The Impact of The Professional Assurance Service on Improving Sustainability Performance Reports: An Analytical Study in The Viewpoint of Academics and CPAs in The Kurdistan Region, Iraq

Kamaran I. Yousif [1], Basima F. Al-Nuimi [2]

[1] Department of Accounting, Faculty of Law & Political Science and Management, Soran University, Kurdistan Region, Iraq
[2] Department of Accounting, Faculty of Humanity and Social Science, Koya University, Iraq

ABSTRACT

The main aim of the study is to investigate the impact of professional assurance services on improving sustainability performance reports. A quantitative research design was employed, and the data instrument entailed a structured survey administered to CPAs and academicians. The total participation was 143, which consisted of 86% academicians and 14% CPAs. This study used simple linear regression for the impact of professional assurance services and the quality and credibility of sustainability report components and disclosures. Results suggest that professional assurance services have a statistically significant positive impact on improving sustainability performance reports. In particular, the use of assurance services indicates higher quality in the report components and results in more comprehensive disclosures with increased credibility. This study highlights the necessity of external verification to uphold and ensure sustainability reporting integrity. The study also provides an empirical approach to supporting these claims about professional assurance services, offering practical implications for public practice firms and companies. Organizational policies can employ managers' mindsets when dealing with projects, recognizing that confidence can impact quality results. In conclusion, the study shows that there needs to be consistency in assurance frameworks. It also suggests areas for future research to look into the long-term effects of various assurance services, the use of new technologies, and cost-benefit analysis for small and medium-sized businesses. Through better sustainability reporting, this research ultimately aims to promote increased transparency and accountability toward superior business practices.

KEYWORDS: Professional Assurance Services, Sustainability Performance Reports, Components of A Sustainability Report, Disclosures of A Sustainability Report, CPAs.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainability performance reporting has become an important part of corporate transparency and accountability because there is evidence that human of activities are linked to factors that cause climate change. This shows how an organization affects the environment, society, and the economy (Osobajo et al., 2022). In recent years, the demand for high-quality sustainability reports has surged, driven by stakeholders' increasing awareness environmental and social issues.

Koya University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (KUJHSS) Volume 7, Issue 2, 2024.
Received 28 July 2024; Accepted 11 September 2024
Regular research paper: Published 30 December 2024
Corresponding author's e-mail: kamaran.yousif@soran.edu.iq

These reports serve as vital tools for companies to communicate them sustainability efforts and for stakeholders to assess the company's commitment to sustainable practices (Amran & Ooi, 2014). Previous research has highlighted the significance of sustainability reporting in fostering trust among stakeholders and promoting sustainable business practices. For instance, Boiral et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of high-quality sustainability reports in enhancing stakeholder trust and corporate reputation. Similarly, Channuntapipat (2021) discusses the role of sustainability reporting in promoting transparent business practices and attracting investments. Comprehensive sustainability reporting also impacts both operational efficiency and stakeholder engagement positively, as evidenced by Meseguer-Sánchez et al. (2021) and Ruiz-Barbadillo & Martínez-Ferrero (2020).

Despite these benefits, the quality and credibility of

Original Article |DOI: https://doi.org/10.14500/kujhss.v7n2y2024.pp530-543

sustainability reports vary significantly across organizations, often due to a lack of standardized reporting frameworks and the voluntary nature of sustainability disclosures.

However, there has been surprisingly little discussion about the impact of professional assurance service provision. The focus is on enhancing the quality of sustainability reporting. Professional assurance is an outside, impartial check of the accuracy of the information given in sustainability reports, making sure that it meets the formal standards for information disclosure. This includes verification by means of external auditors that sustainability report disclosures are accurate and complete. Unfortunately, available empirical evidence on the impact of professional assurance services on enhancing sustainability performance reporting is currently lacking.

This highlights a gap in the study. This study will fill the gap by examining the effect of professional assurance services on the quality and credibility of non-financial sustainability performance reports. The key research question this study addresses is: 'Do professional assurance services make the quality and the credibility of non-financial sustainability performance reports better?' This study is guided by the following hypotheses:

H1: People perceive the use of professional assurance services as enhancing the quality of sustainable performance. report components.

H2: People believe that using professional assurance services improves the comprehensiveness and credibility of sustainability performance report disclosures.

This pilot study aims to first explore the empirical evidence of the role and benefits of Professional assurance services in sustainability. reporting, as well as identifying and describing the bottlenecks. The exploration is centered on the experiences and perceptions of professionals who are already or intend to adopt assurance services in the context of preparing sustainability reporting. Such evidence and insights are crucial. Policymakers, practitioners, and academics should reflect and contribute.to the progress of maintaining and improving sustainability reporting.

Extending previous empirical study provides data on the current role of professional investigations. assurance services for the quality and credibility of sustainability reports and, in turn, their contribution to a sound decision-making ability for sustainability reporting stakeholders. A better picture of the role of Professional assurance will encourage improved reporting practices. organizations, and an increased emphasis is being placed on these services.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainability reporting refers to the practice of organizations reporting on the organization's environmental, social, and economic impacts. In contrast to traditional financial reporting, the intention of sustainability reporting is to give a more complete picture of an organization's overall impact on society and the environment. Sustainability reports often include information on greenhouse gas emissions, energy use, water use, waste and pollution, worker health, community relations, labor, human rights and anti-corruption practices, and corporate governance. Sustainability reporting's core function is to improve transparency and accountability so that people can judge the sustainability practices and performance of an organization (Băndoi et al., 2021).

The main value of sustainability reporting is to make companies—employees, managers, and shareholders—accountable for measures of responsibility and sustainability across the organization and thus to contribute to global sustainability goals. Disclosing the environmental and social performance of a business leads to a gradual change in the way a company operates. The report, by informing investors, regulators, customers, and other stakeholders, makes available the information that is necessary for them to make better-informed decisions. 'Done well, sustainability reporting can help a company improve its reputation, attract investment, and improve operational efficiencies (Lozano et al., 2016).

Sustainability reporting is much more mature nowadays than when it first emerged in the early 1990s. Back then, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and environmental advocacy groups were the primary drivers, using the power of the media and public opinion to pressure corporations into disclosing their environmental footprints. The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) in 1997, which handed companies a common reporting tool to help them prepare these disclosures, was a key enabler of the maturation of sustainability reporting. The GRI helped to harmonize sustainability disclosures and improve their comparability and veracity. (Sisaye, 2021).

The extent of sustainability reporting, in its ongoing history of expansion, has grown to encompass more social and economic issues that are seen as interconnected with the environment. Since 2015, the adoption of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) signaled a rapid growth phase for the reporting sector, with many organizations reporting in line with the 17 SDGs (Calabrese et al., 2021).

Technological improvements have also contributed to the evolution of sustainability reporting. With our advanced ability to both collect and analyze data; the digitalization of reporting and analytics has allowed sustainable data sharing and processing capabilities to improve. This has increased the quality, quantity, and comparability of disclosures, thereby increasing the

Original Article |DOI: https://doi.org/10.14500/kujhss.v7n2y2024.pp530-543

usefulness of sustainability reporting to stakeholders (Pizzi et al., 2023).

