an organization response, which then becomes the basis for further activism. This creates a feedback loop that shapes the interaction between the two sides over time.

Being an action and reaction loop, this cycle is not linear, nor does it necessarily lead to resolution. Rather, it results in evolving relationships in which both sides reinterpret one another's actions and adjust their responses (King & Pearce, 2010). Similarly, Briscoe and Gupta (2016) describe how organizations may oscillate between suppression, symbolic gestures and genuine engagement depending on internal alignment, leadership priorities and external pressures. These theories offer a basis for the claim that the interaction between EA and CR is best understood as a dynamic, recursive negotiation over meaning, legitimacy and control within the firm.

Through this interaction, media framing plays a crucial role in analysing how these movements are portrayed, together with their corporate responses. According to Entman (1993), framing involves selecting aspects of reality and making them more salient in communication, thereby shaping how audiences understand issues, attribute responsibility, and evaluate legitimacy. Media coverage of climate activism can deeply impact and influence a firm's reputation, especially when it is sourced from internal actions (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007). Media then becomes a "strategic arena", where legitimacy is contested (Carvalho & Burgess, 2005; Nisbet, 2009).

While King and Pearce (2010) and Briscoe and Gupta (2016) serve as a foundation for answering the study's research question, both papers analyse interactions over static points in

time and isolated events. Through adopting a longitudinal lens for analysing the phenomenon, a clearer understanding can be gained of how sustained activism can reconfigure internal power dynamics, or rather how it may be defused, neutralized or absorbed by the organization.

Together, these contributions offer a cohesive methodological and philosophical foundation for this study's aim to understand the iterative dynamic of internal activism, media framing and organizational strategies and how they interrelate across time. By integrating SMT and the activism-response cycle, this study develops a robust framework to analyse how employee climate activism and corporate response interact in Big Tech and how they unfold over time.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study employs an inductive qualitative longitudinal case study approach based on media analysis, to investigate the interaction between EA and CR within a large technology corporation (Yin, 2011).

The case of Amazon offers a uniquely valuable context, given its long-term global prominence, complex environmental reputation, and the emergence of a well-documented internal movement like AECJ (AECJ, 2019; Tabuchi, 2019). By tracing the development of this movement from 2018 to 2024, the research focuses on EA and CR not as a static phenomenon, but as a dynamic and evolving dual process with strategic inflection points and varying organizational consequences over time.

A longitudinal process approach is essential for capturing how EA gains traction, escalates, and provokes either symbolic or substantive responses. It moves beyond single-event studies to examine how internal dissent unfolds and accumulates within organizational systems (Cloutier & Langley, 2020; Langley, 1999). Publicly available media sources serve as a rich database to reconstruct the timeline of activism and corporate response. As activism increasingly plays out in the public domain, media coverage becomes a valuable lens for observing how events are communicated, legitimized, and strategically leveraged by both employees and the company (Tabuchi, 2019).

This design allows for the development of a processual framework, using the GM that captures how EA evolves over time and interacts with CR, offering insights into the dynamics and strategies that shape these activist-corporate interactions. The goal is not only to understand how activism functions and interacts with leadership within Amazon, but to offer a conceptual tool applicable to similar activist groups and firms facing growing internal pressure on climate and sustainability issues.

3.2 Case Selection: Why Amazon?

Amazon was selected as the central case study for this research due to its strategic relevance to the research question. As one of the most prominent Big Tech companies, Amazon has a significant global presence and is frequently at the centre of environmental and labour-related scrutiny. Its public commitment to sustainability through The Climate Pledge contrasts with ongoing criticism regarding its operational emissions and supply chain practices (Amazon, 2023).

More importantly, Amazon provides a rich empirical setting for examining internal climate activism due to the well-documented emergence of AECJ. Since 2018, this employee-led group has organized large-scale walkouts, issued public letters, and mobilized around shareholder initiatives to demand stronger climate commitments from corporate leadership (AECJ, 2020; Tabuchi, 2019). These actions offer a clear timeline of longitudinal employee dissent and organization response, aligning with this study's aim to analyse longitudinal activism as a process.

Amazon's visibility, the accessibility of media documentation along a vast timeline, and the presence of a defined activist group make it a paradigmatic case for understanding how employee-led climate initiatives evolve, how they are framed, and what forms of organizational change they may trigger. Studying Amazon thus allows for generalizable insights into the push-pull effect of the EA and CR interaction within other highly visible, complex organizations in the tech sector.

3.3 Data Collection

For this study, data was collected from the Nexis Uni platform, a comprehensive media archive. Using a systematic keyword-based search strategy and limiting the dataset to English-language news articles between 2018 and 2024 that referenced employee-led climate actions within Amazon, an eligible dataset was formed and further analysed. Boolean operators were used to optimise the results of the search (e.g., ("Amazon Employees for Climate Justice" OR "AECJ" OR "Amazon worker protest" OR "Amazon employee strike") AND ("climate change" OR "climate activism" OR "climate justice")). The keywords used were chosen to capture both the activism itself and the corporate responses.

The search initially returned 815 results. After having applied the first level of exclusion criteria, which entailed limiting the dataset by language (English) and timeline (2018-2025), the number of hits was reduced to 599. Subsequently, a round of initial relevance screening was conducted, through which the following types of articles were excluded: radio transcripts, news summaries covering multiple events, only briefly mentioning Amazon, and lastly, news reports focused solely on other companies. This led to the reduction of the dataset to 455 articles.

Following, a two-step duplication removal process was employed. First, an automatic removal was realised with the help of an AI tool. This aided in the efficient removal of clearly identical duplicates, bringing the total number of articles down to 330. Then, a manual review was used to further lower the number to 213. Near-duplicates, such as stories with identical core content but slightly reordered text or paraphrased sections were removed in this process.

Lastly, only articles published by reputable news outlets were selected, as to ensure quality and reliability. With this final selection step, only 101 unique articles remained.

Articles were included based on a predetermined criterion. They had to explicitly mention instances of climate-related activism initiated by Amazon employees, including organized walkouts, petitions, internal letters or coordinated media campaigns. Moreover, corporate responses to activism, including but not limited to policy announcements, internal memos, disciplinary measures, public statements, or new environmental pledges that were framed as responses to employee action were included as well. Additionally, articles that offered interpretive framing of these actions, particularly portraying them as disruptive, empowering, necessary, controversial, or heroic were considered essential to understanding the true nature of the phenomena.

