



A review of management theories in the context of quality, environmental and social responsibility voluntary standards



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ABSTRACT

Management theories are an important backbone of scholarly work. Various areas of management such as purchasing, logistics and strategy have critically evaluated theories to move these fields of management forward. However, no such work exists in the area of voluntary standards. Voluntary standards, such as standards for quality, environmental management and social responsibility have been covered extensively in research studies and substantial knowledge exists in terms of their diffusion, adoption, impact and governance. The studies adopt different theoretical perspectives. A number of literature reviews on voluntary standards exist; however, none of the papers so far has critically scrutinized the theoretical underpinnings of these studies. This paper, therefore, fills an important gap in the literature by providing a critical review of theories that contribute to understanding the issues pertinent to voluntary standards. Inductive and deductive search methods are applied considering the ten most prominent voluntary standards (ISO 9001, ISO 14001, OHSAS, 18001, ISO 26000, EMAS, AA1000, SA8000, FSC, MSC, and FairTrade). Nine theories (clustered as Corporate Nature Theories, External (Stakeholder) Perspective Theories and Process and Attitude Perspective Theories) that have been previously employed are scrutinized. The paper analyses the evolution of theoretical underpinnings of 62 papers published in high ranked journals between 2001 and 2016. The analysis demonstrates a dominant use of Corporate Nature Theories and External (Stakeholder) Perspective Theories and shows the evolution of the field. The paper concludes by linking the theories to key research areas in voluntary standards and aids researchers by identifying theories that are promising in terms of their applicability to explore future research paths in this field of study.

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1. Introduction

Relying on theory permits to predict and explain the nature of relationships between phenomena based on a systemized structure (Chicksand et al., 2012; Defee et al., 2010; Hunt, 1991) as well as to generalize in and between fields of research (Kenworthy and Verbeke, 2015). Studies that scrutinize the theories are found in various areas of management research; such as supplier monitoring (Tachizawa and Yew Wong, 2014), green supply chain management (Sarkis et al., 2011), purchasing, logistics and supply chain management (Chicksand et al., 2012; Defee et al., 2010; Halldórsson et al., 2015; Spina et al., 2013), strategic management (Kenworthy and Verbeke, 2015) and corporate sustainability (Lozano et al., 2015). However, one important area of management remains

overlooked; that of voluntary standards for quality, environmental management and social responsibility.

Voluntary standards emerged as global regulatory mechanisms to address sustainability, quality, health and safety in organizations and their supply chains (Büthe and Mattli, 2011). Examples of voluntary standards include ISO standards for quality and environmental management (e.g. ISO 9001 and ISO 14001 series), standards by private standards developers (e.g. AA1000 and SA 8000 for social accountability) or various eco-labels (e.g. FSC for sustainable forestry and MSC for sustainable fishing). Voluntary standards (especially ISO standards) have been covered extensively in research studies and substantial knowledge in terms of their diffusion, adoption, impact and governance exists (Castka and Corbett, 2015). The studies often adopt different theoretical perspectives, such as *Institutional Theory* (Guler et al., 2002), *Attitude Theory* (Castka et al., 2015), *Transaction Cost Theory* (Delmas and Montiel, 2009) and many others. A number of review studies into

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voluntary standards exist: reviews of integrated management systems (Rebello et al., 2014), reviews of ISO 9001 literature (Boiral, 2012), review of ISO 9001 and 14001 (Heras-Saizarbitoria and Boiral, 2013) and a review of a broad set of management systems standards (Castka and Corbett, 2015). Castka and Corbett (2015) point out that the lack of understanding of theoretical underpinnings of the studies is undermining the buildup of knowledge in the field: studies often embrace different theoretical underpinnings and, hence, it is difficult to build on the studies in a formative way. However, no study so far has critically scrutinized the theoretical underpinnings of the studies.

In this paper, the theoretical underpinnings of research into voluntary standards are scrutinized based on a sample of ten voluntary standards - covering quality management, environmental management and social responsibility. The paper pursues three objectives. First, the paper *identifies the theories and theoretical underpinnings that are used to explain the phenomenon of voluntary standards*. To achieve this aim, a thorough search in the literature was conducted. 34 theories were identified. The nine most prevalent theories are closely scrutinized in the paper. Second, the paper aims to *discuss the application of theories in the context of voluntary standards*. The paper provides a detailed account of the origins of the theories and discusses how the theories translate into the context of voluntary standards. This discussion provides a platform for the third objective: *to critically discuss how various theories address important research areas of voluntary standards and to identify which theoretical perspectives are promising for future research studies*. The research areas are drawn from a literature review by Heras-Saizarbitoria and Boiral (2013) and include creation and development of standards, their diffusion, motivation to adopt, benefits of adoption, internalization, integration of standards and auditing. These research areas are commonly used in the literature on voluntary standards (Castka and Corbett, 2015). Unlike previous studies however, the paper links the research areas to management theories. Furthermore, the paper links the use of theories to future research opportunities and highlights the most promising trajectories for future research. This paper therefore fills an important gap in the literature by providing a critical review of theories in the literature on voluntary standards. The paper especially provides useful insights for researchers in this field and assists them with identifying a suitable theoretical underpinning for their studies.

