

Sustainability Accounting: A Perspective of Symbolic Interactionism

Yohanes Fabiyola Halan

Departement of Accounting, Dharma Cendika Catholic University, Surabaya, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the understanding and interpretation of the concept of sustainability in accounting based on existing literature. Utilizing an interpretive qualitative approach, this research examines various scholarly articles and publications related to sustainability accounting to explore how the meaning of sustainability is shaped through social interactions among stakeholders. The analysis results indicate that sustainability accounting is not only related to measuring environmental and social performance but is also influenced by the social and cultural contexts that shape perceptions and practices of accounting. These findings underscore the importance of understanding sustainability accounting as a dynamic and contextual process, highlighting the need for a more holistic approach in comprehending sustainability indicators. Practically, this study highlights the importance of transparency, stakeholder engagement, and collaborative dialogue to build more effective social and environmental accountability. By understanding the social processes underlying the construction of sustainability meanings, organizations can strengthen the credibility of their sustainability reports, reduce the risks of information manipulation, and integrate sustainability values into their business strategies more meaningfully. This research contributes to the accounting literature by providing new insights into how symbolic interactionism theory can be applied in the analysis of sustainability accounting practices.



Corresponding Author:

Yohanes Fabiyola Halan,
Departement of Accounting, Dharma Cendika Catholic University,
Surabaya, Indonesia
Email: Yohaneshalan01@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism, rooted in George Herbert Mead's pragmatism, provides a valuable framework for analyzing the complexities inherent in sustainability accounting (Situ et al., 2020). Blumer articulates three core premises that define symbolic interactionism: first, individuals act toward things based on the meanings those things hold for them. Second, the meanings of those things arise from or emerge through the social interactions individuals have with one another. Third, these meanings are handled and modified through the interpretive processes that individuals use when confronting the things they encounter (Snow, 2001). These premises indicate that sustainability, as a concept, is not a fixed and objective reality, but rather a socially constructed understanding that emerges from ongoing interactions and interpretations (Aksan et al., 2009). Therefore, sustainability accounting becomes a dynamic process shaped by the shared meanings and interpretations of various stakeholders, including accountants, managers, investors, regulators, and the public.

The application of symbolic interactionism to sustainability accounting reveals how individuals and organizations interpret and respond to sustainability issues, as well as how these interpretations shape accounting practices and disclosures (Hahn & Lülfes, 2014). This approach

highlights the critical roles of communication, negotiation, and meaning-making in the construction of sustainability information, emphasizing that sustainability accounting is not merely a technical practice but also a social and political one. The increasing integration of sustainability-related values and practices into organizational decision-making underscores the need to understand how these values are interpreted and integrated through collaborative efforts (Forrest et al., 2025). Considering sustainability as a fluid and controversial concept is essential for recognizing the diverse perspectives and potential limitations inherent in its application within the business context (Lankoski, 2016). The essence of sustainability accounting lies not only in its technical methodologies but also in the meanings attributed to it by those involved. The stakeholder perspective emphasizes the interconnectedness among various stakeholders of the firm, such as customers, suppliers, employees, investors, and the community, and their impact on sustainability (Bashir et al., 2022).

Sustainability accounting grapples with the challenge of integrating environmental and social considerations into traditional financial reporting frameworks (Debnath, 2017). While frameworks such as the Triple Bottom Line reporting and Sustainability Reporting as advocated by the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) aim to capture a broader spectrum of organizational performance, these frameworks ultimately rely on the interpretations and values of those who prepare and utilize them (George, 2003). The fashion industry, for instance, faces inherent conflicts with sustainability principles due to the waste generated by demand uncertainty and resource-intensive production processes (Wu et al., 2015). This creates tension between economic objectives and environmental responsibilities, highlighting the need for prudent handling in adopting sustainable practices and making strategic decisions that consider sustainability in capital budgeting (Frost & Rooney, 2021). Sustainability accounting goes beyond traditional financial metrics by incorporating environmental and social performance indicators (Jankalová & Kurotová, 2020). Sustainability serves as an integrative and challenging decision-making framework that combines social, economic, and ecological interests (Ginson, 2006). The evolution of sustainability accounting reflects the growing recognition that businesses have a responsibility to be accountable, responsible, and transparent to stakeholders (Băndoi et al., 2021).