This systematic media review approach allowed for both chronological tracking and interpretive analysis of the evolving relationship between Amazon employees and the company, as well as their interaction over a vast time period.

3.4 Data Analysis

This study employed the GM, as presented and conceptualized by Gioia, Corley and Hamilton in 2013, to analyse the evolving relationship between EA and CR at Amazon. This method allowed for inductive theory-building by grounding the analysis in language and meaning-making of organizational actors, as reflected in the collected empirical database. Rather than treating employee activism as a fixed variable or isolated event, the GM allowed for the identification of first-order concepts based on informant-centric terms, which were then clustered into second-order concepts and aggregated dimensions. Additionally, these inductive categories were further applied to develop a processual mapping that illustrated the unfolding sequence of interactions longitudinally.

The analysis was conducted with a clear focus on temporality and dynamics. Events were chronologically mapped along a timeline from the establishment of AECJ in 2018 to the most recent developments in 2024.[1] These events were then organized into temporal bracketing phases in the processual map, such as initiation, escalation, response, resolution, and re-escalation, to capture how activism evolves and how Amazon responds at different stages. The aim was not only to trace what happened but also to identify causal mechanisms, feedback loops and critical junctures that shaped the trajectory of EA and corporate behaviour.

By analysing the processual flow of events, the study explored how internal climate activism develops over time and how its impact manifests, whether through symbolic compliance or substantive change. This dual-layered approach, grounded in the Gioia coding structure and analysed through a process-theoretical lens (Langley, 1999; Langley & Cloutier, 2020), produced a rich, longitudinal perspective on activism within a high-profile firm.

While media reports serve as the primary data source, the analysis does not centre on media framing itself but uses these sources to reconstruct sequences of actions and responses in a publicly documented context. This approach enabled a nuanced view of the evolving dynamics within the context of climate activism in Big Tech.

3.5 Validity and Limitations

While using media articles offers visibility into public discourse and corporate positioning, it is not without limitations. Selection bias may lead to a focus on high-profile actions while overlooking more routine or internal efforts. Media framing asymmetries could potentially skew public understanding of discourse (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007), and underreporting due to undisclosed company decisions or employee actions could potentially hinder the validity and actuality of information found in news articles.

To mitigate these limitations, this study draws upon a diverse range of media outlets to triangulate multiple perspectives.

While the case of Amazon will serve as the primary case study, chosen as a paradigmatic example of EA in Big Tech, the goal of this research is to identify patterns, mechanisms, and processes that can be generalized to similar contexts across the Big Tech sector.

All data used is publicly available via Nexis Uni, and no personal or sensitive information is collected. The study adheres to the principles of ethical qualitative research (BSA, 2017).

[1] See Appendix A

4. FINDINGS

This chapter focuses on the findings of this study, resulted from the construction of the Gioia data structure[2] and the processual map.

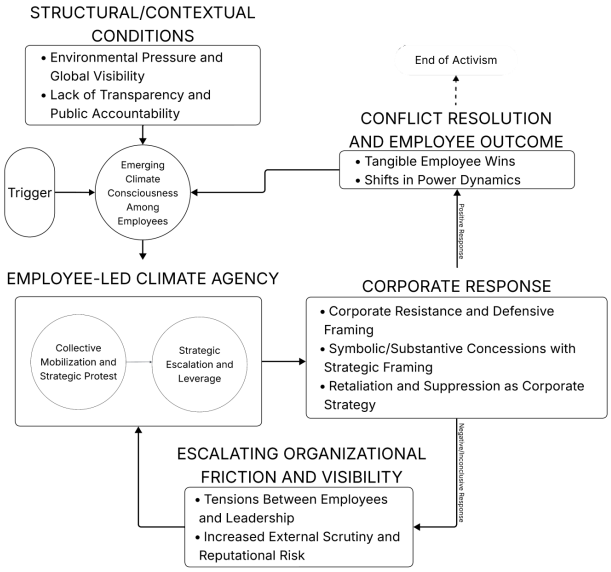

Figure 1 Processual Map

4.1 Structural and Contextual Conditions

The findings suggest that EA starts with structural and contextual conditions such as environmental pressures and global visibility, followed by a lack of transparency and public accountability. Thus, while the primary focus of this study was the relationship between internal EA and CR, ignoring external influences would have provided an incomplete picture.

4.1.1 Environmental Pressure and Global Visibility

In the case of Amazon, NGOs like Greenpeace helped exacerbate the awareness and criticism of Amazon's climate practices early on. For example, in their 2017 Click Green report, Greenpeace stated that:

"The lack of emissions data provided by Amazon's cloud services arm is "one of the single biggest obstacles to sector transparency"." (ABC Premium News, July 4, 2029; Art. No. 3)

Following the formation of AECJ in 2018, their first major public action was an open letter, presented not only to Amazon leadership but also at a shareholder meeting. This directly engaged shareholders and raised awareness of Amazon's climate practices. This letter emerged from growing internal tensions and was heavily influenced by external environmental pressure and the increasing global visibility of climate change issues, as reflected in the letter itself:

"Climate change is an existential threat. The 2018 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report predicts that a warming of 2° Celsius, which we're currently on track to surpass, will threaten the lives of hundreds of millions of people and put thousands of species at risk of extinction" (MailOnline, January 2, 2020; Art. No. 21)

As environmental organizations increasingly mobilized to pressure businesses and governments to adopt stronger climate policies, AECJ aligned itself with these movements. This was evident through AECJ's participation in the 2019 Global Climate Strike, which was "[…] timed to draw attention to a global

[2] See Appendix B

climate strike on Sep 20 and a UN climate summit on Sep 23." Around 1,000 Amazon employees decided to join these efforts. (Channel NewsAsia, September 11, 2019; Art. No. 6)

The COVID-19 pandemic further influenced employee perspectives. Work-from-Home (WFH) policies and their subsequent retraction highlighted for many employees the climate impact of commuting. This realization contributed to a growing climate consciousness within Amazon's workforce, which is a topic further explored in this chapter.

