Universidade do Minho
Escola de Economia, Gestão e Ciência Política

Gonçalo Rodrigues Monteiro

Disclosure of Sustainability Information Among Textile SMEs in Guimarães

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Disclosure of Sustainability Information Among Textile SMEs in Guimarães

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Conducted under the supervision of:
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This marks the culmination of a long, demanding, and deeply meaningful journey. The completion of this Master's dissertation represents something far greater than the mere attainment of a Master's degree in Business and Management - it represents the achievement of a goal that was only made possible by the people who accompanied me along the way.

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I hereby declare having conducted this academic work with integrity. I confirm that I have not used plagiarism or any form of undue use of information or falsification of results along the process leading to its elaboration.

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DIVULGAÇÃO DE INFORMAÇÃO SOBRE SUSTENTABILIDADE PELAS PMEs TÊXTEIS DE GUIMARÃES

RESUMO

Num contexto marcado pela crescente importância do relato de sustentabilidade e pela emergência de novos referenciais regulatórios e normativos, como a *Voluntary Sustainability Reporting Standard for non-listed SMEs* (VSME), esta dissertação parte do reconhecimento de que, embora as PME desempenhem um papel central na economia e na transição para modelos mais sustentáveis, continuam a enfrentar dificuldades específicas no domínio da sistematização, comunicação e relato das suas práticas de sustentabilidade.

Este estudo tem como objetivo identificar as principais práticas e iniciativas de sustentabilidade divulgadas pelas PME do setor têxtil no município de Guimarães através dos seus websites e analisar a forma como são apresentadas e comunicadas, incluindo em que medida essa divulgação reflete dimensões ESG. Tem ainda como objetivo desenvolver um guião de entrevista semiestruturada para futura investigação aprofundada. Do ponto de vista metodológico, a investigação adotou uma filosofia interpretativista e uma abordagem qualitativa, predominantemente descritiva e exploratória. A componente empírica baseou-se na análise de conteúdo dos websites de uma amostra intencional de 30 empresas do setor têxtil de Guimarães, composta por 10 microempresas, 10 pequenas empresas e 10 médias empresas. O referencial usado foi a VSME. Em paralelo, foi desenvolvido um guião de entrevista semiestruturada como output complementar, destinado a apoiar futura investigação aprofundada neste contexto.

Embora várias empresas da amostra evidenciem práticas sustentáveis relevantes, a maioria permanece ainda distante de um nível de relato estruturado e sistemático. Em vários casos, as empresas parecem desenvolver iniciativas concretas de sustentabilidade, mas essas práticas não são acompanhadas por sistemas formais de medição, monitorização e comunicação. A VSME constitui um instrumento potencialmente adequado, mas a sua adoção efetiva dependerá da criação de condições concretas para a sua operacionalização, nomeadamente apoio técnico, ferramentas simplificadas, capacitação progressiva e modelos colaborativos de suporte ao relato.

Como contributos, o estudo acrescenta evidência empírica sobre a comunicação pública da sustentabilidade entre PME, num contexto local e setorial, e disponibiliza bases para futura investigação aprofundada sobre práticas de sustentabilidade e divulgação.

Palavras-chave: Relato de sustentabilidade; CSRD; VSME; PMEs; Setor têxtil; Guimarães.

DISCLOSURE OF SUSTAINABILITY INFORMATION AMONG TEXTILE SMEs IN GUIMARÃES

ABSTRACT

In a context marked by the growing importance of sustainability reporting and the emergence of new regulatory and normative frameworks, such as the Voluntary Sustainability Reporting Standard for non-listed SMEs (VSME), this dissertation departs from the recognition that, although SMEs play a central role in the economy and in the transition towards more sustainable models, they continue to face specific difficulties in the systematisation, communication, and reporting of their sustainability practices.

This study aims to identify the main sustainability-related practices and initiatives disclosed by SMEs in the textile sector in the municipality of Guimarães through their corporate websites, and to analyse how they are presented and communicated, including the extent to which such disclosure reflects ESG dimensions. It also aims to develop a semi-structured interview guide for future in-depth research. From a methodological standpoint, the research was informed by an interpretivist philosophy and adopted a qualitative approach, predominantly descriptive and exploratory. The empirical component was based on a website content analysis of a purposive sample of 30 textile companies in Guimarães, comprising 10 micro-enterprises, 10 small enterprises, and 10 medium-sized enterprises. The VSME served as the analytical reference framework. In parallel, a semi-structured interview guide was developed as a complementary output, intended to support future in-depth research in this context.

Although several companies in the sample demonstrate relevant sustainability practices, most remain far from a structured and systematic level of reporting. In many cases, companies appear to develop concrete sustainability initiatives, yet these are not accompanied by formal systems of measurement, monitoring, and communication. The VSME constitutes a potentially appropriate instrument; however, its effective adoption will depend on the creation of concrete conditions for its operationalisation, namely technical support, simplified tools, progressive capacity-building, and collaborative reporting models.

In terms of contributions, the study adds empirical evidence on the public communication of sustainability amongst SMEs in a local and sector-specific context and provides a basis for future in-depth research on sustainability practices and disclosure.

Keywords: Sustainability Reporting; CSRD; VSME; Textile Sector; SMEs; Guimarães.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ATP – *Associação Têxtil e Vestuário de Portugal*

BCI – *Better Cotton Initiative*

CDP – *Carbon Disclosure Project*

CDSB – *Climate Disclosure Standards Board*

CEC – *Commission of the European Communities*

CERES – *Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies*

CESOP - Centro de Estudos e Sondagens de Opinião Pública

CITE - Comissão para a Igualdade no Trabalho e no Emprego

CITEVE – *Centro Tecnológico das Indústrias Têxtil e do Vestuário de Portugal*

COP26 – *26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties*

CSR – *Corporate Social Responsibility*

CSRD – *Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive*

CSDDD – *Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive*

CTCP – *Centro Tecnológico do Calçado de Portugal*

DPP - Digital Product Passport

EC – *European Commission*

EEA – *European Environment Agency*

EFRAG – *European Financial Reporting Advisory Group*

EMS – *Environmental Management System*

ESG – *Environmental, Social and Governance*

ESPR – *Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation*

ESRS – *European Sustainability Reporting Standards*

EU – *European Union*

FSB – *Financial Stability Board*

FSC – *Forest Stewardship Council*

GDP - Gross Domestic Product

GEE - Gabinete de Estratégia e Estudos

GHG - Greenhouse Gas

GOTS - Global Organic Textile Standard

GRI - Global Reporting Initiative

GRS - Global Recycled Standard

GVA - Gross Value Added

IASB - International Accounting Standards Board

IASC - International Accounting Standards Committee

IFRS - International Financial Reporting Standards

IIRC - International Integrated Reporting Council

ILO - International Labour Organization

ISO - International Organization for Standardization

ISSB - International Sustainability Standards Board

IUCN - International Union for Conservation of Nature

KPMG - Klynveld Peat Marwick Goerdeler

MBR - Membrane Bio-Reactor

NEPA - National Environmental Policy Act

NFRD - Non-Financial Reporting Directive

OCS - Organic Content Standard

OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PRR - Plano de Recuperação e Resiliência

RCA - Revealed Comparative Advantage

SASB - Sustainability Accounting Standards Board

SDG - Sustainable Development Goal

SDSN - Sustainable Development Solutions Network

SME - Small and Medium-sized Enterprise

TCFD - Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures

TCI - Textile and Clothing Industry

UN - United Nations

UNCTAD - United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

UNEP - United Nations Environment Programme

USD - United States Dollar

VSME - Voluntary Sustainability Reporting Standard for non-listed SMEs

WCED - World Commission on Environment and Development

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the motivation and rationale for the chosen topic, as well as the study's research questions, objectives, and expected contributions. It also outlines the structure of the master's dissertation by providing an overview of its main components and explaining how they relate to one another in addressing the central research problem.

1.1. Justification of the study

In recent decades, sustainability and sustainable development have become increasingly prominent, largely due to population growth, industrial expansion, and rapid technological advancement. To provide some context, the world's population has more than tripled since the mid-twentieth century, increasing from approximately 2.5 billion in 1950 to an estimated 8.2 billion today, and is projected to reach a peak of 10.3 billion by 2080 (United Nations, 2024).

This demographic growth highlights a critical challenge: as global demand for resources continues to increase, natural, social, and environmental resources remain finite. The depletion and degradation of these resources threaten the well-being of both present and future generations and underscore the need for development models that reconcile economic growth with environmental protection and social equity.

In response to these global challenges, the concept of sustainable development has been formalised through international policy frameworks such as the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which sets out 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Achieving these goals requires the active involvement of economic actors, particularly companies, which are expected to contribute not only to responsible production and decent work, but also to climate action and inclusive growth. As a result, companies are increasingly expected not only to generate economic value but also to contribute actively to broader social and environmental objectives.

In this regard, sustainability reporting has become a vital aspect of corporate governance, responsibility, and accountability (Goerzen et al., 2025). Recent studies show that sustainability reporting is a key mechanism through which organisations communicate their environmental, social, and governance (ESG) performance to stakeholders (Eccles & Krzus, 2018; KPMG, 2022). The increasing global focus on ESG issues has consequently intensified the demand for sustainability disclosures that are transparent, comparable, and standardised.

This progress has also prompted greater engagement from regulatory and standard-setting bodies operating at both regional and global levels. Initiatives such as the European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS) and the establishment of the International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB) aim to harmonise the disclosure of sustainability information, thereby enhancing transparency and comparability among firms (Hummel & Jobst, 2024). Nevertheless, although these initiatives seek to improve the quality and consistency of sustainability reporting, they also create technical and operational challenges for organisations with limited internal resources (Stolowy & Paugam, 2023).

From a strategic perspective, organisations are increasingly expected to contribute to the creation of shared value by aligning financial objectives with broader societal interests (Porter & Kramer, 2006). In this sense, non-financial reporting can be regarded as an important tool for communicating corporate initiatives and outcomes related to ESG issues. Greater transparency may strengthen stakeholder trust, reinforce organisational legitimacy, and build a credible and consistent reputation over time, which is a key factor in enhancing corporate reputation (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2014).

Within the broader context of corporate governance, SMEs constitute a distinct organisational setting. According to the European Commission (2025), small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are classified into three categories: micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises. Micro-enterprises employ fewer than 10 persons and have an annual turnover or balance sheet total not exceeding €2 million. Small enterprises employ fewer than 50 persons and have an annual turnover or balance sheet total not exceeding €10 million. Medium-sized enterprises employ fewer than 250 persons and have an annual turnover not exceeding €50 million or a balance sheet total not exceeding €43 million.

A key reason for this emphasis on SMEs is their significant contribution to economic activity and employment. The European Commission (2025) Annual Report on European SMEs 2024/2025 states that SMEs represent 99.8% of enterprises operating in the European Union and employ approximately 89.8 million people, accounting for 61.1% of total employment, while large enterprises represent only 0.2% of all enterprises. This importance is even more pronounced in Portugal, where SMEs account for 99.9% of the business sector, represent 76.2% of national employment, and contribute 67.4% of national value added (European Commission, 2025a). Notably, Portugal ranks as the Member State with the second-highest concentration of SMEs, with

106 SMEs per 1,000 inhabitants, second only to Slovakia, which records 108. By contrast, Germany and Denmark have the lowest proportions, with 30 and 42 SMEs per 1,000 inhabitants, respectively (European Commission, 2023).

Although strategically important, SMEs are often at a disadvantage when responding to growing regulatory and societal challenges related to sustainable development. In contrast to large corporations, SMEs often have limited specialised human resources, less formalised governance structures, and fewer technical capabilities in relation to sustainability practices, which makes it more difficult for them to adopt such practices and report on them effectively (Setyaningsih et al., 2024; Galli et al., 2023). These constraints make SMEs particularly vulnerable to evolving sustainability reporting requirements, despite their importance in supporting broader sustainability transitions and their role as a key driver of the economy.

In the European context, these challenges have become even more salient with the introduction of the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) (Directive (EU) 2022/2464), which is associated with the European Green Deal and the Action Plan on Financing Sustainable Growth. Although the CSRD imposes mandatory reporting requirements primarily on large undertakings and listed SMEs, non-listed SMEs are also increasingly affected indirectly through "cascade effects", as larger firms seek sustainability-related information throughout their value chains (Synesgy Global Observatory, 2025; Hummel & Jobst, 2024).

These sustainability imperatives are particularly salient in the textile and clothing industry, which presents a compelling illustration of the tensions between economic relevance and environmental and social sustainability. Globally, the sector employs over 300 million people along the value chain and generates approximately USD 1.3 trillion in economic value (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017), making it one of the most important industries for employment and economic development worldwide, especially in developing and transition economies.

In the European Union, clothing ranks as the fourth most environmentally significant consumption category, following food, housing, and transport (European Parliament, 2021). Despite its economic importance, the textile industry is also one of the most resource-intensive and polluting sectors globally. It is estimated to be responsible for 8–10% of total global greenhouse gas emissions - surpassing the combined emissions of the international aviation and shipping industries - as well as approximately 20% of global industrial water pollution, largely due to the

chemical-intensive processes of dyeing and finishing (European Parliament, 2021; Niinimäki et al., 2020).

The sector consumes around 215 trillion litres of water annually and less than 1% of the material used in clothing production is currently recycled into new clothing, resulting in significant resource losses (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017).

Beyond environmental impacts, the textile industry faces serious social challenges along its global value chain. Workers, the majority of whom are women in low- and middle-income countries, are frequently exposed to precarious employment conditions, low wages, excessive working hours, and unsafe working environments, while issues such as child labour and forced labour remain persistent concerns in certain producing regions (Velluti, 2024).

These combined environmental and social impacts underscore the urgent need for greater transparency, accountability, and sustainability reporting across the textile sector, and position SMEs operating in this industry, such as those based in the textile hub of Guimarães, as particularly relevant subjects of study in the context of sustainability governance and disclosure.

This regulatory environment creates a critical paradox for SMEs. On the one hand, sustainability reporting involves financial costs, operational complexity, and substantial knowledge requirements that may exceed SMEs' current organisational capabilities, particularly in relation to human resources, data infrastructure, and technical expertise (Niemann et al., 2025; Hummel & Jobst, 2024). At the same time, a growing body of literature suggests that sustainability reporting may offer SMEs strategic benefits, such as greater market differentiation, improved access to finance, stronger stakeholder relationships, and reputational gains (Jenkins, 2009; Eccles & Krzus, 2018). Consequently, sustainability reporting has gradually evolved from a mere compliance obligation into a potential strategic tool for long-term competitiveness and value creation, even for smaller firms operating under resource-constrained conditions (Porter & Kramer, 2006; KPMG, 2022).

While sustainability reporting has become an increasingly prominent topic in academic research in recent years, scholarly attention has focused predominantly on large corporations, whereas the experiences and challenges of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), particularly those operating in resource-intensive industries, remain comparatively underexplored. This gap is especially evident in local contexts such as the textile industry in the municipality of

Guimarães, where SMEs play a central economic and social role. Against this backdrop, the present study is justified by its aim to advance understanding of how SMEs navigate sustainability practices and reporting requirements, and how these processes shape organisational strategy and development.

In summary, although sustainability reporting has become increasingly developed among large corporations under regulatory pressure and stakeholder expectations, its implications for SMEs remain insufficiently explored in the academic literature (Stolowy & Paugam, 2023; Hummel & Jobst, 2024).

1.2. Research questions and objectives

The growing emphasis on sustainability in the business environment has led to increased expectations for transparency and accountability from both regulators and stakeholders. In this context, it has become increasingly relevant for SMEs, including those not directly subject to mandatory reporting requirements, to communicate their sustainability-related practices and initiatives, particularly when they operate within value chains shaped by emerging regulatory pressures. Given the economic and social relevance of the textile sector in the municipality of Guimarães, this study focuses on examining how SMEs in this sector publicly communicate sustainability-related practices and initiatives through their corporate websites. In addition, the study seeks to develop a semi-structured interview guide to be provided to the Municipality of Guimarães in order to support a subsequent in-depth analysis of these issues.

The study is guided by the following general research questions:

- What sustainability-related practices and initiatives are currently disclosed by SMEs in the textile sector in the municipality of Guimarães through their corporate websites?
- How are these sustainability-related practices and initiatives communicated through the corporate websites of SMEs in the textile sector in the municipality of Guimarães?
- What dimensions and themes should be included in a semi-structured interview guide to support a subsequent in-depth analysis of sustainability practices and disclosure in these SMEs?

To answer these questions, the study pursues the following objectives:

- To identify the main sustainability-related practices and initiatives disclosed on SMEs' corporate websites.
- To analyse how such practices and initiatives are presented and communicated through website content, including the extent to which these disclosures reflect environmental, social, and governance (ESG) dimensions.
- To design a semi-structured interview guide for a subsequent in-depth analysis of sustainability practices, motivations, challenges, and disclosure processes within these SMEs.

From a methodological perspective, this dissertation is grounded in an interpretivist research philosophy and follows a predominantly descriptive and exploratory qualitative design. It combines the analysis of publicly available sustainability information disclosed on the websites of a purposive sample of textile SMEs in the municipality of Guimarães with the development of a semi-structured interview guide designed to support future in-depth research in this field.

1.3. Expected contributions

This study is expected to contribute to the understanding of how SMEs in the textile sector in the municipality of Guimarães publicly communicate sustainability-related practices and initiatives through their corporate websites. In doing so, it offers empirical insight into the visibility and nature of sustainability disclosure in a local and economically significant industrial context.

The study may also provide useful evidence for local authorities and institutional actors, particularly the Municipality of Guimarães, by supporting future actions aimed at promoting sustainability awareness, disclosure, and engagement among SMEs. In addition, the semi-structured interview guide developed as part of this research constitutes a practical methodological contribution, as it may support a subsequent in-depth analysis of sustainability practices, challenges, and communication processes within these firms.

From an academic perspective, the dissertation contributes to a still limited body of research on sustainability disclosure among SMEs, especially in regional and sector-specific settings. By focusing on a local textile context, the study also helps broaden current discussions on sustainability communication beyond large corporations and listed companies.

1.4. Structure

This dissertation is organised into five chapters. The present chapter, the Introduction, sets out the motivation and rationale for the research, formulates the research questions and objectives, outlines the expected contributions of the study, and presents the overall structure of the dissertation.

Chapter 2 presents the Literature Review and establishes the theoretical and conceptual foundations of the study. It examines the concepts of sustainability, sustainable development, and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), and explores the role of accountability and legitimacy in sustainability reporting. The chapter also traces the historical development of sustainability reporting and addresses the specific challenges and dynamics associated with sustainability reporting among SMEs, before concluding with final remarks.

Chapter 3 describes the Methodology adopted in the dissertation. It outlines the epistemological stance of the research, justifies the methodological choices made, characterises the sample of companies, and details the data collection and analysis procedures employed.