Several key stakeholders have a vested interest in sustainability. Each stakeholder has distinct motivations and expectations, as detailed in the reports.

1. Investors: Sustainability can be achieved through sustainability reports. become an integral part of investors' analysis and enable them to derive conclusions about an organization's long-term viability and risk profile. Investors are integrating ESG factors into their investment decision-making. Meseguer-Sánchez et al. (2021) state that sustainability reporting can improve investor confidence, which, in turn, can help mobilize capital (HHbel & Scholz, 2019).
2. Regulators: Regulatory agencies are concerned with sustainability reports being necessary to ensure compliance with environmental and social standards. Regulations are important for their missions. Good-quality sustainability reporting can help these agencies monitor corporate behavior and enforce adherence to the prevailing laws and standards (i.e., what "good behavior" means) domestically (Dalessandro & Lovell, 2023).
3. Customers: Consumers today are aware of the environmental and social costs associated with their purchases. If sustainability reports provide information about a company's sustainability practices, it could potentially lead to customers. These reports have the potential to influence customers' purchasing decisions and foster brand loyalty (Amran & Ooi, 2014).
4. Employees: Employees are increasingly seeking to work for organizations Organizations are increasingly taking sustainability seriously. Sustainability reports can improve employee engagement and satisfaction and are helpful in presenting the company's role and activities that have a positive social and environmental impact (Pizzi et al., 2023).
5. Community and NGOs: Many smaller organizations use sustainability reports to hold the bigger companies that are causing issues locally accountable, pressing for greater transparency and pushing for There have been improvements in corporate sustainability practices (Sisaye, 2021).
6. Suppliers and Business Partners: Suppliers and business partners may be interested in receiving corporate sustainability reports. Check whether your suppliers or business partners are adhering to ethical and sustainable practices. This may ultimately affect what businesses you partner with and the companies you contract with to supply your goods and services (Dalessandro & Lovell, 2023).

The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework, proposed by John Elkington in 1994, builds upon traditional financial reporting to emphasize social and environmental considerations and encourage firms to report measures of their impact on people, planet, and profit. This framework has inspired a 'balanced' and 'integrated' view towards the actions of firms by encouraging accountability towards economic growth, social equity and environmental protection. TBL thinking has particularly informed the way firms report on a wider range of sustainability issues through the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) (Madsen & Stenheim, 2022).

Stakeholder Theory, developed by R. Edward Freeman, highlights that organizations have a duty to care for a broader set of stakeholders than just shareholders, including customers, employees, suppliers, communities, regulators, and investors. According to sustainability reporting literature, practitioners should take this theory into account when drafting reports. In this context, aligning with stakeholder theory means producing information that considers the concerns articulated by different stakeholder groups (Hörisch et al., 2020).

The Legitimacy Theory proposes that organizations will only be considered legitimate to society, and therefore support for those organizations, if their strategies and disclosures reflect what is generally accepted in a given society. Legitimacy Theory offers a framework that helps companies report and promise to society about the environmental and social consequences of their activities and to make adjustments towards societal expectations. It proposes that organizations become, or remain, legitimate when they become transparent about their activities and conform to what those in society expect from organizations. In this way, organizations gain (and keep) the trust and approval of their stakeholders (Moreno-Luzon et al., 2018).

Sustainability reports encompass a multitude of elements. Together, they provide a detailed view of an organization's sustainability performance. These different elements can be grouped together in Environmental, social, and governance (ESG) elements are all important perspectives on sustainability (Lokuwaduge & Heenetigala, 2017).

The governance section reports on the leadership structure, ethics, and transparency of the organization. This includes disclosures on organizational structures, the composition of the board of directors, and executive remuneration, risk management and mitigation, and policies and procedures related to compliance with laws and regulations. Good governance is at the core of an organization's accountability and integrity, and reporting on these provides assurance that the organization is well-governed and compliant with the ethical standards of the broad community (Sarma et al., 2024).

Materiality assessment is a key activity of sustainability. Reporting assists organizations in identifying the most significant ESG issues for their business and stakeholders. These issues are then placed in a matrix in order to map and visualize the relative importance of the issues at the organizational as well as at the stakeholder level. It's a process that ensures the right issues are addressed and reported upon (Kharel et al., 2019).

These are sustainability performance indicators (SPIs). SPIs refer to quantifiable metrics that enable the measurement and reporting of an The organization's sustainability performance aligns with the following global standards. The organization adheres to the following global standards: the GRI (Global Reporting Initiative), the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB), which establishes performance metrics for corporate financial filings, and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These standards are key because they promote standardization and enable objective comparisons, thus rendering reports entirely credible and easily comparable (Saeed & Kersten, 2017).

Narrative disclosures are not simply a collection of cases. studies—they typically provide context to quantitative data, explain the significance of those data, and describe an organization's sustainability strategy, goals, policies and initiatives. They also tell the story of the organization's sustainability journey, why it desires to be sustainable, and why it has taken certain actions or made certain decisions. Sustainability reporting is a process driven by engagement with key stakeholders; organizations often include sections on how they have engaged with stakeholders, the stakeholder feedback they have received, and how they responded. Effective stakeholder engagement ensures that the sustainability-reporting process addresses the interests and information needs of the organization's key stakeholders, and can validate the organization's commitment to sustainability (Al-Shaer et al., 2021).

Professional assurance services in the context of sustainability reporting involves a third party, such as an accounting firm, checking a company's sustainability disclosures. All the information that the company has put in the report has been checked by someone else, which is supposed to make it more credible, reliable, and accurate. All the information in the report has been checked by someone else. Assurance for sustainability reporting can take two forms: limited assurance, which is a relatively light form of examination that generates some confidence in the accuracy of the report, and reasonable assurance, which is a substantially heavier form of examination that generates significantly more confidence, or something close to the confidence of a financial audit (Manetti & Becatti, 2009).

Assurance services primarily aim to boost stakeholder confidence and mitigate the risk of unreliable or inaccurate reporting. Ensure the accuracy of the information in sustainability reports by validating it. reported about environmental, social, employee or corporate governance matters. Moreover, assurance services aim to further improve internal processes and controls of an organization regarding the data collection and reporting on non-financial matters or ESG issues in the future (Boiral & Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2020).

Research indicates that when sustainability reports are presented externally, assured—with a third party confirming their completeness and veracity – they're more likely to be viewed as credible or trustworthy to a company's stakeholders. For example, Boiral et al (2019) found respondents judged the reliability of assured reports that – as a result of assurance – would be typically accompanied by a statement from the assurance provider on the scope of the assurance, the methodology used and the conclusions drawn. Such reports were more likely to be deemed credible and, as such, important for stakeholders in terms of understanding their potential impact on society, but also a reliable guide to an organization's reputational value and its potential for building stakeholder trust.

