

The impact of corporate social responsibility transparency on the financial performance, brand value, and sustainability level of IT companies

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Abstract

The companies are aware of the impact that disseminating their corporate social responsibility (CSR) performance has on how shareholders or investors perceive them. This work analyses if disseminating CSR results affects their economic-financial results, their scores in open-access sustainability ranking, their brand values, and also the credit ratings that agencies S&P and Moody's confer them. For this purpose, the only 13 companies of the IT sector occupying a top 100 brand rankings position were selected. The results reveal that large companies come over as being more transparent in terms of sustainability, but this transparency is not related to their financial behaviour. Brand rankings collect socio-economic and environmental information, but only the transparency in social and environmental aspects explains the public-access CRS rankings. Finally, the results also show that this transparency affects credit ratings.

KEYWORDS

brand rankings, credit ratings, CSR reports, finance performance, stakeholder engagement, sustainable development, technology sector

1 | INTRODUCTION

The origin of the *business social responsibility* concept dates back a little over one century in the business world (Carroll, 1979). After the work by Bowen (1953), in the 1950s, corporate social responsibility (CSR) began to be implemented into U.S. companies (Ghobadian, Money, & Hillenbrand, 2015). Later in the 1990s, this concept was reinforced and has constantly evolved thanks to globalisation, economic activity accelerating, awareness of ecology, and new technologies developing (Moreno & Cabrera, 2016).

CSR, also known as corporate sustainability, is a concept that takes several meanings. One of the most widely used ones by the literature is that proposed by the EU (Commission of the European Communities, 2001): "a concept whereby companies integrate social and

environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis." Since the 1970s, the CSR concept has also encompassed the three pillars of sustainability, namely social, economic, and environmental (Kutay & Tektüfekçi, 2016), also known as the Triple Result (Archel, 2003). In this work, we use this definition of the CSR, and we use it in a homogeneous way to define corporate sustainability.

Basically, there are four reasons (Charlo, Moya, & Muñoz, 2017) why companies must improve their socially responsible initiatives: their moral obligation (Young & Thyil, 2008), lawfulness (Boesso, Kumar, & Michelon, 2013), reputation as a source of competitive advantage (Jones, Felps, & Bigley, 2007), and the last reason has to bear in mind the previous three reasons combined, known as the strategic approach (Porter & Kramer, 2006). Studies have also been conducted on the positive relation between CSR and companies' financial performance (Ding, Ferreira, & Wongchoti, 2016; Kao, Yeh, Wang, & Fung, 2018) and on brand value (Manzano, Simó, & Pérez,

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2013; Torres, Bijmolt, Tribó, & Verhoef, 2012). Therefore, nowadays, more and more CSR actions and their better results form a strategic objective of companies.

Notwithstanding, although Directive 2014/95 (OJEU, 2014) expects large companies to disclose nonfinancial information in their annual accounts, there is no specific regulation or homogeneous standard that determines what the dissemination of companies' socio-environmental information should be. This makes it difficult for those companies displaying sustainable performance to be able to evaluate and disseminate these results.

In parallel, integrating CSR into businesses involves making a comparison between the company and its shareholders (Ballou, Casey, Grenier, & Heitger, 2012), where sustainability reports are the form of communication most widely used by companies to report their socio-economic and environmental impact (Fernández-Feijoo, Romero, & Ruiz, 2014). Indeed the reputation of companies and the way their shareholders perceive them both improve if they communicate their sustainable performance more (Graafland & Smid, 2004), and all this positively influences their future (Cornelissen, 2004). Communicating CSR actions not only affects shareholders, or the company itself, but also can affect their competition, investors, customers, and generally society as a whole. Thanks to companies communicating their CSR, groups of interest will predictably have a different vision of the company and the policies it adopts.

Seeing that sustainability reports are the main tool used to communicate companies' CSR actions, this work aims to study the relations that may stem from companies deciding to disseminate their "sustainable" results with these reports. The specific aim is to solve the matter of whether a company's CSR can be related with the results it obtains.

More explicitly, the objective of the present study is, by employing existing information from CSR reports of IT, companies to model (a) the company's economic-financial and corporate information, (b) its score from open-access CSR rankings and brand value rankings, and (c) the company's score obtained from credit ratings. Hence, the present work intends to find out how socially responsible companies are perceived, and how their CSR transparency commitment affects markets through different indicators.

To our knowledge, the only work that studies the free-access CSR rankings jointly was carried out by Alcaide, De La Poza, and Guadalajara (2019), who analysed the degree of similarity in the sustainability valuation among these open-access sustainability rankings. On the contrary, the private-access rankings have been included in some works (Pinillos, Fernandez-Fernandez, & Mateo, 2018; Wang, Hsieh, & Sharkis, 2018). Doubtlessly, free-access CSR rankings will be more widely used to evaluate companies' responsible performance given the lack of homogeneity when measuring CSR actions and also the need for groups of interest to find a trustworthy index that measures companies' nonfinancial aspects.

The present study examines companies from the IT sector as it is the most incipient sector and the fast-growing one in today's economy, especially since the 1990s, in terms of both turnover and number of companies, promoted by the technological revolution that affected society as a whole (Timoteo, Matías, Buxaderas, & Ferruz, 2015) and is

still a very powerful constantly progressing industry in markets. In addition, today, this technological revolution has affected not only markets but also the value of IT companies' brands and is the sector of economy with a larger number of brands within the top 10 most prestigious international branding rankings in the last decade. So this study focuses on analysing the most valuable brands in the IT sector during the 2000–2017 study period.