Chapter 4 constitutes the Empirical Study and forms the core analytical component of the dissertation. It begins by contextualising the Portuguese Textile and Clothing Industry (TCI), as well as the specific industrial and sustainability landscape of the municipality of Guimarães. It then presents the analysis of the sustainability information publicly disclosed on the corporate websites of the companies included in the sample, and concludes with the presentation of a semi-structured interview guide developed as a methodological contribution to support future research.

Finally, Chapter 5 presents the main conclusions of the research, its contributions, the limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter 2 reviews the academic and regulatory literature relevant to sustainability reporting, with particular attention to SMEs. It begins by examining the conceptual foundations of sustainability, sustainable development, and CSR, while also considering the relevance of accountability and legitimacy in explaining the motivations, functions, and implications of sustainability reporting practices. The chapter then traces the historical development of sustainability reporting, from early voluntary disclosures to the emergence of international frameworks and standard-setting initiatives, before examining the European regulatory landscape and recent developments such as the CSRD. Building on this background, it explores the specific challenges and dynamics of sustainability reporting among SMEs, including structural constraints, reporting incentives, and the emergence of simplified frameworks such as the Voluntary Sustainability Reporting Standard for non-listed SMEs (VSME). The chapter concludes with final remarks.

2.1. Sustainability, Sustainable Development and Corporate Social Responsibility

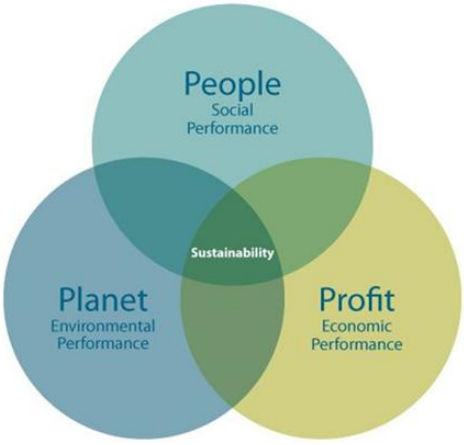
The notion of sustainability has historically emerged as a multifaceted ideal that integrates environmental, social, and economic considerations (Purvis et al., 2019). Rather than representing a single objective, sustainability reflects a normative concept concerned with the long-term preservation of ecological systems, social equity, and economic viability. It has also been closely associated with social justice, particularly through its emphasis on the fair distribution of resources and on ensuring broad access to education, healthcare, and other essential goods and services (Sachs, 2015).

Conservatism, understood as the defence of tradition and the maintenance of the status quo, and internationalism, associated with cooperation among states to address shared global problems, have also been identified as historical currents related to sustainability (Purvis et al., 2019). By the late twentieth century, these different historical legacies had converged in what is now recognised as the concept of sustainable development, most notably articulated in the Brundtland Report published by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987. In that report, sustainable development is defined as “Development which meets the needs of the

present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987, p. 41).

This definition moved beyond the traditional understanding of development as synonymous with economic growth by emphasising the interdependence of the economy, society, and the environment. This integrated perspective was later operationalised through the Triple Bottom Line framework, which proposes that organisational performance should be assessed across economic, environmental, and social dimensions simultaneously (Elkington, 1997; Loviscek, 2021). Accordingly, sustainability is increasingly understood as a systems-based approach grounded in three interdependent pillars - people, planet, and profit - which must be addressed concurrently in order to promote long-term well-being (Lozano, 2012), as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Triple Bottom Line



Source: Adapted from Elkington (1997).

The environmental pillar focuses on the sustainable use of natural resources, the protection of biodiversity, the reduction of impacts on air, water, and soil, and the promotion of more sustainable patterns of production and consumption (United Nations Environment Programme, 2020). This perspective recognises that the Earth's natural resources are finite and that economic development must take place within planetary boundaries. Recent studies (e.g., Salonen et al., 2025) highlight that environmental degradation threatens not only ecosystems, but also economies and societies, thereby reinforcing the need to integrate environmental considerations into the design of development models.

Regarding the social dimension of sustainability, respect for human rights, together with the active promotion of diversity and inclusion, is fundamental; equally important are the eradication of poverty and the commitment to ensuring that no one is left behind (Sachs, 2015;

United Nations, 2015). Beyond the reduction of inequality, social sustainability also involves the construction of resilient societies grounded in social cohesion, participation, and distributive justice, thereby enabling individuals and communities to adapt to economic, environmental, and social change over time.

The economic dimension of sustainability concerns the capacity to promote long-term prosperity through the continuity of organisations, the efficient use of resources, and the provision of quality employment. However, within sustainability debates, this dimension is often shaped by power relations and tensions between short-term growth objectives and longer-term efficiency and equity considerations (Hahn & Kühnen, 2013). Consequently, economic sustainability should not be reduced to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth but should instead be understood in terms of resilient business models that integrate environmental and social risks into organisational strategies and support long-term value creation (Bocken et al., 2014). From this perspective, the meaning of "profit" extends beyond purely financial returns to include environmental and social externalities in the assessment of both corporate and societal performance (Epstein, 2008).

Over recent decades, the concept of sustainable development has expanded to incorporate additional dimensions and indicators. Initially centred on environmental and social balance, it has gradually come to encompass governance, corporate responsibility, and technological innovation (Lozano, 2012; Sachs, 2015). This evolution suggests that sustainable development is a dynamic and context-dependent process, shaped by regional conditions, institutional capacities, and interactions at the global level. In this regard, the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 SDGs represent one of the most comprehensive international frameworks for the operationalisation of sustainable development, providing concrete targets and indicators while calling for greater alignment between public policies and private strategies in addressing global challenges such as climate change, social inequality, and environmental degradation (United Nations, 2015, 2023).

Within this broader sustainability context, increasing attention has been given to the role of the business sector, in which Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has long served as a key framework (Carroll, 2016). CSR refers to the idea that companies have responsibilities that extend beyond economic performance to include their social and environmental impacts on society. In this sense, CSR gives organisational expression to the principles of sustainability and sustainable development by translating them into corporate practices, governance mechanisms, and

stakeholder engagement (Dahlsrud, 2008). More recent studies indicate that CSR initiatives and sustainability strategies are closely interconnected, with sustainability reporting playing a particularly important role as a tool for communicating corporate responsibility and aligning organisational actions with broader societal goals (Adams et al., 2022).

Contemporary academic literature (Jones et al., 2020) emphasises that sustainability is a long-term paradigm in which public policies, corporate decisions, and individual behaviours are understood as interrelated within a systemic perspective. The Triple Bottom Line model remains one of the most influential frameworks for implementing sustainability in organisational contexts, as it integrates economic, environmental, and social considerations into decision-making processes (Elkington, 1997; Loviscek, 2021). Recent findings suggest that organisations that incorporate these three dimensions into their strategies may not only contribute more effectively to social and environmental goals, but also demonstrate greater resilience, stronger reputations, and improved long-term financial performance (Hahn & Kühnen, 2013; Lozano, 2012; Setyaningsih et al., 2024). Nevertheless, recent studies have also highlighted the model's limitations, particularly its tendency to treat the three pillars as separable rather than deeply interdependent, thereby potentially obscuring trade-offs and power asymmetries (Jones et al., 2020; Hahn et al., 2018; Lozano, 2012).

In conclusion, sustainability and sustainable development are closely related, multidimensional concepts that require the integration of environmental, social, and economic considerations. While sustainable development is generally understood as a long-term normative objective, it is also associated with broader processes of societal and organisational transformation directed towards that goal. Taken together, these ideas provide a useful conceptual foundation for the analysis of sustainable corporate practices and non-financial reporting, highlighting the importance of measuring, managing, and communicating environmental, social, and economic impacts in a holistic manner as a prerequisite for resilient and sustainable prosperity.

2.2. Accountability, legitimacy and sustainability reporting

Sustainability reporting has gained increasing prominence in connection with broader debates on accountability and organisational legitimacy. Accountability may be understood as the obligation of organisations to explain, justify, and assume responsibility for their actions and their consequences to relevant stakeholders (Bovens, 2007). In the context of sustainability,

accountability also extends to the social and ecological impacts of organisational activities, reflecting growing societal expectations regarding corporate responsibility and transparency (Bebbington et al., 2008).

Legitimacy theory offers a complementary perspective on why companies engage in sustainability reporting. According to this theory, organisational legitimacy depends on the extent to which a company's actions are perceived as appropriate and desirable within a socially constructed system of norms, values, and beliefs (Suchman, 1995). As the societal impacts of climate change become more visible and social concerns gain greater prominence, companies face increasing scrutiny to respond to these expectations. In this context, sustainability reporting is often understood as a strategic communication instrument through which organisations seek to maintain, reinforce, or restore legitimacy by signalling alignment with prevailing social norms and regulatory requirements (Deegan, 2002; Cho et al., 2015).

In this context, sustainability reporting functions as a mechanism of both accountability and legitimacy. On the one hand, it enables organisations to disclose their environmental, social, and governance (ESG) impacts, thereby responding to increasing demands for accountability and transparency. On the other hand, sustainability reporting allows firms to shape stakeholders' perceptions and to maintain their social licence to operate, particularly in highly regulated environments characterised by heightened public visibility and regulatory scrutiny (see Suchman, 1995; Deegan, 2002).

Nevertheless, the literature also highlights major tensions and limitations within the field of sustainability reporting. Some authors argue that, in the absence of strong checks and balances and clear regulatory requirements, sustainability reports may become more symbolic than substantive, serving as instruments of impression management rather than as mechanisms for meaningful organisational change (e.g., Moody-Stuart, 2006; Cho et al., 2015). This critique is consistent with concerns about greenwashing, selective disclosure, and the intentional omission of negative impacts, all of which may undermine the credibility of sustainability reporting as a mechanism of accountability (Hahn & Kühnen, 2013).

More recent research suggests that the effectiveness of sustainability reporting as a mechanism of accountability is highly context-dependent, varying according to organisational size, stakeholder pressures, regulatory environments, and institutional capacities (Setyaningsih et al., 2024; Steidle et al., 2025). While large organisations may have greater financial and technical

resources to invest in more extensive reporting practices than smaller firms, this does not necessarily guarantee the effective realisation of accountability objectives. Consequently, sustainability reporting may serve primarily legitimacy-seeking purposes without leading to substantive organisational transformation, particularly in voluntary or weakly regulated contexts.

The literature (e.g., Cho et al., 2015) therefore suggests that sustainability reporting should not be understood merely as a technical disclosure exercise, but rather as a socio-institutional practice embedded in broader dynamics of accountability, legitimacy, and stakeholder relations. This perspective is crucial for analysing why and how organisations engage in sustainability reporting, as well as for assessing its effectiveness in promoting meaningful sustainability change.

Although sustainability reporting initially emerged as a voluntary activity, the extant literature highlights its limitations in ensuring accountability and comparability across organisations. In particular, the absence of binding standards and enforcement mechanisms, together with challenges related to sustainability-related knowledge, selective disclosure, symbolic reporting, and heterogeneous reporting practices, has raised questions about the credibility and decision-usefulness of sustainability information (Cho et al., 2015; O'Reilly et al., 2024). Consequently, sustainability reporting has gradually evolved from a primarily voluntary and legitimacy-oriented activity into an increasingly institutionalised and regulated phenomenon. This evolution reflects policymakers' efforts to strengthen accountability, reduce information asymmetries, and enhance the reliability and comparability of non-financial disclosures, thereby paving the way for the establishment of formal regulatory frameworks for sustainability reporting.

2.3. Sustainability Reporting: historical evolution and regulatory context

2.3.1. Historical Development of Sustainability Reporting

The origins of sustainability reporting can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s, when the first environmental reports began to emerge and gradually expanded to incorporate social and economic aspects (Global Reporting Initiative [GRI], 2022). These early reports are best understood as responses to increasing pressure from stakeholders and civil society, rather than as fully developed voluntary reporting practices (Larrinaga & Bebbington, 2021).

An important early milestone was the introduction of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in the United States, which required the assessment of environmental consequences prior

to the implementation of federal projects (Council on Environmental Quality, 1996). Although significant from a regulatory perspective, this development had only limited implications for private corporations in terms of sustainability reporting, as neither the theoretical foundations nor the regulatory expectations surrounding such reporting were yet clearly established (Gökten et al., 2020).

During the mid-1970s, environmental reporting also began to appear in the work of governmental and intergovernmental bodies, including the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Commission of the European Communities (CEC). A major turning point came in 1972 with the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm, which placed environmental degradation firmly on the international agenda (United Nations, 1972). Historical analyses suggest that, although the Stockholm Conference was highly significant in political and institutional terms, its influence on corporate reporting practices only became more visible in the 1980s (Gökten et al., 2020).

In 1980, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), in collaboration with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), published the World Conservation Strategy, a document that influenced subsequent environmental disclosure and contributed indirectly to the emergence of sustainability as a broader concept (International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, 1980). This was followed by the establishment of the Brundtland Commission in 1983 and the publication of Our Common Future, which famously defined sustainable development as development that meets "the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987, p. 43). This definition became foundational to subsequent sustainability discourse and strongly influenced later approaches to corporate social and environmental reporting (Benameur et al., 2024).

The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro further reinforced the global relevance of sustainable development by linking environmental protection with economic development and by generating key international instruments such as Agenda 21, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, and the Statement of Principles for the Sustainable Management of Forests (United Nations, 1992). Around the same period, the Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies (CERES), established in 1990, promoted voluntary corporate sustainability initiatives and contributed to the diffusion of environmental and social reporting practices. Research suggests

that macro-environmental shocks and major international events played an important role in legitimising corporate responsibility and accelerating the spread of such reporting, even if its early forms were often symbolic (Larrinaga & Bebbington, 2021).

Academic debate also began to question the substantive value of these emerging reporting practices. Some authors argued that the expansion of environmental reporting into broader sustainability reporting did not necessarily imply deeper organisational transformation. In this regard, Moody-Stuart (2006) raised an important critique by questioning whether sustainability reporting actually improves corporate behaviour, suggesting that in the absence of mandatory requirements and verification mechanisms, reporting may function more as rhetoric than as an instrument of change.

2.3.2. International Frameworks and Standard-Setting Developments

The consolidation of sustainability reporting at the international level accelerated from the late 1990s onwards, as a growing number of frameworks and standard-setting initiatives sought to provide greater structure, comparability, and legitimacy to non-financial disclosure. A major milestone in this process was the creation of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), which emerged in 1997 with the support of the Tellus Institute and aimed to establish an internationally recognised framework for non-financial reporting. According to the GRI (2022), this represented not only the introduction of a formal reporting structure, but also the incorporation of materiality as a central principle, encouraging organisations to disclose issues of greatest relevance to their stakeholders.

The GRI released the first full version of its Sustainability Reporting Guidelines (G1) in 2000 and became an independent non-profit organisation based in Amsterdam in 2001 (GRI, 2022a). Subsequent iterations of the Guidelines, including G2 in 2002, G3 in 2006, and G4 in 2013, progressively improved clarity and reinforced the importance of materiality, although challenges related to assurance and integration with financial reporting remained (KPMG, 2017). In particular, the publication of G4 in 2013 marked an important structural development by placing greater emphasis on materiality, thereby enabling organisations to focus more explicitly on the sustainability issues most relevant to them and to their stakeholders. Research suggests that this contributed to more consistent reporting practices, while also exposing continuing limitations in relation to external assurance and connectivity with financial information (KPMG, 2017).

Alongside the GRI, other major reporting initiatives also emerged. These included the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP), established in 2000 and focused primarily on emissions and

environmental risk management, and the United Nations Global Compact, which formally endorsed the GRI in 2006. Although such initiatives enhanced awareness and comparability, they also contributed to increasing fragmentation within the reporting landscape, as multiple frameworks with different objectives, audiences, and methodologies began to coexist (De Villiers et al., 2022).

Parallel developments also took place in the field of financial reporting. The restructuring of the International Accounting Standards Committee (IASC) led to the establishment of the IFRS Foundation and the International Accounting Standards Board (IASB), with growing responsibility for the development of international financial reporting standards (IFRS Foundation, 2001). In the following decade, additional initiatives sought to bridge financial and non-financial reporting more explicitly. The International Integrated Reporting Council (IIRC), created in 2010, promoted the integration of financial and non-financial information into a single value-creation report, while the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB), established in 2011, developed sector-specific sustainability metrics with a stronger investor focus.

Another major turning point came with the creation of the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD) by the Financial Stability Board in 2015. The TCFD was mandated to develop recommendations for climate-related risk disclosure and quickly became a quasi-standard across many markets and investor communities (Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures, 2017). However, although voluntary adoption expanded significantly, the resulting disclosures often remained fragmented, more strongly oriented towards opportunities than risks, and not always clearly linked to market performance (Demers et al., 2024). The TCFD's recommendations were formally integrated into the IFRS Foundation architecture in 2023 (IFRS, 2023), reflecting a broader movement towards convergence in sustainability disclosure.

This movement was reinforced in 2021 with the creation of the International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB) under the IFRS Foundation during COP26, with the objective of developing globally comparable sustainability reporting standards (International Sustainability Standards Board, 2021). The ISSB consolidated a number of existing initiatives, including SASB, IIRC, and CDSB, and sought to enhance global comparability and connectivity in sustainability disclosure (Goerzen et al., 2025). In parallel, the GRI Standards, introduced in October 2016 to replace the earlier G4 Guidelines, reinforced the GRI's role as a leading international standard for sustainability reporting. This transition from guidelines to standards marked an important normative shift, introducing a more modular and flexible structure aligned with broader international benchmarks

such as those of the United Nations, the OECD, and ISO 26000 on social responsibility (International Organization for Standardization, 2010; OECD, 2023; United Nations, 2015).

These developments significantly enhanced the credibility and comparability of voluntary sustainability reporting and contributed to its growing institutional maturity (La Torre et al., 2020). Today, the GRI Standards remain the most widely used global framework for sustainability reporting and are increasingly regarded not only as a reporting instrument, but also as a tool for strategic management, organisational communication, and ESG-related performance assessment (GRI, 2022b). Nevertheless, their application varies considerably across organisational, institutional, and sectoral contexts, shaped by differences in regulation, reporting culture, visibility, stakeholder pressure, and resource availability (Adams et al., 2022). According to GRI and KPMG (2020), around two-thirds of the N100 and almost three-quarters of the G250 use the GRI Standards, yet significant disparities remain in levels of adherence, external assurance, regional patterns of application, and the connection between sustainability and financial indicators (Bais et al., 2024).

More recently, efforts towards interoperability have gained further momentum. In 2024, the GRI and the IFRS Foundation signed a memorandum of collaboration aimed at promoting greater alignment between their respective disclosure frameworks, thereby supporting convergence between market-oriented and multi-stakeholder approaches to sustainability reporting (Al Shihabi, 2024). This development reflects a broader recognition of the need for interoperability across frameworks and standard-setting initiatives (Al Shihabi, 2024). However, the literature also warns that convergence remains a complex and incomplete process, given ongoing conceptual ambiguities, differences in standard-setter objectives, and national institutional variations, all of which may limit the practical benefits of harmonisation (Stolowy & Paugam, 2023).

