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WORKING PAPER

Discovering patterns in corporate social responsibility (CSR) reporting: A transparent framework based on the Global Reporting Initiative's (GRI) Sustainability Reporting Guidelines

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Abstract

To reveal all the patterns that exist in corporate social responsibility (CSR) reporting, content analysis must provide an answer to the following three questions: (1) Which CSR topics are disclosed? – a question regarding *content*; (2) What is the extent of disclosures on the different CSR topics? – a question regarding *extent*; (3) What types of CSR disclosure are made? – a question regarding *quality*. In this paper, we develop a content analysis framework that simultaneously addresses these three questions.

The framework consists of two dimensions. The first dimension is based on the Global Reporting Initiative's (GRI) Sustainability Reporting Guidelines. Through this dimension, the content and the extent of disclosures can be captured. The second dimension distinguishes between four types of disclosure. The first three – Values & Principles, Management Approach, and Future Plans – largely are based on the work of Vuontisjärvi (2006). The fourth type of disclosure – Performance Indicators – is based on the list of performance indicators in the GRI.

The case of listed Belgian firms is used to illustrate the developed methodology and to demonstrate its usefulness answering a wide range of research questions.

By following the Sustainability Reporting Guidelines of the GRI and providing complete transparency, the developed content analysis framework can be applied broadly by the research community, so as to enhance knowledge regarding CSR reporting practices in different settings and countries.

Keywords: content analysis; corporate social responsibility; disclosure; Global Reporting Initiative; methodology; sustainability reporting