ABSTRACT
Social Accountability 8000 (SA8000) is currently considered the most important corporate social responsibility. After about 10 years of research on SA8000, this paper provides the first comprehensive literature review on this topic. We identified and classified 49 papers, highlighting and discussing the main research fields concerning SA8000: advantages of the adoption of the ethical certification, obstacles to adoption and management, comparison with ISO standards, and comparison with other CSR models. Building on these findings, we present various theoretical, methodological, and thematic gaps and propose a research agenda.

KEYWORDS: Social Accountability, Social Responsibility, Systematic Literature Review.

INTRODUCTION
Since the first introduction of the social responsibility concept in the second half of the 20th century, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has received an increasing attention from managers, scholars, and politicians (Bauman and Skitka, 2012). In particular during the last two decades there has been a growing pressure towards responsibility from both primary (owners, employees, customers, and suppliers) and secondary (non-governmental organizations, governments, and activists) stakeholders (Waddock et al., 2002).
Also the academia has followed this trend. Thousands of papers have been published and some special issues of leading journals have been devoted to CSR (e.g., “Corporate social responsibility, irresponsibility and corruption” in the Journal of Business Research, “Corporate Social Responsibility: Strategic Implications” in the Journal of Management Studies, “Corporate Social Responsibility” in the International Journal of Management Reviews).
Standards, codes of conduct and management systems developed so far allow firms to show their commitment to one or more aspects of CSR. Examples of CSR models are: SA8000, AccountAbility 1000, Global Compact, Global Reporting Initiative, ISO 26000, FLA Workplace Code, ETI Base Code, and CSC 9000 T. Among these, SA8000 is of particular interest also for its increasing diffusion. From eight SA8000 certified organizations in 1998 (one year after the standard’s introduction), in the first quarter of 2013 the number of certified facilities amounted to 3,137, with an annual growth rate around 12% during the last 4 years (Social Accountability Accreditation Services, 2013). This has made SA8000 the most widespread CSR standard. Forced by its continuous diffusion, some scholars have started studying SA8000 since 2001. However, even considering the relevance of the topic, the increasing number of certifications, the standard’s changes and improvements, the knowledge about SA8000 is limited and rather fragmented. There is therefore the need to make the point, highlighting the issues so far discussed and identifying theoretical, methodological, and thematic weaknesses of existing literature. Therefore the aim of this work is to develop the first literature review on SA8000, classifying existing works, identifying and defining the main issues till now discussed and highlighting research gaps to guide future analyses.

This paper is organized as follows. After a brief description of the literature review approach, we classify the analyzed works by year of publication, publication outlet, research purpose and methodology. Afterwards we present the main issues: strengths and weaknesses regarding SA8000, comparison with ISO9000 and ISO14000 standards, and comparison with other CSR models. Finally, we highlight some lacks of literature and suggest specific research directions. The last section presents the conclusions.

LITERATURE REVIEW APPROACH

This work is based on a systematic review of literature on SA8000. The review covers all works published in English in academic journals or international books. Since SA8000 is a multidisciplinary topic that might be addressed by several disciplines (and journals), the keyword search without any reduction of the scope of journals seemed to be the most suitable approach (Seuring and Gold, 2012). Thus, we searched the main electronic databases (i.e. ABI Inform Global Proquest, Academic Search Premier EBSCO, Emerald, ISI Web of Knowledge, JSTOR Business, and Science Direct) using the keywords “SA8000”, “SA 8000”, and “Social Accountability 8000”. Finally, the search was complemented by cross-referencing for further relevant publications using a snowballing approach.

This way, we identified 306 works. We excluded the ones which just cited the SA8000 without any analysis/discussion. The final list included 49 contributions: 46 scientific papers and 3 books.