Overall, the historical development of international sustainability reporting frameworks reflects a transition from fragmented and largely voluntary disclosure practices towards a more structured and globally interconnected reporting landscape. This evolution mirrors broader societal and institutional demands for transparency, accountability, and corporate responsibility, while also revealing persistent challenges in relation to comparability, coherence, and practical implementation (see Molnár et al., 2025; Papafloratos & Pantazi, 2025; Stolowy & Paugam, 2023).

2.3.3. The European Regulatory Context of Sustainability Reporting

The European Union has progressively positioned itself as one of the central regulatory actors in the field of sustainability reporting, extending a broader policy tradition based on precaution, prevention, and the polluter-pays principle into the area of corporate transparency and disclosure. Over time, sustainability concerns have moved beyond environmental policy alone and become increasingly embedded in economic governance, corporate accountability, and reporting regulation (Hummel & Jobst, 2024).

An important early step in this process was the gradual incorporation of non-financial disclosure into the EU corporate reporting framework. Although earlier reforms were still primarily focused on financial reporting, the Non-Financial Reporting Directive (NFRD) represented the first major EU initiative to require certain large public-interest entities to disclose information on environmental, social, employee, human rights, anti-corruption, and diversity matters (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2014). Academic analyses have interpreted the NFRD as a significant move away from voluntarism and towards the institutionalisation of sustainability reporting within EU company law (Adams et al., 2022; Bais et al., 2024). At the same time, the literature has highlighted important limitations, including the absence of a common reporting standard, the principles-based nature of the directive, weak comparability, and uneven implementation across Member States (Romão et al., 2014). In Portugal, the directive was transposed through Decree-Law No. 89/2017, which introduced non-financial reporting obligations for certain large undertakings and public-interest entities (República Portuguesa, 2017).

The limitations of the NFRD contributed directly to the adoption of the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) in 2022, which significantly broadened the scope and ambition of EU sustainability reporting requirements. Compared with the NFRD, the CSRD extends reporting obligations to all large undertakings and all listed undertakings except micro-undertakings, while requiring reporting in accordance with the European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS) (European Commission, 2022a; Lisi et al., 2023). This reform has been widely interpreted as a qualitative shift in the institutionalisation of sustainability reporting, moving from relatively open non-financial disclosure towards a more standardised, comparable, and enforceable sustainability reporting regime (Adams et al., 2022; Marques Roque, 2024). The change in terminology from “non-financial information” to “sustainability information” is also significant, as it signals that environmental and social matters are no longer viewed as peripheral to business

performance, but as integral to strategy, governance, and long-term value creation (European Union, 2022).

A central innovation of the CSRD is the introduction of the principle of double materiality, which requires undertakings to disclose both how sustainability matters affect their financial position and how their own activities affect society and the environment. This principle substantially broadens the reporting perspective by linking sustainability issues to corporate governance, risk management, and value-chain accountability (Lisi et al., 2023; Zhou, 2023; Dragomir et al., 2024). In operational terms, the CSRD is implemented through the ESRS, adopted by the European Commission on 31 July 2023 following technical work by EFRAG (European Commission, 2023; EFRAG, 2024). The ESRS are designed to enhance consistency, comparability, and digitalisation across the European Union, while EFRAG has assumed a central technical role in supporting implementation and fostering interoperability with international initiatives, including the IFRS Sustainability Disclosure Standards (IFRS Foundation & EFRAG, 2024).

Although the CSRD primarily targets large undertakings and listed entities, its effects extend beyond those directly within scope. Through value-chain reporting requirements, many SMEs may experience indirect pressure to provide sustainability-related information to larger clients and business partners, thereby creating the so-called cascade effect (EFRAG, 2024a). At the same time, the literature and professional debate have drawn attention to the complexity, reporting burden, and implementation costs associated with the ESRS, especially for smaller firms and for organisations with limited internal reporting capacities (Hummel & Jobst, 2024; Ramanathan & Isaksson, 2023; Stolowy & Paugam, 2023). These tensions became particularly visible in the debates that led to the adoption of the "Stop-the-Clock" Directive, formally enacted as Directive (EU) 2025/794, which postponed certain CSRD and related application dates in response to concerns about feasibility, legal certainty, and administrative burden (European Parliament & Council, 2025; European Commission, 2025b; European Commission, 2025c).

A further milestone in this evolving regulatory landscape is the adoption by the Council of the European Union of Directive (EU) 2026/470, here referred to as the Omnibus I Directive. This Directive was formally adopted on 24 February 2026 and published in the Official Journal on 26 February 2026. Initiated by the European Commission on 26 February 2025 as part of a broader simplification agenda designed to alleviate administrative and regulatory burdens for the business sector, the Omnibus I Directive entails broad legislative revisions to the CSRD and the Corporate

Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CS3D) (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2026; European Commission, 2025d). Its most significant feature is the substantial reduction in the number of legally binding obligations under the CSRD, resulting from higher applicability thresholds. From the start of the Directive's implementation, the obligation to prepare sustainability reports will be limited to entities with more than 1,000 employees and a net annual turnover above €450 million, thereby significantly reducing the number of companies subject to disclosure requirements (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2026).

This is reflected directly in the fact that listed SMEs, previously expected to be included in the so-called wave three implementation of the CSRD, are removed from the mandatory reporting timeline altogether. The Directive also establishes a value-chain cap and limits the amount of sustainability information that in-scope companies may request from small and out-of-scope suppliers and partners, in an effort to minimise the indirect trickle-down effect of reporting requirements on SMEs (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2026; PwC Ireland, 2026). In addition, the ESRS will be revised, with mandatory data points expected to be reduced by approximately 61% and sector-specific principles removed from the near-term reporting horizon (PwC Ireland, 2026). Member States must transpose the Directive into national legislation within 12 months of its entry into force. First-time application under the amended framework must take place for financial years beginning on or after 01 January 2027.

Overall, the European regulatory framework for sustainability reporting reflects a clear shift from fragmented and largely voluntary disclosure practices towards a more harmonised, institutionalised, and mandatory regime. At the same time, the evolution from the NFRD to the CSRD, the ESRS, and subsequent corrective interventions demonstrates that this process is marked by an ongoing tension between transparency and burden, comparability and proportionality, and regulatory ambition and organisational capacity. These tensions are especially relevant for understanding the position of SMEs within the emerging sustainability reporting landscape.

2.4. SMES and sustainability reporting

SMEs play a key role in the European economy, accounting for the vast majority of firms and contributing significantly to employment and value creation. Despite their aggregate

environmental and social impact, SMEs have historically occupied a marginal position in sustainability reporting regimes, which have largely been designed for large, publicly traded companies with greater organisational capacity and regulatory visibility. A substantial body of academic literature highlights that sustainability reporting frameworks, and the disclosure expectations associated with them, have mainly developed in contexts shaped by capital markets, investor interests, and formal governance structures, all of which are generally less salient for SMEs (Johnson & Schaltegger, 2016). Consequently, sustainability-related disclosures among SMEs have often been informal, ad hoc, and only weakly standardised, raising concerns about their transparency, comparability, and usefulness for sustainability-related managerial decision-making (UNCTAD, 2025).

A growing body of research continues to highlight the structural constraints that SMEs face in engaging with sustainability reporting. These include limited financial and human resources, a lack of internal expertise, underdeveloped data collection systems, and the substantial costs associated with implementing reporting frameworks originally designed for large corporations (Cicchini et al., 2024; Setyaningsih et al., 2024). Moreover, SMEs are generally subject to lower levels of external pressure from investors and regulators, which may weaken the perceived short-term benefits of voluntary disclosure and reduce incentives for systematic reporting (Steidle et al., 2025; Stolowy & Paugam, 2023). As a result, the application of existing voluntary standards, such as GRI or SASB, has often led to inconsistent and fragmented approaches to sustainability reporting among SMEs, thereby reinforcing the need for proportionate, scalable, and capacity-sensitive reporting approaches that reflect the specific challenges faced by smaller firms (Ramanathan & Isaksson, 2023).

The Voluntary Sustainability Reporting Standard for non-listed SMEs (VSME) was developed at the request of the European Commission and technically prepared by EFRAG in response to the specific needs of micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises. More specifically, the VSME is intended for non-listed companies that fall outside the scope of the mandatory reporting obligations established by the CSRD (European Commission, 2022b).

The VSME is intended to provide a simplified, proportionate, and consistent reporting framework, aligned with ESRS principles, that enables SMEs to report their ESG impacts in a structured manner while keeping the administrative burden proportionate to their capacities. Official documentation explains that the standard is voluntary, modular, and scalable, with varying

levels of reporting requirements and technical complexity (EFRAG, 2024). Moreover, EFRAG has supported the implementation of the VSME through multilingual digital tools and guidance materials, such as electronic templates and outreach initiatives, in order to encourage its practical application by SMEs across Europe (EFRAG, 2024c, 2024d, 2024e).

The development of the VSME is closely linked to two key considerations. First, it reflects the recognition that most voluntary guidelines and standards, such as GRI and SASB, have tended to generate a high degree of diversity in sustainability reporting practices among SMEs. Second, it responds to a political need to promote convergence within an inclusive transition towards a more sustainable economy, without imposing disproportionate social and economic costs on SMEs (European Commission, 2025a).

Recognising that a strict application of the CSRD would be disproportionate for smaller entities, the European Commission tasked EFRAG with developing a voluntary regime aligned with the ESRS but simplified in terms of indicators and requirements (EFRAG, 2024a). EFRAG's recent activities have also included mapping available digital platforms and initiatives that support SMEs' non-financial reporting, illustrating that an integrated approach extends beyond regulatory issuance alone and may involve practical tools and capacity-building measures (EFRAG, 2024c).

Structurally, the VSME adopts a modular design consisting of a basic module, which covers a minimum set of key indicators (e.g., GHG emissions, energy use, basic labour issues, and anti-corruption principles), and a comprehensive module intended for SMEs with the resources and motivation to engage in more advanced reporting practices (EFRAG, 2024b). Table 1 summarises the main features of these two VSME reporting modules.

Table 1. VSME: Basic Module versus Comprehensive Module

Category	Basic Module	Comprehensive Module
Who	Target approach for micro-undertakings and minimum requirement for other non-listed SMEs.	Intended for undertakings needing to respond more comprehensively to information requests from banks, investors, and corporate clients.
What	Provides the foundation for sustainability reporting through general disclosures, environmental, social, and governance metrics.	Builds on the Basic Module by adding further disclosures that address more advanced or externally requested sustainability information needs.
Disclosures	11 disclosures (B1–B11), if applicable, covering basis for preparation; practices, policies	9 additional disclosures (C1–C9), if applicable, covering strategy: business model and

Category	Basic Module	Comprehensive Module
	and future initiatives for transitioning towards a more sustainable economy; energy and greenhouse gas emissions; pollution of air, water and soil; biodiversity; water; resource use, circular economy and waste management; workforce general characteristics; workforce health and safety; workforce remuneration, collective bargaining and training; and convictions and fines for corruption and bribery.	sustainability - related initiatives; description of practices, policies and future initiatives for transitioning towards a more sustainable economy; GHG reduction targets and climate transition; climate risks; additional (general) workforce characteristics; additional own workforce information - human rights policies and processes; severe negative human rights incidents; revenues from certain sectors and exclusion from EU reference benchmarks; and gender diversity ratio in governance bodies.
Key characteristic	Basic Module: Voluntary and proportionate; provides the baseline for VSME reporting.	Builds on the Basic Module and remains voluntary; it is particularly suitable for SMEs that need to respond to external demands for more detailed ESG information.

Source: Based on EFRAG (2024b).

This architecture is intended to enhance the richness of information disclosed while reducing compliance costs, a trade-off frequently highlighted in the literature on sustainability reporting among SMEs (Setyaningsih et al., 2024). The VSME also emphasises practical guidance and digital templates designed to ensure compatibility with financial systems and customer requirements, thereby bringing reporting procedures closer to the operational realities of SMEs (EFRAG, 2024b). The digital tools provided by EFRAG support this objective by offering a standardised model that helps reduce linguistic and technical barriers while also promoting greater coherence in implementation across European countries and regions (EFRAG, 2024d).

The literature suggests that, compared with other approaches, the adoption of a simplified voluntary standard such as the VSME may enable SMEs to realise tangible benefits, including improved access to sustainable finance, enhanced corporate reputation, and easier integration into the value chains of larger buyers. However, empirical studies consistently indicate that several barriers persist, including limited internal capacity in terms of knowledge and staff, implementation costs, constraints related to data availability across organisational ecosystems, and the perception that sustainability reporting offers limited short-term utility (Setyaningsih et al., 2024). Consequently, the main justification for adopting the VSME lies in its role as a compromise that

promotes greater standardisation without imposing immediate legal obligations. Nevertheless, the actual value of the VSME is likely to depend strongly on external drivers, such as customer and investor pressure, as well as on the availability of technical and financial support schemes for SMEs (Ramanathan & Isaksson, 2023).

From a pragmatic and institutional perspective, professional bodies and consulting firms identify three major benefits of the VSME: proportionality, through a reduced number of core metrics; credibility, through its conceptual alignment with the ESRS, which may facilitate future comparability; and preparedness, by enabling SMEs to begin developing reporting capabilities in anticipation of potential contractual or legal requirements (KPMG, 2025; European Commission, 2025a). However, both the specialist press and sectoral analyses also point to certain risks, including the possibility that firms may adopt the standard unevenly in a voluntary setting, thereby creating informational "silos" across companies, as well as the risk that large buyers may begin to require VSME compliance, thus increasing the administrative burden for both parties (El País, 2025).

With regard to interoperability, the VSME has been designed to be compatible with the ESRS and, where relevant, with international initiatives such as IFRS/ISSB, thereby reducing fragmentation and facilitating the integration of reports when SMEs grow or face more demanding contractual requirements (IFRS Foundation & EFRAG, 2024). However, the literature emphasises that technical compatibility alone does not eliminate asymmetries in organisational capacity: SMEs will still require automation tools, training, and support for data collection and verification to ensure that the reports they produce are both reliable and useful (EFRAG, 2024; Cicchini et al., 2024; OECD, 2025; Setyaningsih et al., 2024).

In conclusion, the VSME constitutes a credible normative and technical instrument for supporting the inclusion of SMEs in the transition towards more sustainable management practices without imposing disproportionate demands. Nevertheless, its effectiveness will depend largely on the ability of policymakers and private actors, such as banks, clients, and industrial clusters, to establish complementary incentives and support measures that facilitate its practical implementation among SMEs. For both scholars and policymakers (e.g., Hummel & Jobst, 2024; OECD, 2025; Stolowy & Paugam, 2023), the VSME also represents a promising empirical setting for research capable of informing public policy design, support programmes, and the future development of sustainability reporting standards.

2.5. Concluding remarks

The literature reviewed in this chapter highlights the growing importance of sustainability reporting, while also revealing persistent conceptual, regulatory, and operational tensions that are particularly significant for SMEs. Although sustainability reporting has become increasingly institutionalised through the development of standards, frameworks, and regulatory initiatives, important debates remain regarding its purposes, scope, comparability, and practical implementation (Cho et al., 2015; Stolowy & Paugam, 2023). In particular, the literature shows that sustainability reporting may simultaneously function as a mechanism of accountability, a tool for legitimacy, and a response to regulatory and stakeholder pressures, yet these functions do not always translate into meaningful organisational change (Cho et al., 2015; Deegan, 2002; see also Suchman, 1995).

These tensions are especially evident in the case of SMEs. While SMEs play a central role in the European economy and have a substantial aggregate environmental and social impact, sustainability reporting frameworks have historically been developed primarily with large, listed companies in mind (Johnson & Schaltegger, 2016). As a result, SMEs often face significant constraints in engaging with sustainability reporting, including limited financial and human resources, weaker internal data systems, and lower access to specialised ESG knowledge (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013; Johnson & Schaltegger, 2016; Setyaningsih et al., 2024). At the same time, the literature also suggests that sustainability reporting may create strategic opportunities for SMEs, including reputational benefits, improved access to finance, and stronger positioning within supply chains (Bocken et al., 2014; Jenkins, 2009). This gives rise to a central tension in the literature: for SMEs, sustainability reporting may represent both a burden and a potential source of strategic value.

Recent regulatory developments have intensified this tension. The transition from predominantly voluntary disclosure practices to more structured and institutionalised frameworks, particularly within the European Union, has increased expectations regarding transparency, comparability, and accountability (Adams et al., 2022; Marques Roque, 2024). At the same time, these developments have also raised concerns about proportionality, feasibility, and implementation capacity, especially for smaller firms (Ramanathan & Isaksson, 2023; Stolowy & Paugam, 2023). In this context, the VSME has emerged as a relevant voluntary instrument intended to provide a more proportionate and scalable reporting framework for non-listed SMEs (EFRAG,

2024). However, the literature and professional debate also suggest that its practical value will depend on the extent to which SMEs are able and willing to adopt it, as well as on the availability of external support, digital tools, and incentives (Ramanathan & Isaksson, 2023; Setyaningsih et al., 2024).

Taken together, the literature points to several gaps that justify the present study. First, although sustainability reporting has been widely discussed in relation to standards, regulation, and large firms, there is still limited evidence on how SMEs publicly communicate sustainability-related practices and initiatives through accessible channels such as corporate websites. Second, empirical research remains limited in regional and sector-specific contexts, particularly in relation to SMEs operating in economically significant industries such as the textile sector. Third, while the literature identifies important barriers, pressures, and emerging voluntary instruments such as the VSME, there remains a need for research tools capable of supporting future in-depth analysis of how SMEs communicate and potentially develop sustainability-related practices.

Against this background, the following chapter presents the methodological approach adopted in this dissertation to examine how SMEs in the textile sector in the municipality of Guimarães publicly disclose sustainability-related practices and initiatives through their websites. It also explains the development of the semi-structured interview guide designed to support a subsequent in-depth analysis of sustainability practices and disclosure in this context.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research was developed within the framework of the UNIMUNICÍPIOS programme, launched by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network Portugal. Through a Memorandum of Understanding signed on 1 September 2025, the project was established between SDSN Portugal, the municipalities of Guimarães, Matosinhos and Braga, the University of Minho, and the Porto Higher Institute of Engineering. By helping universities engage more closely with the real needs of local territories, the UNIMUNICÍPIOS initiative supports master's dissertations aligned with the SDGs identified by the municipal partners.

This study emerged within that framework and was carried out in cooperation with the Municipality of Guimarães, represented by Laboratório da Paisagem, a non-profit institution established by the Municipality of Guimarães in 2014. It is also important to note that Guimarães holds the title of European Green Capital 2026, an award granted by the European Commission in recognition of the environmental leadership, citizen engagement, and sustainable development promoted by European cities. Within this broader context, the present study focuses on the business dimension of sustainability in the municipality, particularly on the dissemination of sustainability strategies in sectors of significant economic and social relevance, such as the textile sector.

Given the economic and social relevance of the textile sector in the municipality of Guimarães, this study examines how SMEs in this sector publicly disclose sustainability-related practices and initiatives through their corporate websites. In addition, it seeks to develop a semi-structured interview guide to support a subsequent in-depth analysis in this context.