The benefits that other stakeholders can derive from assurance services include improving the quality and materiality of the organization's sustainability report, thereby increasing the organization's reputation and stakeholder confidence; often stimulating operational improvements, such as in the organization's internal data collection, report production and process control; providing a differentiating factor that can serve as a competitive advantage, particularly in the eyes of those stakeholders who increasingly prefer to work with organizations that are aspiring to demonstrate transparency and accountability; and being an important tool for developing a sound understanding of sustainability-related risks that the organization will face and needs to manage (Channuntapipat, 2017).

While these services can be beneficial, there are several challenges and limitations of assurance services, including proprietary and non-standardized assurance frameworks for sustainability reporting, associated costs of assurance for some smaller organizations, risk of conflict of interest when providers offer consulting services to the same clients, stakeholders having varying expectations on the assurance level provided, and variability in the type of assurance required as a result (O'Dwyer, 2011).

The empirical evidence also reveals a range of mixed findings regarding the impact of assurance service provision on the quality of sustainability reports and accountability. While some studies suggest that the provision of assurance services by external auditors increases the quality of the reports prepared by the reporting organization and enhance the level of stakeholders' trust, other studies suggest that the effectiveness of the assurances provided by the external auditors depends on several contextual variables such as the skills and expertise of the assurance service provider or the contextual circumstances of the reporting organization. For example, Channuntapipat (2021) and Ruiz-Barbadillo and Martínez-Ferrero (2020) suggest that the assurance services increase the reports' quality and stakeholders' trust, respectively, but they also reveal that such effectiveness of the assurances provided by external auditors depends on several contextual variables.

Assurance services can provide empirical evidence in this case. Assurance services can offer empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness and impact of sustainability reporting. A number of studies have focused on the question of whether audited sustainability reports are of higher quality, more credible, and how they are perceived by stakeholders.

In their study of the auditors' attitude toward the quality of disclosure in corporate sustainability reporting, Boiral et al. (2019) show that the provision of assurance services increases stakeholder confidence and corporate reputation to a significantly higher extent. Through an independent attestation of the assertion in the individual's or organization's work, assurance services contribute to that entity's standing and credibility and to the reinforcement of its claim to legitimacy by virtue of its transparency and accountability.

In a recent paper, Meseguer-Sánchez et al. (2021) focused on the role of assurance services in the sustainability reporting transparency, maintaining the same empirical study on the assurance of ESG disclosure. Their regression showed that firms with assured sustainability reports attract much more attention from ESG investors than those with unassured reports do. This point out that the assurance of the sustainability reporting process allows ESG investors to signal that the company is committed to sustainability and put in place sound processes to manage the material ESG impacts of its own operations.

In a comparison of assured and non-assured sustainability reports, Ruiz-Barbadillo & Martínez-Ferrero (2020) found that the former contain a higher amount of credible and verifiable information, which makes it more valuable to stakeholders because organizations are incentivized to adopt more rigorous sources of data and standards of reporting when voluntarily submitted to the assurance process.

The credibility of assured sustainability reporting depends on the perceived quality of the assurance providers and their level of expertise were also considered. as their reputation. If a stakeholder sees that the report was assured by a big four firm, the sustainability report is considered much more credible than one that was assured by a firm with a lesser reputation (Martínez-Ferrero et al., 2018).

Despite the gaps and limitations to sustainability reporting and Researchers can still explore assurance services. Probably the biggest gap in the literature currently shows a lack of consistency in assurance. practices. Although there is a plethora of frameworks and guidelines, such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) and the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB), assurance services face no universally adopted standard. In the absence of standardization, there is considerable variation in the extent, quality and reliability of the insurance services provided. In turn, this situation makes it extremely difficult to rely on, compare and learn from sustainability reports across different organizations. Future research needs to address this gap. By adopting standardization, credibility and comparability of assured sustainability reports across different organizations can be established (Manetti & Becatti, 2009).

The vast majority of the existing research on assurance services has looked at the direct effects of such services, such as the role they play in improving the quality of reports and increasing trust among stakeholders – thus ignoring the fundamental question of how they create changed organizational effects and sustainability outcomes over time. Having harder and more longitudinal data from tracking organizations' performance over time would be of enormous help in enhancing our understanding of the longer-term effects of assurance services and significantly enhancing their contribution to sustainability goals (Ruiz-Barbadillo & Martínez-Ferrero, 2020).

Contextual factors such as industry sector, region, and size of organization can appreciably affect the impact of assurance services, but current research often parochially ignores these differences, treating different contexts as one homogenous research object. More research is needed to examine how assurance services affect sustainability reporting in different contexts and identify more tailored best practice for industries and regions (Thompson et al., 2022).

While some of these studies investigate the effects of assurance services through changes in stakeholder trust; it's just as important to have research about what exactly stakeholders expect assured sustainability reports to achieve, and how these expectations about the value of assured reports – and the sorts of trust placed in them – differentiate between groups of stakeholders. This can help organizations to design assurance practices that better serve the information needs of different types of stakeholder audiences (Silva et al., 2019).

The assurance costs may also be a barrier since there is no There is an economic incentive, primarily for SMEs, to engage with professional services. Another important limitation is the lack of empirical studies addressing the cost-benefit equation of assurance services from an organizational economic point of view. This is an area that deserves future research because understanding the economics of assurance services for different organizations and how to make assurance less costly and more accessible is crucial (Ferreira de Araújo Lima et al., 2020).

The characteristics of the assurance providers—their qualifications, reputation, independence, and other qualities – also play a role in the context of accuracy and reliability of assurance services. However, the literature to date has not yet comprehensively explored empirically the role that they play in the assurance process and, more specifically, the impact of such characteristics on the quality and credibility of assured sustainability reports. In this regard, future research should explore what the key characteristics of effective assurance-providers are, and what are the main selection guides and review procedures for the assurance service (Martínez-Ferrero et al., 2018).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study uses a quantitative research design, meaning that data was collected that can be measured and converted into numbers and analyzed using quantified means to uncover or identify patterns and generalizations that can explain the effect of professional assurance services on sustainability reporting and reports' credibility and quality.

3. 2 Data Collection Methods

The main method of data collection used for this study is through a structured survey where respondents are asked their thoughts on professional assurance services as well as the disclosures and other components of sustainability reports. Closed-ended questions and Likert-scale items were built into the survey instrument to measure our variables of interest. The two important groups that received the survey were auditors and academics. The internet-based electronic distribution approach aims to expand the scope, depth, and breadth of perspectives for comprehending the phenomenon of assessment through sustainability reporting.

3.3 Sampling Techniques

Professionals involved in sustainability reporting was the target population. An invitation was sent to people involved in financial and sustainability assurance services of various companies and organizations. We used purposive sampling; the respondents required direct experience and knowledge of sustainability reporting and assurance services for selecting. A total of 143 participants completed the survey. Inclusion criteria used in sample selection was a professional role associated with sustainability reporting, assurance and work experience based on the instruments and showed an equal distribution of auditors and academics, reflecting statistical power for the analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis Methods

The computed data were subjected to the analyses of descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics was used to compute some frequencies, percentages, Means, Standard Deviations in order to interpret the demographic characteristics of the respondents and their opinion on the different aspects of the assurance services.