The coding process followed a deductive-inductive approach: categories were defined a priori by the research team (deductive approach) and adjusted during the coding process (inductive approach). In order to ensure inter-coder reliability, the coding was carried out independently by two researchers (Duriau et al., 2007). Despite inter-rater reliability was quite high, different judgments were individually accessed and resolved through a discursive alignment of interpretations.

DESCRIPTIVE FINDINGS

In this section, we present some descriptive analyses of the reviewed works concerning distribution of the publications over time, publication outlets, research approaches, underpinning theories and geographical areas of the studies.
Distribution of Publications over Time

The first work about SA8000 was published in 2001, four years after standard’s introduction (1997). During the following years there was an average of 4.8 contributions a year, without any special oscillations, except for a peak in 2009 (11 works). The delay between standard’s introduction and the first contributions on the topic is a typical phenomenon; it takes in fact some years for the diffusion of a new certification and the development of scientific studies focused on it. The recent growing interest towards the standard can be explained with the attention that companies are increasingly placing to environmental and labor conditions, particularly after the scandals related to child labor exploitation by suppliers of important multinational companies (e.g., Adidas, Apple, Microsoft, Nike, Samsung, and Wal-Mart).

Publication Outlets

SA8000 represents an interdisciplinary topic. The main research domains covered by the journals are in fact business ethics, operations management, international business, and quality management. However, despite SA8000 has drawn the attention of scholars belonging to different disciplines, our literature review shows that it is quite rare to find an interdisciplinary perspective within single studies. Moreover, we may notice that the main part of works addresses issues related to SA8000 from an ethical-philosophical point of view (e.g., Beschorner and Müller, 2007; Ciliberti et al., 2011; Gilbert and Rasche, 2007, 2008; Reynolds and Yuthas, 2008; Zutshi et al., 2009), while only a few contributions deal with the impact of the standard on management aspects (e.g., Miles and Munilla, 2004; Ramasamy and Garriga, 2009; Rasche, 2009, 2010a; Rohitratana, 2002; Ruževičius and Serafinas, 2007). This limit of the current literature could be overcome in future studies (see the ‘Research agenda’ paragraph).

Research approaches

More than half of contributions are exploratory in nature (63%); less significant parts are oriented to theory building (25%) or theory testing (10%), while 2% aims at theory extension/refinement. The relative newness of the topic could explain the predominance of exploration-oriented works. As far as the adopted methodologies are concerned, 61% of works is conceptual, 25% case study, 8% survey and 6% relies on other methods. We notice that research on SA8000 has been mainly theoretical and that empirical studies represent only a minor part of the analysed literature (i.e., 12 case studies, 4 surveys). The predominance of theoretical-descriptive contributions is one of the most significant weaknesses of the literature and opens up interesting possibilities for future research (see the ‘Research agenda’ paragraph).

Underpinning theories

As far as the theoretical foundations of the studies, only three works (Christmann and Taylor, 2006; Ciliberti et al., 2011; Gilbert and Rasche, 2007) are built on existing management theories. Christmann and Taylor’s (2006) paper is grounded on transaction cost economics (TCE) (Coase, 1937; Williamson, 1975, 1979, 1981, 1985). Starting from two predictions (monitoring reduces customer-supplier information asymmetries and opportunistic behaviors (Lal, 1990;
Balakrishnan and Koza, 1993); sanctions reduce the likelihood of opportunistic behaviors (Williamson, 1996)), the authors analyse the level of quality of implementation (symbolic vs. substantive) of international certifiable standards (i.e., ISO 9000, ISO 14000, and SA8000). Ciliberti et al.’s (2011) work – built on principal-agent theory (PAT) – shows that the adoption of codes of conduct, in particular third-party certifications such as SA8000, reduces the information asymmetry between the firm (principal) and its partners (agents). This could attenuate two key problems in agency relationships, i.e., moral hazard and adverse selection (mainly caused by information asymmetry).