The study is guided by the following general research questions:

- What sustainability-related practices and initiatives are currently disclosed by SMEs in the textile sector in the municipality of Guimarães through their corporate websites?
- How are these sustainability-related practices and initiatives communicated through the corporate websites of SMEs in the textile sector in the municipality of Guimarães?
- What dimensions and themes should be included in a semi-structured interview guide to support a subsequent in-depth analysis of sustainability practices and disclosure in these SMEs?

To answer these questions, the study pursues the following objectives:

- To identify the main sustainability-related practices and initiatives disclosed on SMEs' corporate websites.

- To analyse how such practices and initiatives are presented and communicated through website content, including the extent to which these disclosures reflect environmental, social, and governance (ESG) dimensions.
- To design a semi-structured interview guide for a subsequent in-depth analysis of sustainability practices, motivations, challenges, and disclosure processes within these SMEs.

This chapter presents the methodological framework adopted in the dissertation. It outlines the epistemological stance of the research, describes the methodological choices made, details the data collection process, and explains the analytical approach employed. It also characterises the sample and presents the procedures followed throughout the study in order to ensure validity, reliability, and scientific rigour.

Methodology provides the structural foundation of any research study, as it shapes how phenomena are examined and how data are collected, analysed, and interpreted. As Saunders et al. (2019) argue, research should follow a systematic and explicit process that enables methodological decisions to be aligned with the objectives of the study. Similarly, Creswell and Creswell (2018) maintain that methodology must reflect the relationship between the research problem, the research questions, and the techniques used, so as to produce valid and meaningful knowledge.

In the context of this dissertation, methodological choices are particularly important because the study seeks to examine how SMEs in the textile sector in the municipality of Guimarães publicly disclose sustainability-related practices and initiatives through their corporate websites, while also developing a semi-structured interview guide to support a subsequent in-depth analysis of these issues. The methodology therefore needs to be appropriate both for identifying and characterising the sustainability-related content currently disclosed on corporate websites and for analysing how such content is presented and communicated.

3.1. Research perspective

Based on the research aims and questions identified in this study, the research is grounded in an interpretivist perspective and underpinned by a qualitative methodological approach. According to Saunders et al. (2019), interpretivism is particularly appropriate for examining how meanings are constructed and how complex social and organisational phenomena are understood within their specific contexts. Rather than seeking universal laws or causal

regularities, interpretivist research aims to understand how practices, representations, and actions are shaped by context and by the meanings attached to them.

This research philosophy is appropriate for the present study because sustainability-related disclosure by SMEs cannot be understood solely as a technical or neutral reporting activity. Rather, it is embedded in organisational contexts, communication choices, and broader institutional dynamics. As Bryman (2016) notes, interpretivism assumes that social reality is socially constructed and that research should seek to understand the meanings associated with practices and experiences. In the context of this dissertation, this is especially relevant to the analysis of how sustainability-related practices and initiatives are publicly disclosed and communicated through corporate websites.

The relevance of an interpretivist approach is further reinforced by the particular characteristics of SMEs. As previous studies suggest, sustainability-related practices in SMEs are often shaped by organisational conditions, resource constraints, managerial priorities, and external pressures (Johnson & Schaltegger, 2016; Del Baldo, 2012). In contrast with larger organisations, SMEs frequently adopt less formalised approaches to sustainability and may communicate their practices selectively, implicitly, or in ways that are closely tied to their specific organisational realities (Del Baldo, 2012). This makes it particularly important to adopt an approach capable of capturing the contextualised and situated nature of sustainability-related disclosure.

In addition, qualitative research is especially suitable for exploring areas that remain under-researched or insufficiently understood (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Sustainability-related disclosure among Portuguese SMEs, particularly in traditional and economically significant sectors such as textiles, remains relatively unexplored. A qualitative approach therefore enables a more nuanced understanding of how sustainability is represented in website content, while also supporting the development of a research instrument for subsequent in-depth investigation.

Within this interpretivist and qualitative approach, the study adopts an exploratory and descriptive design. Exploratory research is appropriate when the aim is to develop a deeper understanding of a phenomenon, identify emerging patterns, and generate insights rather than test preconceived theory (Saunders et al., 2019). At the same time, the study is descriptive in that it seeks to identify and characterise the sustainability-related practices and initiatives disclosed by SMEs and to examine how such content is communicated through their websites. This combination is particularly appropriate in a context where sustainability-related disclosure practices are evolving and where institutional and regulatory developments are creating new expectations for SMEs.

Overall, the interpretivist philosophy and the qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive approach provide a coherent methodological foundation for this study. They make it possible to examine website disclosures not merely as isolated pieces of information, but as forms of organisational communication shaped by context, priorities, and emerging sustainability-related expectations. At the same time, this methodological framework supports the development of a semi-structured interview guide capable of informing a future in-depth analysis of sustainability practices and disclosure in SMEs operating in the textile sector in the municipality of Guimarães.

3.2. Sample

To define the universe of analysis, the Orbis database was used to identify firms according to a set of pre-established criteria. The selection criteria were as follows:

- Sector: textile manufacturing industry;
- Geographical location: municipality of Guimarães;
- Size: SMEs, according to the European Commission (2020) criteria.

Although the study focuses on SMEs, the sample was extended to include micro-enterprises in order to provide a more comprehensive and realistic representation of the local textile business fabric, in which very small firms are numerically dominant. This decision reflects the structure of the sector at local level and allows for a broader understanding of how sustainability-related practices and initiatives are publicly communicated across firms of different sizes.

From this process, a purposive sample of thirty companies was selected, comprising 10 micro-enterprises, 10 small enterprises, and 10 medium-sized enterprises. This distribution makes it possible to consider whether company size is associated with differences in the scope and sophistication of public sustainability communication. The table below presents the full sample of the companies analysed, indicating their size classification and whether they are signatories of the Guimarães Climate Pact.

Table 2. Distribution of companies by size and participation in the Guimarães Climate Pact / Guimarães Marca

Company	**Size**	**Climate Pact / Guimarães Marca**
Ecochic Portuguesa	Micro-enterprise	No
Golden Decision	Micro-enterprise	No

Company	**Size**	**Climate Pact / Guimarães Marca**
Nossos Feltros	Micro-enterprise	No
Lerdeira & Martins	Micro-enterprise	No
DM Vest	Micro-enterprise	No
Leviana – Confeções e Malhas	Micro-enterprise	No
Morris & Alves	Micro-enterprise	No
Velura – Têxteis	Micro-enterprise	No
Futuro à Maneira	Micro-enterprise	No
Têxteis J. A.	Micro-enterprise	No
ACM Sport	Small enterprise	No
Morais & Matos	Small enterprise	No
Iberis	Small enterprise	No
SP – Serafim Pereira	Small enterprise	Yes
Lurex – Confeções	Small enterprise	Yes
Malhas Natália Ribeiro	Small enterprise	No
Pereira da Cunha	Small enterprise	No
Têxteis Massal	Small enterprise	Yes
Realfio Têxteis	Small enterprise	No
R. Lobo – Confeções	Small enterprise	No
Confeções Fernandes & Miranda (FEMIR)	Medium-sized enterprise	No
Be Stitch	Medium-sized enterprise	No
Cristêxtil	Medium-sized enterprise	No
Confeções Cunha & Ribeiro	Medium-sized enterprise	Yes
Francisco Vaz da Costa Marques	Medium-sized enterprise	Yes
Vilartex	Medium-sized enterprise	Yes
Filasa	Medium-sized enterprise	Yes
Sampedro	Medium-sized enterprise	Yes
Lavoro – ICC	Medium-sized enterprise	Yes
AMF – Safety Shoes	Medium-sized enterprise	No

Source: own elaboration based on the consultation of companies' institutional websites.

3.3. Data Collection and Data Analysis

Website content analysis was selected as the main method for collecting and analysing data. This method was considered particularly appropriate given the objectives of the study, namely to identify the main sustainability-related practices and initiatives disclosed by SMEs, to analyse how such practices and initiatives are communicated, and to examine the extent to which these disclosures reflect ESG dimensions.

The initial design of the research envisaged the conduct of semi-structured interviews with organisational managers. For this purpose, a detailed interview guide was developed (see Appendices 1 and 2, in English and Portuguese, respectively) based on the literature review and structured around themes intended to explore internal dynamics, managerial perspectives, motivations, challenges, and strategic decision-making related to sustainability practices and disclosure. However, despite the efforts made to contact and recruit participating firms, it was not possible to conduct the interviews within the timeframe of the dissertation. The invited companies showed a low response rate and a general lack of availability to participate in formal interviews, reflecting common barriers to accessing the organisational context of SMEs.

In light of these constraints, the study was methodologically reoriented towards the analysis of publicly available documentary sources, specifically the official corporate websites of the selected firms. Nevertheless, the interview guide remains an important contribution of this dissertation. It is presented as a complementary methodological output, resulting from a structured process of construction grounded in the literature review and aligned with the research questions and objectives of the study. In this sense, it constitutes a ready-to-use instrument for future research and may also support subsequent in-depth analysis by the Municipality of Guimarães, including within the scope of local sustainability initiatives such as the Guimarães Climate Pact.

Data collection focused on the documentary analysis of the selected companies' official websites. This analysis was conducted between 25 March and 22 April 2026. Each website was manually screened, and relevant data were recorded through a structured matrix based on VSME standard. The material collected included website text, mission statements, sustainability-related sections, downloadable reports, certifications, and other publicly available documents. The data were then compiled and organised into a comparative database in order to support systematic cross-company analysis.

The process was guided by a set of broad categories designed to capture the main dimensions of sustainability communication. These included:

- Environmental commitments: evidence of carbon footprint reduction, energy efficiency, waste management, or other environmentally oriented practices;
- Social responsibility: information regarding labour standards, community engagement, employee well-being, or ethical sourcing;
- Local alignment: explicit references to the Guimarães Climate Pact and its associated commitments, including not only formal adherence but also the extent to which companies communicate progress or concrete actions linked to local decarbonisation goals;
- Reporting and transparency: the presence of sustainability reports, labels, certifications, or other formal disclosure mechanisms, including standards such as GOTS or OEKO-TEX[1].

The analysis was additionally informed by the VSME framework developed by EFRAG (2024b). The VSME was used as a reading grid against which the public communications of each company were assessed, enabling an evaluation of how far current disclosure practices align with, or diverge from, the logic of this voluntary standard.

The analysis sought to identify patterns, emphases, and gaps in the content published on the official websites of the selected SMEs. This approach made it possible to observe the public face of these organisations by examining the information they chose to disclose to external stakeholders.

The findings were subsequently analysed in light of the literature review and the specific objectives of the study. This process involved interpreting the evidence within the broader context of the Guimarães Climate Pact, the role of the textile sector in the local economy, and the challenges faced by SMEs in communicating sustainability-related practices in an evolving regulatory environment.

[1] GOTS (Global Organic Textile Standard) is an international certification standard for organic textiles, covering the entire production chain - from raw material harvesting to labelling - ensuring strict environmental and social criteria. OEKO-TEX is an independent certification system that tests textile products for the presence of harmful substances, ensuring that the final product is safe for human health. Both certifications function as transparency and accountability mechanisms in the textile sector, signalling to consumers and business partners a company's commitment to sustainable and responsible practices.

4. EMPIRICAL STUDY

This chapter presents the empirical component of the dissertation and is organised into three main sections. The first provides the study's contextual foundation by characterising the Textile and Clothing Industry at both national and regional levels. The chapter begins with an overview of the Portuguese TCI, highlighting its economic significance, structural composition, export performance, and key sustainability challenges. It then narrows the focus to the municipality of Guimarães, examining the local industrial fabric and the sustainability initiatives developed at municipal level, with particular reference to the Guimarães Climate Pact and the European Green Capital 2026 distinction. The second section constitutes the core analytical component of the chapter, presenting a systematic analysis of the sustainability information publicly disclosed on the corporate websites of the companies included in the sample, using the VSME standard as the reference framework. The chapter concludes with the presentation of a semi-structured interview guide developed as a methodological contribution to support future in-depth research on sustainability practices and disclosure among textile SMEs in the municipality.

4.1. Characterisation of the textile sector

4.1.1. Characterisation of the textile sector in Portugal

The Textile and Clothing Industry (TCI) is one of the oldest and most significant sectors in the Portuguese economy, being deeply rooted in the historical continuity of the Northern Region, particularly in the Ave and Cávado valleys. Over the decades, the textile industry has proven to be a driver of industrialisation, job creation and exports, playing a decisive role in Portugal's participation in international trade (ATP, 2024).

After a period of significant decline in the early 2000s, largely due to market globalisation and pressure from Asia, the Portuguese textile industry adopted a new strategic positioning based on quality, technological development, design innovation and sustainability. Over time, this shift enabled a gradual recovery of competitiveness and the regaining of market position in key European destinations, thereby consolidating an image of excellence and reliability (GEE, 2024).

According to the most recent data from GEE – *Estudos Setoriais 2030*, published in October 2024 (GEE, 2024), in 2022 the Portuguese TCI comprised 12,222 companies,

predominantly in the Fashion and Clothing segment (70%). In line with the national business structure, the sector is essentially composed of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs, 99.7%), distributed as follows: 79.9% micro-enterprises, 15.5% small and 4.2% medium-sized enterprises (GEE, 2024).

In terms of employment, TCI companies employed 128,089 workers in 2022, representing 17.3% of total industrial employment in the country. The sector contributed approximately €2.7 billion in Gross Value Added (GVA). Labour productivity stood at 21,252€ in 2022, below the national average of 28,857€ (GEE, 2024).

TCI companies are mainly concentrated in the Northern Region, particularly in the Ave and Cávado sub-regions. The main hubs include Porto, Braga, Guimarães and Vila Nova de Famalicão, while Covilhã (in the interior) remains a key wool production area (Associação Têxtil e Vestuário de Portugal – ATP, 2024).

In 2022, Portuguese TCI exports reached their highest level ever recorded (approximately 6.1 billion euros), partly due to higher production costs and inflation. In 2023, exports decreased by 5.6% compared to the previous year, totalling €5.753 billion (or 5.815 billion euros according to GEE data), representing 7.5% of total goods exports in Portugal (ATP, 2024).

In 2024, the downward trend continued: between January and September, exports totalled 4.17 billion euros, a decrease of 6% compared to the same period in 2023. The decline was more pronounced in European Union markets (-8%), while extra-EU markets remained relatively stable, with the United States recording growth of 2.7%, totalling 318.4 million euros (ATP, 2024).

In terms of international positioning, Portugal ranked 27th worldwide in TCI exports in 2022, with a 0.7% share of global exports. Nevertheless, the country shows a revealed comparative advantage (Revealed Comparative Advantage Index – RCA) of 1.9 in the textile and clothing sector, a value higher than that of countries with greater relative importance in global exports, indicating favourable specialisation (GEE, 2024).

The main export destinations for Portuguese TCI in 2023 were Spain (23.1%), France (16.3%), Germany (8.7%) and the United States (7.9%), which together accounted for 80% of exports. Despite the overall decline, Portugal increased its market share in key EU destinations: in Germany, from 0.8% to 0.9%; in Spain, from 4.1% to 4.5%; in France, from 2.2% to 2.4%; and in the Netherlands, from 1.0% to 1.1% (ATP, 2024; Visão, 2024).

Between 2020 and 2024, sustainability became a central theme in the Portuguese textile industry. Many companies invested in recycled fibres, reducing water consumption and obtaining environmental certifications, responding to increasing market demands and the evolution of the European regulatory framework. Digital transition also became a priority, with the adoption of technologies to optimise production processes and improve efficiency (ATP, 2024).

However, the sector faces significant structural challenges, namely: competitive pressure from countries such as Morocco and Turkey, which have been gaining share in European imports; rising production costs (energy, raw materials, labour); and the impact of the global geopolitical context (war in Ukraine, reconfiguration of supply chains). Added to these are EU regulatory requirements in the field of sustainability, particularly the CSRD and Ecodesign Regulations, which have introduced new obligations and challenges regarding transparency and accountability for companies in the sector (ATP, 2024).

4.1.2. Characterisation of the textile sector and sustainability initiatives in Guimarães: a regional context

Guimarães is one of the most industrialised municipalities in the North of Portugal, with a strong local textile industry. The municipality is located in the Ave Valley sub-region and belongs to a territory with an industrial heritage: in these areas, many families have depended on textiles as a source of income and social support for several generations (GEE, 2024). According to Ferreira (2025), the textile sector in Guimarães is inseparable from economic life, providing essential support to everyday family life and forming an integral part of the region's identity.

The Ave Valley concentrates a considerable proportion of companies and employment within the Portuguese textile sector. Textile and clothing industry (TCI) companies are largely based in the Northern Region, particularly in the Ave and Cávado sub-regions. According to ATP, the main production hubs include Porto, Braga, Guimarães and Famalicão, demonstrating the strategic relevance of this part of the national TCI (ATP, 2024).

The textile business structure of Guimarães is predominantly composed of SMEs and family-owned micro-enterprises that have formed the backbone of the local economy for decades. This SME-based structure coexists with larger companies operating in international markets.

At the end of 2023, the textile industry in Guimarães and the Ave Valley entered a phase of crisis, which deepened further in 2025. In the first ten days of September 2025, the Guimarães

Court recorded 17 new insolvencies, mainly among small production units, while some companies underwent significant restructuring, directly and indirectly affecting around 2,000 workers in the region (Couto, 2025).

In the first week of September 2025, more than one thousand workers became unemployed in the textile and footwear sectors of the Ave Valley, as reported by Pedro Ferreira (2025). The Textile Union of Minho and Trás-os-Montes confirmed that the situation was the worst in recent years, and the number of closures of production units in Guimarães and Vizela increased significantly (Ferreira, 2025). This crisis is symptomatic, at a local level, of the structural challenges faced by the sector on a national and international scale: the delayed impact of COVID-19, increases in raw material and energy prices, higher interest rates, and growing competition from third countries (such as Morocco and Turkey) in terms of energy costs and demand (including Western demand) (Ferreira, 2025).

However, despite this cyclical crisis, the business fabric of Guimarães maintains a strong export orientation and a capacity for innovation that is internationally recognised. Portuguese companies regularly participate in the main international trade fairs in the sector (such as those in Milan and Paris), competing in higher value-added segments.

The Lusitano Project, integrated within the Recovery and Resilience Plan (PRR), constitutes one of the main instruments for the modernisation and restructuring of the textile sector in the Ave Valley, foreseeing investments in technology, production efficiency and sustainability involving companies from the Guimarães region (Couto, 2025).

Since 2013, the Municipality of Guimarães has placed environmental sustainability at the centre of its political agenda. An integrated and multidisciplinary governance platform, coordinated with the public sector, private sector and citizens, was first established in 2014 with the launch of *Guimarães 2030: Governance Ecosystem*. This ecosystem includes the *Guimarães 2030 Mission Structure*, the *Landscape Laboratory – Environmental Research and Education Centre*, developed in collaboration with the Universities of Minho and Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro, and a Climate Action Team (Câmara Municipal de Guimarães, n.d.).