4.1.2 Lack of Transparency and Public Accountability

A lack of transparency and public accountability was found to be an important factor in triggering climate consciousness among employees as well as in damaging company reputation. For example, despite its global visibility, Amazon has consistently resisted full transparency regarding carbon emissions. An illustration of this disclosure-avoidance behaviour is when the company contested emission divulgence requirements in Australia by citing "trade secrets". This led to the company facing growing criticism for its vague or incomplete climate commitments, often accused of making largely symbolic gestures. In their article, ClimateWire accused the company of a lack of transparency, stating that:

"The opacity around the pledges of Bezos and the tech giant he runs have led to growing concern about the speed and sincerity of their climate commitments." (ClimateWire, September 21, 2020; Art. No. 65)

Amazon has also been known to quietly abandon previously made commitments. For instance, one 2019 commitment was later withdrawn with little to no explanation, raising further scepticism. Fastcompany.com voiced these concerns in one of their articles:

"[…] if the company was on track to hit the target, it's not clear why they wouldn't want to celebrate that publicly."

When asked, an important leader of the nonprofit Pacific Environment declared as well that Amazon's actions towards sustainability are rather unclear:

"I can't speak to their reasoning, but the fact that this commitment was quietly deleted from their website and had to be unearthed by a reporter who had previously reported on Amazon underestimating their carbon footprint, is concerning". (Fastcompany.com, May 30, 2023; Art. No. 84)

These structural and contextual conditions created fertile ground for internal activism to emerge and challenge leadership. While these external pressures were crucial, the formation of AECJ served as a key catalyst, sparking broader employee mobilization that continued to grow from that point forward.

4.2 Employee-Led Climate Agency

The findings paint a clear picture of what constitutes climate EA. Starting with the emergence of climate consciousness and continuing with mobilization and escalation. In the case of Amazon, these elements are clearly represented.

4.2.1 Emerging Climate Consciousness Among Employees

The emergence of AECJ, together with the previously discussed structural and contextual pressures, triggered growing climate consciousness among Amazon employees. Initially, much of this awareness centred on Amazon's lack of transparency around its carbon footprint and the absence of a robust climate action plan. Over time, however, employees also began reflecting on their personal contribution to the problem and their role within a company contributing to climate change.

At this early stage, this study can only assume that employee reflections mostly occurred privately and were not immediately visible as organized activism. Nevertheless, several employees later shared personal accounts explaining what motivated them to mobilize.

"As Brandy Russum, an Amazon designer, explained on the group's website, frustration with the company over climate change started with Hurricane Katrina's massive assault on New Orleans in 2005. "After five 'storms of a lifetime,' you realize something is going wrong in your lifetime. ... Things are getting worse," she said." (ClimateWire, September 23, 2019; Art. No. 17)

This growing internal dialogue ultimately laid the foundation for public actions and initiated open confrontation with corporate leadership.

4.2.2 Collective Mobilization and Strategic Protest, Escalation and Leverage

AECJ' activism unfolded through a series of increasingly escalated actions. Early efforts included open letters, such as the 2019 Open Letter to Shareholders, which served as their first formal call for corporate climate action. However, after shareholders rejected their proposal, combined with weak corporate responses, employees intensified their mobilization.

One of the most visible actions was the 2019 climate walkout, during which nearly one thousand Amazon employees in Seattle joined the global climate strike, using momentum of international climate activism to amplify their demands. The group stated that:

"The Paris Agreement, by itself, won't get us to a livable world". This declaration shows how symbolic gestures do not lead to the silencing of activism. The group continued their statement:

"Today, we celebrate. Tomorrow, we'll be in the streets to continue the fight for a livable future." (CNN Wire, September 19, 2019; Art. No. 7)

Employees also strategically used platforms such as Medium to publicly criticise Amazon, gaining additional media attention and applying further pressure on leadership. Amazon's threats to fire employees for public criticism provoked even stronger responses, with media framing these actions as acts of "defiance", writing "Amazon workers defy company rules with public list of complaints" (UPI, January 27, 2020; Art. No. 32); or "courage", as "Workers criticize Amazon on climate despite risk to jobs" (Canadian Press, January 26, 2020; Art. No. 27)

In 2020, employees expanded their activism to include concerns beyond climate. The "sickout" walkout combined grievances over the company's treatment of workers during the pandemic with environmental issues and the firing of AECJ leaders. One of the affected leaders, Maren Costa, encouraged fellow Amazon activists to join this movement, saying:

"We want to tell Amazon that we are sick of all this - sick of the firings, sick of the silencing, sick of pollution, sick of racism, and sick of the climate crisis. So we're asking tech workers to join us for a sick out on Friday, 24 April and show Amazon that you do not agree with their actions." (The Independent (United Kingdom), April 17, 2020; Art. No. 47)

This combination of labour and environmental concerns widened participation and strengthened mobilization. The formation of "Make Amazon Pay" shortly after, in November, further reflected growing discontent with Amazon's increasing emissions and pollution, especially around Black Friday operations.

A subsequent major walkout followed Amazon's quiet withdrawal from its Shipment Zero commitment. This protest

also incorporated frustration over broader workplace issues, such as layoffs and return-to-office (RTO) mandates, alongside climate demands. This marked an approximate 100% increase in employee participation, compared to the first climate walkout in 2019, as "[…] nearly 2,000 Amazon employees reportedly walked off the job to protest how the company has handled a series of issues. […] The move reflects what protesters say is a "lack of trust in company leadership's decision-making." […] Employees are also protesting a reduction in the company's efforts to fight climate change." (Inc.com, June 1, 2023; Art. No. 93)

Notably, while most of the media coverage did not focus on individual leaders, Maren Costa, one of the key leaders of AECJ alongside Emily Cunningham, was mentioned frequently, appearing 96 times across the dataset. Costa often served as a spokesperson for AECJ, publicly articulating the group's positions to the press.

4.3 Corporate Response

4.3.1 Corporate Resistance and Defensive Framing

This type of response typically occurred when the pressure from EA was not yet highly threatening to Amazon's reputation, or as a support to other forms of CR. It served as a light, reputational defence, allowing Amazon to reaffirm its commitments to sustainability while downplaying criticism. The company would often restate their direct contributions to climate action in an effort to maintain positive public opinion:

"We have launched several major and impactful programs and are working hard to integrate this approach fully across Amazon […] Our dedication to ensuring that our customers understand how we are addressing environmental issues has been unwavering - we look forward to launching more work and sharing more this year." (CNN Wire, April 10, 2019; Art. No. 1)

Amazon frequently emphasized the scale and complexity of its operations, framing these as both obstacles and proof of its leadership potential in sustainability. Initially, Jeff Bezos declared that Amazon will indubitably reach its climate goals, even positioning the company as a benchmark in the sector:

"We're done being in the middle of the herd on this issue […] If a company with as much physical infrastructure as Amazon - which delivers more than 10 billion items a year - can meet the Paris agreement 10 years early, then any company can." (Agence France Presse – English, September 19, 2019; Art. No. 10)

However, four years later, as both external and internal pressure escalated, Amazon's spokesperson Brad Glasser framed the company's situation as considerably harder and needing more time and patience to reach established goals:

"While we all would like to get there tomorrow, for companies like ours who consume a lot of power, and have very substantial transportation, packaging, and physical building assets, it'll take time to accomplish" (Inc.com, June 1, 2023; Art. No. 93)

When key spokespersons of AECJ began publicly criticizing Amazon's climate inaction, the company responds with disciplinary warnings. The company defended these actions by pointing to long-standing internal policies on public communication. During this incident, a company spokesperson declared:

"Our policy regarding external communications is not new and, we believe, is similar to other large companies. We recently updated the policy […] to make it easier for employees to participate in external activities […] employees may receive a notification from our HR team if we learn of an instance where a policy is not being followed." (The Guardian (London), January 2, 2020; Art. No. 20)

This response not only defended Amazon's position but also subtly discredited employees by implying they knowingly violated company policy.

4.3.2 Symbolic or Substantive Concessions with Strategic Framing

During the period of the study Amazon has frequently engaged in symbolic gestures. These often took the form of public pledges and philanthropic initiatives, strategically timed and framed to cast the company in a favourable light. Rarely has Amazon made truly substantive changes.

One notable example can be found after the 2019 shareholder meeting, when AECJ announced plans for a mass protest. In response, Amazon unveiled its Climate Pledge. The announcement had come just one day before the scheduled walkout. This move failed to deter the activists, and the protest proceeded as planned.

In July 2024, Amazon declared it had achieved its climate goals, a claim which was quickly disputed by its employees. In earlier responses to AECJ, Amazon publicly acknowledged the legitimacy of climate concerns, presenting itself as aligned with employee values. The company used media channels to state:

"[…] that reducing human-made climate change is an "important commitment." Amazon said it has sustainability teams working on initiatives to reduce its environmental impact." (CNN Wire, September 9, 2019, Art. No. 4)

This would all be done in an effort to present Amazon in a more favourable light. Grand philanthropic gestures, such as Jeff Bezos' Earth Fund, also fit this pattern of strategic framing. While praised by some, these donations attracted criticism and controversy, as they failed to address core structural issues such as labour rights and taxation.

"Some campaigners believe Bezos […] should have used the money to pay more in taxes, or higher wages." (The Guardian (London), February 18, 2020; Art. No. 41)

4.3.3 Retaliation and Suppression as Corporate Strategy

When EA escalated or whistleblowers attracted significant media attention, Amazon employed more aggressive measures, including threats and terminations. The most notable example is the firing of Maren Costa and Emily Cunningham, two key AECJ leaders. After repeated warnings, both were ultimately dismissed. This was confirmed by an Amazon spokesperson, who justified that this decision was taken due to a repeated violation of internal policies.

Amazon framed these actions as neutral policy enforcement, even trying to maintain an appearance of support for their employees' voice, just as long as it is done in adherence to internal guidelines.

"We support every employee's right to criticize their employer's working conditions, but that does not come with blanket immunity against any and all internal policies." (The Guardian (London), April 14, 2020; Art. No. 45)

This strategy however backfired significantly when the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled in 2021 that Amazon had indeed engaged in illegal retaliation, leading to legal consequences and widespread media criticism.

4.4 Escalating Organizational Friction and Visibility

According to the findings of this study, if CR is received negatively by EA, it can lead to further escalation of conflict. In Amazon's case the push-pull dynamic between employees and

Amazon leadership intensified, tensions grew, and confrontations became more frequent, resulting in a cyclical pattern. At the same time, media visibility increased, drawing further external scrutiny and public attention. Over time, these pressures not only escalated internal conflict but also led to leadership resignations in protest.

4.4.1 Tensions Between Employees and Leadership

As previously stated, one of the tensest points occurred during the retaliation claims following Amazon's disciplinary actions against employee activists. Employees became increasingly vocal about their dissatisfaction with Amazon's choices. To defend their fellow activists as well as critique the company's actions, AECJ voiced their concerns through a series of tweets:

"Jeff Bezos and Amazon executives are threatening to fire a few members of our group after we spoke up about wanting our company to be a leader in the worldwide effort to avert climate catastrophe."

Following this, the group released a press statement "to what it called Amazon's 'intimidation tactics." (International Business Times News, January 3, 2020; Art. No. 22)

Furthermore, in a surprising move, one of the AWS Vice-Presidents, Tim Bray quit his position and took to the media to slam Amazon leadership and "described the firings as "chickens**t" and it was meant to foster "a climate of fear" among workers" (International Business Times News, May 4, 2020; Art. No. 51). Bray's resignation and public statements received substantial media attention, further amplifying the internal conflict.

4.4.2 Increased External Scrutiny and Reputational Risk

With each confrontation, media coverage surrounding Amazon's climate practices increased. As shown in Appendix D, media attention on Amazon's climate issues experienced a steep rise following AECJ's formation in 2018, peaking during the 2020 global climate walkout. After a temporary decline, coverage spiked again in 2023 when nearly 2,000 employees walked out in protest of return-to-office (RTO) policies and climate inaction.

This sustained media attention exposed Amazon's actions to public scrutiny and held the company accountable for unfulfilled climate pledges. NGOs and advocacy organizations repeatedly accused the leader of Amazon "[…] of paying lip service to the climate crisis after he pledged to spend $10bn to combat global warming, to which his massive online empire has contributed millions of tonnes in carbon emissions. Several groups also have labelled the multi-billionaire a hypocrite for contracting with oil and gas companies and allegedly threatening workers who engage in climate activism." (The Independent (United Kingdom), February 18, 2020; Art. No. 38)

Furthermore, as negative framing of the company's actions started appearing, Amazon faced growing reputational risks. Some coverage went beyond specific actions and directly questioned Amazon's entire business model, stating that the company's "[…] problematic approach to climate change goes beyond the planetary harm inherent to its very business model." (Down To Earth, February 20, 2020; Art. No. 42)

4.5 Conflict Resolution and Employee Outcome

The findings indicate that when the corporate response is structured in a way that meets employee needs and addresses activist demands, it can lead to a resolution. Moreover, when the progression from EA to CR results in meaningful outcomes for employees, it can trigger a complete de-escalation of activism, effectively concluding the interaction. In the case of Amazon, the company lacked true substantive resolutions, however, tangible employee wins were still present, as well as power dynamics shifts between the leadership and employees.

