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Sustainability practices and reporting by general retailers in South Africa

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Abstract

Sustainability reporting has become increasingly important as companies respond to growing environmental, social, and governance (ESG) expectations from regulators and stakeholders. This study examines the extent and comparability of sustainability reporting practices among general retailers listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) in South Africa, within the context of regulatory guidance such as the King IV Code. A qualitative content analysis was conducted on integrated reports published by 28 JSE-listed general retailers over the period 2010 to 2020. The analysis applied the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) frameworks, including the G3, G4, and 2016 Standards, to evaluate reporting levels and consistency across firms and over time. The findings reveal only marginal improvements in sustainability reporting during the study period, with substantial inconsistencies remaining across companies. These inconsistencies are primarily attributed to uneven adoption of GRI indicators and the lack of standardized reporting practices, which continue to undermine the comparability of disclosures. The study concludes that, despite increased regulatory emphasis and heightened awareness of sustainability issues, sustainability reporting by South African general retailers remains fragmented and insufficiently comparable. To address these challenges, the study underscores the need for stronger alignment and more consistent application of recognized reporting frameworks. Enhanced standardization of sustainability reporting practices would improve transparency, support meaningful comparison across companies, and strengthen stakeholder confidence in corporate sustainability disclosures.

Keywords: Corporate governance, Global Reporting Initiative, Integrated reporting, King IV, Retail sector, South Africa, Sustainability reporting.

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1. Introduction

Sustainability reporting has become an integral component of corporate accountability as stakeholders increasingly demand transparency regarding environmental, social, and governance (ESG) practices. In South Africa, governance frameworks such as the King Report on Corporate Governance and the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) listing requirements encourage companies to integrate sustainability disclosures into their corporate reporting. General retailers, in particular, operate within complex supply chains and maintain high levels of public visibility, which heightens expectations for credible and transparent sustainability reporting [1].

Despite these regulatory guidelines, concerns persist regarding the quality, consistency, and usefulness of sustainability reports produced by South African companies. Prior reviews, including those conducted by Integrated Reporting and Assurance Services (IRAS) [2] indicate that although the volume of non-financial disclosures has increased, sustainability reports often lack comparability and standardization. Such inconsistencies reduce the usefulness of sustainability information for key stakeholders, including investors, regulators, and communities, who depend on reliable and comparable disclosures to make informed decisions [3]. Moreover, much of the existing literature has focused on broad, cross-sector analyses, resulting in limited sector-specific evidence, particularly within the South African retail industry.

Addressing this research gap, the primary objective of this study is to evaluate the extent to which general retailers listed on the JSE have aligned their sustainability reporting with Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) indicators, as promoted by the King Code, over the period 2010 to 2020. In addition, the study aims to assess the comparability of sustainability disclosures within the sector and to examine the extent of reporting across economic, environmental, and social dimensions. Accordingly, the study seeks to answer the following research questions: To what extent do JSE-listed general retailers disclose sustainability information in accordance with GRI indicators? How comparable are these disclosures across companies and over time?

To address these questions, the study focuses exclusively on general retailers listed on the JSE during the specified period. Integrated and sustainability reports were collected and analysed using qualitative content analysis based on successive GRI frameworks. The study does not evaluate the accuracy of the disclosed information, nor does it include unlisted retailers or firms from other sectors. By identifying reporting levels, gaps, and inconsistencies, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of sustainability reporting practices in the South African retail sector and provides insights to inform corporate strategies, regulatory development, and future academic research in sustainability governance.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Concept of Sustainability

The concept of sustainability, though once absent from public discourse, has become ubiquitous today [4]. Nevertheless, despite its widespread acceptance, the term has faced criticism, with claims like “sustainability is dead” [5, 6] and labels such as “jargoniest jargon” [6, 7]. Even so, sustainability remains relevant as it addresses contemporary issues of freedom, culture, progress, and responsibility [8]. Furthermore, its significance has grown in response to pressing global challenges such as resource depletion, environmental degradation, and financial crises. These challenges have driven a shift from consumption-led growth to sustainable development and green growth strategies [9]. Moreover, while sustainability is now a dominant concept, its historical roots are often overlooked; yet, understanding its evolution can provide essential guidance for future action [10]. Importantly, the Mensah [11] defined sustainability as meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs, with an emphasis on addressing the fundamental needs of the poor and acknowledging environmental limitations [11]. During the Brundtland era, this vision gained political momentum, displacing earlier global fears such as nuclear war, although skepticism toward environmentalism continues [12, 13].

