

Institutional Isomorphism And ESG Signalling: A Cross-National Examination Of Strategic Conformity In Sustainability Narratives



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Abstract

Environmental, social, and governance (ESG) reporting has gained immense prominence as corporations seek legitimacy within their institutional environments. This paper investigates the role of institutional isomorphism in shaping ESG signalling, specifically how firms in different national contexts conform to ESG expectations. Utilizing institutional theory and signalling theory, this study explores the interplay between coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures in shaping sustainability narratives. We hypothesize that firms across countries adapt their ESG reporting to institutional expectations, which are influenced by the regulatory environment, market maturity, and cultural factors. A comparative analysis of ESG reports from firms in developed and emerging markets reveals that coercive pressures dominate in regions with stringent regulations (e.g., the European Union), while mimetic pressures are more prevalent in less regulated markets (e.g., Asia). The study also finds that normative pressures, driven by global reporting frameworks such as the GRI and TCFD, shape strategic conformity in ESG disclosures. This paper contributes to the understanding of cross-national differences in ESG signalling and offers managerial and policy implications for multinational corporations (MNCs) and regulators.

Keywords: Institutional Isomorphism, ESG Signalling, Strategic Conformity, Sustainability Narratives, Cross-National Comparison, Corporate Governance.

1. Introduction

Environmental, social, and governance (ESG) concerns have risen to the forefront of corporate strategy and reporting. In response to growing stakeholder demand, firms across the globe have increasingly adopted ESG reporting practices to demonstrate their commitment to sustainability and ethical governance. However, despite the universal rise in ESG disclosure, substantial differences exist in the way firms across national contexts approach sustainability reporting. This paper explores the role of institutional isomorphism defined by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) as the process by which organizations in a given field tend to become similar over time due to external pressures in shaping corporate ESG narratives.

The growing emphasis on ESG issues and their integration into corporate governance is not only a response to regulatory pressures but also part of broader institutional processes that affect firms' strategies. This study posits that firms are influenced by coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphic forces in their ESG signalling practices, and these forces vary depending on national institutional contexts. We aim to explore how firms across countries conform to ESG expectations and whether the nature of this conformity differs based on regulatory environments, market maturity, and cultural dimensions.

This research contributes to the literature by integrating institutional theory with signalling theory to explain how strategic conformity in ESG narratives is shaped by institutional forces. It also provides practical insights for managers of multinational corporations (MNCs) who must navigate varying national standards in ESG reporting and develop appropriate strategies for global legitimacy.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Institutional Theory and Isomorphism

Institutional theory, particularly the work of DiMaggio and Powell (1983), provides the foundational framework for understanding how organizational behaviour is shaped by external forces. They identify three primary mechanisms of isomorphism: coercive, mimetic, and normative. Coercive isomorphism refers to pressure from regulatory bodies, industry standards, or government regulations. Mimetic isomorphism occurs when organizations imitate successful counterparts in response to uncertainty. Normative isomorphism stems from professional networks, educational systems, and industry-specific standards that shape norms and expectations.

In the context of ESG reporting, these isomorphic pressures guide firms' behaviours and decision-making processes. For example, regulatory mandates

in the European Union have introduced strong coercive pressures on firms to disclose comprehensive sustainability data. In contrast, firms in less regulated environments may adopt ESG practices due to mimetic pressures, influenced by leading firms or global norms.

2.2 ESG and Sustainability Signalling

Signalling theory, as applied to corporate communication, suggests that firms use ESG disclosures as a way to signal their commitment to sustainability and ethical behaviour to stakeholders (Connelly et al., 2011). These signals help firms differentiate themselves in competitive markets, gain legitimacy, and enhance their reputation. According to Hahn and Kühnen (2013), ESG signalling can enhance corporate reputation and provide firms with access to capital, as investors increasingly value companies with strong sustainability practices. However, signalling is not uniform across firms or nations. Differences in the institutional

environments, such as regulatory frameworks, market structures, and cultural norms, shape how firms communicate their sustainability efforts. Thus, understanding the institutional context is crucial for interpreting ESG signals.

2.3 Cross-National Differences in ESG Institutionalization

The institutionalization of ESG practices varies significantly across countries, with developed markets generally exhibiting more robust regulatory frameworks for sustainability reporting. Ioannou and Serafeim (2012) suggest that firms in developed economies such as the U.S. and EU face stronger institutional pressures and are more likely to adopt comprehensive ESG strategies. In contrast, firms in emerging markets may face less stringent regulatory oversight, and ESG practices may be more voluntary or driven by global norms rather than domestic regulations.