4.5.1 Shifts in Power Dynamics

The findings suggest that following conflict resolution, EA can take one of two paths: either a complete de-escalation and cessation of activism, or a redirection toward renewed climate consciousness among employees. In Amazon's case, most resolutions led back to an earlier stage in the processual map, partly due to a shift in power dynamics that increasingly favoured the activists.

Over time, Amazon employees gradually gained greater influence within the organization. At the 2019 shareholder meeting, their first attempt to leverage company stock ownership to introduce a climate action plan was unsuccessful. However, persistent activism, such as protests, open letters, media engagement and walkouts, progressively shifted the power balance.

A significant turning point occurred when AWS Vice President Tim Bray publicly resigned in support of the employee activists, directly criticizing Amazon's leadership and culture:

"Firing whistleblowers isn't just a side-effect of macroeconomic forces, nor is it intrinsic to the function of free markets," […] It's evidence of a vein of toxicity running through the company culture. I choose neither to serve nor drink that poison." (CNN Wire, April 5, 2021; Art. No. 75)

The NLRB's findings further strengthened the activists' position by legally recognizing Amazon's retaliatory actions, signalling an institutional acknowledgment of employee grievances. Moreover, these findings cleared any negative framings that might have appeared in media regarding EA.

Additionally, Amazon's treatment of its workforce began to raise concerns among shareholders, particularly those focused on environmental, social, and governance (ESG) criteria. As the pandemic heightened awareness of labour practices, some shareholders started applying additional pressure on Amazon. The stockholders were concerned as to how "Amazon's practices are damaging to workers and could eventually harm the company itself." (Congressional Quarterly News, May 20, 2020; Art. No. 54)

With shareholder support emerging alongside leadership defections and regulatory interventions, a gradual shift in power dynamics became increasingly visible. While not yet fully resolved, these developments suggest a growing capacity for employee activism to influence corporate decision-making in the future.

4.5.2 Tangible Employee Wins

In these six years covered in the analysis, Amazon employees have faced a great number of challenges. However, they had quantifiable wins as well.

While Amazon's achievement of its Climate Pledge remains debatable, as it entailed a complete elimination of the company's carbon footprint, EA played a significant role in pressuring the company to invest heavily in green initiatives. These investments included the Seattle Climate Arena, electric delivery vans, and reforestation funds. The Climate Pledge itself became a major milestone, functioning both as a catalyst for Amazon's sustainability efforts and as a benchmark against which employees and external actors could hold the company accountable. However, its largely symbolic nature continued to fuel further employee protests.

Another major victory for employees came with the NLRB findings, which validated employee claims of retaliation and shed light on their wrongful treatment. Maren Costa, upon hearing the findings, triumphantly tweeted that:

"One little thing is right in the world today" (International Business Times Australia, April 5, 2021; Art. No. 74)

Similarly, Emily Cunningham told a media outlet that she:

"[…] couldn't be more happy with the news today. It is a moral victory and it feels incredible to be not only on the right side of history but the right side of the law," […] "Amazon tried to silence workers and it hasn't worked. We're actually stronger than ever. Organizing continues to grow at Amazon."" (CNN Wire, April 5, 2021; Art. No. 75)

These two declarations helped fuel EA confidence and validate AECJ's victory. However, despite these successes, no final resolution was reached during the study period that would mark a definitive end to the ongoing tensions between Amazon leadership and its employees. Even so, this could in theory mark the end of activism as presented in the processual map.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Processual Dynamics of Activism-Response Cycle

The findings of this study strongly support the findings of King & Pearce (2010) and Briscoe & Gupta (2016) regarding the processual and cyclical nature of EA and CR. Rather than shaping itself as a linear series of isolated events, the interaction between EA and corporate leadership develops as a continuous feedback loop where each round shaped subsequent responses. In Amazon's case, the phenomenon is clearly captured through the interaction between AECJ and Amazon leadership. Every action had the following subsequent action, which in turn led to a new cyclical series of action and response.

The processual map represents an innovative addition to the existing literature, as it captures the dynamic nature of EA-CR interactions, as well as its recursive loops with visible turning points and actor reconfigurations. The map itself was developed as a result of the data structure. The five core aggregated dimensions discussed in the Findings Chapter were rearranged to illustrate the key phases of activism: from pre-activism, to awakening, mobilization, escalation, corporate response and outcome, or in the case of this study, continuation. Each phase was shaped by both internal dynamics and external conditions.

Comparative to prior study's, this one contributes to literature by not only examining isolated events of EA and CR interactions, but by creating a process map, which synthesizes the steps throughout the activism cycle over a six-year longitudinal timeframe. Moreover, by building upon King & Pearce's (2010) model of iterative contention and adapting it to a Big Tech scenario, it allowed for the analysis of developing dynamics between the two parties. Thus, a clear strategic transition for both involved actors was identified. Furthermore, it offers a visual representation of how activism trajectories develop and interact with corporate leadership and offers a framework for future research into similarly dynamic EA-CR cycles across Big Tech.

In the case of Amazon, the CR evolved from initial resistance to more complex forms of symbolic compliance and selective concession-making. To avoid reputational risks, Amazon employed defensive framing, public commitments and philanthropic initiatives. However, these were also a disguise to avoid deeper structural reforms. When the employed defence mechanisms failed to contain employee demands, coercive methods were adopted.

Similarly, the employee-led climate activism followed an alike pattern. When initial peaceful, yet firm and demanding requests were not answered as expected, the employees took it upon themselves to continue the pressure. This happened through their involvement and alignment with other external NGOs, but also through repeated interactions with the media, which raised visibility to their actions. These actions align with earlier studies from Briscoe & Gupta (2016), which theorized the relational and strategic use of both external and internal channels by insider activists to grow their movement and create traction. Moreover, the findings of Ganz (2000) and Soule (2009) extend the strategic use of external channels by social movement actors to build power through coalition-building and alliances (e.g. NGOs, the media).

Importantly, the processual analysis highlights how the response cycle is continuously influencing the legitimacy of the involved actors, by either reinforcing it or eroding it. In its earlier stages, employee-led climate activism tends to lack legitimacy, due to limited visibility, internal recognition and perceived credibility. Such movements must acquire initial small wins (e.g. legal validation, external endorsement) to build legitimacy over time (Soule, 2009; McDonnell et al., 2019). For AECJ, such wins are represented by the NLRB findings and increased support from NGOs like Greenpeace and Amnesty. These incremental gains help increase activist confidence whilst pressuring companies to respond more substantively.