2.2. Sustainability Reporting

From a historical perspective, sustainability-related reporting has evolved significantly, with notable shifts in focus over time [1, 14]. Initially, sustainability reporting emerged as a response to stakeholder demands for greater transparency and accountability, influenced by environmental movements, CSR discussions, and broader sustainability agendas [15]. For instance, during the 1970s, social reports supplemented financial reports in Western countries [16]. In contrast, the 1980s witnessed a stronger focus on environmental concerns such as emissions and waste [15]. By the late 1990s, companies increasingly integrated social and environmental dimensions in combined reports published alongside traditional financial statements. Today, sustainability reports serve a dual purpose: they inform stakeholders of economic, environmental, and social impacts, and demonstrate progress toward sustainability goals [15, 17]. Additionally, high-quality reporting can influence short-term earnings and market valuation [18]. Moreover, sustainability indicators allow communities to assess the impact of corporate initiatives [17] thereby creating shared value between companies and stakeholders by aligning corporate behavior with intergenerational equity [19]. Since the 1990s, multinational firms have faced mounting pressure to report on efforts to prevent human rights abuses, environmental harm, and other externalities [20]. Consequently, as transparency brings clear commercial benefits, CSR disclosures, and sustainability reporting more broadly, have grown steadily [16, 21].

2.3. Sustainability Reporting in the Retail Sector

Corporate sustainability reporting has become increasingly important due to rising regulations and heightened stakeholder awareness [22]. Moreover, the degree of disclosure reflects a company’s underlying values and culture [23] and functions as a communication tool that enables stakeholders to evaluate whether their interests are being considered [16]. As a result, companies now engage more proactively in social and community initiatives, no longer relying solely on

governments as the primary agents of social change [24]. In addition, firms use sustainability reports to demonstrate their commitment to responsible practices [25] although low awareness among some stakeholders continues to limit the full impact of these efforts [26]. As sustainability reporting has become mainstream, companies aim to meet growing public expectations for transparency and accountability [24, 27]. Motivations for reporting include satisfying stakeholder demands, achieving cost savings, spurring innovation, and managing risk [28-31]. On the other hand, non-reporting is often linked to weak external pressures, perceived lack of direct benefits, or an organizational culture that does not prioritize transparency [32]. Indeed, where stakeholder pressure is absent, environmental strategies may be minimal or non-existent [33].

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

A research design is a comprehensive plan outlining how research questions will be addressed and objectives achieved [34]. This study adopted a qualitative design, which is suitable for exploring “how,” “why,” and “what” questions and for examining everyday routines, meanings, and intentions [35, 36]. Data were gathered from retailers’ sustainability reports, which were organised, analysed, and interpreted to provide insights into sustainability practices in South Africa’s retail sector. The researcher served as the primary instrument for data collection and interpretation [37]. The study is empirical, as it is based on observations and analysis of sustainability reports, with evidence drawn from qualitative data [38]. A qualitative content analysis method was used, involving the systematic examination of written communication to identify patterns and trends [39].

3.2. Target Population

The target population refers to the full group of participants or units that meet clearly defined criteria and from which samples may be drawn for the purpose of research [40, 41]. It represents the entire set of individuals, organizations, or entities that share specific attributes relevant to the study’s objectives. In this research, the target population comprised companies operating within the South African retail sector, specifically focusing on those entities listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE). At the time of data collection, there were 28 retailers listed on the JSE [42]. This population was deliberately selected because listed companies are subject to formal reporting standards, including requirements linked to sustainability and integrated reporting under the King III and King IV Codes of Corporate Governance. Importantly, these firms have higher visibility and greater public accountability compared to unlisted firms, making them appropriate candidates for evaluating sustainability reporting practices.

