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# “Sustainability reporting: An overview of the recent development”

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## SUSTAINABILITY REPORTING: AN OVERVIEW OF THE RECENT DEVELOPMENT

### Abstract

This study aims to provide an extensive overview of the current state of sustainability reporting through the review studies on sustainability reports (SR) in the accounting literature for the period 2015–2020. A structured literature review (SLR) methodology is used to investigate how the SR literature develops and focuses. The study uses keywords such as “sustainability report” and “sustainability reporting” to identify studies that are relevant to a given topic. A total of 44 published studies were found. This study identifies the main directions of SR research in the 2015–2020 period and discusses several important aspects of research, namely methodology, research methods, and the theory used. To enrich the results, this study defines the scope, country of research, topics and sectors studied. The study provides insight into future SR research used by researchers to develop SR research. Several things are proposed that can be used as a guide for future SR research, such as sustainability in SMEs and the public sector. Ensuring sustainability is one of the research topics that can be a direction for researchers in the future. Theories such as contingency and source credibility can be an alternative to explaining the reality of sustainability reporting.

### Keywords

sustainability report, sustainability reporting, sustainability performance

### JEL Classification

Q56, M40

## INTRODUCTION

Sustainability reporting (SR) is a new paradigm shift that is not only related to disclosure, but also integrates with the communication process between companies and stakeholders. This process provides stakeholders with an opportunity to determine if the company has taken their interests into account when making decisions (Frynas & Yamahaki, 2016). The increasing attention of companies to sustainability reporting globally has been reported by (KPMG and UNEP 2006; KPMG, 2008; Lynch et al., 2014; Anunciação et al., 2017; Larrinaga-Gonzalez, 2007; Adams & Frost, 2008). Scientific research in this area has also developed significantly where the quality of sustainability reporting is the subject of research and benchmarking studies (Milne & Gray, 2013; Arayssi et al., 2016; Rezaee, 2016; Kolk, 2004).

Researchers continuously examine sustainability reporting to contribute to the development of SR. Nevertheless, almost all studies were carried out in the western and developed countries such as the USA, Canada, the UK, Australia, or New Zealand (Journeault et al., 2020; Safari & Areeb, 2020; Kaur & Lodhia, 2018; Crifo et al., 2019; Michelin et al., 2019). For this reason, in many European countries, a sustainability report is mandatory for many companies.

Meanwhile, in Asia, studies on sustainability reports are mostly carried out in developed countries such as China (Dong et al., 2020; Li et al., 2013), Malaysia (Jamil et al., 2020), Thailand (Petcharat & Zaman,

2019), while in other Asian countries, SR research is still very few such as Pakistan (Bae et al., 2018), India (Aggarwal & Singh, 2019), and Indonesia (Amidjaya & Widagdo, 2019; Meutia et al., 2018). Bae et al. (2018) state that there are few studies on sustainability reporting in Asian countries. Besides, several researchers have also identified SR practices in the public sector (Adams et al., 2014; Gazzola et al., 2019; Montecalvo et al., 2018; Farneti et al., 2019).

Given the importance of sustainability reporting in accounting research, this study provides a comprehensive review of existing research over the past six years. The study continues the studies conducted by Dienes et al. (2016). It tries to make a systematic SR study by questioning the factors driving sustainability reporting. The research sample is 516 studies on sustainability reporting published in English-language journals for 16 years (2000–2015). The study seeks to refine Dienes's research by focusing on SR studies that are published in accounting journals and those related to sustainability. Besides, Dienes's study mixed the terminology of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility Reporting) and SR (Sustainability Reporting). Although these two terms appear similar, there are conceptual differences between CSR and SR (Schnepp & Bowen, 1954).

The social responsibility of entrepreneurs as “the obligation of businessmen to make policies, carry out these decisions, and follow actions consistent with the goals and values in our society” (Bowen, 2013, p. 6). According to Carroll (1979, p. 500), “The social responsibility of business encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time.” CSR means more than just obeying the law; Just complying with the law cannot be considered a CSR activity. Some examples of CSR actions adopt pro-gender human resource management programs, non-discrimination, energy-saving, recycling, and pollution reduction, supporting micro and local businesses' development, including creating products with local wisdom (Carroll, 2009, p. 23).

Historically, sustainability was not an unknown concept in the business world. Many organizations have used this concept to achieve long-term economic and social stability for a company and an expression of good corporate citizenship. Thus, this concept has been generalized as the basis for the theory of good corporate citizenship. It refers to the narrow concept of economic profitability and considers a company's social and environmental sustainability. The fact that sustainability represents good corporate citizenship means that the company is aware of and agrees to comply with society's interests by considering future generations, nature, and the environment in every company's decision making.

This review contributes to the following accounting literature. This study focuses on sustainability reporting in accounting, management and business journals, especially those related to sustainability from 2015 to 2020. It is crucial to capture the direction of the SR research development, especially in accounting, management, and business. The literature review will highlight the various methodologies used, the theoretical basis of the study, the sustainability literature's limitations, and provide recommendations for future research.

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## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study uses a literature review approach because, according to Massaro et al. (2016), a literature review contributes to developing research lines and questions based on previous research findings. To offer useful insights and critiques to evaluate, identify, and discuss possible future SR research agendas, this study adopts the SLR method: “An SLR is a method for studying a corpus of

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scholarly literature, to develop insights, critical reflections, future research paths, and research questions” (Massaro et al., 2016, p. 3).