The paper is organized in the following way. In Section 2, a discussion of quality, environmental and social responsibility voluntary standards is provided. In Section 3, the method is discussed inclusive of the account of the selection of voluntary standards, the approach to literature search and the approach to analysis. In Section 4, an overview of the identified theories is provided and this section also contains a discussion of the current use of theories and their suitability to address the *research areas* inclusive of suggestions for future research. Conclusive remarks are presented in Section 5.

2. Background – quality, environmental and social responsibility voluntary standards

A voluntary standard is a “document established by consensus and approved by a recognized body that provides for common and repeated use rules, guidelines or characteristics for activities or their results” (Bruckner et al., 2014). In comparison to mandatory standards, voluntary standards are not required by legislation and organizations adopt these standards voluntarily. Voluntary standards codify organizational practices (Uzumeri, 1997) and provide a set of requirements that an organization has to adhere to in order to gain a third party certification. In general, the standards require

organizations to develop, maintain and improve their management systems. This feature is common to voluntary standards and as Uzumeri (1997) notes, such design means that standardization for intangible aspects (such as quality management, environmental management and social responsibility) is possible.

Voluntary standards were first developed in the area of quality management and later also addressed environmental issues as well as social responsibility (Castka and Balzarova, 2008c). According to Salomone (2008), the most popular standards are, ISO 9001 covering quality management systems of products and services, ISO 14001 covering environmental management systems and OHSAS 18001 covering occupational health and safety. More recently, International Organization for Standardization (ISO) launched various new standards: ISO 26000 (social responsibility), ISO 55000 (energy efficiency), and ISO 14064 for Green House Gases Emissions. Apart from ISO based standards, other institutions also introduced global standards for social accountability (AA1000 and SA 8000) and more recently over 400 eco-labels (also based on standards and third party certification) emerged in the market place (Castka and Corbett, 2016b).

The research into voluntary standards has been substantial and multidisciplinary. The studies appear in many disciplines including economics (Blind, 2003), operations and supply chain management (Castka and Corbett, 2015), strategy (Darnall and Edwards, 2006), accounting (Darnall et al., 2009) and political science (Büthe and Mattli, 2011). In general, the research is categorized into diffusion and adoption of standards, impact of standards and governance of standards (Castka and Corbett, 2015). Moreover, reviews on specific voluntary standards such as ISO 9001 and ISO 14001 (Boiral, 2012; Heras-Saizarbitoria and Boiral, 2013) and SA 8000 (Sartor et al., 2016) have contributed to a deep understanding of voluntary standards.

3. Method

3.1. Search approach

In order to gather papers for a literature review, four procedures are deployed in scientific literature (Brandenburg et al., 2014; Zimmer et al., 2016): key word based search in scientific journals (Tranfield et al., 2003), research in specific journals (Zorzini et al., 2015), cross-referencing (Ang, 2014) and analysis of thematically familiar reviews (Brandenburg et al., 2014). These four ways of gathering papers are used in the search process for this paper.

A systematic search in abstracts was conducted in EbscoHost and ProQuest with two sets of key word groups. The first group consists of key words “theory” and “view” and aims to identify management theories such as *Institutional Theory* and the *Resource Based View*. The second group encompasses the names of ten voluntary standards (see Table 1). Varying names for identical standards are used in literature (for instance ISO 9000 and ISO 9001 are used interchangeably). Therefore, the search used several variations of the names of the standards.

3.2. Scope of search

The study focuses on high quality journals which are part of the ABS Academic Journal Quality Guide 2015 or rated A+, A or B in VHB-JOURQUAL3. The scope is limited to empirical papers that use large datasets, which are suitable for multivariate statistics and econometric analysis. Therefore, conceptual papers and qualitative studies are excluded. Even though conceptual papers and qualitative studies play an important role in research on voluntary standards (e.g. Ciliberti et al., 2011), they often lack theoretical underpinnings or aim to build theories. During the analysis of the

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