Finally, Gilbert and Rasche’s (2008) paper – based on the stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984; Donaldson and Preston, 1995) – identifies opportunities and problems of social standards/certifications (e.g., UN Global Compact, Global Reporting Initiative, and SA8000) using a stakeholder management perspective.

Geographical Areas

As far as the geographical diffusion of the standard is concerned, in the first quarter of 2013, 32% of certified companies were headquartered in Italy, followed by India (22%), China (16%), and Romania (8%). Considering the number of employees of certified companies, in the first place there is India with 26%, followed by Italy (18%), China (18%), and Brazil (7%) (SAAS, 2013).

As far as the empirical studies reviewed in this paper are concerned, most of them analyse companies located in Western countries (e.g., Italy, Germany, Spain, and the USA). Only a minority of the studies analyze instead companies whose headquarters are located in developing countries. We might think that Western companies face a series of problems and situations different from companies headquartered in emerging economies, often characterised by weaker legislative systems about labor rights. The lack of studies on these countries is for sure an important limit of the present literature, that could be addressed by future researches (see the ‘Research agenda’ paragraph).

FOCAL ISSUES AND RELATED FINDINGS

It is possible to identify four main research fields in the SA8000 literature: advantages and motivations related to the adoption and management of the certification (discussed by 23 works), obstacles (17 works), comparison with ISO 9000 and 14000 standards (17 works) and comparison with other CSR models (31 works). Although there are some interdependencies among the considered issues, each of them identifies a specific line of research and debate that we will describe in the following sections.

SA8000 strengths

The advantages/motivations of SA8000, mentioned or discussed in the analyzed papers, might be categorized according to the functions they are related to: purchasing, production, marketing, research & development, finance and human resources.

Purchasing

The need of alignment on the same ethical requirements along the whole supply chain seems to lead to a stronger collaboration between the certified company and its suppliers. A direct consequence is a deeper knowledge of the supply chain, also due to the frequent second-party audits imposed by the certification (Leipziger, 2001, 2010; Meehan et al., 2006; Tencati and
These positive effects seem to be particularly strong in key buyer-supplier relations. An indirect consequence of the strong collaboration along the supply chain is the reduction of the information asymmetry (e.g. Ciliberti et al., 2009, 2011; Christmann and Taylor, 2006; Koerber, 2010). One of the clearest examples mentioned in the literature is Coop Italy, which created a value network that involves all its suppliers. This action has strengthened the bond between actors of the supply chain, allowing better communication between them and a deeper reciprocal knowledge (Meehan et al., 2006).

A last positive effect of SA8000 seems to be the improvement in the punctuality of deliveries (Henkle, 2005; Leipziger, 2009), that seems to be mainly determined by the frequent second-party audits required by SA8000.

Production

Leipziger (2001, 2009), Rohitratana (2002) and Salomone (2008) highlight that process improvement could be one of the most important effects of SA8000 certification, thanks to changes made to the business processes to align them to the SA8000 requirements. Several authors agree that SA8000 certification could also lead to an increase of productivity (Gilbert and Rasche, 2007; Henkle, 2005; Miles and Munilla, 2004; Rohitratana, 2002). This seems to be mainly determined by the “higher enthusiasm of the employees” (see “Human Resources” paragraph), that is a direct effect of most of the SA8000 requirements: no use of forced or compulsory labor (that sets the employees free to select their workplace); the presence of a safe and healthy environment (that allows the employees not to fear for potential occupational accidents); the freedom of association and right to collective bargaining (that allows the voice of the employees to be heard by the top management and the shareholders); no disciplinary practices (that allow employees not to fear for corporal punishment); no discrimination; normal workweek and adequate wages.

Another possible SA8000 positive effect seems to be the decrease of work accidents (mentioned by 9 papers). The standard requires companies to identify potential sources of danger, proactively facing the risks before they happen through the drawing up of verification, prevention and improvement plans (Leipziger, 2001; Stigzelius and Mark-Herbert, 2009; Werre, 2003).