The Department of Environment and Sustainability of the Municipality of Guimarães has been responsible, on the one hand, for implementing the SDGs within municipal policies and practices and, on the other hand, for promoting the efficiency of natural resources, sustainable

waste management, and collaboration in research and institutional partnerships for climate adaptation. The municipality is a signatory of the Aalborg Commitments, the Covenant of Mayors, the Basque Declaration, the Paris Agreement, the Green City Accord, and is involved in the EU Mission of 100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities by 2030 (Câmara Municipal de Guimarães, n.d.).

The Municipality of Guimarães has developed its Municipal Budget and activity plan in alignment with the 17 SDGs adopted under the United Nations 2030 Agenda, within the framework of the CESOP – Local for Sustainable Territories project, endorsed by Católica-CESOP. This exercise allows for the assessment of higher investment priorities and strategic direction of the municipality, as well as the monitoring of implementation levels of the targeted SDG agendas (Câmara Municipal de Guimarães, 2023a). Sofia Ferreira, Councillor for the Environment, highlighted that the project "will contribute to the ambition of Guimarães as a more resilient, sustainable territory with a higher quality of life, reinforcing the importance of implementing multidisciplinary governance ecosystems" (Câmara Municipal de Guimarães, 2023b).

The Guimarães Climate Pact was launched on 5 June 2023, World Environment Day, in Guimarães, in the context of the conference "Circular Economy and Environment" organised by the Landscape Laboratory. It is a project of the Municipality of Guimarães aimed at engaging citizens, companies, institutions and the municipality in a joint initiative dedicated to the decarbonisation of the territory, with the objective of achieving climate neutrality by 2030. Its launch was aligned with Guimarães' application to become European Green Capital 2025 and, subsequently, 2026 (Câmara Municipal de Guimarães, 2023b).

At the announcement of the initiative, more than 70 institutions signed the Climate Pact, including municipal/intermunicipal companies, sports clubs, the University of Minho, the United Nations University - EGOV, fire brigades and private companies from the textile industry, as well as the Vimaranense Association for Ecology. Subsequently, the total number of supporters increased to 100 companies and associations (Dias, 2023).

The Guimarães Climate Pact represents a structuring of municipal sustainability policy, in line with European Climate Pacts. This effort functions as a mobilisation for climate action among citizens, companies, institutions and civil society organisations, establishing firm commitments to emissions reduction and climate change adaptation.

The signatories of the Guimarães Climate Pact commit to:

- implement immediate, medium- and long-term decarbonisation initiatives for their activities;
- lead, enable and support the implementation of GHG emissions reduction targets;
- involve all stakeholders and partner entities in the implementation process;
- collect information and monitor the achievement of emissions reductions and sustainability objectives;
- communicate performance and the results of activities clearly to all stakeholders (Dias, 2023).

One of the most widely promoted actions under the Climate Pact is an annual tree-planting event, which began on 28 October 2023. The *Guimarães Mais Floresta* Project is an initiative aimed at reforesting the municipality, protecting biodiversity and improving green areas, with the goal of doubling the number of native trees in the territory. It also includes an initiative to help protect rivers from plastic and textile waste, motivated by research showing that 97% of the waste found along the municipality's riverbanks consists of plastics and textiles (Guimarães 2030, n.d.-a).

The city has also provided citizens and companies with an Ecological Footprint Calculator, developed with the support of the Global Footprint Network, and has introduced a favourable waste tariff for individuals who collect bio-waste or engage in composting. Since the beginning of 2024, the collection of bio-waste has been mandatory in Portugal, with Guimarães playing a leading role (Guimarães 2030, n.d.-b).

In Valencia (Spain), Guimarães was awarded the title of European Green Capital 2026 by the European Commission on 27 November 2024, becoming the second Portuguese city to receive this distinction, after Lisbon (2020). As European Green Capital, the municipality received financial support of €600,000, to be allocated to sustainability projects and initiatives (Câmara Municipal de Guimarães, n.d.; Comissão Europeia / Representação em Portugal, 2024). Launched in 2010, the European Green Capital Award recognises cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants from EU Member States and candidate countries that stand out in terms of environmental, social and economic sustainability. These cities serve as leading examples in implementing the European Green Deal. The eligibility and evaluation criteria are based on the Zero Pollution Action Plan, the Circular Economy Action Plan and the EU Biodiversity Strategy.

The achievement of this title is the result of more than ten years of environmental investment across three applications submitted by the municipality: 2017, 2023 and 2024. Among the most relevant projects supporting the application are the expansion of the cycle lane network; the creation of new low-emission and carbon-neutral zones; carbon neutrality targets for 2030; energy cost savings; the renaturalisation of watercourses; increased urban greenery; environmental protection and habitat conservation. Community involvement in reforestation initiatives, urban gardens and environmental monitoring was also fundamental to the success of the application (Laboratório da Paisagem, 2024).

To implement a sustainable urban mobility solution, in 2026 the municipality will convert its 40 hectares of historic heritage into a fully pedestrianised space integrated with natural resources. As stated by Mayor Domingos Bragança: "Guimarães can be an increasingly industrial and increasingly green territory", ensuring a healthy environmental balance in all actions undertaken (Público, 2024).

4.2. Analysis of sustainability information disclosed on the companies' websites

The analysis presented in this section is based on the VSME standard. This framework served as a reference grid for interpreting the publicly disclosed information from the companies in the sample, particularly on their websites and other accessible institutional channels, such as sector newspapers.

The choice of this instrument is justified by the fact that the VSME standard presents itself as a simplified and proportionate framework, designed to support small and medium-sized enterprises in structuring sustainability reporting, serving as a starting point for organisations that do not yet have formal reporting practices.

As previously mentioned, the VSME standard is structured into two modules: the Basic Module and the Comprehensive Module. The former corresponds to the initial level of reporting and brings together the essential requirements for disclosing sustainability information. The latter, optional in nature, represents a more advanced level of reporting, with a more strategic and comprehensive perspective, being more suitable for SMEs with greater organisational maturity, more complex operations or higher demands from stakeholders.

Both modules are organised into four dimensions of analysis: General Information, Environmental Metrics, Social Metrics and Governance Metrics. Based on this structure, the present study examines the positioning of the companies in the sample with regard to each of these dimensions, seeking to identify whether the information communicated is closer to the requirements of the Basic Module (see Table 3) or the Comprehensive Module (see Table 4). In this way, the analysis makes it possible to assess the degree of maturity of the companies in the field of sustainability and their readiness to move towards more structured sustainability reporting.

Table 3. VSME: Basic Module

General Information	Environmental Metrics	Social Metrics	Governance Metrics
B1 Basis for preparation	B3 Basis for preparation	B8 Workforce – General characteristics	B11 Convictions and fines for corruption and bribery
B2 Practices, policies and future initiatives for the transition towards a more sustainable economy	B4 Air, water and soil pollution	B9 Workforce – Health and safety	
	B5 Biodiversity	B10 Workforce – Remuneration, collective bargaining and training	
	B6 Water		
	B7 Resource use, circular economy and waste management		

Table 4. VSME: Comprehensive Module

General Information	Environmental metrics	Social metrics	Governance metrics
C1 Strategy: Business Model and Sustainability – Related initiatives	B3+ Considerations when reporting greenhouse gas emissions – Scope 3	C5 Additional (general) workforce characteristics	C8 Revenues from certain sectors and exclusions from EU benchmarks
C2 Description of practices, policies and future initiatives for the	C3 GHG reduction targets and climate transition	C6 Additional workforce information – Human	C9 Gender diversity ratio in the governing body

General Information	Environmental metrics	Social metrics	Governance metrics
transition towards a more sustainable economy		rights policies and processes	
	C4 Climate risks	C7 Severe human rights incidents	

The analysis began with a review of the information made available on the companies' websites regarding sustainability, based on the assumption that these constitute the main public channel of institutional communication accessible to external stakeholders. However, it was immediately observed that not all companies in the sample present this type of information on their websites. In this context, the following table summarises, for each company, whether there is public disclosure related to sustainability and, when such disclosure is present, how it is carried out: through text incorporated into the website itself and/or through documents made available for download, indicating, in the latter case, the designation of the respective documents.

Table 5. Public disclosure of sustainability-related information on companies' websites

Company	Presents sustainability information	Format
Ecochic Portuguesa	No	Not applicable
Golden Decision	No	Not applicable
Nossos Feltros	No	Not applicable
Lerdeira & Martins	No	Not applicable
DM Vest	No	Not applicable
Leviana – Confeções e Malhas	No	Not applicable
Morris & Alves	No	Not applicable
Velura – Têxteis	No	Not applicable
Futuro à Maneira	No	Not applicable
Têxteis J. A.	No	Not applicable
ACM Sport	No	Not applicable
Morais & Matos	No	Not applicable
Iberis	No	Not applicable
SP – Serafim Pereira	No	Not applicable

Company	Presents sustainability information	Format
Lurex – Confeções	No	Not applicable
Malhas Natália Ribeiro	No	Not applicable
Pereira da Cunha	Yes	Website
Têxteis Massal	No	Not applicable
Realfio Têxteis	Yes	Website
R. Lobo – Confeções	No	Not applicable
Confeções Fernandes & Miranda (FEMIR)	No	Not applicable
Be Stitch	No	Not applicable
Cristêxtil	No	Not applicable
Confeções Cunha & Ribeiro	Yes	Website and document (Statement of Good Practices - Guimarães 2030 platform)
Francisco Vaz da Costa Marques	Yes	Website
Vilartex	Yes	Website
Filasa	Yes	Website
Sampedro	Yes	Website
Lavoro – ICC	Yes	Website and document (Sustainability Report 2024)
AMF – Safety Shoes	Yes	Website

The analysis is presented below, considering four dimensions of disclosures according to the VSME.

4.2.1. General information

In the "General Information" dimension of the VSME standard, only a limited number of companies in the sample present, on their websites, sufficiently explicit information regarding their business model, the integration of sustainability into their strategy and/or future sustainable transition initiatives. Among these, Realfio, Cunha & Ribeiro and FILASA stand out. The remaining companies in the sample do not clearly and verifiably demonstrate sufficient public information to confirm compliance with this requirement.

Realfio stands out as the company with the strongest integration of sustainability into its business model. On its website, sustainability is explicitly stated in the company's mission, being dedicated to the "sustainable production of threads for sewing, embroidery and footwear" (Realfio, n.d.). For the company, sustainability is not an add-on, but rather a constitutive part of its business model. It can be read on the website that:

> Sustainability is increasingly a fundamental part of Realfio's business strategy. The main objective is not only to develop innovative solutions and create revolutionary products that reflect a commitment to the environment and future generations, but also to emphasise ecological and social aspects in day-to-day operations. (Realfio, n.d.)

This formulation approaches level C1 of the Comprehensive Module, by explicitly linking sustainability and business strategy. Realfio is close to the Comprehensive Module in this dimension and demonstrates readiness to move towards structured sustainability reporting with regard to General Information.

With regard to Cunha & Ribeiro, the company also presents a clear strategic formulation by formally declaring, following its adherence to the Guimarães Climate Pact, the objective of achieving carbon neutrality by 2050, with an intermediate target of reducing emissions by more than 50% by 2030 (Cunha & Ribeiro, n.d.). This formulation of time-bound targets corresponds to what the Comprehensive Module defines as climate strategy (C3), a requirement that goes beyond the mere description of practices in the Basic Module. Cunha & Ribeiro positions itself within the Comprehensive Module in this dimension and is prepared to begin formal sustainability reporting.

FILASA (FILASA, n.d.) describes sustainability as a central "concern", rather than as a business in itself. According to Filo (2024), the company continuously invests in integrating sustainable yarns and techniques into its production line, reflecting an environmental commitment materialised through the use of recycled and organic materials, the implementation of more efficient production processes, and the adoption of technologies aimed at reducing environmental impact. FILASA's stated ambition is to be recognised not only for product quality, but also for its social and environmental responsibility, positioning sustainability as inseparable from its vision of industrial progress.

This position reflects the common profile of SMEs: sustainability is a market imperative and a duty, but it has not yet become part of formal strategy in terms of objectives, indicators and

structured reporting. FILASA partially complies with the Basic Module (B2), but needs to formalise the integration of sustainability into business strategy before progressing to structured reporting.

4.2.2. Environmental metrics

The VSME Basic Module requires information on: basis for preparation (B3), air, water and soil pollution (B4), biodiversity (B5), water (B6), and resource use, circular economy and waste management (B7). The Comprehensive Module adds: considerations on scope 3 emissions (B3+), GHG reduction targets and climate transition (C3), and climate risks (C4). The analysis of environmental metrics is divided into three main areas identified in the sample: sustainable raw materials, energy and emissions, and waste management.

- **Sustainable raw materials**

Thus, within environmental metrics, and beginning with sustainable raw materials, this represents one of the main areas of environmental concern in the textile sector and is the area most frequently communicated by the companies in the sample. This communication is mainly related to requirement B7 (resource use, circular economy and waste management) and, when it includes information on the upstream value chain, it approaches the logic of the Comprehensive Module.

FILASA is the most advanced case in this regard. Its website presents a wide range of sustainable fibres - organic cotton, recycled wool, soybean fibre, recycled polyester and LENZING ECOVERO fibres - and explains the environmental attributes of each choice. The Products section explains, for example, that LENZING ECOVERO fibres "comply with the strict EU Ecolabel guidelines (European Union Ecolabel), considered the leading environmental standard worldwide" (FILASA, 2018). The company also explains the production of TENCEL Lyocell fibres based on REFIBRA technology (a combination of pre-consumer cotton waste reuse and wood pulp from sustainably managed forests), representing circular economy practices at the raw material level (FILASA, 2018). FILASA demonstrates strong alignment with the logic of B7 and approaches more developed disclosures regarding communication on raw materials and the value chain. However, it needs to quantify the proportion of sustainable materials within the total raw materials used to support more structured reporting.

Vilartex is also a reference in this area. Registered on the Portuguese Government's Circular Economy portal as a benchmark case, the company is a pioneer in the introduction of

yarns made from plastic bottles and, since 2017, fabrics produced from plastic waste recovered from the sea (Vilartex, n.d.).

Vilartex has distinguished itself as a pioneering company in the use of environmentally friendly cotton and in the production of yarn from used plastic bottles. Anticipating market demand for this type of material, linked to the environmental goals of international brands such as H&M, Adidas and Inditex, it decided to invest in this segment, including pursuing internationalisation. More recently, since February 2017, it has initiated the production of knitted fabrics using plastic waste collected from the sea. (FashionNetwork, 2017).

Thus, Vilartex demonstrates relevant alignment with B7 in this area and consistent circular economy practices. To move towards structured reporting, it mainly needs to quantify and systematise data relating to the materials used.

In turn, Sampedro (Sampedro, n.d.) has expanded its material offerings to include bamboo, hemp and 100% Tencel flannel, communicating on its website the nature and environmental benefits of each product certification. The company demonstrates qualitative alignment with B7, but requires quantitative data to support formal reporting.

Pereira da Cunha (Pereira da Cunha, n.d.) has adopted a fibre purity approach, rejecting polyester and working exclusively with natural fibres. According to António Leite, head of the commercial department:

We do not work with polyester, nor do we produce cotton–polyester blends. The only components that may contain polyester are cushion fillings, and in that case, it is recycled polyester. In the fabrics we manufacture, we only use natural fibres. (Portugal Têxtil, 2025b).

The company demonstrates a clear materials policy, aligned with the logic of B7, but the absence of quantitative data limits the transition to structured reporting.

Cunha & Ribeiro (n.d.) focuses on the transition to natural-origin dyes (such as minerals) and the use of organic cotton. The company has obtained BCI (Better Cotton Initiative) and Sedex certifications, the latter focused on working conditions within the supply chain, representing a concern for the social dimension of the value chain. The company shows alignment with B7 and presents additional elements related to the value chain, being partially prepared for more structured sustainability reporting based on the logic of the standard.

From this analysis, it is possible to identify a transversal gap: most companies qualitatively describe the materials used but do not quantify the proportion of sustainable materials within the total raw materials acquired, nor do they systematically demonstrate traceability throughout the value chain. This remains the main barrier to readiness for reporting in this area. In the case of the remaining companies in the sample, no relevant public disclosure was identified regarding this dimension.

- **Energy and emissions**

With regard to energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, the Basic Module specifies that companies must report total energy consumption, the percentage of energy from renewable sources and GHG emissions in scopes 1 (direct emissions) and 2 (indirect emissions from purchased electricity), in tCO2e. The Comprehensive Module adds scope 3 (B3+) and reduction targets (C3). It is in this area that most companies present the greatest gaps and the lowest level of readiness for reporting.

Lavoro - ICC is the company that comes closest to the required level of reporting. In its first Sustainability Report (referring to 2024, published in November 2025), it provides structured quantitative data on GHG emissions by scope (Centro Tecnológico do Calçado de Portugal, 2024). The results show a 23% reduction in total emissions from 2022 to 2024, with scope 1 reduced by 39% and scope 2 by 9%. The implementation of photovoltaic panels allowed 11.3% of the energy used to come from renewable sources (ICC, n.d.). Lavoro demonstrates strong alignment with the requirements of the Basic Module in this area and also presents elements compatible with the Comprehensive Module. Within this sample, it is the company most clearly prepared for structured sustainability reporting, having already initiated it.

Sampedro made one of the largest investments in the sample in energy efficiency and decarbonisation (Portugal Têxtil, 2025a). Within the scope of the PRR, it invested approximately three million euros in energy decarbonisation, including the installation of a biomass boiler and heat recovery systems (Portugal Têxtil, 2025a). According to administrator Diogo Gomes, speaking to Portugal Têxtil:

"Among the measures implemented is the installation of a biomass boiler, which allowed the reduction of natural gas consumption, and heat recovery systems in stenters and other equipment, enabling a 65% reduction in the carbon footprint."

Sampedro demonstrates significant investments (practices), but an absence of measurement systems and quantitative reporting. The company shows high potential, needing to translate these practices into systematically monitored and disclosed metrics.

Cunha & Ribeiro quantifies the results of its actions: the photovoltaic park, LED lighting and the electrification of the fleet resulted in a 5% reduction in the carbon footprint between 2022 and 2023, with an estimated reduction of 45% once full fleet conversion is completed (Cunha & Ribeiro, n.d.). The company presents partial quantitative data, positioning itself between the logic of the Basic and Comprehensive Modules. It is therefore relatively close to structured reporting, mainly needing to formalise the reporting format, which is currently dispersed across several statements rather than consolidated into a systematic report.

Francisco Vaz da Costa Marques states on its website that it sets annual environmental targets and objectives for indicators such as water consumption, electricity and chemicals (Vaz da Costa, n.d.). However, these data are not publicly available. The company demonstrates internal management practices compatible with the logic of the Basic Module, but the absence of disclosure of metrics prevents a more robust assessment of its readiness for public reporting. In this case, the next step would consist of transitioning to the external communication of data already collected internally.