Blumer's theory emphasizes the role of meaning-making in human behavior ("Brief History of Sustainability Reporting," 2012). Individuals act based on the meanings they attribute to objects, people, and situations, and these meanings emerge from social interactions (Hsiao et al., 2022). These meanings are not fixed; rather, they are continuously negotiated and modified through interaction. The application of symbolic interactionism to sustainability accounting highlights how sustainability is understood and enacted within organizations. The convergence of sustainability accounting and symbolic interactionism offers a unique perspective for examining the development, implementation, and impact of sustainability practices in organizations. The concept of sustainability itself is susceptible to various interpretations, influenced by individual and collective values, experiences, and social contexts. By recognizing sustainability as a socially constructed concept, symbolic interactionism encourages a more nuanced understanding of how sustainability initiatives are shaped and executed within organizations.

Critical accounting research challenges the assumptions and power structures embedded in accounting practices. This research questions the neutrality of accounting and explores how accounting can be used to legitimize and perpetuate social and environmental injustices. Accounting figures are not objective facts; rather, they are social constructions that reflect specific perspectives and values. Accounting practices influence the distribution of wealth, social justice, political ideology, and environmental degradation (Baker & Bettner, 1997). The critical perspective also elucidates how accounting can be employed as a tool for social and environmental change (Coville, 2023). Symbolic interactionism provides a robust theoretical perspective for examining the social construction of sustainability within accounting practices. The integration of ecological, social, and economic goals into corporate decision-making is a crucial factor in the transition toward sustainability (Müller & Pfleger, 2014). This approach underscores the importance of understanding how individuals and organizations interpret and respond to sustainability issues, and how these interpretations shape accounting practices and disclosures. The concept of "sustainability" itself is susceptible to various interpretations, and its implementation is often hindered by confusion and a lack of shared understanding (Faber et al., 2005). Existing accountability frameworks are inadequate

in addressing sustainability issues and societal needs (Mohammed, 2013). Beyond external aspects, accountability requires an understanding of the internal dynamics, processes, actors, and tools used to establish sustainability accountability within organizations (Frostenson & Johnstone, 2023). A crucial aspect of symbolic interactionism is its emphasis on social interaction as the primary source of meaning. Organizations respond to institutional pressures regarding sustainability through a combination of manipulation and compliance (Iarossi et al., 2012).

The integration of symbolic interactionism with sustainability accounting highlights the dynamic interaction between meaning, interaction, and action in shaping accounting practices. Various stakeholders may interpret sustainability differently based on their values, experiences, and social contexts (Kuasirikun & Constable, 2010). These diverse interpretations can lead to conflicts and challenges in developing a shared understanding of sustainability goals and metrics (Finch, 2011). Individuals construct meaning through communication, and this meaning subsequently influences their actions. Organizations respond to institutional pressures regarding sustainability through a combination of manipulation and compliance. The critical perspective encourages a deeper examination of the power dynamics and discursive strategies that influence sustainability accounting practices. Critical accounting research challenges the assumptions and power structures embedded in accounting practices. This research questions the neutrality of accounting and explores how accounting can be used to legitimize and perpetuate social and environmental injustices. Sustainability can be utilized to develop Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which is a vital component of reputation management efforts (Coombs, 2010). Rather than accepting sustainability accounting practices at face value, it is essential to critically analyze how these practices are constructed, whose interests they serve, and what the consequences are for various stakeholders. Corporate social responsibility is widespread in the commercial world, yet companies often face skepticism regarding the latent motivations behind their CSR activities (Xu et al., 2021). Within this context, a critical question arises: How do social interactions among organizational stakeholders shape the meanings and interpretations of sustainability within accounting practices? Addressing this question is essential to understanding the dynamic and negotiated nature of sustainability accounting, which involves multiple actors whose values, experiences, and power relations influence the construction and communication of sustainability information.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs an interpretive qualitative approach utilizing a systematic literature review method to examine the implementation of sustainability accounting within organizations. The analyzed literature comprises scientific articles, academic publications, and related reports obtained through reputable academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Inclusion criteria encompassed articles discussing sustainability accounting, published in reputable journals between 2015 and 2025, with a specific focus on social and symbolic perspectives, such as symbolic interactionism.