Although some works have analysed the technology sector along with other sectors in economy, we found none that have exclusively studied this sector, and this is another contribution of the present study.

This article is set out as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature about the study object concepts, and it considers the research hypotheses to be analysed to meet the proposed objectives. Section 3 describes the sample and data employed herein. Section 4 explains the methodology to be followed, and Section 5 presents the results. Finally, Section 6 ends by discussing the results and provides details of some final observations made.

2 | BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH HYPHOTESIS

This work intends to study the relation between disseminating sustainability reports (CSR) of companies from the technology sector with four different types of indicators for financial and corporate results, sustainability level, brand value, and companies' solvency. These indicators are described below according to a literature review.

2.1 | Firm's finance performance

The relation between CSR and companies' performance or value has been the study object of many research works (Guerrero-Villegas, Sierra-García, & Palacios-Florencio, 2018; Hu, Wang, & Xie, 2018; Marti, Rovira-Val, & Drescher, 2015). Several of these works have used Tobin's Q ratio to analyse the relation between companies' CSR and performance. One such case is that by Kao et al. (2018), who compared the possible differences of this relation between state and non-state companies from China. To do so, they used the CSR Southern Weekend database. Then, there is the work by Ding et al. (2016), which distinguished seven CSR categories by using the KLD database to do so.

The results offered in the literature are not conclusive. Orlitzky, Schmidt, and Rynes (2003) suggested a positive relation between CSR and financial performance, whereas, in the same year, Margolis and Walsh (2003) argued that no significant relation existed.

More recently, Cherian et al. (2019) suggested that a significant relation exists between the performance of 50 manufacturing Indian companies and their CSR during the period from 2011 to 2017. These authors also used financial indicators, such as return on assets (ROA), return on equity (ROE), or number of employees, which are also used herein. The same study period (2011–2017) was analysed by Chon (2019), who also verified a positive relation between CSR activities

and economic-financial performance (ROA and ROE) of 267 publicly Chinese firms listed in the food and beverage industry. Likewise, Isanzu and Xu (2016) revealed that there is a difference in financial performance (ROE and ROA), which favours the firms that do CSR and implies that CSR has a positive influence on firms' financial performance. In this case, the sample focused on 101 companies in Tanzania. Therefore, several studies that have used financial indicators like ROE and ROA to measure economic-financial performance found a positive relation between this performance and CSR. However, the results are more divergent when other financial indicators are used; for example, other studies (Sheikh, 2019) have found a negative relation between CSR and firm leverage, but it depends on market competition. Specifically, CSR has a negative effect on firm leverage but only when competition in product markets is high because when competition is not fierce, CSR has no impact on firm leverage. However, Niron and Aryani (November, 2017) found that size, leverage, and ROE have an positive aggregate effect on CSR, so they showed that corporate governance contributes additional value to the firm's value.

The relation of these business characteristics has also been studied with some given CSR aspects, like disseminating carbon-related information, in which case, it is significantly related with size (assets) and profitability (ROE; Broadstock, Collins, Hunt, & Vergos, 2017; Liesen, Hoepner, Patten, & Figge, 2015).

Other studies have also analysed the relation of CSR performance with either the cost of companies' financing (Attig et al, 2011), with how bonds perform (Sharfman & Fernando, 2008), with either the credit default swap (Drago, Carnevale, & Gallo, 2018) or the stock market (Miralles-Quiros, Miralles-Quiros, & Guia, 2017). This last study revealed that, in general, European stock market investors value the CSR information published by listed companies for decision making, but this study found differences between markets. Only investors in the German and U.K. markets value CSR reports positively and significantly, whereas investors in other markets do not appear to find that CSR disclosure provides their valuations of the firms with higher values, except for the Swedish market where these authors observed a negative influence on the share value of the firms that disclose CSR reports.

2.2 | Sustainability rankings

Several research works have used private-access sustainability indices like KLD (Chatterji & Levine, 2006; Ding et al., 2016), Southern Week-end (Kao et al., 2018), FTSE4Good (Chatterji & Levine, 2006; Duran & Bajo, 2014), or the Dow Jones Sustainability Index (Searcy & Elkhawas, 2012; Kutay et al, 2016). In recent times, however, some agencies have begun to devise free-access sustainability rankings, like Newsweek in press, Corporate Knight (in press), Reputation Institute, and the Yahoo Finance Sustainability, in press Server. These four institutions score from 1% to 100% (from worse to better) the CSR level of the world's biggest companies on an annual basis, whose scores are included in these rankings: "Green ranking," "RepTrack," "Global 100 most sustainable corporations," and "Finance Yahoo Sustainability," respectively.