“SLR is a method for examining the corpus of scientific literature, for developing insights, critical reflection, future research paths, and research questions” (Dumay et al., 2016, p. 167). As it is commonly used in scientific fields that mostly utilize a quantitative approach, it is also possible to imple-

ment SLR in accounting studies. Several studies in accounting using SLRs are noted, among them are (Dumay et al., 2016; Bracci et al., 2019; Spence et al., 2010; Anessi-Pessina et al., 2016; Khelif & Achek, 2017).

A systematic review uses a search methodology that “makes use of an iterative and incremental procedure in which relevant articles were searched, checked and reviewed for relevance until the whole review is completed” (Massaro et al., 2016, p. 7). Hahn and Kühnen (2013, p. 8) suggest five necessary steps for systematic literature reviews:

- 1) Research question: The first important step in SLR is to define a research question.
- 2) Material collection: The second step is to collect the articles to be reviewed. For that, the journal and the targeted keywords are determined.
- 3) Selection and evaluation: The next step is to evaluate relevant articles from the source. Keywords are used to filter the articles by identifying the title and reading the paper abstract.
- 4) Descriptive analysis and synthesis: Discussing formal aspects concerning the chosen theme to obtain valid results. The purpose of this analysis is to categorize the results of each article into consistent chunks by explaining how they relate to one another. For this reason, it is necessary to record the details of each article.
- 5) Results: To complement the literature review process, the findings on critical points of concern in the research question are discussed. Besides, an essential function of SLR is to present future research areas.

According to Massaro et al. (2016, p. 4), “...researchers use SLR to map and assess the existing intellectual territory to identify future research needs.” For this reason, it is essential to review and criticize existing studies before offering research gaps in the future. To develop further research, Massaro et al. (2016) propose to use three critical research tasks based on Alvesson and Sandberg (2011), namely, ‘insight,’ ‘criticism’ and ‘transformative redefinition’ ask three generic research ques-

tions and adaptable as needed to do SLR. Next, the study adopted three general research questions to focus specifically on the SR literature.

- 1) How is SR research developing?
- 2) What is the focus and methodology of the SR literature?
- 3) What is the future for SR research?

## 2. RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Using a systematic process, manual and electronic searches are combined to determine the papers reviewed in this study. In the first stage, the keywords such as sustainability, sustainability report, sustainability reporting are used to find articles in English-language journals in the Emerald database, EBSCOhost, ProQuest and Science Direct for the period 2015 to 2020. This paper only includes academic publications in the search process, non-academic publications are excluded from this scope. Although the use of this keyword initially gave quite a lot of results, some papers were ignored because they only covered environmental or social aspects, so it was not quite appropriate to discuss sustainability. In addition, some papers also do not specifically discuss sustainability reports. Conceptual writing is included in the database of this study, as long as it discusses the sustainability reporting. The analysis eventually reached a total of 44 publications.

Categorizing the unit of analysis is a useful strategy in identifying and exploring theoretical understanding in reviewing articles. For this reason, this study clustered the analysis based on important aspects of research, namely methodology, research methods, and theory as a basis for SR research, and the scope of research. To enrich the results of the review, this study also clustered research countries, SR topics of research concern, and sectors that were the object of research.

Figure 1 provides the research methodology used in this systematic literature review.

In the first stage, the study recorded bibliographical data from each article consisting of an author, year of publication, title, and journal. In the first