Table 1. ESG Reporting Practices by Industry

| Industry | Adoption Rate (%) | Average ESG Score (0-10) | Regulatory Compliance (%) | Mimetic Pressure Level (0-10) |
|----------------|-------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Energy | 80 | 7 | 85 | 8 |
| Technology | 65 | 6 | 70 | 9 |
| Consumer Goods | 85 | 8 | 90 | 7 |
| Automotive | 75 | 7 | 80 | 8 |
| Finance | 95 | 9 | 90 | 6 |
| Healthcare | 60 | 6 | 65 | 7 |

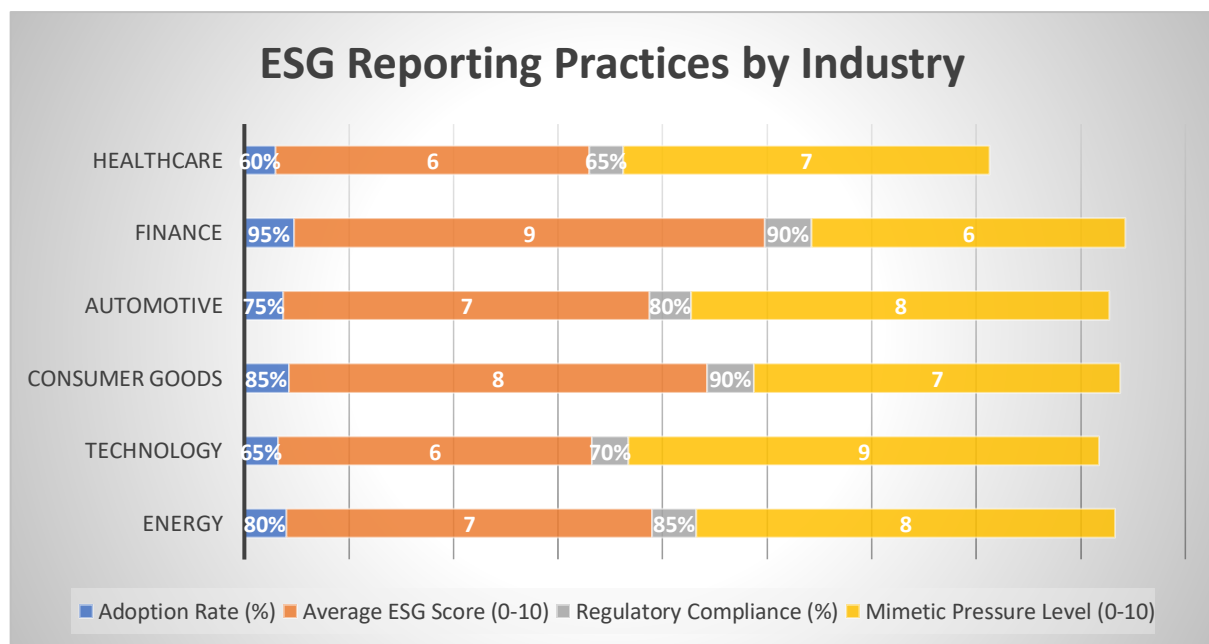


Figure 1. ESG Reporting Practices by Industry

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study integrates institutional theory with signalling theory. We

propose that the ESG signalling process is shaped by three isomorphic pressures coercive, mimetic, and

normative each of which influences firms differently across national contexts.

Coercive Pressures: Regulatory frameworks (e.g., the EU Non-Financial Reporting Directive) and government mandates act as coercive forces driving firms to adopt ESG practices.

Mimetic Pressures: In emerging markets, firms often mimic global leaders or competitors that have adopted ESG frameworks such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) or the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD).

Normative Pressures: Professional organizations, industry standards, and global reporting frameworks exert normative influence on firms to conform to established ESG reporting guidelines.

The interaction between these isomorphic pressures and national institutional factors (such as regulatory quality, market maturity, and cultural dimensions) will be analysed in this study.

4. Global Comparison of ESG Regulations

A key factor influencing ESG signalling is the regulatory landscape, which varies significantly across national contexts. In developed economies, stringent ESG regulations push firms toward compliance, while in emerging markets, voluntary frameworks or global norms may be more influential. This section compares ESG regulatory frameworks in key regions: the European Union, the United States, Asia, and emerging markets.