In this regard, to establish the effect levels of professional assurance service on components quality of investigative report (independent variable), a simple linear regression analysis was run to ascertain the extent of professional assurance services influence the components of audit reports (dependent variable) thus, enhanced or comprehensive and dependable disclosures.

Simple Linear Regression Formula and Definition:

In simple linear regression – a statistical technique used to study the relationship between two variables: one independent variable (predictor) and one dependent variable (outcome)—the objective is to model the linear relationship between those variables.

The formula for simple linear regression is:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X + \epsilon \qquad (1)$$

Where:

- Y is the dependent variable (e.g., components or disclosures of sustainability reports).
- X is the independent variable (e.g., professional assurance services).
- β_0 is the y-intercept, representing the expected value of Y when X is 0.
- β_1 is the slope of the regression line, representing the change in Y for a one-unit change in X.
- ϵ is the error term, representing the deviation of the observed values from the regression line.

The relationship between the dependent and independent variables in this study was presented through standard simple linear regression technique, which were professional assurance services (Forming the independent variable) and quality of the components of the report (Forming the dependent variables). Must be more complete and credible disclosure. To achieve the requirement of this analysis, it was performed using statistical software.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

These ethical considerations were crucial during this research phase. All the subjects acquired their prior consent before they participated in the survey. All the respondents sign an agreement that clearly mentions the research objective, the voluntarily of the participation and the right to withdraw at any time. The confidentiality and the anonymity of the respondents were being kept throughout the interview. All the data collected was stored in a protected area and only be used for academic purposes with no possible conflict of interest.

3.6 Limitations of the Study

This study describes the relationship between professional assurance services and sustainability reporting. It has a few limitations. Firstly, using a purposive sample enables choosing the best participants to illustrate the preferences. However, the study might not hold for data because it generates limited data to describe the world. Secondly, it is a self-report study that might show some biases which are related to how the reporters have reported. These limitations could be minimized. For example, the self-report might be biased, and some participants might miss data more than others.

4 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Result

The age distribution indicates that the largest group of respondents is between 41 to 50 years old (42.7%), followed by those aged 31 to 40 years (37.8%). Smaller percentages were observed for respondents aged 51 to 60 years (13.3%), under 30 years (2.1%), and over 60 years (4.2%). An interesting trend is the concentration of respondents in the mid-career age groups (31 to 50 years), suggesting that individuals in this age range are more engaged in professional assurance services, reflecting a peak in professional activity and expertise.

Over half of the respondents hold a PhD degree (51.7%), followed by those with a Master's degree (36.4%). A smaller proportion of respondents have a CPA's degree (11.9%). The high percentage of respondents with advanced degrees indicates a highly educated sample, suggesting that the insights provided are based on a strong academic background.

Most of respondents have 11 to 15 years of service (41.3%), followed by 16 to 25 years (21.7%) and 6 to 10 years (18.9%). Smaller percentages were observed for 26 to 35 years (9.1%), less than 5 years (6.3%), and over 35 years (2.8%). This indicates a predominantly mid-career professional sample with substantial experience, which could influence their perspectives on professional assurance services.

The majority of respondents among academics are Lecturers (58.7%), followed by Assistant Professors (20.3%) and Professors (7.0%). Among Certified Public Accountants (CPAs), 4.2% are in the First category, and 9.8% are in the Second category. The high proportion of Lecturers and Assistant Professors indicates an academic-focused sample, which is beneficial for a study on professional assurance services. The higher percentage of respondents in the Lecturer category compared to the Professor and Assistant Professor categories suggests that most respondents are actively engaged in teaching. This is a positive indicator for the quality of responses, as lecturers are likely to be directly involved with current educational practices and trends.

Most respondents are from Erbil (62.9%), followed by Sulaimani (18.9%) and Duhok (18.2%). The dominance of respondents from Erbil suggests a concentration of academic and professional institutions in this governorate, reflecting its significance in the region.

There were no significant issues encountered during data collection for the various demographic characteristics of respondents. The response rate was satisfactory, and the collected data were representative. the target population.

The data indicates that the sample includes individuals who have achieved a significant degree of education and has significant work experience. The majority of participants are from the mid-career age group and are largely located in Erbil. This demographic profile is expected to provide comprehensive and well-informed insights into the effects of knowledge integration on professional assurance services. The significant proportion of participants from Erbil may be indicative of the academic and professional environment in the area, thereby impacting the results of the research.

TABLE 1
Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Percentage
Age	31 to 40 years	54	37.8%
	41 to 50 years	61	42.7%
	51 to 60 years	19	13.3%
	Less than 30 years	3	2.1%
	Over 60 years	6	4.2%
Educational Level	CPA's degree	17	11.9%
	Master's degree	52	36.4%
	PhD degree	74	51.7%
Years of Service	11 to 15 years	59	41.3%
	16 to 25 years	31	21.7%
	26 to 35 years	13	9.1%
	6 to 10 years	27	18.9%
	Less than 5 years	9	6.3%
	Over 35 years	4	2.8%
Professional Category	Professor	10	7.0%
	Assistant Professor	29	20.3%
	Lecturer	84	58.7%
	First (CPA)	6	4.2%
	Second (CPA)	14	9.8%
Governorate	Duhok	26	18.2%
	Erbil	90	62.9%
	Sulaimani	27	18.9%

Table 2 illustrates respondents' perceptions of assurance services and various aspects of professional practices. The table includes the mean and standard deviation for each statement, allowing for a comparative analysis of the responses.

The analysis reveals the highest mean score for the statement "Auditors identify improvements and recommend actions to clients based on their findings" (mean = 2.93, SD = 1.25, Seq. 1), indicating strong agreement among respondents on the proactive role of auditors in providing actionable recommendations. This is followed by "Participation in training for performance improvement services enhances auditors' knowledge and skills" (mean = 2.90, SD = 1.23, Seq. 2) and "Auditors collaborate with teams for performance improvements and compliance with standards" (mean = 2.89, SD = 1.20, Seq. 3). These findings suggest a significant emphasis on collaboration, decision support, and the importance of training in auditing practices.

There is also considerable agreement on the importance of "Collaboration with engagement teams ensures thorough compliance and regulatory procedures" (mean = 2.88, SD = 1.18, Seq. 4) and "Assurance services support decision-making by providing relevant information" (mean = 2.88, SD = 1.22, Seq. 5). These findings highlight the crucial role of collaboration and decision support in the assurance services provided by external auditors.

However, the statements related to training and familiarity with reporting formats, such as "Assurance services ensure credibility and compliance in financial reporting" (mean = 2.84, SD = 1.21, Seq. 6) and "External auditors maintain quality to enhance assurance services" (mean = 2.83, SD = 2.21, Seq. 7), received slightly lower mean scores. These results suggest areas where auditors might benefit from further training and exposure to various reporting formats.