Marketing

The attention for workers’ rights, the defense of child labor (still current practice in some developing countries), and in general the attention for ethical issues seem to lead to an improvement in the corporate image (14 works). Another related benefit is the risk reduction of being exposed to scandals linked to unethical behaviors (Fuentes-Garcia et al., 2008; Miles and Munilla, 2004; Rohitratana, 2002; Wang, 2008; Werre, 2003; Zutshi et al., 2009).

Some authors observe that SA8000 could have a strong commercial impact, facilitating market expansion (Christmann and Taylor, 2006; Miles and Munilla, 2004; Salomone, 2008; Stigzelius and Mark-Herbert, 2009; Werre, 2003). The attainment of SA8000 certification seems to be a competitive weapon, particularly effective for companies that set up premium pricing strategies toward the so-called ‘ethical consumer’, interested in buying goods and services provided by socially responsible companies.

The improvement of the relationship with stakeholders is another benefit (e.g., Beschorner and Müller, 2007; Miles and Munilla, 2004). Some authors specifically mention the improvement in the relationship with customers, pointing out that certified companies establish a trust relationship with them, leading to corporate brand loyalty (Ciliberti et al., 2011; Miles and
Munilla, 2004; Rohitratana, 2002; Ruževičius and Serafinas, 2007). Besides customers, SA8000 issues may involve many other stakeholders: labor regulating agencies, investors, governmental and non-governmental organisations (Miles and Munilla, 2004; Miles et al., 2006). Rasche and Esser (2006), in particular, emphasise the possibility to change the approach to stakeholders, from "stakeholder management" to "stakeholder accountability", going beyond the simple communication of the results of CSR initiatives, creating instead a channel of dialogue with all involved parties to define CSR activities and their goals. Miles et al. (2006) talk about strategic conversations (i.e., communication processes that allow active and open dialogue between stakeholders and management) highlighting that SA8000 (like ISO 14000) certification process is an opportunity to involve the stakeholders in this kind of activities.

**Research & development**

Another possible SA8000 positive effect debated in the literature is a more effective development of new products. Ethically responsible companies seem to be able to develop appropriate solutions, efficiently sharing new product development activities with the stakeholders that have similar ethical sensibility (Leipziger, 2009).

**Finance**

According to Leipziger (2001, 2010), SA8000 certified companies could get an easier access to credit, thanks to the improved relationships with financial institutes. Compliance with social responsibility requirements also facilitates relationships with the institutions in charge of monitoring specific requirements (e.g., public welfare and assistance bodies, control agencies for safety).

**Human resources**

The attention for ethical values related to SA8000 seems to generate “enthusiasm” in the employees (e.g., Fuentes-Garcia et al., 2008; Gilbert and Rasche, 2007; Rohitratana, 2002; Ruževičius and Serafinas, 2007). In a context in which the company is committed to the continuous improvement of working conditions and to the compliance with professional ethics, workers feel protected and more involved in the achievement of goals. All these elements seem to positively affect the relationship between the company and its employees, promoting long-lasting ties, leading to positive effects for the company in terms of staff turnover reduction and absenteeism reduction (Henkle, 2005; Stigzelius and Mark-Herbert, 2009). Finally, thanks to SA8000 certification the company seems to be able to more easily attract skilled workforce (Fuentes-Garcia et al., 2008; Miles and Munilla, 2004; Rohitratana, 2002; Wang, 2008). The improvement of working conditions, consequent to the adoption of SA8000, is more evident in the Third World countries. In these areas the gap to be filled to obtain the certification is generally wider. This fact could partially explain the distribution of certified companies at global level, heavily biased – excluding Italy – in favor of the emerging countries, due to higher benefits brought by the implementation of the standard in those areas where working conditions are generally worse and the respect for workers' rights encounters more obstacles.