2.3 | Brand value and brand rankings

The relation between CSR and brand value has been studied from various angles. Nonetheless, the majority of studies have focused on analysing the relation between CSR and brand fidelity or how customers perceive a brand (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2007; Hoeffler & Keller, 2002; Keller, 2003; Lichtenstein, Drumwright, & Braig, 2004). All this research suggests that customer fidelity for a company's brand is related with the CSR actions that it performs, which is very relevant for those international brands subject to constant changes in social expectations, wealth, and globalisation (Werther & Chandler, 2005). A similar perspective has analysed the relation linking a company's CSR and the various stakeholders interested in it (customers, shareholders, employees, suppliers, and society; Torres et al., 2012). Other studies have analysed the relation between CSR and brand value qualitatively (Martínez, Pérez, & Rodríguez, 2012), empirically (Manzano et al., 2013), and with structural equations models (Engizek & Yaşin, 2018; Fatma, Khan, & Rahman, 2018; Lapuente, Cunha, & Matte, 2014; Singh & Verma, 2018). These authors have also studied this relation in connection with the effects that CSR has on customer satisfaction, fidelity, and perception.

Brands have an important quantitative value and are possibly the most valuable intangible asset of companies (Keller & Lehmann, 2006), whose valuation is increasingly important. The difficulty to value brands given their intangible nature and the fact that an active market for selling brands not being available have led to the development of international brand rankings. These rankings are very useful for agents who join financial markets because they provide these agents with an idea of which brands are the most valuable in economic terms, as well as an intangible value, in international and national markets. They also act as a benchmark to value other less recognised brands worldwide.

Currently, there are three main international agencies (Interbrand, Brand Finance, The Brand Finance Group, in press and Millward Brown) that quantify and publish the most internationally esteemed brands yearly. Although a priori it is feasible to believe that the most valued brands are the most sustainable ones, not much literature has analysed the relation between CSR and brand value using these brand rankings. The Interbrand ranking has been employed in several research works to relate its effect on CSR (Interbrand, in press; Torres et al., 2012). Other studies have used the value of these rankings but have related it with stock exchange values (Bagna, Dicuonzo, Perrone, & Dell'Atti, 2017; Dutordoir, Verbeeten, & De Beijer, 2015) but not with companies' sustainability.

2.4 | Credit ratings

According to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commissions, the three main credit rating agencies are Standard & Poor's (S&P, 2008), Moody's, and Fitch.

Studies into the relation between the CSR performance and credit ratings of companies was analysed by Attig, El Ghoul, Guedhami, and

Suh (2013), who found a positive impact between CSR and S&P's ratings. These authors stressed the importance of the nonfinancial information that CSR transmits and indicated that ranking agencies should use it to evaluate companies' solvency. Conversely, Fernandez and Elfner (2015) found a poor, but positive, correlation between CSR ratings and those of Moody's, and they concluded that integrating CSR with a credit analysis created value for companies' shareholders and could also lead to credit stability and investment for their customers. However, the relation between CSR and the Fitch agency credit ratings have not yet been studied.

As previously mentioned, there is no specific regulation to determine how the dissemination of companies' socio-environmental information should be. Hence, transparency in companies' sustainability reports is understood as the quantity and variety of information they report about their CSR results and actions.

Thus, the greater amount of information reported by companies at their sustainability reports, the higher their transparency is. Following this premise, the research hypotheses that this work pursues are set out:

Hypothesis 1. *Companies' economic-financial and corporate information, such as their size, increases in their assets and revenues, their leverage, and their performance, is explained or modelled by such information existing in their CSR reports.*

These economic-financial and corporate variables have been used as control variables in research works conducted to analyse the performance of sustainability reports (Córdova, Zorio-Grima, & Merello, 2018; Sierra-García, García-Benau, & Zorio, 2014; Zorio-Grima, García-Benau, & Sierra-García, 2015).

It is important to verify if disseminating CSR performance and transparency is related with the characteristics of companies and also with the results they produce. In fact, the literature contains nonconclusive results, as previously commented.

Hypothesis 2. *Those companies that obtain a higher ranking in open-access CSR and brand rankings are indeed those that report more information in their CSR reports.*

Those companies whose brands are better valued and obtain better scores in CSR rankings could be expected to be more interested in disseminating their CSR results. Thus, CSR reports would be taken as transparency indicators and, therefore, would act as a useful tool for investors to measure companies' nonfinancial aspects and would, thus, be employed as an index of investors' trust.

Hypothesis 3. *The transparency of companies reflected in their sustainability reports relates their solvency ratings provided by credit rating agencies.*

To date, credit rating agencies have evaluated countries and companies by using economic-financial information and do not explicitly reveal the use of CSR performance information. However, these agencies include a large set of CSR-related activities to measure companies' market/financial risk.

This third hypothesis might be more consistent in the long term than the two previous ones. In fact, some authors indicate that CSR actions have no immediate effect on companies' short-term profitability or only have a weak effect. However, analysing their relation with companies' credit ratings proves a better measure of the profits made from CSR (Attig et al., 2013). These arguments are consistent with other research works (Menz's, 2010), which have concluded that pressure from CSR on credit markets is greater than on the stock exchange.

3 | SOURCES OF INFORMATION

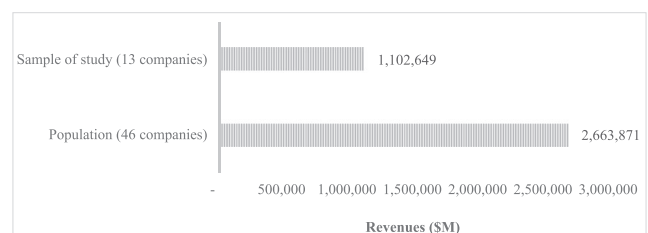
The criterion followed to select companies from the technology sector so they form part of the study sample as those that have been in the top 100 in at least two of the rankings published by three international consultants that value the most prestigious brands, namely, Interbrand, Brand Finance, and Millward Brown, during the period from 2000 and 2018 (both inclusive).