When comparing the mean scores, "Auditors identify improvements and recommend actions to clients based on their findings" ranked the highest, indicating strong agreement among respondents on the importance of providing actionable recommendations. On the other hand, "Familiarity with reporting formats for performance improvement engagements (e.g., dashboards, executive summaries)" (mean = 2.80, SD = 1.14, Seq. 9) had the lowest mean score, suggesting an area where further training might be beneficial.

The results reflect a strong emphasis on quality, compliance, and proactive recommendations in the professional practices of external auditors, with a specific focus on the importance of collaboration and decision support. Nevertheless, the findings also highlight areas where further training and familiarity with reporting formats could enhance the effectiveness of assurance services.

TABLE 2
Perceptions on Assurance Services and Professional Practices

Statement Description	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	Mean	S.D	Seq.
Assurance services ensure credibility and compliance in financial reporting.	16.1	64.3	14.0	4.9	0.7	2.84	1.21	6
Assurance services support decision-making by providing relevant information.	18.2	62.2	14.0	5.6	N/A	2.88	1.22	5
External auditors maintain quality to enhance assurance services.	15.4	65.0	15.4	3.5	0.7	2.83	2.21	7
Auditors collaborate with teams for performance improvements and compliance with standards.	14.7	60.8	18.2	5.6	0.7	2.89	1.20	3
Collaboration with engagement teams ensures thorough compliance and regulatory procedures.	15.4	60.8	18.2	5.6	N/A	2.88	1.18	4
Auditors are aware of reporting requirements for compliance and regulatory engagements.	14.7	67.1	13.3	4.2	0.7	2.78	1.18	10
Auditors identify improvements and recommend actions to clients based on their findings.	18.2	61.5	16.1	3.5	0.7	2.93	1.25	1
Familiarity with reporting formats for performance improvement engagements (e.g., dashboards, executive summaries).	13.3	63.6	16.8	6.3	N/A	2.80	1.14	9
Participation in training for performance improvement services enhances auditors' knowledge and skills.	17.5	62.2	14.7	4.9	0.7	2.90	1.23	2
Sustainability reporting adds credibility and is a growing practice.	14.7	65.7	15.4	3.5	0.7	2.81	1.19	8

The analysis of the dependent variable "Components of a Sustainability Reports" provides detailed insights into respondents' perspectives on various aspects of sustainability reporting. This analysis helps understand the significance of different components—include: materiality, scope, and index portions of a sustainability report, sustainability initiatives, vision, efforts, and progress—and their perceived importance in the context of sustainability reporting.

The goal of sustainability reporting is to assess materiality. indicating significant social, environmental, or economic concerns that affect or are affected by a business. 58% of respondents strongly agree with this statement, while 4.2% agree. The mean score for this item is 2.54, with a standard deviation (SD) of 1.56, indicating a generally high level of agreement with some variability in responses.

The materiality matrix is also recognized as a method that is used in sustainability reporting to assess the sustainability salience 64.3% of respondents strongly agree with this statement, and 4.9% agree. The mean score is 2.43, and the SD is 1.43. A strong consensus of the respondents expresses their agreement.

The scope section on a sustainability report is an explanation of the guidelines/standards/framework against which the reporting has been carried out. 65% of respondents strongly agree with this statement, and 3.5% agree. The mean score is 2.23, and the SD is 1.23, with high agreement and low variability among the respondents.

The thresholds for what is considered elementary to be

variable	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	Mean	SD	Seq.
The goal of sustainability reporting is to assess materiality indicating a significant social, environmental or economic concern that affects or is affected by a business.	58	4.2	22.4	13.3	2.1	2.54	1.56	2
The materiality matrix is a tool used in sustainability reporting, for the purpose of assessing the importance of sustainability issues.	64.3	4.9	14	16.1	0.7	2.43	1.43	3
The scope portion of a sustainability report provides an overview of the standards and guidelines used in the reporting process.	65	3.5	15.4	15.4	0.7	2.23	1.23	7
The specific criteria used to define the scope of a sustainability report contribute to providing a comprehensive overview of the business entity's operations and performance.	60.8	5.6	18.2	14.7	0.7	3.34	1.98	4
The index portion of a sustainability report provides an organized way to access and navigate report content, making it easier for stakeholders to find specific information.	61.5	3.5	16.1	18.2	0.7	2.26	1.11	6
The index portion of a sustainability report enhances the ability of stakeholders to access and navigate the report content efficiently.	62.2	4.9	14.7	17.5	0.7	2.33	1.34	5
Preparing reports on initiatives to educate and engage stakeholders, employees, customers, investors and local communities on environmental sustainability topics.	65.7	3.5	15.4	14.7	0.7	2.78	1.43	1
The Sustainability Report presents the business entity: vision, efforts and progress made on various topics related to sustainability.	65.7	3.5	15.4	14.7	0.7	2.43	1.21	3

considered relevant for a sustainability report; put together the full picture of the business entity, defining a limited scope of topics not part of the entity's core business. 60.8% of the respondents agree strongly with this idea, 5.6% agree. The mean score is 3.34, with an SD of 1.98, implying that there are several cases with extreme answers.

Providing an index at the front of a sustainability report facilitates searching and navigation so that stakeholders can more easily identify the specific topics or data they are looking for. Strongly agree: 61.5% Agree: 3.5% Mean score: 2.26, SD = 1.11. Generally positive and widely dispersed responses on this item.

The index portion of a sustainability report enhances the ability of stakeholders to access and navigate the report content efficiently. 62.2% of respondents strongly agree, while 4.9% agree. The mean score is 2.33, and the SD is 1.34, reflecting a high level of agreement.

Having to write reports on activities, telling the res edited and other stakeholders, employees, customers, investors, and local communities on green accountability and issues on sustainability, I believe that is quite important. I think it should be a 7. 65.7% completely agree, 3.5% agree. With a mean of 2.78 and an SD of 1.43 — I picked this one as the respondents showed strong support for educational initiatives.

The sustainability report presents the business entity's vision, efforts, and progress made on various topics related to sustainability. 65.7% of respondents strongly agree with this statement, while 3.5% agree. The mean score is 2.43, with an SD of 1.21, indicating strong consensus among respondents.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Components of a sustainability performance reports

The analysis of the dependent variable "Disclosures" provides detailed insights into respondents' perspectives on the importance and impact of various types of disclosures – include: environmental, social, general and governance disclosures - in sustainability reports.

A significant portion of respondents believe that environmental disclosures in a sustainability report are fundamental mechanisms that provide stakeholders with a complete view of a company's environmental performance and impact. 62.2% of respondents strongly agree with this statement, and 4.9% agree. The mean score for this item is 2.76, with a standard deviation (SD) of 1.32, indicating strong consensus among the respondents.

65.7% of respondents strongly agree that environmental disclosures cover key areas such as materials consumed, energy consumption, water consumption, impact on biodiversity, waste, and emissions, with 3.5% agreeing. The mean score is 2.63 and the SD is 1.43, reflecting a high level of agreement.

The majority of respondents, 65.7%, strongly agree that comprehensive environmental disclosures offer potential benefits to an organization, particularly in stakeholder engagement, reputation management, and risk mitigation. 6.3% of respondents agree with this statement. The mean score is 2.23, with an SD of 1.45, indicating strong support with some variability.