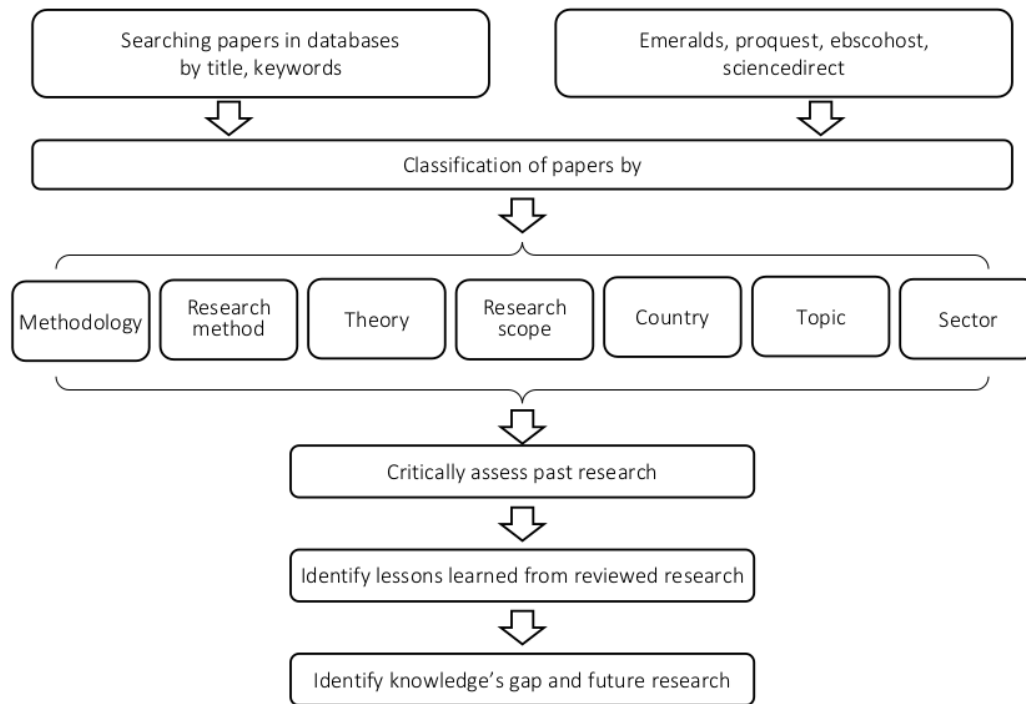


Figure 1. Literature review research methodology

Table 1. Number of sustainability studies in each journal

No.	Journals	No. of studies	Percentage
1	Accounting Forum	2	5%
2	Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal	1	2%
3	Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management	1	2%
4	Critical Perspectives on Accounting	3	7%
5	European Accounting Review	1	2%
6	International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education	2	5%
7	Journal of Accounting in Emerging Economies	1	2%
8	Journal of Applied Accounting Research	2	5%
9	Journal of Asia Business Studies	1	2%
10	Journal of Applied Accounting Research	2	5%
11	Journal of Business Ethics	11*	25%
12	Journal of Business Research	1	2%
13	Journal of Financial Reporting and Accounting	1	2%
14	Meditari Accountancy Research	2	5%
15	Pacific Accounting Review	1	2%
16	Public Management Review	1	2%
17	Public Money & Management	1	2%
18	Social and Environmental Accountability Journal	1	2%
19	Social Responsibility Journal	4	9%
20	Sustainability Accounting, Management and Policy Journal	5	11%
TOTAL		44	100%

Note: \* Emerald, EBSCOhost, ProQuest, and Science Direct.

phase of this study, 124 articles with the keywords sustainability, sustainability report and sustainability reporting were found. The next screening process is to look at journal names and read abstracts to determine whether the topics discussed are related to sustainability in a reporting or accounting context. 80 articles were excluded from the sample because they came from non-accounting journals or did not discuss the reporting aspects of sustainability. This study resulted in 44 articles for further review. As shown in Table 1, the collected papers come from leading accounting, management, and business journals such as *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, *Accounting Forum*, *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, *Journal of Accounting in Emerging Economies*, *Social Responsibility Journal*; *Journal of Business Ethics*; *Sustainability Accounting, Management and Policy Journal*; *Social and Environmental Accountability Journal*. Table 1 provides the list of journals and the number of articles found based on keywords.

The first phase of this study found that most SR articles were in the *Journal of Business Ethics* (11 articles). It seems to be under the journals' scope that put forward ethical issues related to business. Significant numbers of articles are also found in the *Sustainability Accounting, Management, and Policy Journal* (five articles) and *Social*

*Responsibility Journal* (four articles). Meanwhile, other journals only have one or two articles relevant to the search keyword.

### 3. DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Distribution over time

Regarding the year of publication, Figure 2 illustrates that there was an increase in the number of papers published from 2015 to 2020. The increase was relatively high, especially in 2018 and 2019. This trend suggests a growing interest in sustainability reporting research. The increase in SR research after 2015 may be due to the spread of the Sustainable Development Goals agenda in 2015 that were agreed upon by various countries in the world. This shows that many parties, including academics and researchers, are contributing to the achievement of the SDGs by 2030.

#### 3.2. Distribution by methodology and research method

When conducting research, two methodologies can be used: qualitative and quantitative. Both of these approaches are also used in SR research. Some researchers use a qualitative approach, while others use a quantitative approach.

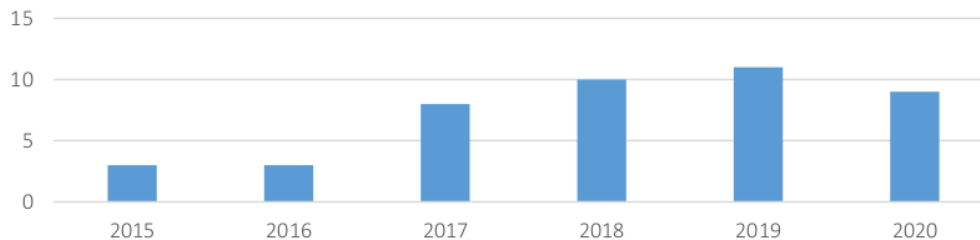


Figure 2. Year of publication



Figure 3. Research methodology

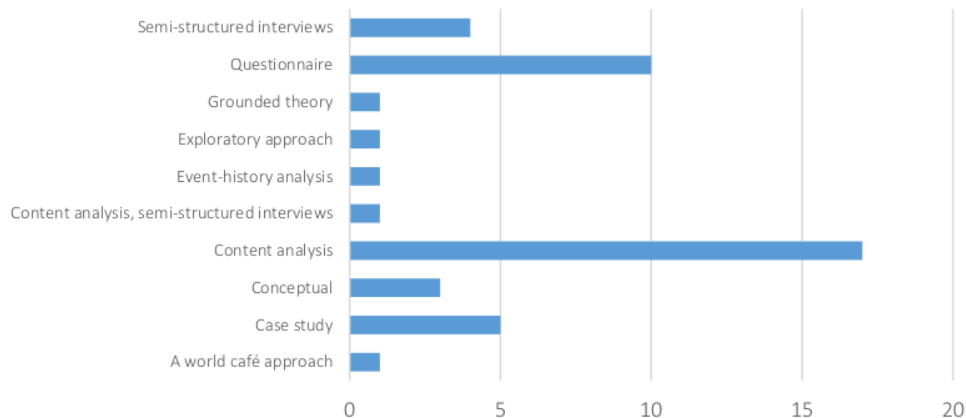


Figure 4. Research method

Figure 3 shows that both qualitative and quantitative approaches are used to study sustainability reporting. There is one conceptual paper, so it cannot be categorized as qualitative or quantitative. Of the 44 existing studies, 23 studies used a qualitative approach, and 21 studies used a quantitative approach. This review shows that sustainability report studies cannot be separated from the two research paradigms.

