



## An Exploratory Analysis of the Voluntary Responsibility Discourse in Corporate Sector: the Case of France

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### Abstract

Corporate disclosure is a method organizations use to interact with their stakeholders and influence their perceptions. We explore patterns of social disclosure within the boundaries of a political entity, i.e., France. We find that French companies focus on employees and the environment as the most important stakeholders in corporate social responsibility (CSR) discourse. We observe a number of differences between our findings and the literature. We argue that societal characteristics, in part, account for these differences and that a more holistic approach that combines institutional and political economy theories with stakeholder and legitimacy theories provides a better approximation of the dynamics of CSR discourse.

### Key Words:

Content Analysis, Corporate Disclosure, Corporate Social Responsibility, Corporate Reporting, Legitimacy Theory, Political Economy Theory, Social Reporting, Stakeholder Theory, Sustainability.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper identifies key trends in responsibility discourse in France's corporate sector for a clearer understanding of how expansive ideas, such as sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR), are interpreted and adapted by business entities. Consequently, we expect to identify patterns of similarities or dissimilarities within an industry and between industries. On the theoretical front, we would like to see if the political and societal context, i.e., the country in which a company operates, affects patterns of responsibility discourse. Previous research has either been industry specific, focusing on a certain industry or sector, such as financial services (Hamid, 2004; Holland and Foo, 2003, Sachs *et al.*, 2006, Simpson and Kohers, 2002), best CSR companies or comparative studies (Sweeney and Coughlan, 2008). We, however, do not differentiate between different industries, sectors or best CSRs companies in our sample selection, the CAC 40.\* Moreover, our work is specific to France, which has not been studied with regard to our research interest despite its obvious importance in the global context. Additionally, we employ theoretical perspectives other than the stakeholder theory so often employed in the CSR context to further the debate on responsibility discourse in business.

The concept of sustainability is often defined as the intersection of social, economic, and ecological interests and initiatives. In most cases, it serves as a meta or base concept for a number of responsible business concepts, terms or issues, such as corporate social responsibility, corporate responsibility, triple bottom line, business ethics, corporate accountability, corporate citizenship, and total responsibility management. Rugimbana *et al.* (2008) regard the integration of social, economic and ecological considerations to be the essence of sustainability. Recent research demonstrates that the overall coverage of terms related to sustainability and