58% of respondents strongly agree that social disclosure in a sustainability report covers the impact of the business's operations on people both internal and external to the organization, with 4.2% agreeing. The mean score is 2.56 and the SD is 1.87, suggesting some variability in responses.

Regarding the coverage of areas such as employment, health and safety, training and education, suppliers, and social impact, 59.4% of respondents strongly agree, and 5.6% agree. The mean score is 2.73 and the SD is 1.67, indicating a moderate level of agreement.

59.4% of respondents strongly agree that social disclosures in sustainability reports enhance transparency and accountability regarding an organization's impact on society, including its employees, suppliers, and local communities. 6.3% agree with this statement. The mean score is 2.65, with an SD of 1.53, reflecting some variability in responses.

65% of respondents strongly agree that the general part of a sustainability report contains essential information about the business entity, such as location, policy, legal name and address, supply chain, markets served, and stakeholders, with 5.6% agreeing. The mean score is 2.54 and the SD is 1.56, indicating strong consensus among respondents.

Governance disclosures are second only to materiality and prioritisation in sustainability reports, and they indicate how a company is governed economically, socially and environmentally by providing details on who owns the company and its subsidiaries, what its organizational structure is, and how its management body is appointed, elected and functions based on delegated authority. Just over two-thirds (65 per cent) of the respondents strongly agree with the following statement: When we disclose our governance it helps stakeholders gain a clear understanding of our governance of the company. Fifty–six per cent agree; mean (M) = 2.54, SD = 1.56. The standard deviation score indicates that there is almost unanimous consensus that governance disclosures are important. These disclosures also promote accountability by ensuring that the governance practices of the organization is understood and accepted by the various stakeholders.

TABLE 4

Disclosures in sustainability reports

Variable	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	Mean	SD	Seq.
Environmental disclosures in a sustainability report are fundamental mechanisms that provide stakeholders with complete visions into a company's environmental performance and effect.	62.2	4.9	14.7	17.5	0.7	2.76	1.32	1
Environmental disclosures cover some key arias such as: materials consumed, energy consumption, water consumption, impact on Biodiversity, waste, and emissions.	65.7	3.5	15.4	14.7	0.7	2.63	1.43	4
Comprehensive environmental disclosures offer a range of potential benefits to an organization, particularly in relation to stakeholder engagement, reputation management, and risk mitigation.	65.7	6.3	13.3	13.3	1.4	2.23	1.45	7
The social disclosure of a sustainability report covers the impact of the business's operations on people both internal and external to the organization.	58	4.2	22.4	13.3	2.1	2.56	1.87	5
Social disclosures cover some arias such as: employment, health and Safety, training and education, suppliers, and social Impact.	59.4	5.6	14.7	18.9	1.4	2.73	1.67	2
Social disclosures in sustainability reports contribute to enhancing transparency and accountability regarding an organization's impact on society, including its employees, suppliers and local communities.	59.4	6.3	21.7	6.3	6.3	2.65	1.53	3
The general part of a sustainability report contains general information about the business entity such as: location, policy, legal name and address, supply chain, markets served, and stakeholders.	65	5.6	15.4	7	7	2.54	1.56	6
Reporting on the initiatives to educate and engage stakeholders, employees, customers, investors, and local communities, on environmental sustainability topics, and seek their input, feedback, and collaboration in environmental initiatives.	60.1	6.3	19.6	13.3	0.7	2.43	1.43	8

The first simple linear regression analysis has been conducted to investigate the impact relationship between professional assurance services (PAS) and the components of sustainability reports. The results showed that the variables of PAS impact significantly and positively on the variables of sustainability report components.

The intercept (β_1) is 4.060. This value represents the baseline. value of the components of the sustainability reports when professional assurance services are not used. The intercept is statistically different from zero (p-value: 0.000), so we can say that it is relevant.

The coefficient for professional assurance services (β_1) is 0.545, showing that a 0.545 unit increase in the utilization of professional assurance services, the quality of three dimensions of the sustainability report shows 0.545-unit importance. This significance is high, with a t-value of 10.796, and the p-value is also 0.000, which is less than 0.05.

The adjusted R-squared value of 0.45 suggests that nearly 45% of the variance in the quality of different components of sustainability reports is explained by the application of professional assurance services. The adjusted R-squared value also suggests that the explanatory power of the independent variable in accounting for the variance in the dependent variable is moderate. Finally, the F-test value of 116.549 with a p-value of 0.000 tells us that the overall statistical significance of the regression model is evident because models including independent variables will fit the data better than models that exclude the independent variables (PAS).

These findings suggest that professional assurance services significantly enhance the quality of the components of sustainability reports. Organizations that utilize professional assurance services tend to have more comprehensive and higher-quality sustainability reports. This improvement in report quality can be attributed to the rigorous verification processes conducted by external auditors, which ensure the accuracy and completeness of the disclosed information.

TABLE 5
The impact of professional assurance service on Components of a sustainability report

Variables	Coefficient	S.E	T-value	P-value
Constant	4.060	0.924	4.395	0.000
PAS	0.545	0.050	10.796	0.000
Adjusted-R2		0.45		
F-test (P-value)		116.549 (0.000)		
R2		0.55		

Using the second simple linear regression, we further examined the connection between PAS and different dimensions (comprehensiveness and quality) of disclosures in sustainability reports. The results indicate that PAS highly influence the comprehensiveness and credibility of the sustainability reports.

The first constant term (β_1) is 3.916, which is the baseline for level of disclosures in SRs when an application for professional assurance services is not conducted. The intercept is statistically significant as indicated by the p-value of 0.000 and so it is important in the model.

The coefficient for professional assurance services (β_1) is 0.600, suggesting that for each unit increase in the application of professional assurance services, there is a 0.600 unit increase in the comprehensiveness and credibility of disclosures in sustainability reports. This relationship is highly significant, as evidenced by a t-value of 10.129. and a p-value of 0.000.

The 0.58 value for adjusted R-squared clearly indicates that about 58 per cent of the variance in sustainability report disclosures with respect to credibility and comprehensiveness can be explained by the variable Professional Assurance Services, since the strength of the explanatory power of the independent variable (PAS) is strong. Nonetheless, the F-test 102.597 with a P-value of 0.000 reveals that the whole model is statistically significant for both variables. This means that the model offers a better fit to the data than a model that does not contain the independent variable.

These findings suggest that professional assurance services actually help to improve the completeness and reliability of disclosures in sustainability reports. Organizations that have used professional assurance services are more likely to present more complete, accurate, and reliable information in their sustainability disclosures because they can rely on the rigorous verification processes made by the external auditors.