The literature search process combined key terms including "sustainability accounting," "symbolic interactionism," "stakeholder engagement," and "corporate social responsibility." Subsequently, the retrieved literature underwent rigorous selection, considering both its topical relevance and academic quality.

Data analysis was performed using thematic synthesis, which involved identifying, organizing, and integrating the main themes emerging from the selected literature. This approach facilitates an in-depth understanding of how social interactions among stakeholders shape the meaning and practice of sustainability accounting, as well as how social and cultural contexts influence these interpretations. The study adopts an interpretive qualitative approach, focusing on the disclosure of meaning through detailed descriptions and explanations of how actors understand the implementation of corporate social responsibility in the context of achieving sustainability (Rochayatun & Kholifah, 2021).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The meanings attributed to sustainability metrics are not inherent; rather, they are socially constructed through interactions among stakeholders. This social construction process involves

negotiation, interpretation, and the exercise of power, resulting in metrics that reflect specific interests and values. Different stakeholders may have varying ideas about what sustainability means, leading to conflicting metrics and reporting practices. This paper highlights the importance of understanding the social and political dimensions of sustainability accounting. Companies have expanded their reporting by publishing their ecological and social impacts alongside financial reports (Cortés et al., 2023). Sustainability reporting is becoming increasingly common among public companies (Munoz et al., 2017). Companies are selective in highlighting sustainability topics in their reports (Garst et al., 2022). They may emphasize positive environmental or social impacts while downplaying disclosures of negative impacts.

Organizations often face pressure from various stakeholders to undertake sustainability initiatives aimed at minimizing the ecological and social impacts of their business operations (Saeed & Kersten, 2020). This necessitates organizations to develop and implement comprehensive sustainability strategies that address a range of environmental, social, and economic issues. Organizations may strategically choose to highlight specific sustainability initiatives that align with their business objectives or enhance their public image, while downplaying or omitting information about areas where they perform poorly. Understanding the social construction of sustainability metrics and the power dynamics involved is essential for promoting more meaningful and effective sustainability accounting practices. By recognizing the influence of values, interests, and social contexts on the interpretation and use of sustainability information, stakeholders can engage in more informed dialogue and work toward shared sustainability goals. It is crucial to critically assess the information provided and consider the motivations and biases that may shape corporate sustainability reporting (Leal Filho et al., 2022). Sustainability reporting has evolved into an important tool for contemporary companies (Almashhadani & Almashhadani, 2023). Effective communication with stakeholders is vital to ensure that sustainability initiatives align with societal expectations and contribute to the creation of long-term value (Hira et al., 2024; Zharfpeykan & Askarany, 2023). Companies must lead meaningfully toward societal improvement (Nicolăescu et al., 2015).