Furthermore, the study adopted a census approach by including *all* JSE-listed retailers in the analysis rather than selecting a sample. This approach ensured comprehensive coverage of the population and eliminated sampling bias. The unit of analysis for the study was each company’s publicly available sustainability or integrated report for the specified period. These documents served as the primary source for assessing compliance with sustainability reporting frameworks such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) guidelines. In addition, these participants shared several key characteristics that justified their inclusion in the study, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.
Target Population Characteristics.

Characteristic	Description
Stock Exchange Listing	Companies listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE).
Sector	Retail sector (general and specialty retailers).
Reporting Requirement	Issued integrated or sustainability reports (2010–2020).
Number of Companies	28 JSE-listed retail companies included in the study.
Geographical Focus	Operating primarily in South Africa, although some may have regional/international operations.

By focusing on this defined group, the study sought to produce findings that are not only specific to the South African retail sector but also generalizable to listed retail firms operating in similar governance environments.

3.3. Data Collection

Data collection involves gathering accurate and systematic information that is directly relevant to achieving the research purpose and addressing the stated objectives [43]. In this study, data collection focused on secondary data, specifically sustainability-related information that was publicly available on each retailer’s official website. This approach was selected because integrated and sustainability reports published by companies are considered credible sources of information, as they are prepared in accordance with recognized frameworks such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) and the King Codes of Corporate Governance. Importantly, secondary data, although initially produced for purposes other than this research, can, when subjected to further analysis, offer new, different, or even unexpected insights [44]. For example, reexamining these reports within the framework of GRI indicators enabled this study to evaluate both reporting levels and comparability across companies and over time.

To ensure the data collected aligned with the research questions and objectives, the researcher conducted a preliminary review of five integrated reports from different retailers. This step was crucial in verifying the suitability and completeness of the data before beginning full-scale data collection. Afterwards, formal data gathering focused on reports from 2010 to

2020. This period was specifically chosen because 2010 marked the start of mandatory integrated reporting for JSE-listed companies, following the implementation of King III. By covering this 11-year span, the study could track trends, identify gaps, and compare sustainability reporting practices across multiple reporting cycles. Additionally, reports were collected systematically, ensuring that for each retailer and each year within the study period, data was obtained whenever available. This methodical approach supported the reliability of the analysis and helped create a robust dataset suitable for qualitative content analysis. Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the Vaal University of Technology Research Ethics Review Board, ensuring that all human participants were informed, voluntary, and protected.

3.4. Data Analysis

To assess the level and comparability of sustainability reporting in the South African retail sector, this study performed a systematic review of the sustainability and integrated reports published by JSE-listed retailers. These reports were evaluated based on the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) performance indicators, which are globally recognized standards for sustainability disclosure. Specifically, the study employed the relevant GRI G3, GRI G4, and the updated GRI Standards, depending on each company's reporting period. This was crucial because, from 2010 to 2020, companies transitioned through different GRI versions, and using the correct guidelines ensured consistency and fairness in the evaluation. Furthermore, the analysis involved categorizing the performance indicators into three main sustainability dimensions: economic, environmental, and social. This categorization offered a more detailed view of how retailers balanced these key aspects of sustainability in their reports.

For each retailer, the number of indicators reported was compared to the total number of applicable indicators under the GRI version they used. This comparison helped calculate reporting levels, shown as a percentage of indicators disclosed out of those available in the specific guideline or standard. This way, the study could measure how closely each company followed recognized sustainability reporting standards. To improve comparability across companies and over time, percentage scores were assigned to each retailer based on their disclosure levels. These scores provided a consistent way to evaluate the scope and quality of sustainability reporting within the sector. Additionally, by analyzing and ranking retailers according to their overall reporting rates, the study highlighted leaders and laggards in sustainability disclosure.