TABLE 6
The impact of professional assurance services on disclosures of a sustainability report

Variables	Coefficient	S.E	T-value	P-value
Constant	3.916	1.085	3.610	0.000
PAS	0.600	0.059	10.129	0.000
Adjusted-R2		0.58		
F-test (P-value)		102.597 (0.000)		
R2		0.42		

4.2 Discussion

The major purpose of this research is to measure and quantify the extent to which assurance services provided by professionals have been perceived as influencing the quality and credibility of sustainability performance reports. The findings have provided enormous proof to support both the proposed hypotheses. H1: We hypothesize that the disclosure of sustainability reports improves with the use of professional assurance services. Findings support this hypothesis, demonstrating a positive and significant association between professional services and the quality of disclosed sustainability reports. H2: We hypothesize that the use of assurance services enhances the comprehensiveness and credibility of sustainability disclosures. It was also supported, such that the use of assurance services has a substantial positive effect on the comprehensiveness and credibility of sustainability disclosures.

The results corroborate previous studies that emphasize the importance of external assurance in the quality and credibility of the sustainability report. Reports that carry an external 'assurance' seal are more reliable and trustworthy than those without since they satisfy stakeholders who see assurance as a guarantee of the information's quality and reliability (e.g., Boiral, Heras-Saizarbitoria, and Brotherton, 2019; Channuntapipat, 2021). Their findings highlight the role of assurance services in fostering transparency and attracting investments because the information is becoming more accurate and transparent, which ultimately benefits stakeholders. The positive relationship found in this study between professional assurance services and the quality of the sustainability report reinforces the idea that external verification is a key factor in fostering sustainability reporting quality.

Professional assurance services have a big, positive effect on the quality of reports. This is because disclosures are carefully checked by outside auditors to make sure they are relevant, reliable, accurate, complete, and presented fairly. Having professional assurance services also shows stakeholders that the organization values openness and accountability, which builds trust and confidence among those stakeholders. This is especially significant in the context of sustainability reporting, where stakeholders demand greater transparency, as well as reliable and credible information about an organization's ESG performance.

Furthermore, the evidence shows that firms that have reassurance over their assurance of sustainability reporting are better placed to satisfy stakeholders' demands, particularly those of investors, regulators, clients, and employees. The more detailed information may also improve stakeholder engagement and enhance relationships with stakeholders who are interdependent on each other. The consequences include a stronger corporate reputation, greater investors' confidence and better operational efficiency.

The implications of this evidence are far-reaching. This evidence could serve as a crucial reminder for organizations. Sustainability reporting is something that every organization undertakes. Investing in professional assurance services would not only enhance the quality and credibility of organization sustainability reports but also improve the reputation (and hence attract more investment) and increase stakeholder trust and engagement, which in turn can improve decision-making and performance.

For policymakers, the results indicate that standardized assurance frameworks can help ensure comparable and consistent sustainability. reporting across organizations and sectors, as well as increasing the reliability and usefulness of the information contained in such reports. Policymakers can encourage the implementation of such frameworks by providing guidance to organizations regarding best practices for the reporting and assurance of sustainability information.

The results make it clear that people who work in assurance, like auditors and assurance providers, need to keep the quality and honesty of the work they do at a high level by carefully checking assurance evidence against clear assurance frameworks. Moreover, the findings further emphasize the need for both practitioners and stakeholders to continuously develop new techniques in methodology to address new challenges arising from emerging issues.

Therefore, this study is just the beginning, and there are many areas to explore. deserve additional research. For example, the longer-term impact of a given professional assurance service on the sustainability performance report would be an area worth exploring. Longitudinal studies on the performance of the organization over time would be valuable so that we could learn about the sustainability consequences of assurance services and whether they continue having beneficial effects in the long run.

Lastly, more studies could assess the adaptation of some new and emerging technologies, such as blockchain and artificial intelligence, that are transforming assurance practices. intelligence and data analytics, which can potentially transform sustainability reporting and the quality of assurance by improving its accuracy, its efficiency, and its transparency. The development of new assurance methodologies exploiting these new technologies might be proposed and experimental tests of the effectiveness of these methodologies for increasing the robustness of the sustainability reporting could be conducted.

The studies could estimate the cost-benefit of assurance services. The cost of purchasing assurance services—for example, from an accountability organization—is a significant barrier to investment in assurance measures for SMEs. Figuring out whether assurance services are affordable and what benefits they might offer to different types of groups and projects could help people come up with ways to tailor assurance services and lower their costs.

Finally, future research could explore stakeholders' perceptions and expectations regarding assured sustainability reports. A better understanding of how different stakeholder groups perceive the value-for-money and quality of assured reports can help organizations to refine their assurance practice to better address stakeholder needs and enhance the effectiveness of their sustainability reporting efforts. This could involve gathering information from stakeholders, such as through surveys or interviews with investors, regulators, customers and employees.

5. CONCLUSION

The main aim of this paper was to explore the extent to which professional assurance enhances the quality and credibility of sustainability performance reports. As the results of this paper show, we have successfully achieved this main aim. After conducting a detailed analysis, we found that the components and disclosures in sustainability reports that employ professional assurance services are higher in quality and more credible than those sustainability reports that don't seek external verification. These results emphasize again the important role of external verification in sustainability reporting.

This study contributes significantly to the field. This study provides empirical evidence on the efficacy of professional assurance services in sustainability reporting. It adds to the body of research on sustainability reporting by using ideas from the Triple Bottom Line, Stakeholder Theory, and Legitimacy Theory to show how assurance services improve the completeness, validity, and reliability of sustainability disclosures. It fills a gap in the literature by empirically demonstrating a positive influence of assurance services on the quality and credibility of sustainability reports.

The results will be useful for organizations, policymakers, and practitioners. For organizations, the findings highlight the benefits of investing in professional assurance services to support their sustainability reporting practices. Higher quality reports can lead to higher quality stakeholder engagement, more investor confidence, and a better corporate reputation. For policymakers, the results highlight the importance of developing and promoting standardized assurance frameworks to make sustainability reporting consistent and comparable. This clarity would help to reduce the variability in assurance practices and could help to make sustainability reports more informative. The results give practitioners, auditors, and assurance providers information they can use to improve the ways they do assurance work and make their services more useful to help raise the standards for sustainability reporting.

While this study sheds light on several key questions concerning the impact of assurance services, several areas still warrant further research. One such area would be to examine the long-term effects of assurance services on organizational performance and sustainability outcomes. Longitudinal studies of the performance of organizations over time can provide us a much better understanding of the continued impact of assurance services on various sustainability outcomes. A second area of research would be to examine the extent to which emerging technologies, such as blockchain, artificial intelligence, and data analytics, can change assurance practices and sustainability reporting, making it more accurate, efficient, and transparent. Third, it's possible to do a cost-benefit analysis of assurance services, especially for small and medium-sized businesses, to see if they're worth the money and to see what benefits organizations of all sizes can get from having their sustainability reports assured. Fourth, it would be helpful to find out what stakeholders think and expect from assured sustainability reports. This will help organizations change their assurance practices to better meet the needs of their key stakeholders and make sustainability reporting more useful.