**Obstacles**

A second research field concerning SA8000 regards the obstacles faced by the certified companies. Considering the phase in which these criticalities are met by the companies, we
classified them in three typologies: a) obstacles faced in getting the certification; b) obstacles faced in the ongoing management of the certification; c) obstacles faced in both these phases.

Obstacles faced in getting the certification

As some authors highlight, an obstacle typically faced by the companies in getting the certification is determined by the lack of internal expertise about SA8000. Literature refers how several quality managers are well trained concerning widespread and “old” certifications (such as the ISO9001), but ignore contents and problems related to the achievement of a quiet recent (ethical) certification.

Another obstacle seems to be the lack of certification bodies (e.g. Fuentes-Garcia et al., 2008). Anyway, this obstacle seems to lose relevance year by year: the SA8000 fast development is determining the establishment of certification bodies in most of the developed and developing economies where the companies (and their suppliers) locate their activities (as the SAI data show).

Obstacles faced in the ongoing management of the certification

The complex data management seems to be one of the most important obstacles typically related to the ongoing management of the certification. The standard requires the storage and management of a large amount of documents (e.g. the exams of the persons evaluated in the recruitment activities in order to demonstrate that no discriminations were carried out). Such activities are complex and costly, both in terms of time and resources. The adoption of data management software seems to be a possible solution to this problem, but not all companies (in particular SMEs) can afford the costs of these systems. Describing the Tata Steel case, Leipziger (2009) highlights the difficulties initially experienced by the company in managing the paper documentations related to audits. These problems were overcome creating the “Tata Steel SA8000 Vendor Assessment Protocol” which automatically generates the assessments related to every requirement of the standard.

Another obstacle typically faced in the ongoing management of the certification is the lower flexibility of suppliers determined by the SA8000 and the related increase in delivery times. The certification imposes working practices (e.g., rest periods, limits to overtime) that reduce the flexibility and hinder companies in quickly responding to the changes of the demand and in solving forecasting and planning errors (Leipziger, 2009, 2010).

Another obstacle faced by the companies in the SA8000 ongoing management regard the limits in supplier selection (Christmann and Taylor, 2006; Leipziger, 2001; Rohitratana, 2002; Werre, 2003). Certified companies ask their suppliers to comply with the SA8000 requirements, limiting the number of potential suppliers only to companies that want (and are able) to meet these obligations.

Another obstacle concerns the poor knowledge of the standard by the customers. The contents of the SA8000 ethical standard seem in fact to be unknown to many customers. This forces the companies to invest (significant) resources in the promotion of their commitment to ethical initiatives.

Obstacles faced in both the phases

An obstacle faced by the companies in getting the SA8000 and in its ongoing management is related with the high costs and the subsequent need of adequate investments. The compliance with each requirement of the SA8000 certification (e.g. the modification of the business processes, the extra-remuneration of the overtime) determines costs. These costs depends on
the gap between the SA8000 requirements and the company behaviors before the certification (Ciliberti et al., 2011; Leipziger, 2001, 2009; Miles and Munilla, 2004; Rohitratana, 2002). They are critical in particular for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), typically characterised by limited financial resources (Rohitratana, 2002; Wang, 2008). The trade-off between costs and advantages related to SA8000 certification is a key issue perceived by many authors, but none of them analyses in depth this topic. Some works only examine the factors affecting the certification costs: Miles and Munilla (2004) and Leipziger (2001) show that they are typically lower in firms that are already ISO 9000 or ISO 14000 certified. The geographical location of the company is another factor that seems to influence the certification costs: the costs to comply with the standard are in fact often higher for plants located in developing countries, due to the larger gap to fill between the SA8000 requirements and the practices required by law. As some authors (e.g., Gilbert and Rasche, 2007; Rasche, 2010a; Rohitratana, 2002) report, another typical obstacle faced in getting the certification and its ongoing management regards religion and local customs. Gilbert and Rasche (2007), for example, show how some cultures have traditions in striking contrast with some SA8000 requirements. The Indian caste-based system, for example, is in contrast with the principle of meritocracy well depicted by the standard. Child labor (considered regrettable by SA8000) is a widespread and well received practice in many countries (contributing to the livelihood of local families) (Miles and Munilla, 2004). In these contexts, SA8000 could be not understood or even rejected by local employees or suppliers.