The next stage is to organize the types of research by reading the paper abstract. Various types of research methods are used by researchers, including:

- Survey and interview studies using questionnaires or (structured) interviews to collect data on sustainability reporting practices.
- Content analysis focuses on the content of the sustainability report. In general, the unit of analysis in this study is a sustainability report or an annual report.
- Case studies are usually carried out through observing or collecting data for one or a small number of organizations. Sustainability reporting cases are often combined with semi-structured interviews with a specific group of respondents
- A semi-structured interview is an interview without formal questions. A researcher asks more open-ended questions, allows discussion with the interviewee, and provides more comprehensive answers.

- The grounded theory means systematic inductive methods used to conduct qualitative studies for theory development.
- Event-history analysis uses observation data obtained from a company in a certain range of time that focus only on the events occurring in the observed company.
- A world café method is a simple, effective, and flexible format for accommodating extensive group discussions. It is a process that leads to not only collaborative dialogue and sharing knowledge, but also creates possibilities for action in groups of all sizes.

The characterization study of sustainability reporting is not ambiguous in any case. Several studies used a mixed-methods approach. For instance, they performed a content analysis and a semi-structured interview. For studies using a mixed-methods approach, it is presented as a separate method.

Figure 4 shows the number of articles by classification scheme type. Generally, studies on sustainability reporting in reviewed articles use content analysis (seven-ten studies), followed by questionnaires (ten studies), case studies (five studies), semi-structured interviews (four studies), and conceptual studies (three studies). Other research methods used are event-history, grounded theory, a combination of content analysis and semi-structured interviews, exploratory, and world cafe approach. Three studies are conceptual, namely Bebbington et al. (2017), Stocker et al. (2020), and Hahn et al. (2018).



Table 2. Methodology and research method in studies

Source: Data analyzed

No.	Year of publication	Authors	Methodology	Research methods
1	2015	Lorenzo Massa, Federica Farneti, Beatrice Scappini	Qualitative	Case study
2	2015	Heejung Byun, Tae-Hyun Kim	Quantitative	Event-history analysis
3	2016	Shidi Dong, Lei Xu and Ron McIver	Quantitative	Content analysis
4	2016	Josh Wei-Jun Hsueh	Quantitative	Questionnaire
5	2016	Nazim Hussain, Ugo Rigoni, Rene' P. Orij	Quantitative	Content analysis
6	2017	Amanpreet Kaur, Sumit Lodhia	Qualitative	Case study
7	2017	Habiba Al-Shaer, Mahbub Zaman	Quantitative	Questionnaire
8	2017	Jan Bebbington, Shona Russella, Ian Thomson	Qualitative	Conceptual
9	2017	Olivier Boiral, Ināki Heras-Saizarbitoria, Marie-Christine Brotherton	Qualitative	Content analysis
10	2017	Samuel Drempetic, Christian Klein, Bernhard Zwergel	Quantitative	Questionnaire
11	2017	Colin Higgins, Samuel Tang, Wendy Stubbs	Qualitative	Content analysis
12	2017	Katrin Hummel, Christian Schlick, Matthias Fiska	Quantitative	Questionnaire
13	2017	Ludger Niemann, Thomas Hoppe	Qualitative	Case study
14	2018	Remmer Sassen, Leyla Azizi	Quantitative	Content analysis
15	2018	Olivier Boiral, Ināki Heras-Saizarbitoria, Marie-Christine Brotherton, Julie Bernard	Qualitative	Semi-structured interviews
16	2018	Sahar Sepasi, Udo Braendle, Amir Hossein Rahdari	Quantitative	Content analysis
17	2018	Tricia Ong, Hadrian Geri Djajadikerta	Quantitative	Questionnaire
18	2018	Patricia Crifo, Elena Escrig-Imledo, Nicolas Mottis	Quantitative	Questionnaire
19	2018	Najul Laskar	Qualitative	Content analysis
20	2018	Carlos Larrinaga, Mercedes Luque-Vilchez, Rosa Fernández	Qualitative	Content analysis
21	2018	Giovanna Michelon, Dennis M. Patten, Andrea M. Romi	Quantitative	Questionnaire
22	2018	Monica Montecalvo, Federica Farneti & Charl de Villiers	Qualitative	Content analysis, Semi-structured interviews
23	2018	Tobias Hahn, Frank Figge, Jonatan Pinkse, Lutz Preuss	Qualitative	Conceptual
24	2018	Samanthi Silva, Edeltraud Guenther	Qualitative	A world café approach
25	2019	Marc Journeault, Yves Levant, Claire-France Picard	Qualitative	Case study
26	2019	Priyanka Aggarwal and Ajay Kumar Singh	Quantitative	Content analysis
27	2019	An et al.	Qualitative	Case study
28	2019	Amina Buallay	Quantitative	Questionnaire
29	2019	Dinithi Dissanayake, Carol Tilt, Wei Qian	Quantitative	Content analysis
30	2019	Prihatnolo Gandhi Amidjaya and Ari Kuncara Widagdo	Quantitative	Content analysis
31	2019	Neungruthai Petcharat, Mahbub Zaman	Qualitative	Semi-structured interviews
32	2019	David Talbot, Olivier Boiral	Qualitative	Content analysis
33	2019	Patrizia Gazzola, Stefano Amelio, Fragkoulis Papagiannis, Zenon Michaelides	Quantitative	Questionnaire
34	2019	Lina Daglieni, Kristina Šutiene	Quantitative	Questionnaire
35	2020	Maryam Safari, Amreen Areeb	Qualitative	Exploratory approach
36	2020	Desi Adhariani, Elda du Toit	Qualitative	Content analysis
37	2020	Muatasim Ismaeel, Zarina Zakaria	Qualitative	Semi-structured interviews
38	2019	Coco Klußmann	Qualitative	Grounded theory
39	2020	Philipp Hummel	Quantitative	Content analysis
40	2020	Amira Jamil, Nazli Anum Mohd Ghazali and Sherliza Puat Nelson	Quantitative	Content analysis
41	2020	Mirwais Usmani, Jane Davison & Christopher J. Napier	Qualitative	Semi-structured interviews
42	2020	Carol A. Tilt, Wei Qian, Sanjaya Kuruppu and Dinithi Dissanayake	Qualitative	Content analysis
43	2020	Fabrizio Stocker, Michelle P. de Arruda, Keysa M. C. de Mascena, João M. G. Boaventura	Qualitative	Conceptual
44	2020	Edward Millar, Cory Searcy	Quantitative	Content analysis