FILASA and Realfio have also invested in photovoltaic panels and energy efficiency improvements but do not disclose quantitative data on consumption or emissions (see FILASA, n.d.; Realfio, n.d.). Both demonstrate relevant practices and investments but do not yet show the level of systematisation and disclosure required for reporting aligned with the Basic Module.

In this area, a pattern was identified: most companies invest in energy efficiency and renewable energy (practices), but it is not yet clear that structured systems for measurement, monitoring and reporting (management and communication) have been implemented. The transition from practices to reporting metrics constitutes the main challenge for reporting in this area. In turn, the remaining companies in the sample do not publish quantitative data or structured information on energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions.

- **Waste management**

Requirement B7 of the Basic Module requires the disclosure of the total volume of waste produced, its classification (hazardous/non-hazardous) and its final destination (recycling,

recovery, disposal). It is an area in which good practices can be observed, although they are rarely accompanied by quantitative reporting.

Lavoro is once again the only company to have published quantitative data: the 2024 Sustainability Report states that 100% of waste was channelled to recycling or recovery. The proportion of hazardous waste decreased from 17.5% to 1.5% of the total, a figure that CTCP described as “a historic leap” (Centro Tecnológico do Calçado de Portugal, 2024). The company also adopts recycled materials in production (recycled polyurethane in soles, cork and recycled PET), demonstrating an integrated circular economy approach in product design. Lavoro shows very strong alignment with B7 and additional elements consistent with a more advanced sustainability approach. It is clearly prepared for, and already conducts, structured reporting in this area.

FILASA has implemented a wastewater treatment system, including a Pre-Treatment Plant and a biological MBR process (Membrane Bio-Reactor / KUBOTA) to recycle part of the effluents in the industrial process. The website describes:

The company is equipped with state-of-the-art dyeing and textile finishing equipment, resulting in a reduced ratio of litres of water used per kg of processed product. Production processes are continuously optimised and the chemicals used are highly biodegradable. Separate collectors allow that, once pre-selected, part of the effluents is directed to a pre-treatment plant, where they are discharged into the municipal SIDVA system, and another part is reused in the industrial process. (Filasa, n.d.)

FILASA demonstrates advanced practices in water and effluent management, relevant to B4 and B6, but the absence of quantitative data prevents a more complete alignment with the Basic Module. It is partially prepared, requiring the quantification and structuring of existing information.

AMF Safety Shoes demonstrates an innovative circular economy approach: it has developed an insole made with more than 50% recycled polyurethane derived from production waste from TOWORKFOR footwear (TOWORKFOR, 2023). Symbolically launched on International Day of Forests, this initiative represents internal waste valorisation within the scope of B7. The company demonstrates relevant circular economy practices but does not publish quantitative data on total waste. It is partially prepared, with potential for more structured reporting following quantification.

Realfio produces sewing threads certified by the Global Recycled Standard (GRS), whose recycled content is verified at all stages of production (Realfio, n.d.). GRS certification provides important external verification, bringing the company closer to the logic of the Basic Module. However, the absence of aggregated data on total waste limits readiness for full reporting.

Sampedro uses its factory outlet as a channel for the reuse of production waste, making fabrics and non-compliant items available to the public at reduced prices (AICEP Portugal Global, n.d.), which constitutes a simple yet effective circular economy practice. The company demonstrates qualitative alignment with B7, although without associated quantitative data.

Vilartex refers to the "R's" policy - rethink, refuse, reduce, reuse, repair and recycle - as the basis of its circular approach, although without associated quantitative data (Vilartex, n.d.). The company demonstrates awareness and orientation towards circularity but does not yet show the level of systematisation required for quantitative reporting.

The remaining companies in the sample do not disclose, in a structured manner, public information on waste production, classification, final destination or circular economy practices, which limits the verification of their alignment with VSME requirements in this area.

4.2.3. Social metrics

With regard to social metrics, the VSME Basic Module includes information on: general workforce characteristics (B8), health and safety (B9), and remuneration, collective bargaining and training (B10). The Comprehensive Module adds: additional workforce characteristics (C5), human rights policies and processes (C6), and severe human rights incidents (C7).

The social dimension is the least communicated pillar by companies on their websites. The Basic Module comprises concrete quantitative data: total number of employees, distribution by gender and type of contract, number of employees receiving training and hours of training provided, number of workplace accidents and days of absence due to illness.

Lavoro - ICC is the only entity in the sample that reports complete quantitative workforce statistics: 204 employees, 70% with permanent contracts and 45% receiving internal training, totalling 1,660 hours of training in 2024 (ICC, 2024). The company reported 22 workplace accidents throughout the year, framing this data in terms of strengthening training in Occupational

Safety, Hygiene and Health. In terms of equality, Lavoro received the Equal Pay Seal from the Commission for Equality in Labour and Employment (CITE), recognising good practices in pay equality between men and women (ICC, n.d.), a topic of the Comprehensive Module (C5/C9). Lavoro demonstrates strong alignment with the Basic Module (B8, B9, B10) and presents additional elements of the Comprehensive Module. It is the only company in the sample clearly prepared for structured social reporting, already disclosing on its website information that approaches this logic.

AMF Safety Shoes is the company that places the greatest emphasis on the social dimension in public communication, through the TOWORKFOR ALL project, the company's corporate social responsibility platform (AMF Safety Shoes, n.d.). On its website it states: "TOWORKFOR and AMF SAFETY SHOES play a socially active role in the local community through donations, voluntary actions and other types of support." (TOWORKFOR, 2023). Documented activities include donations to associations supporting cancer patients, food collection for social solidarity projects (such as the Guimarães pela Paz initiative), support for students from local schools and blood donation campaigns. The company also maintains the TOWORKFOR US project, a method for employee involvement and participation in defining internal initiatives (Centro Tecnológico do Calçado de Portugal, 2022). AMF Safety Shoes demonstrates relevant social responsibility practices and community impact but does not publish quantitative workforce data (B8, B9, B10). Based on the analysis carried out, the company shows maturity in its social practices but needs to systematise and disclose quantitative data on employees, training and safety.

The remaining companies in the sample do not publish structured information on workforce, health and safety or community. Some refer generically to "fair and decent working conditions" (see Realfio, n.d.) or "ethical principles" (Cunha & Ribeiro, n.d.), but without concrete data or disclosures organised according to the logic of the standard.

Thus, a structural diagnosis can be made: this deficit constitutes the main gap in the alignment of social reporting. Workforce-related data exist internally within companies, as they are required for legal and fiscal purposes, but they are not systematised nor publicly disclosed. The evidence suggests that the barrier lies not so much in the absence of data, but rather in the lack of management systems capable of aggregating them for external communication purposes, as well as in the absence of a culture of public social reporting. This is the dimension in which the

companies in the sample diverge most from external sustainability reporting as promoted by the VSME standard, despite being potentially the easiest to address, given that the underlying data already exist internally.

4.2.4. Governance metrics

The VSME Basic Module includes only one governance metric: convictions and fines for corruption and bribery (B11). The Comprehensive Module adds: revenues from certain sectors and exclusions from EU benchmarks (C8), and the gender diversity ratio in the governing body (C9).

Even so, broader aspects of sustainability governance, including climate strategy, formal policies, future initiatives and monitoring mechanisms, are distributed across several VSME disclosures, particularly visible in the Comprehensive Module.

Thus, adherence to the Guimarães Climate Pact can be interpreted as a first formal level of commitment to climate governance by signatory companies. By joining this agreement, companies commit to short-, medium- and long-term decarbonisation strategies, as well as to the monitoring and reporting of progress in GHG emissions. This formal commitment represents an important first step towards sustainability governance, although it does not replace the specific requirements set out by the VSME.

Lavoro - ICC represents the most mature segment of sustainability governance across the entire sample. The publication of the 2024 Sustainability Report constitutes a formal governance decision resulting from a collaborative process with CTCP, involving the specification of material topics, the collection of verifiable data and approval at the highest level of management (ICC, n.d.). The report establishes firm objectives: ISO 14001 certification, increased use of recycled materials, and collaborations with universities and technological centres in sustainability R&D. Lavoro demonstrates alignment with the Comprehensive Module (C1, C2, C3), reflecting a high level of maturity in sustainability governance. It is also the only company in the sample that presents formal and structured reporting.

Cunha & Ribeiro (Guimarães 2030, n.d.-b) presents the clearest strategic formulation among the companies that have not yet published formal reports: a target of carbon neutrality by 2050, emission reductions of over 50% by 2030, with concrete actions underway (solar park, LED

lighting, fleet conversion) and quantified results (-5% emissions between 2022 and 2023) (Guimarães 2030, n.d.). The company acknowledges the challenges:

> C&R believes that energy efficiency, the use of renewable energy and waste reduction can result in significant long-term savings; however, the financial return on these investments may take time and represent a challenge for the company's financial sustainability. For this reason, it has opted for a gradual but steady transition towards carbon neutrality. (Cunha & Ribeiro, n.d.)

The company demonstrates alignment with the logic of the Comprehensive Module (C3); the next step consists of consolidating the currently dispersed data into a structured report.

Francisco Vaz da Costa Marques establishes annual environmental targets and objectives around specific indicators (water consumption, electricity, chemicals), suggesting the existence of internal mechanisms for managing and monitoring environmental performance (Vaz da Costa, n.d.). This practice aligns with the type of information valued in the Comprehensive Module, although the company does not systematically make this data publicly available. The company demonstrates internal mechanisms compatible with the logic of the VSME standard but needs to evolve in terms of structured external communication.

The achievement of internationally recognised certifications is one of the most widely used methods by SMEs to demonstrate their commitment to sustainability. Although certifications can support the structuring of information within the scope of the VSME, they do not replace sustainability reporting. Nevertheless, they represent an important basis for organisational formalisation and governance, potentially facilitating the transition towards more structured disclosure practices.

FILASA has the most extensive portfolio of reported certifications: GOTS, OEKO-TEX Standard 100, OCS and GRS, being the first company in Portugal to become a member of BCI (Filasa, n.d.). These certifications demonstrate a robust external validation structure, particularly in the environmental dimension, providing verifiable evidence that can support more formalised reporting practices. However, it remains necessary to aggregate and communicate this information in a structured manner.

Sampedro holds GOTS, OCS, Masters of Linen (traceability of European linen) and SA8000 (social and environmental auditing) certifications (Sampedro, n.d.). The SA8000 certification is

particularly relevant, as it covers the social dimension - an area in which most companies show weaknesses in reporting.

Realfio complies with OEKO-TEX Standard 100 and GRS and has been included for the third consecutive year in the CITEVE Sectoral Sustainability Report (Realfio, n.d.). Inclusion in sectoral reports is a sign of external recognition and suggests that the company has an informational basis capable of supporting a more structured standalone report.

Cunha & Ribeiro holds BCI and Sedex certifications (Cunha & Ribeiro, n.d.). Sedex, focused on supply chain working conditions, provides particularly relevant information on the social dimension, which is often neglected in this type of corporate communication.

Lavoro holds 18 registered patents and more than 45 product certifications and, in 2024, initiated the process to obtain ISO 14001 environmental certification (Centro Tecnológico do Calçado de Portugal, 2024). The future attainment of ISO 14001 will represent an additional strengthening of the formalisation of environmental governance.

Finally, AMF Safety Shoes participates in the European projects FAMEST and GREENSHOES4ALL, which aim to achieve sustainability and circularity in footwear (Centro Tecnológico do Calçado de Portugal, 2022). Participation in European R&D projects demonstrates organisational commitment and access to specialised knowledge but does not replace the need for structured standalone reporting. In this case, the challenge lies in converting this involvement into effective disclosure practices.

4.2.5. From Public Disclosure to Structured Sustainability Reporting

The VSME was designed precisely to respond to the reality of European SMEs, the vast majority of which do not produce formal sustainability reports. Thus, the central issue in this domain is not so much whether companies actually publish a formal report, but rather to assess the extent to which the information they disclose, whether dispersed or more structured, addresses the topics that the VSME seeks to frame, and whether these companies demonstrate the conditions to evolve towards more structured reporting.

From the analysis carried out, a clear picture emerges: only one company in the sample, Lavoro - ICC, formally discloses a Sustainability Report on its website, referring to the year 2024,

structured according to the three ESG pillars and containing measurable metrics. Developed in partnership with CTCP – *Centro Tecnológico do Calçado de Portugal*, this report highlights the role that sectoral support organisations can play in promoting sustainability reporting among SMEs.

In terms of reporting, Realfio appears as the second most advanced case, although it does not publish its own report, having participated for the third consecutive year in the Sustainability Report of the Portuguese Textile and Clothing Sector, promoted by CITEVE within the scope of the BE@T project. This involvement constitutes a form of collective and sectoral reporting, as it allows the company to express its sustainability performance through an organised and comparable structure, without incurring the costs associated with producing a standalone report - a model particularly suitable for smaller companies.

Cunha & Ribeiro has published, on the Guimarães 2030 platform, a structured statement of good practices, accompanied by quantitative indicators and targets, constituting the document that most closely resembles a sustainability report published by the company, albeit without a formal character.

In turn, FILASA presents on its website a comprehensive description of its environmental practices and certifications, partially covering the requirements of the VSME Basic Module with regard to raw materials and processes, although it does not disclose any aggregated quantitative performance data.

The largest group in the sample (in this case, companies such as ACM Sport, Morais & Matos, Iberis, Malhas Natália Ribeiro, R. Lobo, FEMIR, Cristêxtil) does not present any of these sustainability disclosures, suggesting that it is at a pre-initial stage of reporting readiness within the scope of the VSME. For these organisations, the path towards the VSME Basic Module implies a change in perception and priorities at the management level, as well as technological support and the availability of tools to accompany this transition process.

To this group are added all 10 micro-enterprises in the sample, for which no form of public sustainability communication was identified. When this segment is included in the analysis, the proportion of companies in the sample with no public disclosure in this area increases significantly, reinforcing the urgency of awareness-raising initiatives and technical capacity-building, particularly targeted at smaller companies.

The Digital Product Passport (DPP) is being introduced under the European Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR) as a product-level transparency requirement, with implementation expected to be phased in through future product-specific rules, including those applicable to textiles (European Commission, 2022c). While the VSME is a voluntary reporting standard at company level, the DPP applies at product level and is designed to provide digital access, via a QR code or equivalent data carrier, to sustainability-related information defined for the relevant product group.

Realfio is the company in the sample that is most prepared for this requirement. The company's website and communications also provide evidence of material reuse practices aimed at achieving full product circularity, such as a 100% recycled sewing thread verified by GRS and product-based communication approaches informed by the logic of the DPP. Continuous participation in the CITEVE/BE@T Sectoral Report, which provides traceability data and performance indicators by product, further reinforces this preparedness (Realfio, n.d.).

FILASA and Vilartex, due to their specificity in describing the environmental characteristics of each fibre and product on their website and catalogue, are also in a relatively strong position to operate within the DPP, as they already collect and communicate some of the information that the DPP will require. Product certifications such as GOTS, GRS and OCS, which depend on verified traceability throughout value chains, constitute another excellent approach for DPP implementation.

In the case of the remaining companies in the sample, particularly the smaller ones that do not have structured reporting practices, the DPP will represent an obstacle, requiring a level of traceability and data systematisation that most do not possess. The European Union does, however, foresee the definition of a phased implementation timeline and a set of support tools for SMEs, such as digital tools and sectoral capacity-building projects such as BE@T (European Commission, 2025d).

4.3. Semi-structured interview guide: a tool for future research

The analysis of the companies' websites made it possible to identify important patterns, strengths, and gaps in the public disclosure of sustainability-related practices and initiatives among SMEs in the textile sector in the municipality of Guimarães. At the same time, it revealed the limits

of relying exclusively on publicly available website content to understand the organisational realities underlying such disclosures. While websites provide valuable evidence of what companies choose to communicate externally, they do not fully capture the internal motivations, constraints, decision-making processes, and practical challenges that shape sustainability practices and reporting. It is in light of these limits that the development of a semi-structured interview guide becomes justified, as a tool to support future in-depth research in this field.

Although the interviews were not conducted within the scope of this dissertation, the guide constitutes a relevant output of the research, designed to operationalise the study's third research question: "What dimensions and themes should be included in a semi-structured interview guide to support a subsequent in-depth analysis of sustainability practices and disclosure in these SMEs?"

The semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix 1) is organised into seven thematic areas aligned with the specific objectives of the study. The following analysis examines each section in turn, explaining its relevance, justifying its inclusion in light of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, and clarifying how the proposed questions are intended to generate the information necessary for a deeper understanding of sustainability practices and disclosure in a future stage of research in this context.

Before presenting the thematic blocks of the interview itself, the guide includes a preliminary framing section designed to support the implementation of a future study. This initial section sets out the research objectives of the proposed study, identifies the intended interviewees, clarifies the methodological approach and practical arrangements for conducting the interviews, and includes an introductory protocol to be followed before the interview begins, namely the presentation of the research, the participation and consent statement, the request for permission to record the interview, and an expression of thanks for the participant's availability.

Starting with the first section, its objective is to obtain contextual information about the interviewee, namely their professional background, current duties, and previous experience, including any involvement in sustainability-related activities. This section provides essential background information that allows the researcher to interpret the interviewee's subsequent answers in light of their organisational position, level of expertise, and proximity to sustainability-related decision-making. These questions establish an important basis for understanding how sustainability is perceived, practiced, and communicated within each firm.

The literature has consistently highlighted that sustainability practices in SMEs are often informal and strongly shaped by the views, knowledge, and initiative of key individuals, rather than by formal organisational structures (Johnson & Schaltegger, 2016; Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013). For this reason, information about the respondent's role, tenure, and educational background is essential for contextualising their answers and assessing the reliability and scope of the information provided. The literature also shows that SMEs frequently do not have dedicated in-house sustainability staff, meaning that sustainability-related responsibilities are often distributed across administrative, managerial, and operational roles (Setyaningsih et al., 2024; Cicchini et al., 2024).

The questions concerning the interviewee's direct involvement in sustainability and any previous experience with sustainability reporting are intended to reflect this organisational reality. The final question in this section 1 ("When you hear the term 'sustainability' in a business context, what comes to mind first?") serves as an interpretive anchor. Understandings of sustainability vary considerably across organisations and individuals, and these differences are likely to shape both the adoption and the communication of sustainability practices (Purvis et al., 2019; Lozano, 2012).

In Section 2, the corresponding objective is to identify and characterise the main sustainability practices adopted by SMEs in the textile sector, considering ESG dimensions. While the website analysis (Section 4.2) provides an external, publicly observable perspective on disclosed practices, this interview section is designed to capture the internal perspective - namely, what practices are actually implemented, regardless of whether they are publicly communicated. This approach allows for the identification of gaps between practice and disclosure, a phenomenon highlighted in the literature on sustainability reporting and greenwashing (e.g., Cho et al., 2015; Hahn & Kühnen, 2013).