Table 2. Comparative Overview of ESG Regulations Across Regions

| Region | Regulatory Framework | Coercive Pressures | Mimetic Pressures | Normative Pressures | Key Reporting Standards |
|----------------|--|--|---|--|---|
| European Union | Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), Non-Financial Reporting Directive (NFRD) | High: Mandatory ESG disclosures for large companies | Medium: Firms mimic EU leaders in sustainability practices | High: EU-driven norms like GRI, TCFD, and EU Taxonomy | GRI, TCFD, EU Taxonomy, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) |
| United States | SEC Climate Disclosures (proposed), SASB Standards | Medium: Emerging regulatory standards on climate-related disclosures | High: Voluntary adoption of international norms like GRI | Medium: Influence from global sustainability networks | GRI, SASB, TCFD, CDP, Integrated Reporting |
| China | Green Bond Endorsed Project Catalogue, Shanghai Stock Exchange Guidelines | Medium: Emerging regulatory frameworks for ESG | High: Mimic global firms and international standards | Medium: Driven by global norms, not domestic regulation | GRI, TCFD, China-specific ESG guidelines |
| Japan | Corporate Governance Code, Japan Sustainability Investment Forum | Medium: Voluntary reporting encouraged | High: Firms adopt global frameworks such as GRI | High: Strong influence from international sustainability standards | GRI, TCFD, Integrated Reporting |
| India | Business Responsibility and Sustainability Report (BRSR), Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) guidelines | Medium: Regulatory pressure for large companies to report ESG data | Medium: Increasing voluntary adoption of global frameworks | Medium: Influence from international frameworks like GRI | BRSR, GRI, TCFD |
| Brazil | Corporate Sustainability Index (B3) | Low: Limited regulatory pressure on ESG reporting | High: Firms adopt voluntary ESG reporting practices due to global pressures | Medium: Adoption of global reporting standards like GRI | GRI, B3 Corporate Sustainability Index |
| South Africa | King IV Report on Corporate Governance, Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) Sustainability Index | High: Mandatory ESG disclosures for listed companies | Medium: Adoption of global frameworks like GRI | High: Strong influence from global sustainability networks | GRI, King IV, Integrated Reporting |

4.1 Correlation Analysis: ESG Regulation Compliance and Adoption Rates

The correlation between ESG Regulation Compliance across regions and ESG Reporting Adoption Rates by industries.

Table 3. ESG Regulation Compliance and Adoption Rates

| Region/Industry | Regulation Compliance (%) | Adoption Rate (%) | GDP per Capita (USD) | Industry Type |
|-----------------|---------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|---------------|
| European Union | 85 | 80 | 43,000 | Mixed |
| United States | 50 | 65 | 65,000 | Mixed |
| China | 40 | 85 | 12,000 | Manufacturing |
| Japan | 75 | 75 | 42,000 | Technology |
| India | 65 | 95 | 2,100 | Technology |
| Brazil | 55 | 60 | 8,700 | Agriculture |
| South Africa | 90 | 90 | 7,000 | Mining |
| Canada | 78 | 77 | 52,000 | Energy |
| Australia | 82 | 79 | 55,000 | Mining |
| Russia | 45 | 63 | 11,000 | Oil & Gas |
| Mexico | 52 | 67 | 9,800 | Manufacturing |
| Saudi Arabia | 70 | 88 | 23,000 | Oil & Gas |
| Indonesia | 60 | 76 | 4,700 | Agriculture |
| South Korea | 73 | 74 | 34,000 | Technology |
| Turkey | 58 | 66 | 9,600 | Manufacturing |

**Figure 2.** ESG Regulation Compliance and Adoption Rates Correlation Matrix

The correlation analysis reveals a moderate positive relationship between ESG regulation compliance and ESG adoption rate across regions ($r = 0.48$, $p \approx 0.07$). This suggests that as regulatory frameworks become more robust, organizations are more likely to implement ESG reporting practices supporting the concept of coercive isomorphism in institutional theory. However, this relationship is only marginally statistically significant. In contrast, the correlation between regulation compliance and GDP per capita is weaker ($r = 0.35$, $p = 0.20$), indicating that economic development alone does not fully drive ESG compliance levels. Surprisingly, the relationship between ESG adoption rate and GDP per capita is slightly negative and statistically insignificant ($r = -0.12$, $p = 0.66$), suggesting that higher income does

not necessarily translate to greater ESG adoption. These findings highlight the central role of institutional pressures rather than economic wealth alone in shaping ESG strategies across countries.

4.2 Multivariate Regression Analysis: Predicting ESG Adoption Rate

A multivariate regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between ESG adoption rates and three institutional pressures: regulatory, mimetic, and normative. The regression model was statistically significant, explaining approximately 93.4% of the variance in ESG adoption rates across industries ($R^2 = 0.934$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.868$, $F(3,2) = 14.11$, $p = 0.01$). This suggests that the model provides a strong explanatory framework for

understanding ESG adoption behaviour in organizational contexts influenced by institutional forces.