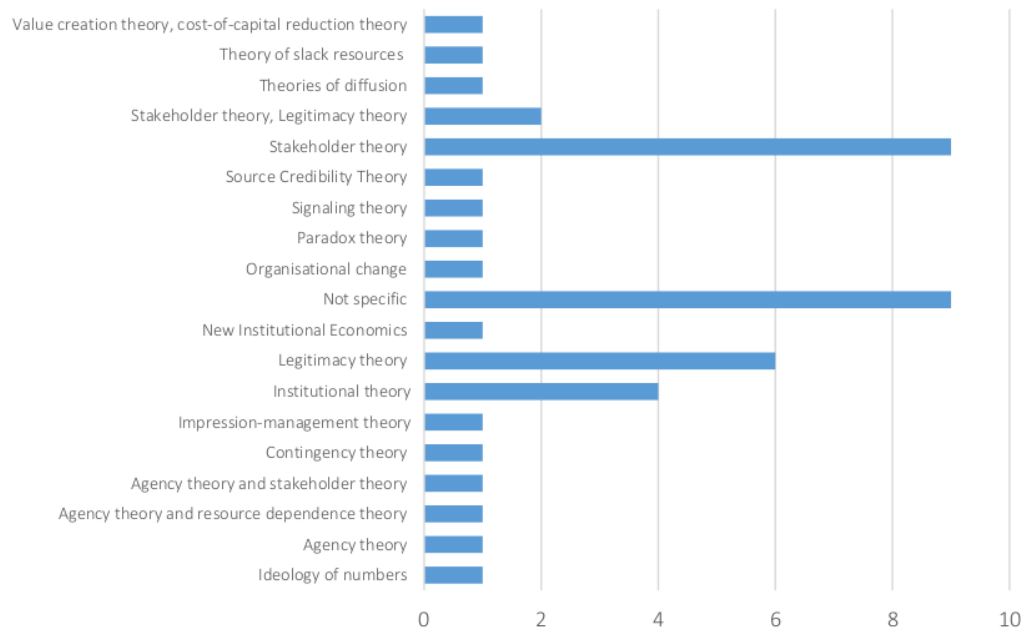


Figure 5. Research theories

### 3.3. Research theory

Figure 5 describes the theories used in the study of sustainability reporting during the review period. Nine articles do not explicitly state the theory used in the study. Stakeholder theory is one of the most widely used approaches in the previous literature to explain sustainability reporting (Safari & Areeb, 2020; Kaur & Lodhia, 2018; Al-Shaer & Zaman, 2019; Sassen & Azizi, 2018; Ong & Djajadikerta, 2018; Dissanayake et al., 2019). According to stakeholder theory, companies have responsibilities towards other groups with interests in the company apart from shareholders (Freeman, 1984). Following what was reported by Spence et al. (2010), researchers describe stakeholder theory as the dominant and most useful theory in explaining the practice of sustainability reporting.

Apart from stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory is also the basis for several researchers in discussing SR (Aggarwal & Singh, 2019; Boiral et al., 2019; Michelon et al., 2019; Petcharat & Zaman, 2019; Talbot & Boiral, 2018; Usmani et al., 2020). The legitimacy theory explains the existence of a contract between a company and the community, which forces the company to comply with social norms to ensure its sustainability and society. SR provides legitima-

cy for corporate action by firmly influencing public perceptions and helping to avoid unexpected publication (Lanis & Richardson, 2012; Bebbington et al., 2008; Archel et al., 2009). Two articles use both theories together, namely the stakeholder theory and the legitimacy theory (An et al., 2019 and Klufmann et al., 2019).

Apart from these two theories, another theory used by researchers is the institutional theory (Dong et al., 2020; Ismael & Zakaria, 2020; Montecalvo et al., 2018; Dissanayake et al., 2019). Institutional theory explains how organizations can adopt certain organizational forms to conform to institutionalized norms or rules to gain legitimacy in the context in which they operate. According institutional theory, organizations carry out their activities by adopting homogeneous forms of behavior from other organizations. Sustainability reporting is the homogeneous behavior of a group of organizations, reflecting conformity with institutionalized norms or rules formed by isomorphic mechanisms (Shabana et al., 2017). The institutional theory also shares the same views as the stakeholder theory. External pressure, power, and legitimacy, and other sources of influence are also discussed in studies of stakeholder relations (Majoch et al., 2017).