The Triple Bottom Line framework (Elkington, 1997) provides the conceptual foundation for examining sustainability practices across environmental, social, and economic dimensions. The literature reviewed in Section 2.1 emphasises that sustainability is a multidimensional concept, and that meaningful assessment requires attention to all three pillars: people, planet, and profit (Loviscek, 2021; Lozano, 2012).

For SMEs specifically, the literature indicates that sustainability practices are often driven by a combination of internal motivations (values, efficiency gains) and external pressures (customer requirements, supply chain demands, regulatory expectations) (e.g., Ramanathan & Isaksson,

2023; Steidle et al., 2025). The questions in this section are therefore designed to capture both the nature of the practices and the factors that prompted their adoption.

The distinction between formalised and informal practices is particularly relevant. Research suggests that SMEs frequently implement sustainability-related activities without formal documentation or explicit policies, which may limit both internal systematisation and external communication (Johnson & Schaltegger, 2016; UNCTAD, 2025). This section therefore includes questions on the degree of formalisation, enabling the researcher to assess the organisational maturity of sustainability integration.

For firms that have not adopted sustainability practices, the guide includes questions on whether such practices have been considered and what barriers have prevented their adoption. This approach is consistent with the literature on barriers to sustainability in SMEs, which identifies resource constraints, lack of expertise, and weak perceived benefits as key obstacles (see Cicchini et al., 2024; Setyaningsih et al., 2024).

Section 3 aims to analyse how sustainability practices are integrated into managerial practices and decision-making processes, and to assess their perceived effects on organisational structures and activities. This section makes it possible to explore not only what practices exist, but also how they are embedded within the organisation, helping to determine whether sustainability is treated as a strategic priority, and is therefore more likely to be communicated externally, or as a more peripheral concern.

The literature on sustainability integration emphasises that meaningful organisational change requires the embedding of sustainability considerations into core business processes, including supplier selection, production methods, human resource management, and strategic planning (Bocken et al., 2014; Hahn et al., 2018). Without such integration, sustainability practices may remain symbolic rather than substantive, a concern raised by scholars examining the gap between sustainability reporting and actual organisational transformation (e.g., Cho et al., 2015; Moody-Stuart, 2006).

For SMEs, the literature suggests that sustainability integration is often constrained by organisational size, resource limitations, and the absence of dedicated personnel (e.g., Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013; Ramanathan & Isaksson, 2023). This section therefore includes questions about

whether a specific person or function is responsible for sustainability, and whether sustainability considerations are applied systematically or only occasionally in management decisions.

The questions also make it possible to understand whether sustainability influences concrete organisational decisions, such as the choice of suppliers and other operational and managerial processes. This is important for assessing the practical relevance of sustainability practices within the company and the extent to which they are integrated into everyday decision-making.

Section 4 has the principal objective of examining the reporting and communication of sustainability-related practices adopted by SMEs, including both formal and informal mechanisms directed at external stakeholders. While the website analysis provides an external view of what is publicly disclosed, this interview section explores the internal perspective: why communication occurs (or does not occur), which channels are used, who the intended audiences are, and what benefits or challenges are associated with sustainability communication.

The literature on sustainability reporting frames disclosure as serving multiple functions, including accountability, legitimacy, and stakeholder communication (see Bovens, 2007; Deegan, 2002; Suchman, 1995). For SMEs, the literature indicates that sustainability communication is often informal, fragmented, and primarily directed at specific stakeholders such as customers or supply chain partners rather than the general public (e.g., Johnson & Schaltegger, 2016; UNCTAD, 2025).

This section is designed to capture the diversity of communication practices among SMEs, ranging from formal sustainability reports to informal responses to customer inquiries. The questions distinguish between firms that actively communicate sustainability-related information and those that do not, enabling the researcher to identify patterns and barriers.

For firms that do communicate sustainability-related information, the questions explore the type of information disclosed, the channels used, the objectives underlying such communication, and the perceived benefits. This approach is consistent with the literature on voluntary disclosure, which suggests that firms communicate sustainability information in order to enhance reputation, satisfy stakeholder demands, and differentiate themselves in the market (Adams et al., 2022; Hahn & Kühnen, 2013).

For firms that do not engage in structured sustainability communication, the questions explore whether external requests for sustainability-related information have been received and how these are handled. This is particularly relevant given the cascade effect noted in the literature, whereby SMEs may be required to provide sustainability data to larger customers or financial institutions even in the absence of formal reporting obligations (e.g., EFRAG, 2024a; Setyaningsih et al., 2024).

Section 5 aims to analyse awareness of and engagement with the Guimarães Climate Pact and the Guimarães City Climate Contract. This section provides important contextual depth for the study, as the Guimarães Climate Pact represents a local institutional initiative that may influence both the adoption and the communication of sustainability practices among SMEs in the municipality. Understanding firms' awareness of and engagement with this initiative helps to illuminate the role of local governance in shaping sustainability-related behaviour.

The literature on sustainability governance emphasises that local and regional institutions can play a significant role in promoting sustainability among SMEs through support programmes, incentives, and collaborative initiatives (see OECD, 2025; Sachs, 2015). The UN 2030 Agenda and the European Green Deal both call for multi-level governance approaches that engage local actors in the transition to sustainability (e.g., European Commission, 2022a; United Nations, 2015).

The Guimarães Climate Contract, as a local operationalisation of European climate objectives, constitutes a relevant institutional context for understanding sustainability practices in this specific geographic and sectoral setting. Questions concerning awareness, participation, and perceived impact are intended to assess the extent to which local governance initiatives influence SME behaviour.

For firms that have not engaged with the Pact, the questions explore the reasons for non-participation and the conditions under which engagement might occur. This approach is consistent with the literature on barriers to sustainability, which identifies lack of awareness, perceived irrelevance, and resource constraints as key factors limiting SME engagement with sustainability initiatives (e.g., Stolowy & Paugam, 2023; Ramanathan & Isaksson, 2023).

The final question in this section ("What role do you believe the Municipality of Guimarães can or should play in promoting sustainability among SMEs?") is designed to capture respondents' perceptions of the appropriate scope and nature of public sector support. This is relevant for

informing future recommendations and for deepening understanding of the institutional context in which sustainability practices develop.

Section 6 aims to identify the main factors influencing the adoption and reporting of sustainability practices, distinguishing between organisational, economic, technical, regulatory, and relational barriers and facilitators. This section provides important explanatory depth by identifying the factors that enable or constrain sustainability practices and their communication. Understanding these factors is essential for interpreting observed patterns in website disclosure and for informing the design of support measures.

The literature on sustainability in SMEs consistently identifies a range of barriers, including limited financial and human resources, lack of internal expertise, underdeveloped data systems, and the costs associated with implementing reporting frameworks (e.g., Cicchini et al., 2024; Setyaningsih et al., 2024). At the same time, the literature also identifies facilitators, including customer and investor pressure, reputational benefits, and the availability of simplified reporting frameworks such as the VSME (see EFRAG, 2024b; Ramanathan & Isaksson, 2023).

This section distinguishes between barriers and facilitators relating both to the adoption of sustainability practices and to their communication or reporting. This distinction is important because the literature suggests that these processes may be influenced by different factors - a firm may implement sustainability practices without communicating them, or may communicate sustainability information that does not reflect substantive organisational change (see Cho et al., 2015; Hahn & Kühnen, 2013).

The questions also distinguish between firms with and without existing sustainability practices, enabling the researcher to compare the experiences of firms that have already faced implementation barriers with the anticipated challenges of firms that have not yet adopted such practices.

The final question ("What type of support do you consider would be most useful to overcome these difficulties?") is designed to generate actionable insights for policymakers, support organisations, and industry associations. This is consistent with the applied orientation of research on sustainability in SMEs, which often aims to inform the design of capacity-building measures and support programmes (see European Commission, 2025a; OECD, 2025).

Section 7 aims to assess the perceptions of textile SMEs in Guimarães regarding the future role of sustainability and its reporting. This section extends the analysis beyond current practices and disclosure in order to explore respondents' expectations about the future importance of sustainability and sustainability communication. This forward-looking perspective is relevant for understanding how SMEs are positioning themselves in relation to evolving market and regulatory expectations.

The literature suggests that sustainability is becoming an increasingly important factor in competitive positioning, access to finance, and participation in supply chains (e.g., Hahn & Kühnen, 2013; Lozano, 2012; Setyaningsih et al., 2024). At the same time, the regulatory landscape is evolving rapidly, with the CSRD, ESRS, and subsequent amendments (including the Omnibus I Directive) reshaping the obligations and incentives facing firms of different sizes (Council of the European Union, 2026).

The questions in this section are designed to capture respondents' perceptions of whether sustainability is likely to become more important for competitiveness, what steps their firms may take in this area, and what internal or external changes would be necessary to advance sustainability integration. This approach is consistent with research on strategic responses to sustainability pressures, which emphasises the importance of understanding managerial perceptions and intentions (Adams et al., 2022; Bocken et al., 2014).

The questions also address the future role of sustainability communication more specifically. The literature suggests that the way firms communicate sustainability may become increasingly relevant, particularly in contexts characterised by growing stakeholder scrutiny and concerns about greenwashing (Cho et al., 2015; Deegan, 2002). Questions about whether communication may become a factor of competitive differentiation, and under what conditions, are intended to explore this dimension.

The interview guide concludes with a final considerations section intended to give respondents the opportunity to add information not previously covered but considered relevant to the topic under analysis. This final stage also allows the identification of additional companies or contacts that may be relevant for future research, while ensuring an appropriate closure of the interview through a final note of thanks and the reinforcement of confidentiality and exclusive academic use of the information provided.

The analysis of the sections of the semi-structured interview guide presented in this chapter constitutes a methodological contribution to support future in-depth research on sustainability practices and disclosure among SMEs in the textile sector in Guimarães. Each section of the guide was developed on the basis of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, including theoretical frameworks, empirical findings, and the evolving European regulatory context. The guide was designed in a way that is appropriate to the organisational realities of SMEs while generating information of sufficient depth to support future analysis.

In this sense, the development of the guide responds directly to the study's third research question by identifying the dimensions and themes to be included in a semi-structured interview instrument. By providing a literature-based and ready-to-use tool, this dissertation extends its contribution beyond the analysis of website disclosures and offers a basis for future in-depth research on sustainability practices and disclosure in this context. Thus, the chapter presents not only the empirical analysis of publicly disclosed information, but also a starting point for further research on the organisational realities underlying sustainability communication among textile SMEs in Guimarães.

5. CONCLUSION

This chapter presents the main conclusions of the dissertation. It begins by summarising the main findings of the study, then highlights its main contributions, and finally addresses the limitations of the research and suggestions for future research.

5.1. Main conclusions

This study sought, first, to identify the main sustainability-related practices and initiatives disclosed on the corporate websites of SMEs in the textile sector in the municipality of Guimarães; second, to analyse how such practices and initiatives are presented and communicated through website content, including the extent to which these disclosures reflect ESG dimensions; and third, to design a semi-structured interview guide for a subsequent in-depth analysis of sustainability practices, motivations, challenges, and disclosure processes within these SMEs. These objectives made it possible not only to characterise current patterns of public sustainability disclosure, but also to lay the groundwork for future research capable of exploring the organisational realities underlying those disclosures in greater depth.

Methodologically, the study was informed by an interpretivist research philosophy and adopted a predominantly descriptive and exploratory qualitative approach. The empirical analysis was based on website content analysis of a purposive sample of 30 companies from the textile sector in the municipality of Guimarães, comprising 10 micro-enterprises, 10 small enterprises, and 10 medium-sized enterprises. The VSME standard was used as the main analytical reference framework for examining the sustainability information publicly disclosed by these firms, particularly across the dimensions of General Information, Environmental Metrics, Social Metrics, and Governance Metrics. In parallel, a semi-structured interview guide was developed as a complementary research output, intended to support a future stage of in-depth research on sustainability practices and disclosure among textile SMEs in this context.

Against this background, the main conclusions of the study can be presented in direct relation to each of the research questions that guided the dissertation.

1. What sustainability-related practices and initiatives are currently disclosed by SMEs in the textile sector in the municipality of Guimarães through their corporate websites?

The analysis carried out allowed the conclusion that only a small number of SMEs in the sample disclose, on their websites, a diverse set of sustainability-related practices and initiatives, albeit in an uneven manner and with varying levels of maturity. Of the 30 companies analysed, only 2 small and 7 medium-sized enterprises presented relevant information during the period in which the analysis took place. In general terms, the most visible dimension in the public communication of the companies in the sample is the environmental one, with particular prominence given to practices related to the use of sustainable raw materials, the incorporation of recycled materials, the circular economy, waste management, energy efficiency, and the adoption of environmental certifications. Companies such as FILASA, Vilartex, Sampedro, Realfio, Cunha & Ribeiro, Pereira da Cunha, Lavoro - ICC, and AMF Safety Shoes exhibit this type of initiative, albeit with differing degrees of depth and systematisation.

By contrast, the social and governance dimensions present significantly lower levels of disclosure. In the social domain, with the exception of Lavoro and, primarily in qualitative terms, AMF Safety Shoes, the majority of companies do not publish structured information on workforce matters, health and safety, training, or community engagement. In the governance domain, the available information tends to appear indirectly, through climate commitments, certifications, participation in sectoral projects, or adherence to external initiatives, but rarely through the disclosure of formal policies, monitoring mechanisms, or internal sustainability governance structures.

Accordingly, the main conclusion with regard to the first research question is that relevant sustainability practices and initiatives do exist within the sample, particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises, but their public disclosure is concentrated predominantly in the environmental sphere, being considerably more limited across the social and governance dimensions. This asymmetry confirms a pattern of uneven ESG maturity amongst the observed companies.

2. How are these sustainability-related practices and initiatives communicated through the corporate websites of SMEs in the textile sector in the municipality of Guimarães?

Regarding the second research question, it is concluded that the communication of sustainability practices and initiatives is, in the majority of cases, fragmented, predominantly qualitative, and poorly structured. Although several companies demonstrate relevant sustainable practices, their communication tends to occur through descriptions scattered across different

sections of the website, references to certifications, mentions of specific products or processes, or generic institutional statements. In only a few cases does such communication take the form of structured, systematic, and verifiable reporting.

Lavoro stands out as the main exception, being the only company in the sample to formally publish a Sustainability Report - covering the year 2024 - structured around the three ESG pillars and supported by quantitative metrics. Realfio emerges as the second most advanced case, though not through its own report, but rather through its participation in the Sustainability Report of the Portuguese Textile and Clothing Sector promoted by CITEVE. Cunha & Ribeiro also presents a relatively developed level of communication, through a structured statement of good practices published on the Guimarães 2030 platform, accompanied by quantitative indicators and targets.

However, while several companies already appear to be making investments, adopting certifications, or implementing concrete initiatives, few measure these systematically and almost none communicate them in a structured manner. The main obstacle identified does not appear to lie in the complete absence of sustainable practices, but rather in the absence of internal systems for collecting, aggregating, monitoring, and communicating information. As such, the gap separating many SMEs from VSME-aligned reporting seems less a matter of intention and more a matter of technical capacity, internal organisation, and a reporting culture.

The analysis also made it possible to identify different levels of preparedness. Lavoro emerges as the most advanced case; at a second level sit companies such as Cunha & Ribeiro and Realfio; at an intermediate level are companies such as FILASA, Sampedro, AMF Safety Shoes, Vilartex, and Vaz da Costa; and, finally, a large group within the sample - including micro-enterprises - present insufficient public communication to verify even a minimum level of preparedness for structured sustainability reporting. This conclusion is particularly relevant in light of the VSME.

3. What dimensions and themes should be included in a semi-structured interview guide to support a subsequent in-depth analysis of sustainability practices and disclosure in these SMEs?

Regarding the third research question, it is concluded that the analysis of company websites, whilst useful for identifying practices, patterns, and disclosure gaps, does not allow for a full understanding of the internal motivations, organisational constraints, decision-making processes, and practical challenges that shape sustainability practices and their reporting. It was

precisely in light of these limitations that the development of a semi-structured interview guide was justified as an instrument for future in-depth research.

The interview guide constructed within the scope of this dissertation is organised into seven thematic areas considered essential for deepening the understanding of the phenomenon. These areas include: characterisation of the interviewee; characterisation of the company and its implemented sustainability practices; integration of those practices into management and internal processes; communication and reporting of sustainability practices; awareness of and engagement with the Guimarães Climate Pact and the Guimarães City Climate Contract; key enablers and barriers to the adoption and communication of sustainability; and perceptions regarding the future role of sustainability and its reporting in the textile sector of Guimarães. The guide also includes a closing section for supplementary considerations. This guide was developed in alignment with the literature presented in Chapter 2.

The main conclusion in this regard is that an interview instrument designed to deepen the study of this subject must go beyond the mere identification of practices, and should also capture their organisational meanings, the factors that explain their adoption or absence, the degree of formalisation, the relationship with external requirements, the barriers to communication, and the perceptions regarding the future of sustainability and reporting. In this sense, the guide developed constitutes a relevant contribution of the dissertation, offering a tool grounded in the literature and tailored to the realities of SMEs in the textile sector of Guimarães, capable of supporting future research and potential institutional follow-up on this topic.

In summary, the research demonstrates that several companies in the textile sector of Guimarães find themselves in a transitional state with regard to sustainability and reporting. Relevant practices already exist across a number of companies, particularly in the environmental domain, yet the majority remain far from a level of structured, systematic, and verifiable reporting compatible with the logic of the VSME. The principal gap does not appear to lie in the absence of initiatives, but rather in the difficulty of transforming dispersed practices into organised systems of measurement, monitoring, and communication. In this context, the VSME proves to be a potentially well-suited instrument for the reality of SMEs; however, its effective adoption will depend on the creation of concrete conditions for operationalisation, including management awareness-raising, specialist technical support, simplified digital tools, progressive capacity-building, and collaborative sectoral reporting models.

5.2. Research contributions

The present research offers useful contributions, both from an academic and a practical standpoint, to the understanding of sustainability and sustainability disclosure among SMEs in the textile sector in the municipality of Guimarães.

From an academic perspective, the study adds empirical evidence on how these companies publicly communicate sustainability-related practices and initiatives through their websites, contributing to an area that remains underexplored in the literature, particularly in specific regional and sectoral contexts. It also contributes by applying the VSME framework as an analytical grid, demonstrating its usefulness for systematising and interpreting the information disclosed by companies across the dimensions of General Information, Environmental Metrics, Social Metrics, and Governance Metrics.

From a practical standpoint, the study provides a useful portrait of the current state of public sustainability disclosure amongst the analysed companies, highlighting varying levels of maturity and readiness for more structured forms of reporting. The findings suggest that, in many cases, the main challenge does not lie in the complete absence of sustainability practices, but rather in the difficulty of transforming them into organised, measurable, and communicable information. In this regard, the research may offer relevant insights for future awareness-raising, capacity-building, and technical support initiatives directed at SMEs. Finally, the semi-structured interview guide developed within the scope of the study constitutes an additional methodological contribution, by providing a literature-grounded tool tailored to this context for future in-depth research.