Only 13 global companies met this criterion: Accenture, Apple, Cisco, Facebook, Google, HP, IBM, Intel, Microsoft, Oracle, Samsung, SAP, and Sony.

Figure 1 shows the revenues (in millions of USD) in 2018 of the 13 companies in our sample. Thus follows the importance of the selected sample in relation to the IT sector as a whole as the 13 companies in the sample (28.26%) reached 41.89% of the revenues for the IT sector (46 of the world's largest technologies companies for revenues). Figure 1 represents the IT sector with the world's largest technology companies for revenues according to the 2018 Global 500 list (Fortune Global 500, 2018), which includes the world's 500 largest companies for revenues. This list shows the companies ranked by their annual revenue from their fiscal years that ended on or before March 31, 2018. Of these 500 companies, 46 come from the IT sector and are, therefore, considered the world's largest technology companies for revenues.

The employed information was grouped into five kinds:

1. Economic-financial and corporate variables: the economic-financial and corporate information was acquired from the companies' annual accounts for the years 2000–2017. This information allowed the following variables to be built: total assets logarithm, increase in total assets, increase in revenues or sales, leverage (Total liabilities/Total assets *100), financial profitability



Source: Own performance from Fortune Global 500.

FIGURE 1 Population and sample of technology sector, in 2018. Source: Own performance from Fortune Global 500.

TABLE 1 Characterisation of open-access CSR rankings

Ranking	No. companies	Year the ranking began	Methodology
Green Ranking	Publish the Top 500 ranking	2010 (except 2013)	It uses eight environmental indicators: energy intensity, greenhouse intensity, water intensity, waste intensity, green revenue score, green pay link, sustainability board committee, and audited environmental metrics.
CSR RepTrak	Publish the Top 100 ranking	2012	It collects information through surveys carried out by a panel of experts. It is based on questions that measure the quality of the workplace, governance, and citizenship.
Finance Yahoo Sustainability	More than 2,000 companies	2014	It numerically scores the company for all three environmental, social, and governance ESG categories and an overall score.
Global 100 most sustainable corporations	Publish the Top 100 ranking	2015 ^a	It uses 15 indicators: Five are environmental (energy intensity or productivity, carbon intensity, water intensity, waste intensity, and clean air intensity), and are 10 corporate ones (innovation capacity, percentage of tax paid, CEO to average worker pay, suppliers score, pension fund status, safety performance, employee turnover, leadership diversity, sustainability pay link, and clean capitalism pay link).

Source: Own performance from Alcaide et al. (2019).

^aThis ranking has been published since 2005 and ranks from 1 to 100 companies in it, but it was not until 2015 when it incorporated scores from 1% to 100%.

or ROE (net income/equity * 100), and economic profitability or ROA (BAIL/average total assets * 100). In addition, from the notes of financial statements, the number of employees in each tax year was added.

- Open-access CSR rankings: Green Ranking, RepTrack, Finance Yahoo Sustainability, and Global 100 most sustainable corporations. They were obtained from their respective websites. Table 1 characterises these four rankings. These rankings impose a series of demanding requirements to value the companies that make them all practically listed companies.

The 13 companies forming the sample were not equally present in the four open-access CSR rankings, and the years when each ranking was available also differed.

- Brand values (in millions of USD) rankings for the years 2010–2018 were provided by the rankings of Interbrand, Brand Finance, and Millward Brown.
- Credit ratings: They were taken from the websites of both S&P and Moody's and also from the information company Thomson Reuters, for the 2000–2017 period. These ratings were transformed to an ordinal scale from 1 to 10 according to the values included in Table 2 for each agency (Attig et al., 2013).
- Socio-environmental variables. They compose two of the three CSR dimensions according to the definition of the "Triple Result." These socio-environmental performance variables were taken from the CSR reports, progress reports, or corporate citizenship reports published by companies and also from their websites, for the 2000–2018 period. Unlike the economic variables, which

comprise the third CSR dimension, and whose dissemination is standard and compulsory, publishing socio-environmental variables is completely voluntary for which there is no standard practice.

Sixteen variables were selected in the environmental dimension: greenhouse gas emissions (metric tons CO₂), gas emissions: scope 1 (metric tons CO₂), gas emissions: scope 2 (metric tons CO₂), gas emissions: scope 3 (metric tons CO₂), energy used: electricity (GWh), energy used: natural gas (GWh), energy used: diesel fuel use (KWh), total energy used (GWh), electricity from renewable sourcing (GWh), renewable energy (GWh), renewable energy supply (GWh), use of

TABLE 2 The equivalence of credit ratings to an ordinal value

Ordinal scale	S&P	Moody's
10	AAA	Aaa
9	AA	Aa1
8	A	Aa2
7	BBB	Aa3
6	BB	A1
5	B	A2
4	CCC	A3
3	CC	Baa1
2	C	Baa2
1	D	Baa3

Source: Own performance from Attig et al. (2013).

water (m³), waste generation (metric tons), waste generation (%), waste recycled (metric tons), and waste recycled (%).