In contrast, corporations typically benefit from strong legitimacy as they present an established institutional status and public image, as well as control over communication. However, as the activism movements gain traction, company legitimacy can erode. This is especially amplified when external actors, such as media, NGOs and ESG-investors present support for activist narratives and scrutinize CR (Entman, 1993; McDonnell et al., 2019). For Amazon, the weakening of legitimacy was a gradual process. As AECJ's external support grew, the pressure became apparent for the company. Tim Bray's resignation from his leadership position marked a clear crack in Amazon's control over legitimacy narratives within media, as well as investors and employees. This shifting balance of legitimacy intensifies the dynamic interaction between the two actors and often escalates the cycle of action and response.

Ultimately, this study builds upon this dynamic interaction, which constitutes a perfect example of how EA and CR are mutually constitutive processes, as they continuously are shaped by shifting internal and external pressures. The cycle, however, remains open ended, with no definitive resolution during the period studied. This reinforces the idea that activism-response dynamics are non-linear and recursive in nature, as described in other studies.

5.2 Contribution to Employee Activism and Climate Agency Literature

The findings of this study contribute to the literature on EA and climate agency through establishing an empirically grounded, processual perspective on how employee-led climate activism evolves and interacts with CR over time, with a focus on the Big Tech sector. Beyond the process model, the study also contributes more generally to existing literature.

Built on SMT, this study validates, contributes to and enhances existing understanding of insider activism, repertoires of contention and cyclical interaction between climate EA and CR.

First, consistent with existing literature on the role of employees as "insider activists" who take advantage of their knowledge of organizational structures to challenge leadership (Meyerson,

2003; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016), the findings fully validate these theories. AECJ was formed not only through individual dissenters, but through a collective movement capable of mobilizing both internally and externally, to put pressure on corporate leadership. As suggested by SMT, the framing of grievances and mobilization through walkouts, open letters and media engagement were central mechanisms for escalating employee demands (Ganz, 2000; Snow & Benford 1988; Soule, 2009).

Second, this study contributes to the literature through its recognition and inclusion of external structural and contextual conditions (e.g. heightened global awareness, pressure from NGOs). It illustrates how they interact with internal employee mobilization, and how they shape both the emergence and trajectory of activism (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007; Entman, 1993). The study thus, advances prior literature that often examined these dynamics in isolation. The integration of external and internal pressures highlights how legitimacy struggles increasingly unfold not only within firms but also within broader public arenas (Carvalho & Burgees, 2005; Nisbet, 2009).

5.3 Practical Implications

The findings of this study generate several implications for organizations, employee activists and policymakers seeking to navigate evolving dynamics of employee-led climate activism within powerful firms in the Big Tech. This section addresses these and offers further guidance for future actions.

5.3.1 Implications for Employee Activists

The findings of this study underscore the strategic value of combining internal mobilization with external engagement. From engaging with media platforms, creating NGO partnerships and strategic framing that links climate concerns with broader labour issues, AECJ was able to amplify its message and expand its activist coalition to increase organizational pressure. The case of Amazon highlights how sustained visibility, public legitimacy and external alliances are key mechanisms through which insider activists can shift internal power dynamics over time.

5.3.2 Implications for Companies

For corporations, relying on defensive framing, symbolic concessions, or retaliation may offer short-term protection but risks fuelling further activism when core grievances remain unaddressed. In Amazon's case, gestures like the Climate Pledge became targets for employee critique rather than resolution points. Such strategies risk eroding trust, escalating dissatisfaction, and inviting reputational and legal challenges. More sustainable outcomes likely require genuine engagement, transparent dialogue, and meaningful integration of employee concerns into climate policies.

5.3.3 Implications for Policymakers and Regulators

This study reinforces the need for robust legal protections for whistleblowers and employee activists, especially in contexts where retaliation could be disguised under neutral policy reinforcement. Regulatory bodies, such as the NLRB, played a crucial role in protecting and validating employee claims, whilst keeping Amazon accountable for retaliatory practices. Nevertheless, strengthening legal frameworks that protect worker dissent on environmental and ethical issues remains an essential component of corporate accountability.

5.4 Limitations and Further Research

This study has several limitations. First, the reliance on publicly available media sources limits access to internal dynamics, informal negotiations, and private decision-making within Amazon. Future research incorporating interviews or internal documents could offer deeper insights into the inner workings of activism and leadership responses.

Second, while applying the processual model to a broader range of firms could reveal important variations in activism-response cycles, issues may arise when attempting to fully generalize across industries or companies with different cultures, regulatory pressures, or market positions.

Third, although the six-year timeframe allowed observation of multiple cycles of action and response, longer-term developments may continue to reshape power dynamics. Future longitudinal studies could explore whether sustained activism ultimately produces deeper structural change or more complex forms of organizational adaptation.

Finally, there is overlap between the type of activism discussed in this paper and other forms of activism. While this study focuses on climate activism, the observed dynamics of insider dissent, retaliation, public mobilization, and reputational risk likely apply to other forms of employee activism, such as labour rights or ethical governance. Future research could examine how multi-issue activism unfolds within similarly complex organizational environments.

Despite these limitations, this study provides a grounded understanding of how employee-led climate activism interacts with corporate response in Big Tech, highlighting both the opportunities and constraints facing insider activists.

6. CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to examine how employee-led climate activism and corporate response interact over time in Big Tech, focusing on Amazon as a case study. Using the GM and processual mapping, this study traced the evolving cycles of activism and response between AECJ and Amazon corporate leadership.

The findings revealed the activism progression from internal mobilization to external engagement, media visibility and regulatory body involvement, while corporate responses shifted between defensive framing, symbolic or partially substantive concessions and suppression. A processual map was then developed to capture there dynamic, non-linear interactions over time.

This research contributes to the literature on employee activism, organizational change and legitimacy, while offering practical insights for activists, companies and policymakers. Most importantly, this study offers a thorough breakdown of the events that took place between 2018 and 2024 at Amazon, constituting a great base for further research. Moreover, the findings can as well provide a basis for future research on activism-response cycles in other corporate and industry contexts.