5.3. Research limitations and suggestions for future research

The present research presents several limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. In the first place, the study relied exclusively on the analysis of publicly available information, particularly institutional websites and existing reports. However, this approach did not allow for the capture of sustainability practices that may exist within companies but are not publicly disclosed. Accordingly, the absence of information on a company's website should not be automatically interpreted as an absence of internal practices.

A second limitation stems from the fact that the information available on websites is, in many cases, predominantly qualitative, descriptive, and promotional in nature. This makes it more difficult to analyse VSME metrics that require verifiable quantitative data, such as energy consumption, emissions, waste, workforce figures, or formal governance indicators. Furthermore, websites do not always reflect an up-to-date picture of companies' realities, meaning that the research captures the communication available during the data collection period, rather than a real-time monitoring of company practices.

It should also be noted that the study was initially conceived with a mixed-methods approach, combining documentary analysis with semi-structured interviews. However, despite the contacts made, it was not possible to obtain responses from the invited companies, which precluded the collection of primary data. For this reason, the research came to rely solely on secondary sources, which reduced the depth of the analysis. It is likewise worth noting that the sample is purposive and geographically concentrated in Guimarães, meaning that the findings are not generalisable. Nevertheless, this choice allowed for a contextualised analysis of a territory that is particularly relevant from both an industrial and an institutional standpoint.

These limitations open several avenues for future research. The first consists of applying the semi-structured interview guide developed within the scope of this dissertation, which would allow for a deeper understanding of internal practices, barriers, motivations, and companies' perceptions regarding the VSME and sustainability reporting. A second line of enquiry could follow companies engaged in real VSME implementation processes, with a view to better understanding the difficulties and learning experiences involved. A third possibility would be to develop survey-based studies on the degree of awareness, perception, and intention to adopt the VSME amongst SMEs in the textile sector. Finally, future research could explore the relationship between sustainability, reporting, and economic performance, seeking to ascertain whether companies with more developed practices and communication also achieve better outcomes in terms of growth, resilience, or competitive differentiation.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Semi-structured interview guide – English Version

Research objectives of the proposed future study

The general objective of the proposed study is to identify and analyse how SMEs in the textile industry in the municipality of Guimarães develop, implement, and communicate sustainability within their management practices. To operationalise this general objective, the following specific objectives are defined:

- To identify and characterise the main sustainability practices adopted by SMEs in the textile sector, considering ESG dimensions.
- To analyse how these sustainability practices are integrated into managerial practices and decision-making processes, and to assess their perceived effects on organisational structures and activities.
- To examine the reporting and communication of sustainability practices adopted by SMEs, including both formal and informal mechanisms directed at external stakeholders.
- To identify the main factors influencing the adoption and reporting of sustainability practices, distinguishing between organisational, economic, technical, regulatory, and relational barriers and facilitators.

Interviewees

My intention is to conduct semi-structured interviews with representatives from 30 previously selected companies. Ideally, the interviews will be carried out with employees directly involved in sustainability or in related functions. However, whenever this is not possible, employees in administrative, managerial or other relevant roles will be interviewed, provided they have sufficient knowledge of the company's sustainability practices (or lack thereof), as well as of the processes used to communicate—or not communicate—those initiatives.

Methodology

In order to obtain the information required to meet the objective of the study, individual interviews will be conducted using a semi-structured interview guide as the data collection instrument.

Location

The interviews will be carried out at a date and place previously agreed with each participant, either in person at their workplace or, alternatively, via videoconference, whenever this option is more suitable or convenient for the interviewee.

Introduction and explanation before starting the interview

1. Presentation of the research and its objective
2. Participation and consent statement
3. Request for permission to record the interview
4. Expression of thanks for the participant's availability

Information to be collected during the interview:

Section 1 - Objective: To obtain information about the interviewee

1. Can you describe your current role or position and the main responsibilities associated with it?
2. How long have you been in the labour market? And how long have you been working in this company and in the textile sector?
3. What is your academic background and/or training relevant to your current role?
4. To what extent are you involved in the company's strategic and operational decision-making?
5. Is sustainability part of your direct responsibilities? If so, in what way?
6. Have you ever participated in the preparation of reports or in communicating information related to sustainability (formally or informally)? If so, what was that experience like?
7. When you hear the term "sustainability" in a business context, what first comes to mind?

Section 2 - Objective: Characterisation of the company and context of implemented sustainability practices

1. Does the company currently carry out any type of sustainability-related practice (environmental or social responsibility)?

If yes:

2. What sustainability practices are currently implemented? Can you provide concrete examples?

3. When and why did these practices begin to be adopted?
4. Was this decision mainly driven by internal initiative, customer requests, market or value chain requirements, or other factors? Which ones?
5. Are these practices formalised (procedures, criteria, policies) or are they mostly informal? How would you describe them?
6. In your view, have these practices brought any benefits to the company? Which ones?

If no:

7. Has the company ever considered implementing sustainability practices? Which ones, for example?
8. What has made this decision difficult or delayed?
9. Under what conditions do you believe the company might adopt them?

Section 3 - Objective: To understand the integration of these sustainability practices into management and internal processes

1. In what way, if at all, is sustainability considered in the company's management and decision-making processes?

If sustainability is considered:

2. Do you feel that these practices influence decisions such as the choice of suppliers, production processes, people management and other areas of the company? Can you provide concrete examples?
3. Is there a specific person, role or department responsible for these matters?
4. Even when these practices are informal, are they taken into account systematically in management decisions or only occasionally? How?

If sustainability is not considered:

5. Is sustainability currently discussed at management level?
6. Who within the company could take on this role in the future? Under what conditions?

Section 4 - Objective: To examine the communication and reporting practices of sustainability initiatives

1. Does the company communicate or report sustainability-related information, either formally or informally?

If yes: (questions should be adjusted depending on whether a sustainability report is published or not)

2. What type of information is communicated? Can you provide some concrete examples?
3. How is this information communicated and through which channels?
4. Why is this communication carried out? What is the main objective?
5. What benefits does the company recognise from this practice?
6. Who is the main target audience for this communication?

If no:

7. Has the company received requests for sustainability-related information from clients, partners or external entities? Can you provide concrete examples of the type of information requested and by whom?
8. How does the company currently respond to these requests?
9. What prevents the company from structuring this type of communication?
10. Under what conditions do you believe this communication could be structured in the future?

Section 5 - Objective: To analyse awareness of and engagement with the Guimarães Climate Pact and the Guimarães City Climate Contract

The Guimarães City Climate Contract is a strategic commitment that sets out the municipality's pathway to achieving carbon neutrality by 2030, within the framework of the European Mission for Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities. It is a plan that brings together targets, actions and investments to be developed through collaboration between the Municipality, companies, institutions and citizens, with the aim of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, increasing energy efficiency and promoting more sustainable development models.

(Check whether this information is obtained prior to the interview; if so, adjust the questions accordingly, i.e. move directly to the "If yes" or "If no" sections, as appropriate.)

1. Are you aware of the Guimarães Climate Pact promoted by the Municipality?
2. Has your company joined the Pact?

If yes:

3. What motivated the company to join the Pact?

4. What types of commitments or changes resulted from this engagement?
5. Do you believe that participation in the Pact has had any impact on the company? Which ones?

If no:

6. Has the company ever considered joining?
7. What were the main reasons for not joining?
8. Under what conditions do you believe the company might join in the future?

For all:

9. What role do you believe the Municipality of Guimarães can or should play in promoting sustainability among SMEs?

Section 6 - Objective: To understand the main facilitators and barriers faced by SMEs in adopting sustainability practices and communicating them within the textile sector in Guimarães

1. What do you consider to be the main factors that facilitate the adoption of sustainability practices in SMEs within the textile sector in Guimarães?
2. And what do you consider to be the main factors that facilitate the communication or reporting of these practices?
3. What do you consider to be the main factors that hinder the adoption of sustainability practices?
4. And what are the main factors that hinder the communication or reporting of these practices?

Companies with practices:

5. What were the main difficulties faced in implementing these practices?

Companies without practices:

6. What do you anticipate would be the main difficulties in implementing them?

For all:

7. What type of support do you believe would be most useful in overcoming these difficulties?

Section 7 - Objective: To assess the perception of textile SMEs in Guimarães regarding the future role of sustainability and its reporting

1. Do you believe that, in the future, sustainability may become an (even more) important factor, or even essential, for the competitiveness of textile SMEs in Guimarães?

If yes:

2. What do you consider will be the next steps for your company in this area?

If no or with reservations:

3. What internal or external changes would be necessary for your company to move in that direction?

For all (regarding the sector rather than the specific company):

4. Do you believe that, regardless of the practices themselves, the way companies communicate or report sustainability will become increasingly relevant in the future? Why?
5. Do you consider that the way companies approach, integrate and communicate sustainability can act as a factor of competitive differentiation among companies in the textile sector? Under what conditions?

Final considerations

1. Is there anything you would like to add that has not been addressed and that you consider relevant to the topic under analysis?
2. Do you know of any company or contact that you consider relevant to this study and that you could suggest?
3. Final thanks, reinforcing that the responses will be treated confidentially and used exclusively for academic purposes, along with a brief explanation of the next steps of the research.

Thank you very much for your availability and collaboration.

Appendix 2 – Semi-structured interview guide – Portuguese Version

Objetivos de investigação do estudo futuro proposto

O objetivo geral do estudo proposto é identificar e analisar de que forma as PME do setor têxtil no município de Guimarães desenvolvem, implementam e comunicam a sustentabilidade no âmbito das suas práticas de gestão. Para operacionalizar este objetivo geral, são definidos os seguintes objetivos específicos:

- Identificar e caracterizar as principais práticas de sustentabilidade adotadas pelas PME do setor têxtil, considerando as dimensões ESG.
- Analisar de que forma estas práticas de sustentabilidade são integradas nas práticas de gestão e nos processos de tomada de decisão, e avaliar os seus efeitos percecionados nas estruturas e atividades organizacionais.
- Examinar o relato e a comunicação das práticas de sustentabilidade adotadas pelas PME, incluindo mecanismos formais e informais dirigidos a partes interessadas externas.
- Identificar os principais fatores que influenciam a adoção e o relato de práticas de sustentabilidade, distinguindo entre barreiras e facilitadores de natureza organizacional, económica, técnica, regulatória e relacional.

Entrevistados

A minha intenção é realizar entrevistas semiestruturadas com representantes das 30 empresas previamente selecionadas. Idealmente, as entrevistas serão realizadas com colaboradores diretamente envolvidos em sustentabilidade ou em funções relacionadas. No entanto, sempre que tal não seja possível, serão entrevistados colaboradores em funções administrativas, de gestão ou outras funções relevantes, desde que possuam conhecimento suficiente sobre as práticas de sustentabilidade da empresa (ou a sua ausência), bem como sobre os processos utilizados para comunicar — ou não comunicar — essas iniciativas.

Metodologia

De forma a obter a informação necessária para cumprir o objetivo do estudo, serão realizadas entrevistas individuais utilizando um guião de entrevista semiestruturada como instrumento de recolha de dados.

Local

As entrevistas serão realizadas em data e local previamente acordados com cada participante, presencialmente no seu local de trabalho ou, em alternativa, por videoconferência, sempre que esta opção seja mais adequada ou conveniente para o entrevistado.

Introdução e explicação antes de iniciar a entrevista

1. Apresentação da investigação e do seu objetivo
2. Declaração de participação e consentimento
3. Pedido de autorização para gravar a entrevista
4. Expressão de agradecimento pela disponibilidade do participante

Informação a recolher durante a entrevista:

Secção 1 - Objetivo: Obter informação sobre o entrevistado

1. Pode descrever o seu cargo ou função atual e as principais responsabilidades associadas?
2. Há quanto tempo está no mercado de trabalho? E há quanto tempo trabalha nesta empresa e no setor têxtil?
3. Qual é a sua formação académica e/ou formação relevante para a sua função atual?
4. Em que medida está envolvido na tomada de decisões estratégicas e operacionais da empresa?
5. A sustentabilidade faz parte das suas responsabilidades diretas? Se sim, de que forma?
6. Já participou na elaboração de relatórios ou na comunicação de informação relacionada com sustentabilidade (formal ou informalmente)? Se sim, como foi essa experiência?
7. Quando ouve o termo "sustentabilidade" num contexto empresarial, o que lhe vem primeiro à mente?

Secção 2 - Objetivo: Caracterização da empresa e contexto das práticas de sustentabilidade implementadas

1. A empresa realiza atualmente algum tipo de prática relacionada com sustentabilidade (responsabilidade ambiental ou social)?

Caso sim:

2. Que práticas de sustentabilidade estão atualmente implementadas? Pode fornecer exemplos concretos?
3. Quando e por que razão estas práticas começaram a ser adotadas?
4. Esta decisão foi principalmente impulsionada por iniciativa interna, pedidos de clientes, requisitos do mercado ou da cadeia de valor, ou outros fatores? Quais?
5. Estas práticas estão formalizadas (procedimentos, critérios, políticas) ou são maioritariamente informais? Como as descreveria?
6. Na sua opinião, estas práticas trouxeram algum benefício para a empresa? Quais?

Caso não:

7. A empresa já considerou implementar práticas de sustentabilidade? Quais, por exemplo?
8. O que tornou esta decisão difícil ou a atrasou?
9. Em que condições acredita que a empresa poderia adotá-las?

Secção 3 - Objetivo: Compreender a integração destas práticas de sustentabilidade na gestão e nos processos internos

1. De que forma, se alguma, a sustentabilidade é considerada nos processos de gestão e tomada de decisão da empresa?

Se a sustentabilidade é considerada:

2. Sente que estas práticas influenciam decisões como a escolha de fornecedores, processos de produção, gestão de pessoas e outras áreas da empresa? Pode fornecer exemplos concretos?
3. Existe uma pessoa, função ou departamento específico responsável por estas matérias?
4. Mesmo quando estas práticas são informais, são tidas em conta sistematicamente nas decisões de gestão ou apenas ocasionalmente? Como?

Se a sustentabilidade não é considerada:

5. A sustentabilidade é atualmente discutida ao nível da gestão?
6. Quem dentro da empresa poderia assumir este papel no futuro? Em que condições?

Secção 4 - Objetivo: Examinar as práticas de comunicação e relato das iniciativas de sustentabilidade

1. A empresa comunica ou reporta informação relacionada com sustentabilidade, de forma formal ou informal?

Caso sim: (as perguntas devem ser ajustadas consoante seja ou não publicado um relatório de sustentabilidade)

2. Que tipo de informação é comunicada? Pode fornecer alguns exemplos concretos?
3. Como é comunicada esta informação e através de que canais?
4. Por que razão esta comunicação é realizada? Qual é o principal objetivo?
5. Que benefícios a empresa reconhece desta prática?
6. Quem é o principal público-alvo desta comunicação?

Caso não:

7. A empresa recebeu pedidos de informação relacionada com sustentabilidade por parte de clientes, parceiros ou entidades externas? Pode fornecer exemplos concretos do tipo de informação solicitada e por quem?
8. Como é que a empresa responde atualmente a estes pedidos?
9. O que impede a empresa de estruturar este tipo de comunicação?
10. Em que condições acredita que esta comunicação poderia ser estruturada no futuro?

Secção 5 - Objetivo: Analisar o conhecimento e o envolvimento com o Pacto Climático de Guimarães e o Contrato Climático da Cidade de Guimarães

O Contrato Climático da Cidade de Guimarães é um compromisso estratégico que define o percurso do município para alcançar a neutralidade carbónica até 2030, no âmbito da Missão Europeia para Cidades Climaticamente Neutras e Inteligentes. É um plano que reúne metas, ações e investimentos a desenvolver através da colaboração entre o Município, empresas, instituições e cidadãos, com o objetivo de reduzir as emissões de gases com efeito de estufa, aumentar a eficiência energética e promover modelos de desenvolvimento mais sustentáveis.

(Verificar se esta informação é obtida antes da entrevista; em caso afirmativo, ajustar as perguntas em conformidade, ou seja, passar diretamente para as secções "Se sim" ou "Se não", conforme apropriado.)

1. Tem conhecimento do Pacto Climático de Guimarães promovido pelo Município?
2. A sua empresa aderiu ao Pacto?

Caso sim:

3. O que motivou a empresa a aderir ao Pacto?
4. Que tipos de compromissos ou mudanças resultaram deste envolvimento?
5. Acredita que a participação no Pacto teve algum impacto na empresa? Quais?

Caso não:

6. A empresa já considerou aderir?
7. Quais foram as principais razões para não aderir?
8. Em que condições acredita que a empresa poderia aderir no futuro

Para todos:

9. Que papel considera que o Município de Guimarães pode ou deve desempenhar na promoção da sustentabilidade junto das PME?

Secção 6 - Objetivo: Compreender os principais facilitadores e barreiras enfrentados pelas PME na adoção de práticas de sustentabilidade e na sua comunicação no setor têxtil em Guimarães

1. O que considera serem os principais fatores que facilitam a adoção de práticas de sustentabilidade nas PME do setor têxtil em Guimarães?
2. E o que considera serem os principais fatores que facilitam a comunicação ou o relato destas práticas?
3. O que considera serem os principais fatores que dificultam a adoção de práticas de sustentabilidade?
4. E quais são os principais fatores que dificultam a comunicação ou o relato destas práticas?

Empresas com práticas:

5. Quais foram as principais dificuldades enfrentadas na implementação destas práticas?

Empresas sem práticas:

6. Quais antecipa que seriam as principais dificuldades na sua implementação?

Para todos:

7. Que tipo de apoio considera que seria mais útil para ultrapassar estas dificuldades?

Secção 7 - Objetivo: Avaliar a perceção das PME têxteis de Guimarães relativamente ao papel futuro da sustentabilidade e do seu relato

1. Acredita que, no futuro, a sustentabilidade poderá tornar-se um fator (ainda mais) importante, ou mesmo essencial, para a competitividade das PME têxteis em Guimarães?

Caso sim:

2. O que considera que serão os próximos passos da sua empresa nesta área?

Caso não ou com reservas:

3. Que mudanças internas ou externas seriam necessárias para que a sua empresa avançasse nessa direção?

Para todos (relativamente ao setor e não à empresa específica):

4. Acredita que, independentemente das práticas em si, a forma como as empresas comunicam ou relatam a sustentabilidade se tornará cada vez mais relevante no futuro? Porquê?
5. Considera que a forma como as empresas abordam, integram e comunicam a sustentabilidade pode funcionar como um fator de diferenciação competitiva entre empresas do setor têxtil? Em que condições?

Considerações finais

1. Há algo que gostaria de acrescentar que não tenha sido abordado e que considere relevante para o tema em análise?
2. Conhece alguma empresa ou contacto que considere relevante para este estudo e que possa sugerir?
3. Agradecimento final, reforçando que as respostas serão tratadas de forma confidencial e utilizadas exclusivamente para fins académicos, juntamente com uma breve explicação dos próximos passos da investigação.

Muito obrigado pela sua disponibilidade e colaboração.