Thirteen variables were taken from the social dimension: onsite supplier audits, employees' volunteering hours contributed, employees' donations, hours of voluntary work done, women (%), women's leadership (%), number of African, Hispanic, Asian, White staff members of races or from other ethnic groups, rate of lost work days (per 100 full-time employees), and total incident rate (per 100 full-time employees).

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of the quantitative variables, except for the credit ratings (transformed into an ordinal scale) and the socio-environmental variables (coded as dichotomous variables), as explained in the next section.

4 | METHODOLOGY

The methodology followed to verify the three posed hypotheses was multivariate linear regression by ordinary least squares. The equation of the model is

$$Y_j = \alpha + \sum_{i=1}^n \beta_i X_{ij} + \dots + \epsilon_j, \quad (1)$$

where

- Y_j : dependent variable of the observation j ,
- α : constant term,
- β_i : coefficient of the independent variable i ($i = 1 \dots n$),
- X_{ij} : independent variable i in the observation j ,
- ϵ_j : random disturbance term.

Seven regression models were obtained with 1. The dependent variables were economic-financial and corporate: size, measured

as the total asset's logarithm, and also the number of employees in each tax year; increase in total assets; increase in revenues; leverage; and the company's performance measured with the ROE and ROA ratios.

To analyse 2, seven regression models were built. In the first four models, the considered dependent variables were the score of the four CSR rankings. In Models 5, 6, and 7, the dependent variables were the scores obtained by the companies in the three brand rankings.

The third hypothesis was verified by two regression models. The dependent variables were the long-term credit ratings given by S&P and Moody's, transformed into an ordinal scale in accordance with Table 2.

The independent variables considered in all the analyses were the 29 selected performance variables: 16 environmental and 13 socials. They were all dichotomic: a value of 1 if the company provided information about the variable in its sustainability report and 0, otherwise.

In 2 and 3, the seven economic-financial and corporate variables used in 1 were added as control variables (total asset's logarithm, number of employees, increase in total assets, increase in revenues, leverage, ROE, and ROA).

CSR rankings are published at the beginning of each year t , but their values refer to the previous year ($t - 1$). In contrast, CSR reports are usually published at the end of the year (t) and contain the results of that same year (t). Thus, in 2, the independent variables were referenced to year $t - 1$, and the dependent variables to year t .

The models' goodness of fit was measured with the adjusted R^2 and the Student's t . The error considered levels were 0.5%, 1%, and 5%. Multicollinearity was measured with the condition index (CI) and the variance inflation factor.

TABLE 3 Descriptive statistics of the quantitative variables

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
Green Ranking	79	5	100	60.33	18.91
RepTrak	63	64	75	69.65	2.78
Global 100	16	52	72	57.81	4.96
Finance Yahoo Sustainability	52	41	86	71.19	9.38
Interbrand	216	5,182	214,480	33,684.92	33,569.07
Brand Finance	119	8,021	145,918	33,142.46	26,806.65
Millward Brown	151	5,524	246,992	49,066.33	54,076.91
Total Assets	219	47,000	375,319,000	76,633,190.35	62,619,489.19
Revenues	227	19,108	233,715,000	55,219,998.78	47,273,208.03
Num. Employees	226	7	434,246	123,941.47	112,277.15
ROE	219	-74.12	374.82	24.73	32.22
ROA	219	-31.28	305.95	16.93	26.76
Leverage	219	-111.35	45,540	1.25	9.02

Note. CSR ranking scores take values from 1% to 100%; brand rankings data and financial data are expressed in million USD; ratios, in percentage (%); and number of employees, in units.



5 | RESULTS

5.1 | H1: Companies' economic-financial and corporate information, such as their size, increases in their assets and revenues, their leverage, and their performance, is explained or modelled by this information existing in their CSR reports

Table 4 provides the linear regression results from 2000 to 2017.

Just a few variables (1, in Model 7, to 4, in Model 6) included in the CSR reports are related to the companies' economic-financial results, such as their increased assets, increased revenues, leverage, or performance (ROE and ROA; Models 3 to 7). In addition, their explanatory power is very low (between 2.00% and 13.80%). However, the number of variables included in the CSR reports impacting in their size, measured by the total asset's logarithm (Model 1) and number of employees (Model 2) is greater (8 and 17 variables, respectively), and its explanatory power (48.90% and 75.40%, respectively). This corroborated that the largest companies publish more CSR information and appear more transparent. The total assets logarithm was explained by five environmental variables and three social ones, whereas number of employees was explained by 12 environmental variables and five social ones. Company size (Models 1 and 2) was always explained positively by disseminating gas emissions, renewable energy, waste generation, and number of women leaders and negatively by the energy used.

5.2 | H2: Those companies that obtain a higher ranking in open-access CSR and brand rankings are indeed those that report a larger amount of information in their CSR reports.

The results of the seven models can be found in Table 5.

It is seen from the set of the 36 independent variables under study that only 15 explained some of the four CSR rankings (Table 5). The Finance Yahoo Sustainability was explained by more environmental variables (7), followed by Green Ranking (4), Rep Trak (3), and finally by Global 100 (1). Conversely, Global 100 was not explained by any social variable, whereas the other three CSR rankings were explained by three social variables each. Apart from the diversity of the variables that explained each ranking, it is worth mentioning that the coefficients of each variable completely differed.