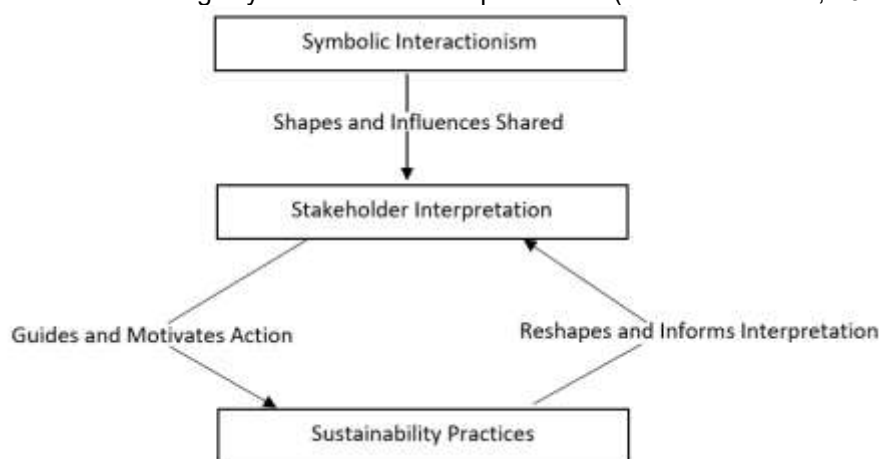


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: Symbolic Interactionism, Stakeholder Interpretation, and Sustainability Practices

Implications of Symbolic Interactionism for Sustainability Accounting

The application of symbolic interactionism to sustainability accounting has significant implications for how organizations approach and communicate their sustainability performance. Understanding the roles of meaning, interaction, and interpretation can help organizations develop more effective and meaningful sustainability practices. This study contributes to the literature on sustainability and ethics by providing empirical evidence on how these issues are addressed in corporate practices. Through the lens of symbolic interactionism, this research highlights the importance of social context in shaping sustainability accounting practices. The information revolution has enabled corporate sustainability reports to evolve over time (Morros, 2016). Sustainability reporting frameworks are vital tools for modern businesses (Almashhadani & Almashhadani, 2023). Companies must focus on

meaning. Sustainability accounting, as a discipline, should recognize the active role of stakeholders in shaping the meaning and relevance of sustainability information. Organizations should strive to create sustainability reports that align with the values and expectations of stakeholders, thereby fostering trust and legitimacy.

Addressing Power Imbalances in Sustainability Accounting

Recognizing the influence of power dynamics is crucial for promoting more equitable and transparent sustainability accounting practices. Organizations must be aware of the potential for influential stakeholders to dominate the sustainability agenda. Promoting inclusivity and participation in the sustainability reporting process can help ensure that the voices of marginalized stakeholders are heard and considered. Transparency in sustainability reporting is essential for ensuring organizational accountability regarding their environmental and social impacts. It is important to consider how sustainability reporting can foster greater accountability and transparency, particularly in industries with significant environmental and social impacts (Gomez-Trujillo et al., 2020). By embracing transparency and accountability, organizations can build trust with stakeholders.

Symbolic interactionism in sustainability accounting adds a social and political dimension to the field. By understanding the roles of meaning, interaction, and power in shaping sustainability practices, stakeholders can collaborate to promote more meaningful and effective sustainability outcomes. Corporate sustainability reporting has become a mainstream business practice involving substantial investments by companies. Decisions regarding sustainability reporting are often driven by legitimacy or reputational concerns, with management primarily focusing on diverting, obscuring, or rationalizing their relatively poor social and environmental performance (Cho et al., 2015). Strengthening a robust corporate reputation can also contribute to corporate sustainability (Lee, 2012). Stakeholder engagement is essential to ensure that sustainability programs align with social standards and facilitate the creation of long-term value. Sustainability initiatives must be aligned with social standards. Through participation in more informed dialogue and collective action, stakeholders can strive toward a more sustainable future for all (Fathi et al., 2025).

Critical Evaluation of Current Practices

Current practices are susceptible to certain critical developments. Stakeholders must critically evaluate the information presented in sustainability reports, considering the potential for greenwashing or selective disclosure. The importance of sustainability information in business is increasingly recognized. Understanding the limitations of sustainability accounting and reporting is essential for promoting more informed decision-making and accountability. Sustainability is a broad concept that encompasses environmental, social, and economic actions and outcomes (Ghardallou, 2022). Although awareness of the importance of sustainability disclosures is growing, the level of integration into business strategies remains inconsistent.