**Table 3.** Theories in studies

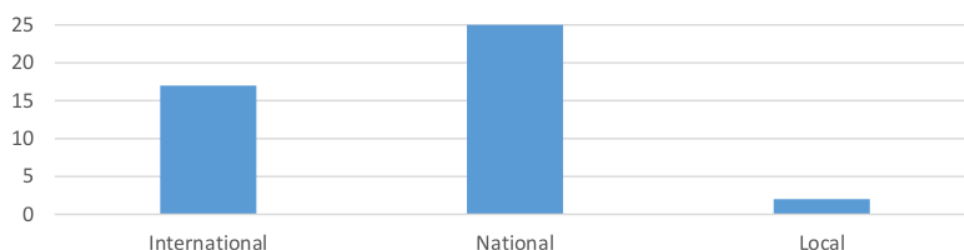
Source: Data analyzed

Theory	Author(s)	Year
Stakeholder Theory	Maryam Safari, Amreen Areeb	2020
	Amanpreet Kaur, Sumit Lodhia	2018
	Habiba AlShaer, Mahbub Zaman	2017
	Remmer Sassen, Leyla Azizi	2018
	Tricia Ong, Hadrian Geri Djajadikerta	2018
	Dinithi Dissanayake, Carol Tilt, Wei Qian	2019
	Fabrizio Stocker, Michelle P. de Arruda, Keysa M. C. de Mascena, João M. G. Boaventura	2020
	Patrizia Gazzola, Stefano Amelio, Fragkoulis Papagiannis, Zenon Michaelides	2019
	Edward Millar, Cory Searcy	2020
Legitimacy Theory	Dinithi Dissanayake, Carol Tilt, Wei Qian	2019
	Giovanna Michelon, Dennis M. Patten, Andrea M. Romi	2018
	Neungruthai Petcharat, Mahbub Zaman	2019
	David Talbot, Olivier Boiral	2019
Signaling Theory	Mirwais Usmani, Jane Davison, Christopher J. Napier	2020
	Katrin Hummel, Christian Schlick, Matthias Fifka	2017
Institutional Theory	Shidi Dong, Lei Xu and Ron McIver	2016
	Muatasim Ismaeel, Zarina Zakaria	2020
	Monica Montecalvo, Federica Farneti & Charl de Villiers	2018
	Philipp Hummel	2020
	Carol A. Tilt, Wei Qian, Sanjaya Kuruppu and Dinithi Dissanayake	2020
Agency Theory	Patricia Crifo, Elena EscrigOlmedo, Nicolas Mottis	2018
	Amira Jamil, Nazli Anum Mohd Ghazali and Sherliza Puat Nelson	2020
Stakeholder – Legitimacy Theory	Yi An et al	2019
	Coco Klußmann	2019
Ideology of numbers	Marc Journeault, Yves Levant, Claire-France Picard	2019
Impression-management	Desi Adhariani, Elda du Toit	2020
Value creation Theory	Amina Buallay	2019
Organizational change	Lorenzo Massa, Federica Farneti, Beatrice Scappini	2015
Slack resources Theory	Samuel Drempetic, Christian Klein, Bernhard Zwergel	2017
Source Credibility Theory	Josh Wei-Jun Hsueh	2016
Theories of diffusion	Heejung Byun, Tae-Hyun Kim	2015
Paradox Theory	Tobias Hahn, Frank Figge, Jonatan Pinkse, Lutz Preuss	2018
Contingency Theory	Lina Dagiliene, Kristina Šutiene	2019

A review of the theory used in SR research shows that several theories can be used as alternatives in explaining SR, such as the ideology of numbers theory (Journeault et al., 2020), paradox theory (Hahn et al., 2018), source credibility theory (Hsueh, 2018), and the theory of diffusion (Byun & Kim, 2017). Using these various theories in SR research will provide a new perspective in observing the SR phenomenon.

### 3.4. Study scope

The research scope is also a concern in this study to determine the previous researchers' concerns. Seventeen studies discuss SR in the international area, twenty-five studies discuss SR in the national scope, and two studies discuss SR topics in the local area. SR research in the local area is

**Figure 6.** The scope of studies

in case studies on local government in Australia (Kaur & Lodhia, 2018) and SMEs in Italia (Massa et al., 2015).

### 3.5. Research country

Developed countries are sovereign countries with economic conditions and technologically advanced infrastructure. Developed countries are also supported by the Human Development Index, political stability, gross domestic product (GDP), industrialization, and high freedom. Countries that have not reached the standards of developed countries are called developing countries.

Seventy percent of SR research is conducted in developed countries, while thirty percent in developing countries. Figure 7 shows that companies in developed countries more widely practice SR practices compared to developing countries. This finding is consistent with Soh (2014), who states

that SR research is more prevalent in developed countries.

Of the 27 studies conducted at the national and local levels, the most research was conducted in the US and Australia, each with four studies. Research in the USA was led by Sassen and Azizi (2018), Hussain et al. (2018), Michelon et al. (2019), Millar and Searcy (2020). Meanwhile, research in Australia was conducted by Safari and Areeb (2020), Kaur and Lodhia (2018), Ong and Djajadikerta (2018), Higgins et al. (2020).