Conversely, more variables (18) explained brand values in the brand rankings. In short, 11 environmental data, 5 social, and 2 control variables (num. employees and ROE) explained the scores obtained in the brand rankings. Interbrand and Millward Brown were explained by 11 variables (six environmental, three social, and two economic-financial), but Brand Finance was explained by 10 variables (seven environmental and three social). The coefficients of the variables also considerably differed. The three rankings only coincided in valuing positively the variables: renewable energy use and renewable energy supply. Regarding the social variables, two of the three rankings

negatively valued information about the total incident rate, White staff and Black staff in companies, and positively valued information on Hispanic staff and other ethnicity employees in companies.

Paradoxically, the socio-environmental variables showed that the brand rankings models had more homogeneous explanatory power (62.60%–82.40%) than the CSR models (16.50%–83.80%). In addition, the explanatory power in CSR rankings was heterogenous; Finance Yahoo Sustainability, which is the only CSR ranking to consider economic-financial variables, obtained a high power, 83.80%, followed by RepTrack and Green Ranking, with 69.10% and 54.60%, respectively, whereas Global 100 had the least explanatory power (16.50%).

5.3 | H3: The transparency of companies reflected in their sustainability reports relates their solvency ratings provided by credit rating agencies

The linear regression results showing the relation between CSR transparency and credit ratings are presented in Table 6.

The explanatory power of Moody's model (51.90%) was better than the S&P one (35.60%). Moody's was also explained by more variables (12): five environmental ones (gas emissions: scope 2, renewable energy, renewable electricity, water use, and waste generation), three social ones (employee volunteerism rate, women, and total incident rates), and four economic-financial ones (inc. assets, leverage, ROE, and ROA). The S&P's model was explained by three environmental information variables (gas emissions: scope 3, renewable energy, and renewable electricity), two social ones (employee volunteerism rate and lost work day) and two economic-financial variables (inc. assets and ROA).

The coefficients of the environmental variables were completely logical: All those related with gas emissions took a positive sign, so these rankings positively valued the fact that companies informed about such emissions. The same occurred with renewable energy. This influence was stronger in Moody's rating than in S&P's rating. Conversely, water use took a negative coefficient.

The social variables indicated that these ratings defended further information being made available about employee volunteerism rate and punished the incidence rate and lost work days.

Initially, we performed the 2 and 3 without considering the financial variables, but to check the robustness of the models, we performed the analyses again including those variables, as control variables. The results obtained, which are the ones shown in this section, confirm the previous analysis, and therefore, give them consistency.

6 | DISCUSSION

This paper analyses the relation between the information provided by companies in the technology sector about their socio-environmental actions, their economic results, their size, the value of their brands, their score in the rankings of CSR, and its credit ratings. This relation

TABLE 4 Results of the linear regression for the economic-financial and corporate information from 2000 to 2017

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Log. total assets	Num. employees	Inc. asset	Inc. revenues	Leverage	ROE	ROA
Constant	7.11*** (0.000)	40,862.00*** (0.000)	31.90*** (0.002)	27.22*** (0.002)	49.22*** (0.000)	34.46*** (0.000)	15.55*** (0.000)
Greenhouse gas emissions	0.36*** (0.001)	53,094.22*** (0.003)					
Gas emissions: scope 1				164.56*** (0.000)			
Gas emissions: scope 2		60,787.22*** (0.000)		-183.33*** (0.000)			
Gas emissions: scope 3		-38,836.08*** (0.002)	35.83* (0.021)				
Energy use: electricity		-43,039.24*** (0.004)			-21.88* (0.038)	-25.27*** (0.000)	
Energy use: natural gas					34.82*** (0.002)		
Energy use	-0.19* (0.025)	-54,604.62** (0.001)					
Diesel fuel use		123,947.12*** (0.000)				28.10*** (0.000)	
Renewable electricity	0.29** (0.006)						
Renewable energy	0.43*** (0.000)	43,324.19*** (0.004)					
Renewable electricity		-49,710.32* (0.016)					
Water use		-100,393.51*** (0.000)					
Waste generation (mt)	0.32*** (0.000)	17,497.53*** (0.000)				15.84* (0.033)	14.31* (0.019)
Waste generation (%)							
Waste recycled (mt)		-79,090.29*** (0.000)					
Waste recycled (%)		-54,325.38*** (0.000)					
Volunteering hour contributed			-42.21*** (0.005)				
Women's leadership	0.29*** (0.000)	88,440.67*** (0.000)					
White		-112,240.66*** (0.000)					
Hispanic	-0.26*** (0.001)						
Other ethnicity		44,129.19*** (0.005)					
Employee volunteerism rate	0.21** (0.006)						
Lost work day		-112,242.39*** (0.000)				-24.26*** (0.000)	
Total incident rate		57,551.35*** (0.000)					
Adjusted R ² (%)	48.90	75.40	4.00	9.30	3.70	13.80	2.00
N	219	226	206	214	219	218	219
CI	8.56	16.58	2.54	9.71	4.42	3.42	1.37
VIF	1.187	3.835	1.088	9.423	2.973	1.794	1.000

Note. The dependent variables in Models 1–7 are size, measured as the total asset's logarithm, and also with the number of employees in each tax year; increased assets/revenues; leverage (total liabilities/total assets * 100); and company's performance, measured by the return on equity (ROE) and return on assets (ROA) ratios, respectively. The independent variables in this study are the 29 dichotomic socio-environmental variables, which take a value of 1 if the company provides information about the variable in its sustainability report and 0, otherwise. Condition index (CI) and variance inflation factor (VIF) present a low level in the obtained models. This means that no multicollinearity exists among the variables.