In recent years, stakeholders such as investors have increased their demand for non-financial performance data from companies, highlighting the growing importance of sustainability reporting for businesses (M. Mamun, 2022). Companies are increasingly recognizing the significance of non-financial sustainability disclosures, including economic, environmental, and social issues, in their annual reports as well as in standalone sustainability reports (A. Al Mamun, 2019). The rising awareness of environmental issues and their connection to business is further driving the demand for sustainability reporting (Grotta et al., 2020). Organizations must prioritize comprehensive and transparent reporting to enable stakeholders to make informed decisions regarding their environmental and social impacts (Suzana et al., 2024). Companies are now considering social, ethical, and environmental issues related to their operations, and they are expected to act in a more transparent and responsible manner (Kvasničková Stanislavská et al., 2023).

4. CONCLUSION

By integrating symbolic interactionism, sustainability accounting can transcend mere technical practices and become a tool for fostering meaningful dialogue, promoting accountability, and driving positive change toward a more sustainable future (Nicolo et al., 2023). This research contributes to the existing literature by offering a critical perspective on sustainability accounting through the lens

of symbolic interactionism. This framework provides a deeper understanding of the social processes that shape sustainability practices and their implications for organizational behavior and social outcomes.

The utilization of sustainability reporting by companies to communicate and report on sustainability performance objectives has heightened awareness of its value in the corporate world (Benvenuto et al., 2023). As a strategic necessity, many businesses are now implementing and conveying sustainability practices (Nicolăescu et al., 2015). The prevalence of sustainability reporting in the corporate sector has increased. This approach emphasizes the need for organizations to consider the social and environmental consequences of their actions, report their sustainability performance, and engage with stakeholders to address their concerns and expectations (Grewal & Serafeim, 2020). Integrating sustainability into core business strategies and decision-making processes is also crucial for driving meaningful change and achieving long-term value creation (Martanti et al., 2020). Companies should focus on measuring and managing their social and environmental impacts, establishing clear sustainability targets, and tracking progress over time (Christensen et al., 2021; Seles et al., 2022).

This study emphasizes the importance of transparency, stakeholder engagement, and accountability in sustainability accounting practices, advocating for a more critical and reflective approach to measuring and reporting environmental and social performance. The movement toward more reliable, objective, and standardized sustainability reporting is a crucial undertaking. Companies require appropriate systems to measure and control their own behaviors to assess whether they are effectively addressing stakeholder concerns and to communicate the results achieved (Perrini & Tencati, 2006).

This study finds that sustainability accounting is a social process shaped by interactions and interpretations among stakeholders, making the meaning of sustainability contextual and dynamic. Companies often use sustainability reporting strategically for legitimacy purposes, selectively presenting information. Through the lens of symbolic interactionism, sustainability accounting can serve as a tool to promote transparency, accountability, and meaningful positive change toward greater sustainability.

Limitations and Future Research

Recognizing the limitations of current sustainability accounting practices is crucial for guiding future research efforts. Future studies should focus on refining and expanding the theoretical framework of sustainability accounting (Nagendrakumar et al., 2022). Research should explore the roles of culture, power dynamics, and institutional contexts in shaping sustainability accounting practices and their outcomes. Longitudinal studies can provide valuable insights into the long-term impacts of sustainability initiatives on organizational performance and community well-being. Furthermore, comparative analyses across various industries and regions will help identify best practices and inform the development of context-specific sustainability strategies. Such research can offer a richer and more nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in promoting sustainable development through accounting practices. Future studies may also explore the intersections of sustainability accounting with other emerging fields, such as integrated reporting, circular economy, and social entrepreneurship (Hazbi & Mounir, 2023; Miaomiao et al., 2025). Future research needs to focus on ways to enhance comparability and standardization within sustainability reporting frameworks.

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