### 3.6. Research topic

This study identifies 28 topics dealing with the various issues related to sustainability report research. An issue that has attracted a lot of attention from SR researchers is governance and identification of factors influencing SR. The topic of governance is in studies by Ong and Djajadikerta

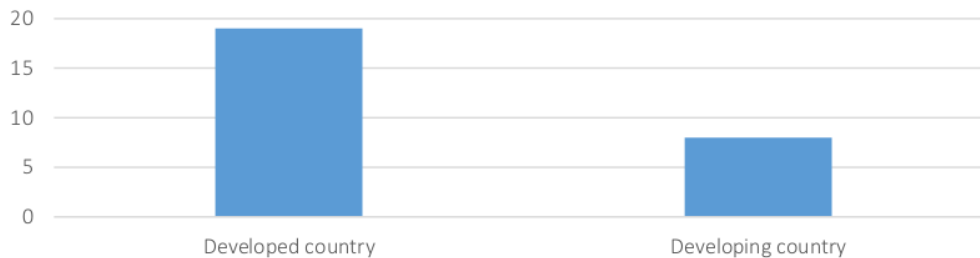


Figure 7. Country category

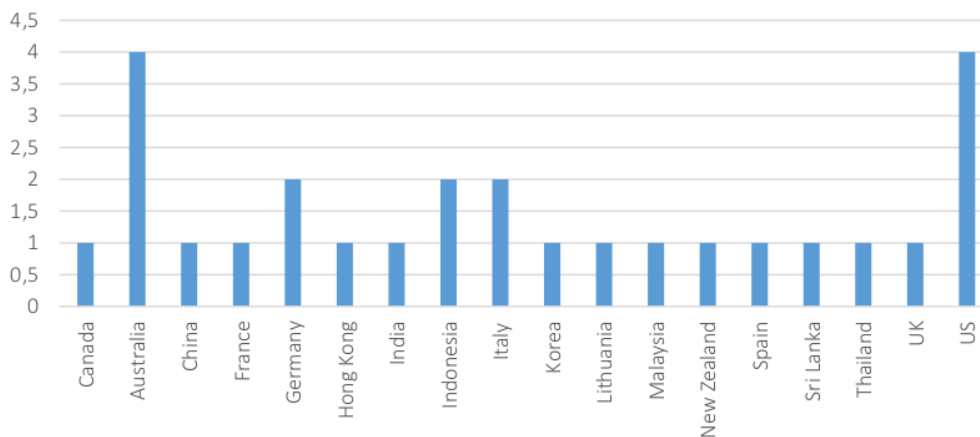


Figure 8. Country of origin

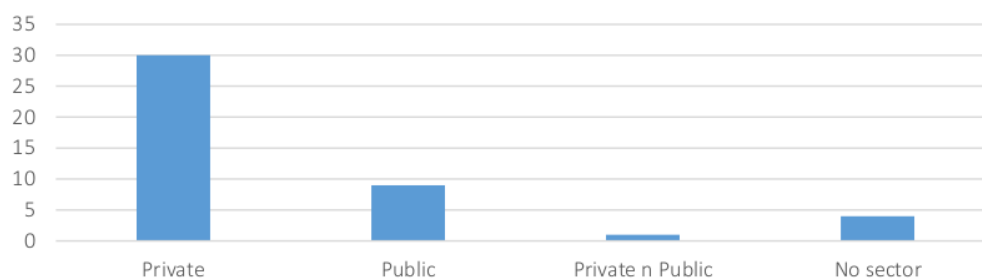
**Table 4.** Research topics

No.	Research topics	Articles	Percentage
1	Sustainability discourse	1	2.3%
2	A credibility gap	1	2.3%
3	Citizen science	1	2.3%
4	Comprehensiveness of SR	2	4.5%
5	Corporate governance of SR	5	11.4%
6	Corporate sustainability accounting information systems	1	2.3%
7	Quality of SR	2	4.5%
8	Disclosure topics	1	2.3%
9	Environmental Orientation	1	2.3%
10	Factors influencing SR	5	11.4%
11	Impact of SR on firm performance/business performance	2	4.5%
12	Impression Management	2	4.5%
13	Online SR	1	2.3%
14	Paradoxes in sustainability	1	2.3%
15	SR preparers	2	4.5%
16	Readability of SR	1	2.3%
17	Real-life SR	1	2.3%
18	Reflection on social and environmental accounting	1	2.3%
19	SME's	1	2.3%
20	Stakeholder engagement	2	4.5%
21	Sustainability assurance	2	4.5%
22	Sustainability performance	1	2.3%
23	Sustainability restatements	1	2.3%
24	SR practices and processes	2	4.5%
25	Diffusion of SR	1	2.3%
26	Compliance SR	1	2.3%
27	The state of SR	1	2.3%
28	Transparency of SR	1	2.3%
TOTAL		44	100.0%

(2018), Crifo et al. (2019), Hussain et al. (2018), Amidjaya and Widagdo (2019), and Jamil et al. (2020). Meanwhile, researchers who identify the factors influencing SR are Al-Shaer and Zaman (2019), Dong et al. (2020), Drempetic et al. (2020), and Montecalvo et al. (2018).

In this research period, 2015–2020, it can be seen that SR topics are more diverse than in the previous period. The diversity of these topics shows that there has been a development in researchers'

mindset towards SR topics. If Hahn and Kühnen (2013) identify that governance is the primary concern of SR research in the period 1999–2011, the focus of SR research in 2015–2020 does not only discuss the factors that influence SR or the impact of SR practice. However, it has expanded to process, dissemination, readability, compliance, stakeholder engagement, and assurance. This finding suggests that as a relatively new issue, SR research offers a broader research niche for researchers in this field.