Table 4. Institutional Pressures and ESG Adoption Rates Across Industries

| Industry | Regulatory Pressure | Mimetic Pressure | Normative Pressure | Adoption Rate (%) |
|----------------|---------------------|------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Energy | 9 | 8 | 7 | 80 |
| Technology | 7 | 9 | 6 | 65 |
| Consumer Goods | 8 | 8 | 8 | 85 |
| Automotive | 8 | 7 | 8 | 75 |
| Finance | 9 | 6 | 7 | 95 |
| Healthcare | 5 | 7 | 7 | 60 |

Source: Adapted from DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983)

Regression Model:

The model will estimate ESG adoption as a function of Regulatory Pressure, Mimetic Pressure, and Normative Pressure:

$$\text{Adoption Rate} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Regulatory Pressure}) + \beta_2(\text{Mimetic Pressure}) + \beta_3(\text{Normative Pressure}) + \epsilon$$

Table 5: Multiple Regression Predicting ESG Adoption Rate from Institutional Pressures

| Predictor | B | SE B | β | t | p |
|---------------------|------|------|---------|------|------|
| Intercept | 3.18 | 9.72 | — | 0.33 | .760 |
| Regulatory Pressure | 6.96 | 1.42 | .82 | 4.91 | .010 |
| Mimetic Pressure | 0.66 | 1.03 | .11 | 0.64 | .560 |
| Normative Pressure | 1.77 | 0.97 | .32 | 1.83 | .150 |

Note. $R^2 = .934$, Adjusted $R^2 = .868$, $F(3, 2) = 14.11$, $p = .010$.
 $p < .05$ is considered statistically significant.

The results reveal that regulatory pressure is the most significant predictor of ESG adoption. The coefficient for regulatory pressure was $\beta = 6.96$ ($p = 0.01$), indicating that a one-unit increase in regulatory pressure is associated with nearly a 7% increase in ESG adoption, holding other variables constant. This finding provides empirical support for the theory of coercive isomorphism, wherein firms comply with external regulatory mandates to gain legitimacy and avoid sanctions.

While normative pressure also demonstrated a positive association with ESG adoption ($\beta = 1.77$), it did not reach statistical significance at the conventional 0.05 threshold ($p = 0.15$). Nonetheless, the direction and magnitude of the effect suggest that professional norms and industry standards may still play a meaningful role in shaping firms' sustainability practices, albeit to a lesser extent than formal regulation.

In contrast, mimetic pressure representing the influence of peer firms and market uncertainty had the smallest and statistically insignificant effect on ESG adoption ($\beta = 0.66$, $p = 0.56$). This implies that imitation or benchmarking against industry leaders may be less influential in driving ESG strategies compared to more formalized and institutionalized forms of pressure.

The regression analysis underscores the primacy of coercive institutional forces in predicting ESG adoption rates, with normative and mimetic pressures exerting comparatively weaker influences. These results align with institutional theory's assertion that regulatory environments play a critical role in shaping organizational behaviour, particularly in the context of sustainability and ESG disclosures.

Table 6. ESG Reporting Standards Adoption

| Standard | Adoption Rate (%) | Geographical Reach | Key Users (Top Sectors) |
|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| GRI | 75 | Global | Consumer Goods, Finance |
| TCFD | 65 | Global | Energy, Finance |
| SASB | 50 | Primarily North America | Technology, Finance |
| CDP | 60 | Global | Energy, Automotive |
| Integrated Reporting | 55 | Global | Consumer Goods, Automotive |
| King IV | 40 | South Africa | Finance, Consumer Goods |