***0.5% error level, **1% error level, *5% error level.

TABLE 5 Linear regression models for the brand and sustainability rankings from 2010 to 2018

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Green Ranking	RepTrak	Global 100	Finance Yahoo Sustainability	Interbrand	Brand Finance	Millward Brown
Constant	63.25*** (0.000)	68.04*** (0.000)	63.33*** (0.000)	65.29*** (0.000)	44,965.44*** (0.000)	56,340.37*** (0.000)	101,880.89*** (0.000)
Greenhouse gas emissions							
Gas emissions: scope 1							
Gas emissions: scope 2							
Gas emissions: scope 3				-8.53*** (0.000)			
Energy use: electricity	-18.67*** (0.001)	3.44*** (0.000)		12.56*** (0.000)	-52,457.48*** (0.000)	-41,776.26*** (0.000)	
Energy use: natural gas	27.72*** (0.000)	-3.42*** (0.000)		-11.74*** (0.000)	36,013.57*** (0.002)		
Energy use	14.03*** (0.004)			9.95*** (0.000)			
Diesel fuel use	18.68*** (0.001)	-3.70*** (0.000)					
Renewable energy			-6.95* (0.043)				-75,608.52*** (0.000)
Renewable energy supply					41,374.97*** (0.000)	32,958.07*** (0.000)	53,501.16*** (0.000)
Waste generation (mt)				-15.92*** (0.000)	56,791.66*** (0.000)	25,613.55*** (0.000)	45,746.64*** (0.000)
Waste generation (%)					32,343.13*** (0.004)		28,645.42* (0.014)
Water use				6.29*** (0.000)		25,550.23*** (0.000)	
Employee volunteerism rate	25.21*** (0.000)	3.50*** (0.000)			-21,686.48** (0.008)		
Volunteering hour contributed	-18.93*** (0.000)						
Hispanic	-22.62*** (0.000)				34,135.25*** (0.000)		36,982.85*** (0.002)
White					-35,157.16*** (0.001)		-54,860.30*** (0.000)
Black		-1.46* (0.020)				-22,765.08*** (0.000)	
Other ethnicity		3.71*** (0.000)				41,328.41*** (0.000)	71,157.78*** (0.000)
Total incident rate					-16,916.39* (0.019)	-20,464.42*** (0.000)	
Inc. revenues				-1,854.35*** (0.000)			
Num. employees					-807.60* (0.012)		-1,328.52*** (0.002)
ROE					333.12* (0.041)		1,432.59*** (0.000)
Adjusted R ² (%)	54.60	69.10	16.50	83.80	62.60	82.40	77.20
N	79	63	20	65	111	99	113
CI	9.78	7.11	2.10	11.53	15.96	24.45	17.12
VIF	2.202	2.650	1.000	2.255	2.579	2.080	2.674

Note. The contemplated dependent variables are, in Models 1–4, the scores obtained in the four corporate social responsibility rankings, respectively; in Models 5–7, they are the scores obtained in the three brand rankings. The independent variables are the 29 dichotomic environmental and social variables selected from the companies' corporate social responsibility reports. Also, seven economic–financial control variables were added. CI and VIF present a low level in the obtained models. This means that no multicollinearity exists among the variables.

Abbreviations: CI, condition index; ROA, return on assets.

***0.5% error level. **1% error level. *5% error level.

TABLE 6 Results of the linear regression for credit rating from 2000 to 2017

	1	2
	S&P	Moody's
Constant	7.49*** (0.000)	5.43*** (0.000)
Gas emissions: scope 2		1.27*** (0.000)
Gas emissions: scope 3	0.56*** (0.000)	
Energy use: electricity		
Renewable energy	0.79*** (0.000)	1.34*** (0.000)
Renewable electricity	0.42* (0.032)	1.33*** (0.000)
Water use		-1.51*** (0.000)
Waste generation		1.62*** (0.000)
Employee volunteerism rate	0.69*** (0.000)	1.61*** (0.000)
Women		-0.66* (0.014)
Lost work day	-0.56*** (0.000)	
Total incident rate		-1.01*** (0.000)
Inc. assets	12.07* (0.022)	26.12*** (0.005)
Leverage		-316.68*** (0.000)
ROE		84.73** (0.006)
ROA	58.30*** (0.004)	621.90*** (0.000)
Adjusted R ² (%)	35.60	51.90
N	200	200
CI	3.17	12.36
VIF	1.051	1.161

Note. The dependent variables are the long-term issuer credit ratings, transformed into an ordinal scale in accordance with the equivalence in Table 2, provided by S&P (Model 1) and by Moody's (Model 2). The independent variables in the study are the 29 dichotomic socio-environmental variables, which take a value of 1 if the company provides information about the variable in its sustainability report and 0, otherwise. Also, seven economic-financial control variables were added. CI and VIF present a low level in the two obtained models. This means that no multicollinearity exists among the variables.

Abbreviations: CI, condition index; ROA, return on assets; ROE, return on equity.

***0.5% error level.

**1% error level.

*5% error level.

does not imply any causal relation between CSR information and other indicators or vice versa (Kendall & Stuart, 1977).