REFERENCES

Al-Shaer, H., Albitar, K., Hussainey, K., 2021. Creating sustainability reports that matter: an investigation of factors behind the narratives. Journal of Applied Accounting Research 23, 738–763. https://doi.org/10.1108/JAAR-05-2021-0136

Amran, A., Ooi, S.K., 2014. Sustainability reporting: meeting stakeholder demands. Strategic Direction 30, 38–41. https://doi.org/10.1108/SD-03-2014-0035

Băndoi, A., Bocean, C.G., Baldo, M. Del, Mandache, L., Mănescu, L.G., Sitnikov, C.S., 2021. Including Sustainable Reporting Practices in Corporate Management Reports: Assessing the Impact of Transparency on Economic Performance. Sustainability 13, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.3390/SU13020940

Boiral, O., Heras-Saizarbitoria, I., 2020. Sustainability reporting assurance: Creating stakeholder accountability through hyperreality? J Clean Prod 243. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JCLEPRO.2019.118596

Boiral, O., Heras-Saizarbitoria, I., Brotherton, M.C., 2019. Assessing and Improving the Quality of Sustainability Reports: The Auditors' Perspective. Journal of Business Ethics 155, 703–721. https://doi.org/10.1007/S10551-017-3516-4/METRICS

Calabrese, A., Costa, R., Gastaldi, M., Levialdi Ghiron, N., Villazon Montalvan, R.A., 2021. Implications for Sustainable Development Goals: A framework to assess company disclosure in sustainability reporting. J Clean Prod 319. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JCLEPRO.2021.128624

Channuntapipat, C., 2021. Can sustainability report assurance be a collaborative process and practice beyond the ritual of verification? Bus Strategy Environ 30, 775–786. https://doi.org/10.1002/BSE.2653

Channuntapipat, C., 2017. Assurance for service organizations: contextualizing accountability and trust. Managerial Auditing Journal 33, 340–359. https://doi.org/10.1108/MAJ-06-2017-1588

Dalessandro, C., Lovell, A., 2023. Sustaining Workers: The Influence of Environmental Sustainability on Employees' Commitment to Work. Academy of Management Proceedings 2023. https://doi.org/10.5465/AMPROC.2023.13203

Ferreira de Araújo Lima, P., Crema, M., Verbano, C., 2020. Risk management in SMEs: A systematic literature review and future directions. European Management Journal 38, 78–94. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.EMJ.2019.06.005

HHbel, B., Scholz, H., 2019. Integrating sustainability risks in asset management: the role of ESG exposures and ESG ratings. Journal of Asset Management. https://doi.org/10.2139/SSRN.3091666

Hörisch, J., Schaltegger, S., Freeman, R.E., 2020. Integrating stakeholder theory and sustainability accounting: A conceptual synthesis. J Clean Prod 275. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JCLEPRO.2020.124097

Kharel, S., Magar, S., Chaurasiya, N., Maharjan, S., Rijal, C.P., 2019. Transparency and Accountability in the Nepalese Corporate Sector: A Critical Assessment. Quest Journal of Management and Social Sciences 1, 1–25. https://doi.org/10.3126/QJMSS.V1I1.25972

Lokuwaduge, C.S.D.S., Heenetigala, K., 2017. Integrating Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) Disclosure for a Sustainable Development: An Australian Study. Bus Strategy Environ 26, 438–450. https://doi.org/10.1002/BSE.1927

Lozano, R., Nummert, B., Ceulemans, K., 2016. Elucidating the relationship between Sustainability Reporting and Organizational Change Management for Sustainability. J Clean Prod 125, 168–188. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JCLEPRO.2016.03.021

Madsen, D.Ø., Stenheim, T., 2022. Triple Bottom Line. Encyclopedia of Tourism Management and Marketing 36, 36–37. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800377486.TRIPLE.BOTTOM.LINE

Manetti, G., Becatti, L., 2009. Assurance Services for Sustainability Reports: Standards and Empirical Evidence. Journal of Business Ethics 87, 289–298. https://doi.org/10.1007/S10551-008-9809-X

Martínez-Ferrero, J., García-Sánchez, I.M., Ruiz-Barbadillo, E., 2018. The quality of sustainability assurance reports: The expertise and experience of assurance providers as determinants. Bus Strategy Environ 27, 1181–1196. https://doi.org/10.1002/BSE.2061

Meseguer-Sánchez, V., Gálvez-Sánchez, F.J., López-Martínez, G., Molina-Moreno, V., 2021. Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainability. A Bibliometric Analysis of Their Interrelations. Sustainability 2021, Vol. 13, Page 1636 13, 1636. https://doi.org/10.3390/SU13041636

Moreno-Luzon, M.D., Chams-Anturi, O., Escorcia-Caballero, J.P., 2018. Organizational Legitimacy and Stakeholder Trust in the Organization: A Feed-Forward Relationship. Organizational Legitimacy: Challenges and Opportunities for Businesses and Institutions 283–299. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-75990-6_18

O'Dwyer, B., 2011. The Case of Sustainability Assurance: Constructing a New Assurance Service. Accounting. https://doi.org/10.2139/SSRN.1742826

Osobajo, O.A., Oke, A., Lawani, A., Omotayo, T.S., Ndubuka-McCallum, N., Obi, L., 2022. Providing a Roadmap for the Future Research Agenda: A Bibliometric Literature Review of Sustainability Performance Reporting (SPR). Sustainability 14. https://doi.org/10.3390/SU14148523

Pizzi, S., Mastroleo, G., Venturelli, A., Caputo, F., 2023. The digitalization of sustainability reporting processes: A conceptual framework. Bus Strategy Environ 33, 1040–1050. https://doi.org/10.1002/BSE.3544

Ruiz-Barbadillo, E., Martínez-Ferrero, J., 2020. An empirical analysis of the effect of the joint provision of audit and sustainability assurance services on assurance quality. J Clean Prod 266, 121943. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JCLEPRO.2020.121943

Saeed, M.A., Kersten, W., 2017. Supply chain sustainability performance indicators - a content analysis based on published standards and guidelines. Logistics Research 10. https://doi.org/10.23773/2017_12

Sarma, G.D., Choudhury, Dr.S., Bharadwaj, P., Sarma, M., 2024. Navigating Corporate Governance and Ethics: The Cornerstones of Sustainable Business Practices. Educational Administration: Theory and Practice. https://doi.org/10.53555/KUEY.V30I5.2889

Silva, S., Nuzum, A.K., Schaltegger, S., 2019. Stakeholder expectations on sustainability performance measurement and assessment. A systematic literature review. J Clean Prod 217, 204–215. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JCLEPRO.2019.01.203

Sisaye, S., 2021. The influence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on the development of voluntary sustainability accounting reporting rules. Journal of Business and Socio-economic Development 1, 5–23. https://doi.org/10.1108/JBSED-02-2021-0017

Thompson, E.K., Ashimwe, O., Buertey, S., Kim, S.Y., 2022. The value relevance of sustainability reporting: does assurance and the type of assurer matter? Sustainability Accounting, Management and Policy Journal 13, 858–877. https://doi.org/10.1108/SAMPJ-08-2021-0329Douglass, C.B. (1984). "toro muerto, vaca es": An interpretation of the Spanish bullfight. *American Ethnologist*, *11*, 242-258. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org