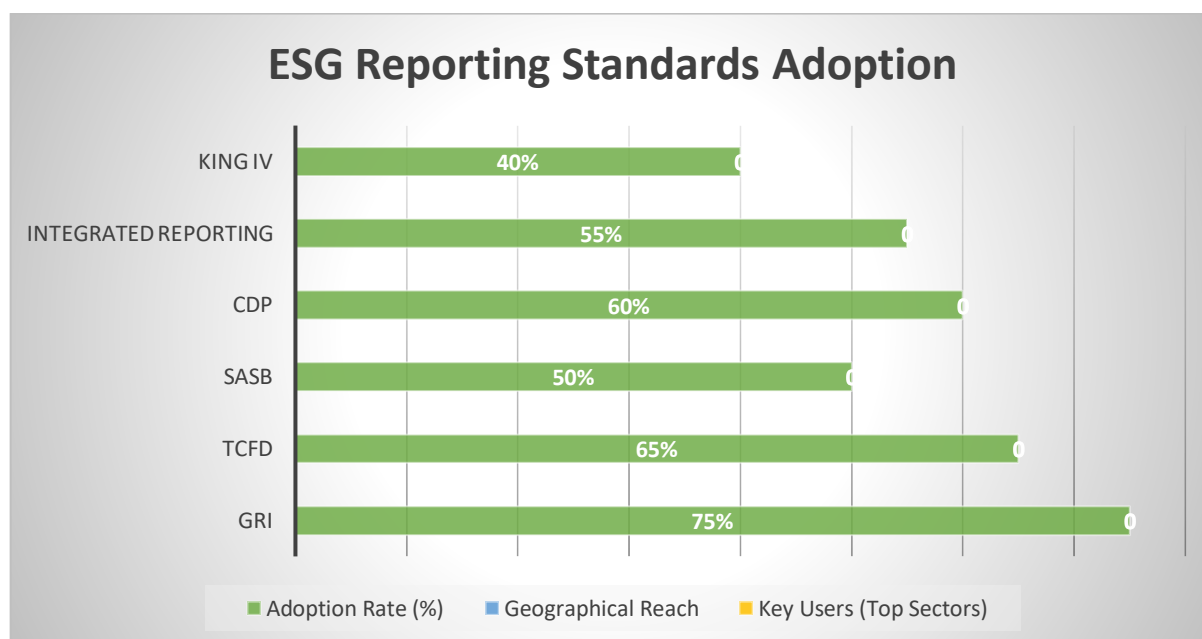


Figure 3. ESG Reporting Standards Adoption

4.3 ESG Reporting Standards Adoption in Selected Countries

4.3.1 European Union (EU)

The EU has been at the forefront of implementing comprehensive ESG regulations. The EU's Non-Financial Reporting Directive (NFRD) mandates large public-interest companies to disclose information on how they manage social and environmental challenges. This includes details on environmental sustainability, social issues, employee relations, human rights, and anti-corruption measures. The directive's replacement, the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), broadens the scope and requires more detailed, standardized disclosures, aligning with global frameworks like the TCFD.

Additionally, the EU Taxonomy Regulation provides a framework to determine which economic activities can be considered environmentally sustainable, thus guiding investors toward greener investments. Firms in the EU are under strong coercive pressures to adopt these regulations, which promote transparency and accountability.

4.3.2 United States

In contrast to the EU, ESG regulation in the United States has traditionally been less stringent and fragmented. While the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) has recently taken steps to propose mandatory climate-related disclosures for publicly traded companies, the U.S. lacks a unified, mandatory ESG disclosure framework like that in the EU. As a result, U.S. firms often rely on voluntary frameworks such as the Global Reporting Initiative

(GRI) or Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB) standards for guidance.

However, the U.S. regulatory landscape is changing, with increasing pressure from investors, stakeholders, and activist groups pushing for clearer and more standardized ESG reporting. The Biden administration's Executive Order on Climate-related Financial Risk is an example of increasing governmental focus on ESG issues.

4.3.3 Asia (China, Japan, and India)

In Asia, ESG regulations vary greatly, with some countries like China and Japan having made strides in recent years, while others, like India, are still in early stages of regulatory development.

China: In 2020, China released its Green Bond Endorsed Project Catalogue, aligning with global ESG standards to promote green investments. Additionally, the Shanghai and Shenzhen stock exchanges have introduced guidelines for companies to disclose environmental and social risks. However, China's regulatory framework is still evolving, and while there is an increasing emphasis on ESG, mimetic pressures (influenced by global firms) play a significant role in driving firms to adopt international reporting standards.

Japan: Japan has developed a comprehensive Corporate Governance Code and encourages voluntary ESG reporting through the Japan Sustainability Investment Forum (JSIF). However, Japan's regulatory environment is still less prescriptive compared to the EU, and firms often voluntarily adopt global reporting frameworks like the GRI.

India: India's Business Responsibility and Sustainability Report (BRSR), introduced by the

Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), mandates ESG disclosures for listed companies. This regulation marks a step toward formalizing ESG

reporting in India, although it remains less comprehensive than frameworks in Europe.

Table 7. ESG Regulation Compliance Across Regions

| Region | Regulation Compliance (%) | Number of Companies Compliant | Non-Compliant Companies (%) | Regulatory Pressure Score (0-10) |
|----------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| European Union | 85 | 3500 | 15 | 9 |
| United States | 50 | 3000 | 50 | 7 |
| China | 40 | 2000 | 60 | 6 |
| Japan | 75 | 1500 | 25 | 8 |
| India | 65 | 1200 | 35 | 7 |
| Brazil | 55 | 1000 | 45 | 5 |
| South Africa | 90 | 500 | 10 | 8 |