**Figure 9.** Research sector

### 3.7. Research sector

Most recent research on social and environmental reporting has focused on the private sector. Previous research on SR has examined publication of company annual reports, but few studies have been reported in the public sector. According to Argento et al. (2019), apart from their relevance to the public sector, accounting and accountability for sustainability have not received much research attention.

The task of public sector organizations is to provide services that affect the quality of people's lives. For this reason, public organizations are expected to show responsible behavior to maintain the sustainability of future generations (Dumay et al., 2010). Therefore, public sector organizations' transparency is highly expected to indicate accountability by reporting their financial and non-financial performance (Grossi & Steccolini, 2014).

30 articles (seventy-five percent) focused on the private sector, 8 articles (22.5 percent) on the public sector, and the remaining 2.5 percent discussed SR in private and public sectors, while 4 articles are conceptual articles that do not specifically discuss a particular sector. All the eight papers that focus on the public sector are research in developed countries such as Australia, the USA, Germany, Italy, Hong Kong, Spain, New Zealand, and other European countries. The public sector that concerns SR researchers includes universities (Klußmann et al., 2019; Sassen & Azizi, 2018; Sepasi et al., 2019; Aş et al., 2019), state-owned enterprises (Larrinaga et al., 2018; Montecalvo et al., 2018), and NGOs (Gazzola et al., 2019).

### 3.8. The future for SR research

This section answers the third research question, "What is the future for SR research?". There are several worthwhile pursuits in sustainability accounting and reporting research such as SR preparers, SMEs, sustainability assurance, sustainable restatement, diffusion of SR, and topics frequently researched, such as SR influencing factors, SR compliance, SR performance, and SR quality. Based on the research object, research on SR in the future should start looking at sustainability in the public

sector and SMEs, considering that not many previous studies have focused on these two objects.

The public sector is considered as a servant in the context of social and environmental problems. The main objective of public sector organizations (PSOs) is to implement public policies and support social welfare (Kaur & Lodhia, 2018). The roles and responsibilities of the public sector are closely related to the sustainability agenda. Mostly since the countries of this world agreed on seventeen sustainable development goals (Bebbington & Unerman, 2018), the next SR researcher should explore the sustainability research niche. While various SR studies have focused more on large companies, SMEs also deserve researchers' attention. What is the role of SMEs in sustainability, or what form of SR is appropriate for SMEs can be new research opportunities for SR researchers.

According to Safari and Areeb (2020), few studies examine the perceptions of report makers in the context of sustainability reporting. Therefore, this issue could become a niche for future research. Researchers can analyze the perceptions of report makers about the quality and challenges in preparing sustainability reports.

The restatement of the SR report is also an interesting issue for future SR researchers. Compared to financial data, it is more likely that errors in sustainability reporting will occur and are less likely to be discovered before the report is published. The lack of reporting standards and ambiguous CFS guidelines allow providers to perform restatements. Restatement is useful for pinpointing problems in sustainability reporting and ensuring the credibility of the report.

GRI data (2020) shows that more and more companies in the world are making sustainability reports. These reports provide information on the company's sustainability performance aimed at stakeholders. Improving the quality and credibility of a sustainability report requires assurance from a competent and independent party. "Sustainability assurance is an emerging practice imbued with many choices, outcomes, and determinants, all of which would benefit from a better theoretical understanding of the assurance decision" (Al-Shaer & Zaman, 2019, p. 3).

## CONCLUSION

This study systematically presents empirical research on sustainability reporting for the period 2015–2020 and provides an overview using a qualitative approach. It also describes and discusses various approaches used in the SR literature. The study has identified a sample of 44 studies related to sustainability reporting published in accounting journals published between 2015 and 2020. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is the most recent literature review that provides an overview of sustainability reporting research. This analysis differs from previous studies that focused on the keywords of sustainability reporting and sustainability report. This study is unlike the previous one, which combined CSR and SR terminology. Using this approach, it can be ascertained that this study provides an overview of current SR research.

This study has contributed to a recent summary of sustainability reporting research and provided interesting insights and recommendations for future research. Based on the systematic literature review, this study shows a significant development of SR research in terms of numbers, diversity of theories, methods, and study concerns over the last few years.

The period 2015–2020 saw an increase in SR research, especially since 2018, which used both qualitative and quantitative paradigms. The SR study uses a variety of research methods, especially content analysis, case studies and semi-structured interviews. There is also a method that is rarely encountered, namely the world cafe approach. Stakeholder and legitimacy theory is still the main theory that is widely used in explaining SR, but various theories such as contingency, institutional, signaling, agency, ideology of number, paradox theory are also used in explaining the SR reality. Some studies use more than one theory to explain SR. The SR research scope consists of international, national and case studies. Research on SR during this period attracted more researchers from developed countries than from developing countries.

Related to the topic, the researchers raised a wide variety of topics ranging from the quantity of disclosure, quality of disclosure, SR performance, readability, preparers and others, although the number of studies is still one or two. This indicates that there is still a wide niche for SR research topics that can be studied further. Of all studies on SR reviewed, generally more were conducted in the private sector, although there were few studies on SR in the public sector.

This paper has limitations that could serve a basis for improving future research. The dataset does not include research papers (e.g. conference papers or working papers). It was also concluded that the reliability of the results can be confirmed more using the SRL method than using traditional literature reviews. However, researchers' understandings and beliefs will greatly influence the interpretation of the results.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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Validation: Zulnaidi Yaacob.

1ualization: Zulnaidi Yaacob.

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