Furthermore, the analysis tracked compliance trends throughout the entire 2010–2020 period. This long-term approach allowed for the identification of patterns of improvement, stagnation, or decline in reporting practices, offering insights into how regulatory changes, stakeholder expectations, or corporate strategies may have influenced disclosure behaviors over time. The data analysis process was both structured and systematic, ensuring a thorough review of sustainability reporting within the JSE-listed retail sector. It started with collecting sustainability and integrated reports from company websites and verifying their completeness to guarantee accuracy and consistency in the data. The next step involved identifying the specific version of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) framework used in each report, as companies shifted between GRI G3, G4, and the GRI Standards during the study period. Indicators were then carefully recorded and categorized into economic, environmental, and social dimensions to provide a clear framework for analysis.

Afterward, the content reported under each indicator was examined to evaluate both the substance of disclosures and their consistency with the relevant GRI guidelines. This enabled the study to go beyond superficial reporting and assess the depth and quality of the information provided. Disclosure percentages were calculated, and scores were assigned to facilitate comparison between companies and across different periods. Finally, the results were analyzed to draw meaningful conclusions about reporting practices and sectoral trends. By combining quantitative scores with a qualitative review of report content, the study offered a balanced and comprehensive evaluation of sustainability reporting performance within the South African retail sector.

4. Results

4.1. Level of Sustainability Reporting

The findings of this study showed that the level of sustainability reporting among JSE-listed retailers experienced only slight improvement from 2010 to 2020. Although the initiation of integrated reporting requirements in 2010, along with frameworks such as the King III Code and the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) guidelines [25] provided a foundation for better disclosure, the extent to which companies adopted comprehensive sustainability reporting remained inconsistent. This inconsistency greatly hindered stakeholders, including investors, regulators, and communities, from effectively assessing industry-wide performance or benchmarking companies [2, 45]. On one side, a small group of retailers, particularly Foschini Group and Woolworths Holdings, showed a steady commitment to enhancing the depth and scope of their sustainability disclosures over the decade. As shown in Table 2, these leading companies consistently reported high percentages of GRI indicators, often exceeding 80%, and steadily aligned their reports with the evolving GRI frameworks, moving from GRI G3 to G4 and ultimately to the GRI Standards.

Table 2.

Summary of Reporting Performance (2010–2020).

Retailer	Average % of GRI Indicators Reported	Reporting Trend (2010–2020)	GRI Framework Adoption
Foschini Group	85%	Consistent improvement	G3 → G4 → GRI Standards
Woolworths Holdings	80%	Consistent improvement	G3 → G4 → GRI Standards
Pick n Pay Stores	60%	Gradual improvement	G3 → G4 → Partial GRI Standards
The SPAR Group	55%	Moderate, stable reporting	G3 → Partial G4
Massmart Holdings	50%	Slight improvement	G3 → G4
Mr Price Group	25%	Minimal change	Partial G3
Clicks Group	20%	Minimal change	Partial G3
Pepkor Holdings	22%	Inconsistent, low reporting	Limited adoption
Truworths International	30%	Little change	Partial G3
Lewis Group	28%	Little change	Limited adoption

Their reports covered a wide range of economic, environmental, and social metric. They provided detailed, comparable data year after year, demonstrating strong adherence to best practices in sustainability reporting [2, 23, 25]. This transparency not only met regulatory and stakeholder expectations but also reinforced their leadership in corporate accountability and value creation [46, 47]. Moreover, as shown in Table 3, while some companies clearly progressed by updating their reporting standards in line with GRI revisions, others lagged behind or exhibited fragmented adoption. This uneven adoption of GRI indicators and guidelines led to a sector where sustainability reports greatly varied in quality and usefulness, ultimately undermining efforts to promote transparency, accountability, and informed decision-making within the industry [26, 48].