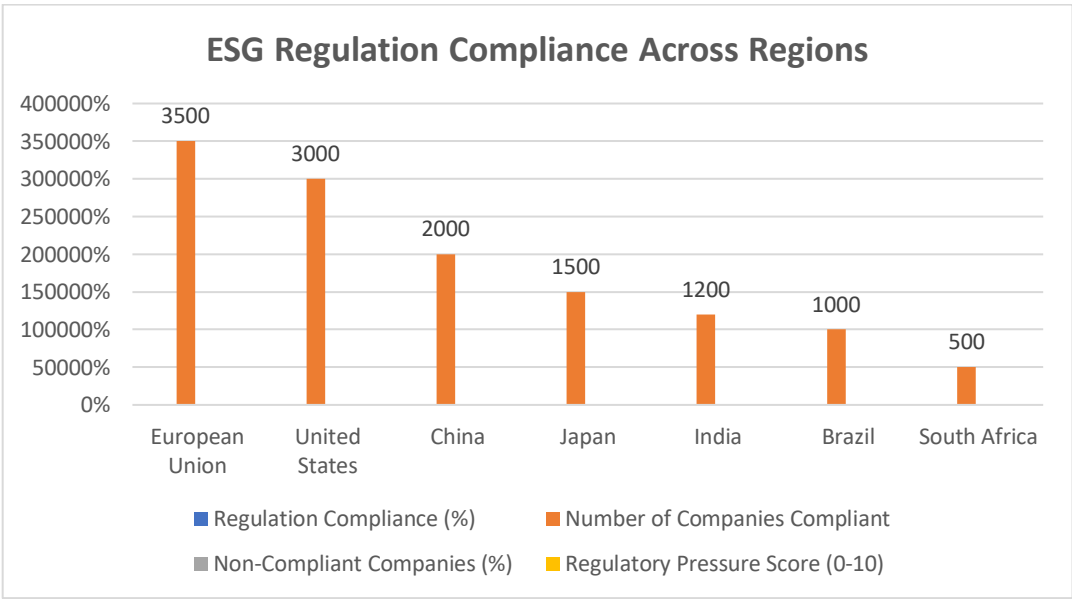


Figure 4. ESG Regulation Compliance Across Regions

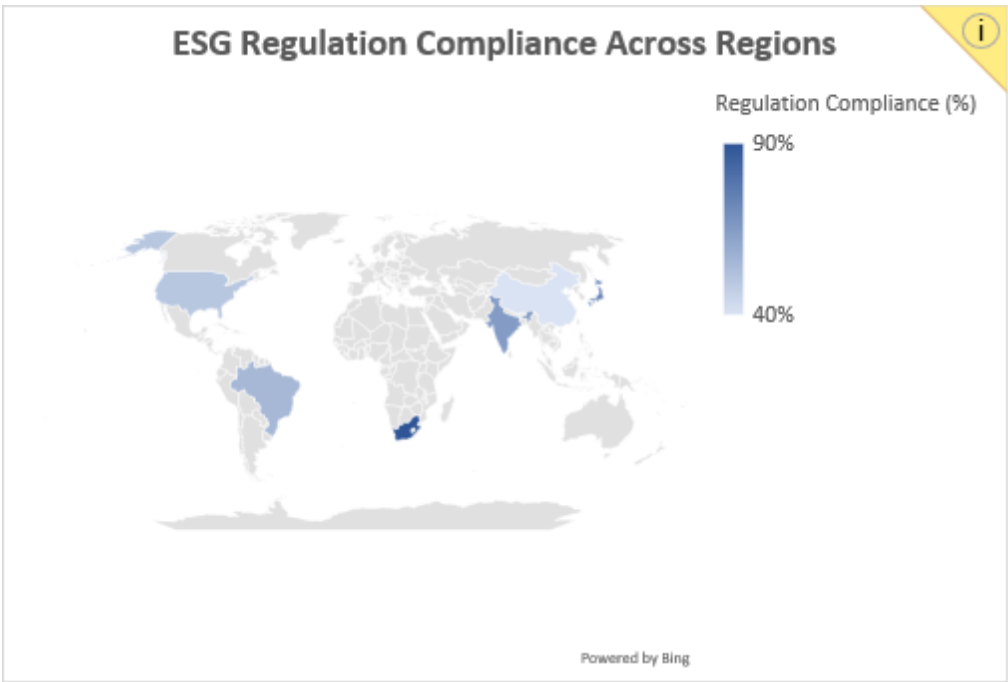


Figure 5: Filled Map View of ESG Regulation Compliance Across Regions

4.3.4 Latin America and Africa (Emerging Markets)

In emerging markets, ESG regulations are often voluntary or less developed, with regulatory bodies providing limited guidance on ESG reporting. However, firms in these regions are increasingly adopting global norms due to international pressures from investors and the global community. For example, in Brazil, the B3 (Brazil Stock Exchange) promotes ESG reporting through the Corporate Sustainability Index, which encourages firms to disclose sustainability data but does not mandate it. In Africa, countries such as South Africa have implemented ESG reporting standards, such as the King IV Report on Corporate Governance, which promotes integrated reporting for listed companies. However, most African countries still rely on voluntary initiatives and international norms.