First, the study reveals that a company's sustainability transparency is well related to its size (number of employees and its assets logarithm), which coincides with other studies (Broadstock et al., 2017; Cherian et al., 2019; Kao et al., 2018; Liesen et al., 2015; Niron & Aryani, November, 2017). Some social variables are positively related to size, such as the percentage of women managers and ethnic variety, whereas the number of White people does so negatively. This may be because large companies have offices all over the world and, therefore, have personnel of many races and are more receptive to incorporate female managers into their staff. Regarding information about

environmental variables, they were in some cases positively related to size, such as information on greenhouse gas emissions, use of diesel fuel, waste generation, and renewable energy, whereas they did so negatively in other cases, such as information on energy use, water use, recycling waste, and the emissions of scope 3. This is logical because large companies are usually more environmentally aware and are more concerned about current environmental variables, such as using renewable energies, greenhouse gas emissions, controlling waste, or using less polluting energies, such as diesel.

Conversely, a company's sustainability transparency is scarcely related to its financial behavior, as suggested by Margolis and Walsh (2003), but not by Orlitzky et al. (2003), who suggested a positive relation between CSR and financial performance. The closest relation was with the ROE (albeit only 13.80%), where the information of only four CSR variables was related to that ratio. Although some CSR variables positively affected financial behaviour, which agrees with several studies (Cherian et al., 2019; Chon, 2019; Isanzu & Xu, 2016) that found a positive relation with ROE, other CSR variables negatively affected it, which coincides with other studies (Sheikh, 2019) that negatively related CSR and firm leverage. To find such evidence, it may be necessary to increase the sample size.

Second, this indicates that disseminating companies' CSR results to improve their brand value in international rankings is generally more beneficial for those than doing this to improve their CSR ranking scores. This indicates that if technology sector companies achieve more transparency and certain standards to prepare sustainability reports, all this will act as an incentive to increase the value of their brands, which is a very beneficial achievement for the companies in this sector, particularly where the value of their intangible assets will become increasingly more relevant compared with other sectors. This finding coincides with other studies that report that disseminating CSR actions positively impacts brand value (Manzano et al., 2013; Torres et al., 2012). Nonetheless, this is not logical because brand rankings theoretically only take into account economic aspects (which have been included in the models through ROE and number of employees, except in Brand Finance) rather than socio-environmental ones. Likewise, the model obtained by Finance Yahoo Sustainability is the only CSR ranking in which economic aspects (increased income) intervene with sustainability aspects to reach a high ranking percentage (83.8%). In the other CSR ranking models (Green ranking, RepTrak and Global 100), economic variables do not intervene but only sustainability ones, which is expected. Although these CSR rankings are open access, our results coincide with other works obtained for private-access CSR (Wang et al., 2018), which confirms a positive and significant relation between CSR performance and transparency reports. We conclude that economic and CSR variables impact brand rankings (except Brand Finance), whereas only CSR variables impact CSR rankings (except Finance Yahoo Sustainability).

Third, publishing complete sustainability reports comes over as being important for companies because these results affect the credit rating given by main agencies S&P and Moody's, especially Moody's, as they are recognised and valued worldwide by investors and creditors so they can learn about companies' solvency and decision making power



with less uncertainty. These results agree with what other research works suggest (Attig et al., 2013; Menz's, 2010), which confirm the positive impact of CSR on companies' credit ratings. However, it contradicts the work of Fernandez and Elfner (2015), who precisely found a poor relation with Moody's.

In parallel, the present research also indicates that transparent environmental information has a stronger impact than the social area on both the economic-financial results of companies and the different studied measurement rankings and ratings. Therefore, it is a bigger priority for companies to improve the transparency of communication on their environmental actions than that of their social actions. Evidently, however, clear and complete communication about all their CSR actions would be ideal. This information disagrees with what some other authors report about an association found between transparency in CSR reports being stronger with social performance than with environmental performance (Wang et al., 2018).

On the basis of these results and as other authors suggest (Chatterji & Levine, 2006; Delmas & Blass, 2010; Windolph, 2011; Alcaide et al., 2019), the present study reveals the need to define a regulation or standards to measure and disseminate companies' CSR actions that also promote greater sustainability transparency. This is important for financial agencies and society and is particularly relevant for investors, shareholders, and creditors who need clearer and more trustworthy indices to be able to measure companies' nonfinancial aspects.

Our results also have relevant implications for companies, especially those interested in obtaining higher values for their brands in brand rankings or higher credit ratings because, as our analyses reveal, disseminating complete information in sustainability reports leads to a lower percentage not only in brand rankings but also in the credit ratings by S&P and Moody's. CSR reporting can also be viewed as a strategy for building and maintaining good relationships with stakeholders (Sun, Zhao, & Cho, 2018).

For all these reasons, this work could be interesting for shareholders to support the investments that companies make in CSR so that companies could be as sustainable as possible and to also help them provide all this information in their CSR reports. Moreover, CSR engagement can act as a tool to improve a firm's creditworthiness. This result can serve as an incentive to pay more attention to CSR in management, regulatory, and investment decisions (Drago et al, 2017).

Despite the importance of analysing the most prestigious brands in the IT sector, it is also necessary to consider other study limitations. One of them is the chosen selection criterion, which limited the sample size to 13 companies. Another study limitation is the period that the open-access CSR ranking scores covered, between 3 and 8 years, in accordance with rankings. This is because it is still an incipient issue worldwide, which ratifies the interest of the present study.

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