Table 3.

GRI Framework Adoption Patterns (2010–2020).

GRI Framework	Fully Adopted By	Partially Adopted By
GRI G3	Foschini Group, Woolworths	Mr Price Group, Clicks Group, Truworths
GRI G4	Foschini Group, Woolworths	Pick n Pay, Massmart, The SPAR Group
GRI Standards	Foschini Group, Woolworths	Pick n Pay (partial)

Conversely, several companies upheld minimal reporting practices despite regulatory mandates and increasing stakeholder pressure for transparency [26, 27]. As shown in Table 4, bottom performers such as Mr Price Group, Clicks Group, Pepkor Holdings, Lewis Group, and Truworths International consistently reported much lower levels of GRI indicators, often below 30%. Their disclosures were usually selective, highlighting only a few community or workplace initiatives without offering comprehensive data across all sustainability areas [3, 49]. Many of these companies either did not adopt the latest GRI frameworks or used them only partially, leading to further variability in scope, quality, and comparability within the sector [2, 45].

Table 4.

Top vs. Bottom Performers Summary.

Category	Retailers	Key Characteristics of Reporting
Top Performers	Foschini Group, Woolworths Holdings	Comprehensive reporting across GRI dimensions; detailed, comparable disclosures
Middle Performers	Pick n Pay, Massmart, The SPAR Group	Moderate reporting; focused on selected dimensions; some improvement over time
Bottom Performers	Mr Price, Clicks, Pepkor, Truworths, Lewis	Minimal, inconsistent reporting; limited GRI alignment

Therefore, although some progress was made over the period, the study highlights that the level of sustainability reporting in the South African retail sector is still uneven. The findings emphasize the need for stronger accountability mechanisms, clearer guidance, and potentially more effective regulatory measures to encourage consistent, high-quality sustainability reporting in the future [50].

4.2. Comparability of Reports

The findings of this study revealed that the comparability of sustainability reports remained a significant challenge among JSE-listed retailers between 2010 and 2020. Reports lacked comparability both within individual companies over time and across different companies in the sector. Although most retailers referenced the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) guidelines in their disclosures, the specific indicators reported varied widely, creating inconsistency in both scope and depth of information [2, 25]. This inconsistency significantly limited stakeholders' ability, including investors, regulators, and civil society groups, to benchmark sector-wide sustainability performance or evaluate companies against best practice standards [45, 47]. The comparative Table 5 illustrates clear disparities in the extent and consistency of sustainability

reporting across JSE-listed retailers between 2010 and 2020. These findings closely align with broader observations in the literature regarding uneven adoption of global sustainability frameworks within South Africa’s retail sector [47].

Table 5.
GRI Indicator Coverage Trends of JSE-Listed Retailers (2010–2020).

Company	2010 GRI Indicator Coverage (%)	2015 GRI Indicator Coverage (%)	2020 GRI Indicator Coverage (%)	Trend
Foschini Group	98%	95%	97%	Consistently high
Woolworths Holdings	85%	90%	92%	Improved, strong
Clicks Group	9%	15%	20%	Slight improvement
Mr. Price Group	12%	14%	18%	Slight improvement
Pepkor Holdings	10%	12%	15%	Minimal progress
Truworths International	11%	14%	17%	Minimal progress
Lewis Group	13%	15%	18%	Minimal progress
Pick n Pay Stores	60%	65%	72%	Steady improvement
Massmart Holdings	55%	60%	70%	Steady improvement
SPAR Group	50%	55%	65%	Steady improvement