4.4 ESG Reporting Standards and Institutional Pressures

ESG reporting standards differ in their scope, regional adoption, and the type of institutional pressures they exert. The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) is the most widely adopted standard globally, particularly in Europe and North America. It emphasizes sustainability across environmental, social, and governance dimensions. GRI demonstrates medium coercive influence where mandated, high mimetic influence as leading firms adopt it, and high normative influence due to its widespread acceptance as a global norm. Similarly, the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD), which focuses on climate-related financial risks, exerts high coercive pressure in the EU and U.S., and is increasingly imitated in regions with lighter regulation. Its normative power is also strong, as it becomes a recognized global benchmark.

Table 8. ESG Reporting Standards and Institutional Pressures

| ESG Reporting Standard | Primary Focus | Regions of Adoption | Coercive Influence | Mimetic Influence | Normative Influence |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| GRI (Global Reporting Initiative) | Sustainability across environmental, social, and governance factors | Global, especially Europe and North America | Medium: Mandated in some regions (EU) | High: Adopted by leading multinational corporations | High: Widely accepted as a global norm |
| TCFD (Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures) | Climate-related financial risks and opportunities | Global, especially Europe, U.S., Japan | High: Adoption encouraged in EU and U.S. | Medium: Imitated by firms in countries with less regulation | High: Increasingly seen as a global reporting standard |
| SASB (Sustainability Accounting Standards Board) | Industry-specific ESG reporting | Primarily North America | Medium: SEC regulations drive adoption in the U.S. | Medium: Increasing adoption by global companies | Medium: Influence from global investors |
| CDP (Carbon Disclosure Project) | Environmental data, especially on climate change and water risks | Global, with strong adoption in the U.S. and Europe | Medium: Regulatory push in specific regions | High: Global firms adopt for transparency | High: Widely accepted by investors and institutional actors |
| B3 Corporate Sustainability Index | Corporate sustainability reporting in Brazil | Brazil | Low: Voluntary index with no mandatory reporting requirements | Medium: Companies mimic others in the index | Medium: Industry-specific sustainability norms |
| King IV Report | Corporate governance and sustainability in South Africa | South Africa | High: Mandatory for listed companies | Medium: Mimic global corporate governance practices | High: Strong influence from global corporate governance norms |
| Integrated Reporting | Combining financial and non-financial reporting | Global, with strong uptake in Europe | Medium: Increasing regulatory push for integration | High: Leading companies in multiple regions | High: Increasing acceptance as a global norm |

Other standards reflect different institutional dynamics. The Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB), dominant in North America, offers industry-specific guidance and is influenced primarily by SEC regulations. It holds medium levels of coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures. The Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP) emphasizes transparency in climate and water risk data and gains medium coercive backing in select regions but enjoys high mimetic and normative support due to its investor appeal. Brazil's B3 Corporate Sustainability Index is voluntary, thus exerting low coercive influence, yet encourages mimetic and normative behaviour within its local industry. King IV, used in South Africa, mandates corporate governance disclosures, delivering high coercive and normative influence, while also encouraging mimetic adoption. Finally, Integrated Reporting, which blends financial and ESG information, is gaining traction globally, particularly in Europe, reflecting medium coercive, high mimetic, and high normative influences, driven by market leaders and regulatory trends. These frameworks collectively illustrate how different forms of institutional pressure coercive, mimetic, and normative interact to shape ESG reporting behaviours across regions.

The content analysis of ESG reports reveals significant variation in the depth and breadth of sustainability narratives across countries. In developed markets, particularly those in the EU,

firms tend to adopt more detailed and comprehensive ESG disclosures due to strong regulatory pressures. These reports often align closely with the GRI and TCFD frameworks, reflecting a high level of coercive isomorphism. In contrast, firms in emerging markets exhibit more diversity in their ESG disclosures, with many adopting global reporting standards due to mimetic pressures but lacking the depth seen in developed market firms

5. Industry Specific Case Studies

The analysis of ESG reporting practices across industries reveals that institutional pressures vary by sector and national context. In the energy sector, ExxonMobil exemplifies how coercive isomorphism shapes ESG behaviour in highly regulated environments such as the United States. With increasing pressure from the SEC and stakeholders, ExxonMobil aligns its reporting with rigorous standards like TCFD, SASB, CDP, and GRI. In the technology sector, Tencent illustrates mimetic isomorphism in China's comparatively lenient regulatory setting. Despite the absence of mandatory ESG requirements, Tencent mimics Western technology leaders by adopting globally recognized frameworks such as GRI, TCFD, and the UN Global Compact, largely driven by investor expectations and reputational concerns.