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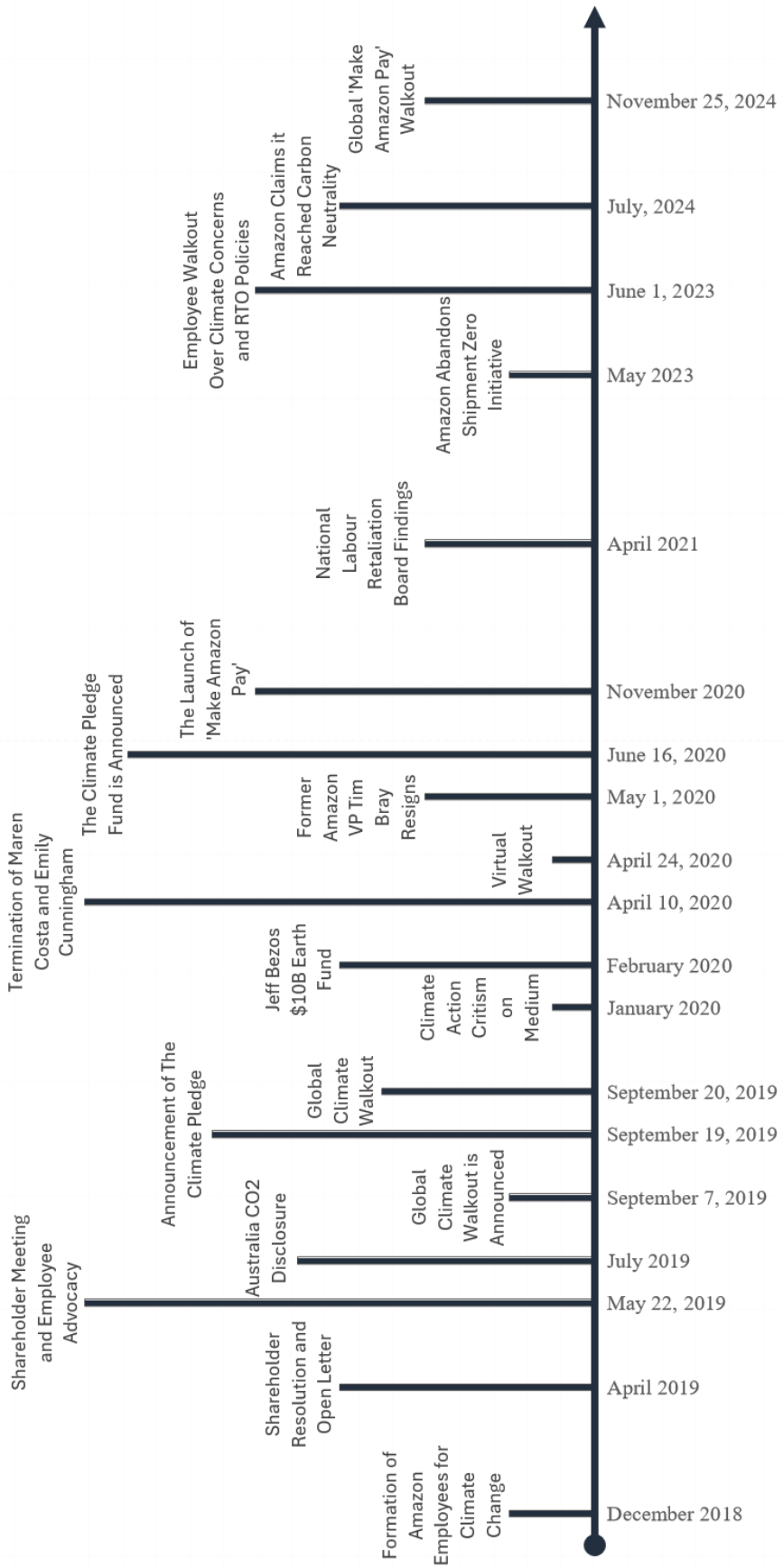
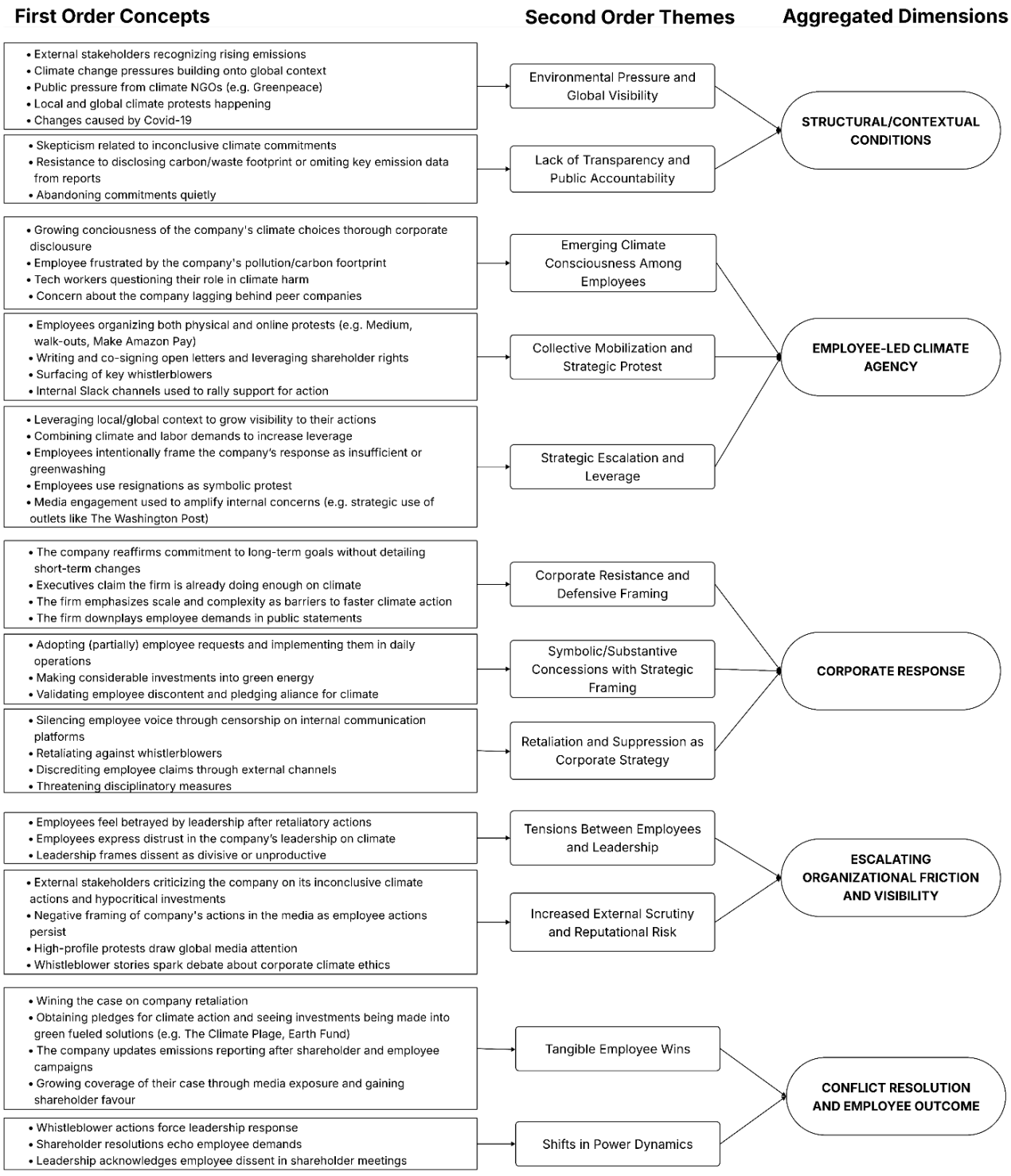
APPENDIX

