Master's Thesis

Framing Corporate Social Responsibility in Austrian Banks: Institutional Pressures and Managerial Sensemaking

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Abstract

This study explores how Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is conceptualised by CSR and ESG managers within the Austrian banking sector. It addresses a gap in the literature by examining the micro-level interpretive processes through which institutional pressures are translated into organisational meaning. While previous research has mainly focused on macro-level antecedents of CSR, this study highlights the importance of understanding how responsibility is constructed through managerial sensemaking. The research question explores how CSR managers in Austrian banks conceptualise CSR. Sub-questions examine perceived institutional pressures and variations across different governance contexts, as well as the mechanisms that mediate the relationship between these pressures and framing. A qualitative, interpretive design using semi-structured interviews with managers from five Austrian banks was employed to capture variation in governance and ownership structures. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, combining inductive coding with theoretically informed categories. Corporate Social Responsibility is not a stable concept but a dynamic managerial vocabulary incorporating overlapping frames like risk management, social mission, and strategic opportunity. These frames are influenced by regulatory and stakeholder pressures but are not uniformly adopted, as different governance contexts interpret structurally similar pressures differently. The study concludes that CSR is an interpretive and context-dependent phenomenon constituted through managerial sensemaking rather than solely determined by external institutional structures. By integrating institutional theory with a micro-level perspective, the research offers a more nuanced understanding of how CSR is framed and translated into organisational practice.