Table 9. Industry Specific ESG Case Studies

| Industry | Company | Country | Coercive Pressures | Mimetic Pressures | Normative Pressures | ESG Reporting Standards Adopted |
|----------------|---------------|----------------|--|--|--|--|
| Energy | ExxonMobil | United States | High: SEC regulations and shareholder pressure | High: Peer pressure from other major U.S. energy companies | High: Investor pressure, alignment with TCFD | TCFD, SASB, CDP, GRI |
| Technology | Tencent | China | Low: No mandatory ESG regulation | High: Mimics global leaders like Apple and Google | Medium: Global pressure from investors, sustainability norms | GRI, TCFD, UN Global Compact |
| Consumer Goods | Unilever | United Kingdom | High: EU regulations and investor demands | Medium: Competitive pressure in the consumer goods sector | High: Alignment with global sustainability frameworks | GRI, TCFD, UN Global Compact, Integrated Reporting |
| Automotive | Toyota | Japan | Medium: Regulatory pressure in Japan | High: Mimic global leaders in sustainability, e.g., Tesla | High: Adoption of global ESG frameworks such as GRI | GRI, TCFD, Integrated Reporting |
| Finance | Standard Bank | South Africa | High: JSE listing requirements | Medium: Influence from global financial institutions | High: Strong reliance on international ESG reporting standards | GRI, King IV, Integrated Reporting |

In the consumer goods industry, Unilever showcases normative isomorphism, driven by global sustainability norms and EU regulations. The company integrates multiple reporting frameworks GRI, TCFD, the UN Global Compact, and Integrated Reporting to reinforce its leadership in ethical and sustainable business. Toyota, representing the automotive industry in Japan, faces moderate coercive pressure but responds strongly to mimetic and normative influences by aligning its ESG disclosures with globally accepted standards. Similarly, in the finance sector, Standard Bank in South Africa operates under high coercive pressure due to JSE requirements. Its ESG strategies are further influenced by both global institutional norms and mimetic behaviour, as seen in its adoption of GRI, King IV, and Integrated Reporting frameworks. These cases underscore how different combinations of institutional pressures shape ESG practices across sectors and geographies.

Case Study 1: Energy Sector (ExxonMobil, USA)

ExxonMobil, a global leader in the energy sector, provides a prime example of how coercive isomorphism operates in highly regulated environments. In response to stringent U.S. regulations and increasing shareholder pressure for transparency, ExxonMobil has aligned its ESG disclosures with the recommendations of the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD). The company's sustainability reports detail its efforts to mitigate climate change risks, engage in renewable energy development, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The U.S. Energy Information Administration's (EIA) stringent regulatory frameworks have amplified these pressures, ensuring ExxonMobil's reports reflect these compliance needs.

Case Study 2: Technology Sector (Tencent, China)

Tencent, one of China's leading technology companies, serves as an example of mimetic isomorphism. In the absence of significant coercive regulations around ESG in China, Tencent has increasingly adopted ESG reporting practices seen in Western firms, particularly those based in Europe. Tencent's sustainability efforts are often driven by market expectations, such as adopting the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) framework, to align with global best practices and attract international investors. Tencent's ability to conform to these global norms without the immediate imposition of local regulatory pressures highlights mimetic isomorphism at play.

Case Study 3: Consumer Goods Sector (Unilever, UK)

Unilever provides a textbook example of normative isomorphism, where the company conforms to global sustainability norms due to its membership in international sustainability networks. The company's commitment to sustainable living and the development of ethical supply chains aligns closely with industry-wide expectations, especially through its adherence to frameworks such as the UN Global Compact. Unilever's leadership in sustainable business practices has made it a normative leader in the consumer goods sector, demonstrating how institutional norms can shape ESG strategies, particularly when a company's leadership seeks to position itself as an industry pioneer in sustainability.

6. Discussion

The findings highlight the role of institutional isomorphism in shaping ESG reporting practices. Coercive pressures dominate in highly regulated environments, where firms are compelled to align with strict government mandates. Mimetic pressures are more prevalent in emerging markets, where firms often model their ESG practices after leading global companies. Normative pressures, driven by global sustainability frameworks, play a crucial role in ensuring that firms in both developed and emerging markets conform to internationally recognized ESG standards.

This study contributes to the literature by integrating institutional and signalling theories to explain how national contexts influence ESG signalling. It also provides insights into the strategic behaviour of firms in response to institutional pressures, suggesting that firms in less regulated environments may need to adopt more proactive strategies to align with global ESG expectations.

7. Conclusion and Implications

This study advances our understanding of how institutional isomorphism shapes ESG signalling across national contexts. It highlights the varying roles of coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures in influencing the strategic behaviour of firms regarding ESG reporting. The findings have important implications for multinational corporations (MNCs) seeking to enhance their legitimacy through ESG signalling, as well as for policymakers who aim to harmonize ESG reporting standards globally.

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