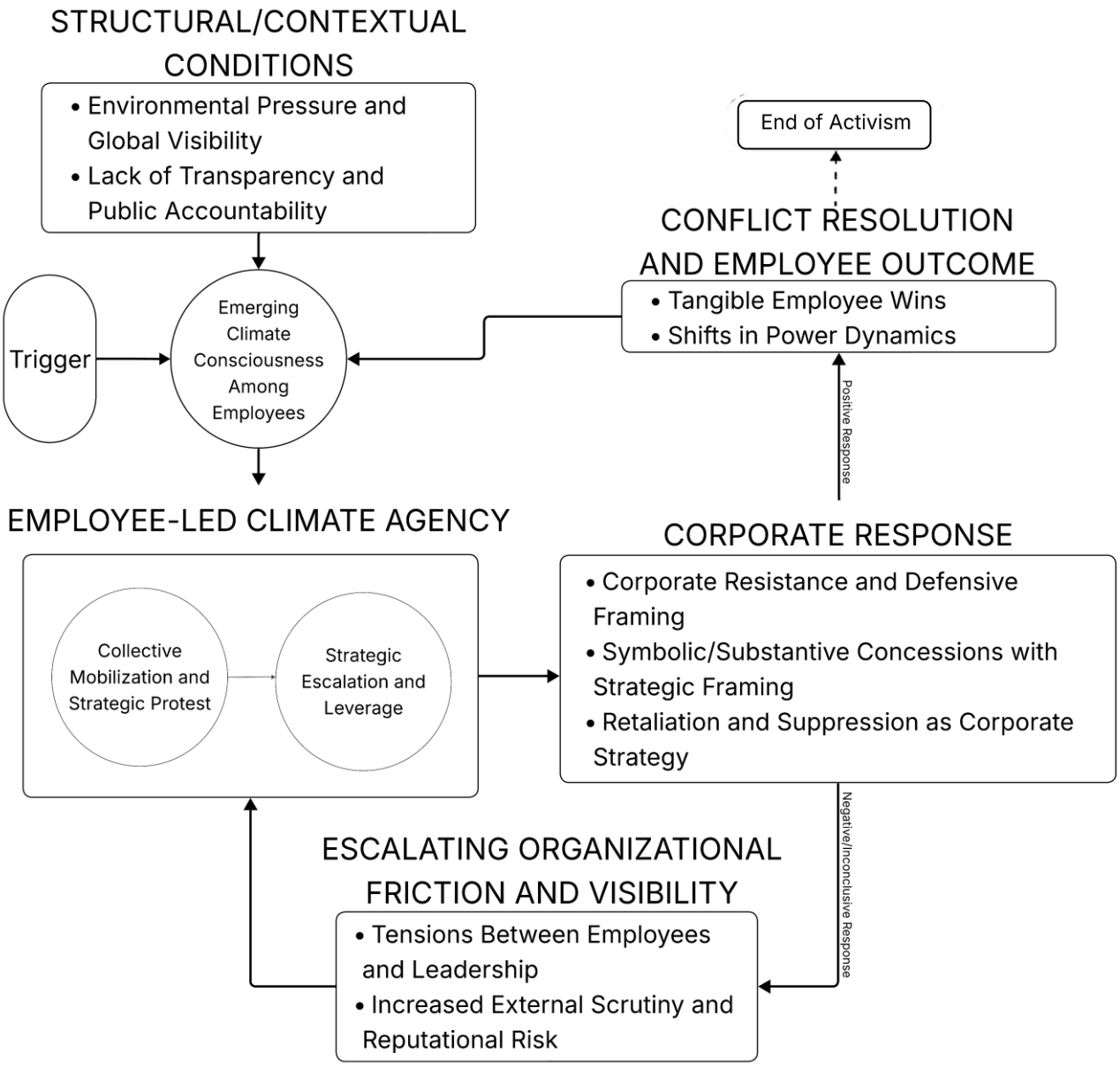
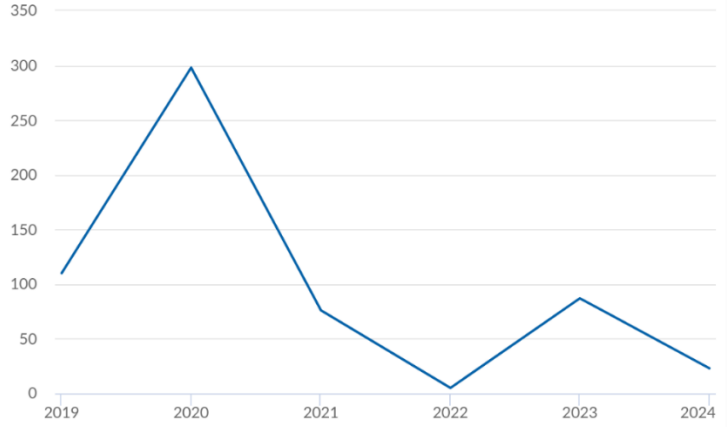
Appendix A – Event Timeline



Appendix B – Data Structure



Appendix C – Processual Map



Appendix D – News Coverage Over Time (Source: NexisUni)