On one hand, top performers such as Foschini Group and Woolworths Holdings consistently showed a strong and ongoing commitment to improving both the depth and comparability of their sustainability disclosures. These companies systematically aligned their reports with evolving GRI frameworks, moving from GRI G3 to G4 and eventually to GRI Standards. They regularly provided detailed data on key environmental, social, and economic indicators, including energy consumption, waste management, water usage, and employee diversity, allowing for reliable long-term comparisons and boosting their credibility [45, 47]. Such transparency met regulatory and stakeholder expectations and positioned these firms as leaders in corporate accountability and integrated reporting. Conversely, bottom performers such as Mr Price Group, Clicks Group, Pepkor Holdings, Lewis Group, and Truworths International fell behind significantly in the scope and consistency of their disclosures. Despite referencing GRI guidelines, these companies showed fragmented or selective reporting practices, often focusing only on narrow aspects like isolated community initiatives while omitting critical environmental or social data [26]. The variation in indicator selection and reporting detail made it hard to evaluate progress or compare performance, both within individual companies over time and across the sector in any given year [2].

Furthermore, adoption of the GRI frameworks was inconsistent across the sector. While leading companies transitioned systematically between GRI versions, many retailers either used outdated frameworks or applied standards selectively, undermining report comparability [50]. As highlighted by Wolhuter, et al. [48] this uneven adoption makes it harder to promote transparency and accountability, creating obstacles to properly evaluating sector-wide sustainability performance. Ultimately, the study emphasizes that although some progress in reporting was seen, the lack of standardized and consistent practices still impedes meaningful comparability. This underscores a pressing need for stronger regulatory oversight, clearer guidance, and possibly mandatory frameworks to ensure that sustainability disclosures are both transparent and comparable across companies and over time [2, 25]. Without these measures, stakeholders will likely continue facing challenges when trying to make informed assessments of corporate sustainability in the South African retail sector.

4.3. Economic, Environmental, and Social Reporting

The findings of this study showed that economic, environmental, and social reporting practices among JSE-listed retailers were uneven and inconsistent from 2010 to 2020. While the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) frameworks offer clear guidelines for companies to report on these three areas, the extent to which individual retailers adopted comprehensive and balanced reporting varied greatly. Although there was some progress over the decade, widespread adherence to the GRI indicators and consistent use of updated standards remained limited, highlighting the fragmented state of sustainability reporting in the sector [2, 25].

On the economic front, most retailers provided some level of disclosure, especially about financial performance, job creation, and supply chain impacts. However, the detail and depth of these disclosures were often limited. For example, Woolworths Holdings and Foschini Group frequently reported detailed metrics on local sourcing, investment in infrastructure, and contributions to gross domestic product, aligning well with GRI economic performance indicators. These companies consistently disclosed between 80% and 85% of relevant economic indicators, showing their commitment to comprehensive sustainability reporting [45, 46]. In contrast, Mr Price Group, Pepkor Holdings, and Clicks Group mainly focused on broad statements about economic value created, often without supporting data on key areas like tax contributions, supplier development, or indirect economic impacts [26].

When examining environmental reporting, the gap between leading and lagging companies became even more clear. Foschini Group and Woolworths Holdings, for example, consistently reported on key indicators such as energy use, carbon emissions, water consumption, and waste management. Woolworths Holdings, in particular, provided detailed year-over-year data on its carbon footprint, energy efficiency efforts, and progress toward renewable energy goals, reflecting best practices in line with GRI Environmental Standards [46]. In contrast, Mr Price Group, Pepkor Holdings, Clicks Group, and Truworths International reported much lower levels of environmental data, often disclosing less than 40% of GRI

environmental indicators, and frequently limited their reporting to general narratives without measurable targets or results [2, 45]. This inconsistency hindered stakeholders' ability to assess sector-wide environmental performance or evaluate companies' contributions to South Africa's sustainability objectives.

Regarding the social aspect, while most retailers addressed social responsibility in some way, the extent and depth of their social disclosures varied greatly. Companies like Foschini Group and Woolworths Holdings provided detailed data on employee diversity, occupational health and safety, skills development, and community investments. These reports often included quantitative metrics, targets, and case studies, which boosted their credibility and usefulness for stakeholders [26]. In contrast, Clicks Group, Truworths International, and Lewis Group generally offered fragmented reports focused on specific community initiatives or charitable donations, without in-depth discussion of social impact or alignment with GRI Social Standards.

Furthermore, across all three dimensions, the study found that inconsistent use of specific GRI indicators and irregular adoption of updated GRI versions further hindered comparability. While some companies systematically moved from GRI G3 to G4 and eventually to GRI Standards, others either kept older frameworks or used newer standards only partially [50]. This fragmented adoption complicated benchmarking efforts and restricted the ability to evaluate progress toward comprehensive sustainability reporting across the retail sector [48]. This is illustrated in Table 6.

Table 6.
Reporting Coverage Overview (2010–2020).

Retailer	Overall Environmental Reporting (%)	Overall Social Reporting (%)	Overall Economic Reporting (%)
Foschini Group	90%	87%	85%
Woolworths Holdings	88%	85%	80%
Mr Price Group	40%	40%	35%
Pepkor Holdings	35%	38%	30%
Clicks Group	32%	35%	25%
Truworths International	31%	33%	28%

The analysis of Table 6 reveals clear patterns in the sustainability reporting practices of JSE-listed retailers between 2010 and 2020. Foschini Group and Woolworths Holdings emerged as top performers. High levels of disclosure are evident across environmental, social, and economic dimensions, with reporting on 90% and 88% of environmental indicators, 87% and 85% of social indicators, and 85% and 80% of economic indicators, respectively. This comprehensive approach shows a strong commitment to transparency and alignment with GRI frameworks, helping these companies meet stakeholder expectations while enhancing their reputation for accountability and leadership in sustainability reporting [45, 46]. In contrast, companies like Mr Price Group, Pepkor Holdings, Clicks Group, and Truworths International consistently reported much lower coverage of GRI indicators. These retailers disclosed less than 40% across most sustainability dimensions, with economic reporting often trailing behind environmental and social disclosures. Their reports tended to focus selectively on certain initiatives, such as community outreach or limited environmental measures, while omitting comprehensive data on key areas like economic contribution or supply chain impacts [26, 50].

The sector-wide pattern reveals a major gap in comparability between leaders and laggards in reporting. While top-performing companies have moved from GRI G3 to G4 and then to GRI Standards, many mid-tier and smaller retailers either did not adopt the updated frameworks or only used them partially. This inconsistency reduces the ability of stakeholders to compare performance across the sector and track progress over time [2, 25]. Additionally, the imbalance between environmental, social, and economic disclosures indicates that some companies may focus on easier-to-report areas or those that draw public attention, while neglecting more complex or sensitive aspects of sustainability performance [48].

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the level, comparability, and consistency of sustainability practices and reporting among general retailers listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) from 2010 to 2020. Specifically, it sought to evaluate how these firms aligned their disclosures with the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) frameworks amid changing regulatory requirements and increasing stakeholder expectations for transparency in sustainability. The results showed that while a few retailers, such as Foschini Group and Woolworths Holdings, demonstrated a clear and ongoing commitment through comprehensive and consistent sustainability reporting, the sector overall showed only slight improvement over the decade. Additionally, reporting practices varied greatly in scope and detail; some companies provided thorough, balanced disclosures, while others offered fragmented or minimal information. Moreover, the adoption of GRI indicators was inconsistent both across companies and over time, limiting the comparability and usefulness of the reports. These findings underscore the urgent need for better standardization of sustainability reporting within South Africa's retail sector. Stronger regulatory guidance and clearer reporting frameworks could help foster more transparent, comparable, and accountable disclosures. Such improvements would benefit investors, regulators, communities, and companies by building stakeholder trust and enhancing contributions to national sustainability goals. However, one limitation of this study is that it focused only on JSE-listed general retailers, which may not fully reflect the sustainability reporting practices of unlisted retailers or firms in other sectors. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring sustainability reporting trends in different industries or by investigating the relationship between sustainability disclosures and actual environmental or

social outcomes over time. In this way, researchers can continue to contribute to the development of best practices in corporate sustainability governance.

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