A further obstacle is the possible lack of employee attention or even the refusal of protections guaranteed by the standard (Leipziger, 2009). As shown for instance by some studies about the Chinese context (e.g., Nassimbeni and Sartor, 2007), in certain emerging countries the employees might be interested to work as much as they can to maximise their earnings (and quickly rejoin their families if they are immigrants). SA8000 (limiting the overtimes) can be perceived as an obstacle for the achievement of these goals.

**SA8000, ISO 9000 and ISO 14000**

With regard to the literature that compares SA8000, ISO 9000, and ISO 14000 standards, we can identify a first group of works which has analysed similarities and differences between these certifications. A second group of researches has instead investigated the potential benefits related to the development of an integrated management system including all these certifications.  

As far as the similarities are concerned, some studies (e.g., Gilbert and Rasche, 2008; Kortelainen, 2008; Rasche, 2009; Ruževičius and Serafinas, 2007) highlight that SA8000 is influenced by the frame of ISO 9000, both for chronological reasons and for the success of this certification. Examples of common points are: audit methodologies, emphasis on continuous improvement (Christmann and Taylor, 2006; Leipziger, 2001; Miles and Munilla, 2004), and the creation of a management system (Christmann and Taylor, 2006; Göbbels and Jonker, 2003; Kortelainen, 2008).

The studies focused on the differences between SA8000, ISO 9000, and ISO 14000 (e.g., Kortelainen, 2008; Leipziger, 2001) have for instance emphasised the dissimilarities in the performance indicators adopted by these certifications and in the use of the interviews of the employees. Miles and Munilla (2004) have shown that (while ISO 9000 and ISO 14000 are process-driven) ethical certification SA8000 is focused on requirements (rather than on processes to be implemented to achieve them).

Along with the comparison between standards, there is a burning and still open debate about benefits obtainable from the implementation of SA8000 in companies already ISO 9000 and/or ISO 14000 certified (e.g., Karapetrovic and Casadesús, 2009; Kortelainen, 2008; Miles and
Munilla, 2004; Rasche, 2010a; Rohitratana, 2002) and the potential benefits resulting from the creation of an integrated management system (e.g., Jørgensen et al., 2006; Karapetrovic and Casadesús, 2009; Salomone, 2008). Companies already ISO 9000 and ISO 14000 certified seem to be facilitated in the implementation of SA8000; the previous knowledge and the process mapping already carried out seem to foster and accelerate the obtainment of SA8000 certification (Kortelainen, 2008; Ruževičius and Serafins, 2007).

With regard to the integration between ISO 9000, ISO 14001 and SA8000 management systems, the authors seem to agree in saying that ISO 9001 standard (and the related management system) should be the starting point (Jørgensen et al., 2006; Karapetrovic and Casadesús, 2009; Salomone, 2008; Tsai and Chou, 2009). The integration could lead to significant benefits, first of all the reduction of costs of implementation and ongoing management of SA8000.

There are also empirical studies that deal with the topic of integration and comparison with ISO 9001 and 14001 standards (e.g., Beske et al., 2008; Jørgensen et al., 2006; Karapetrovic and Casadesús, 2009; Salomone, 2008). Most of these contributions carry out surveys to analyse the priority of implementation of the management systems and propensity towards integration. The comparison of the results of surveys carried out in several European countries – in particular Spain (Jørgensen et al., 2006; Karapetrovic and Casadesús, 2009), Italy (Salomone, 2008) and Germany (Beske et al., 2008) – confirms that ISO 9001 and ISO 14001 standards are considered more critical compared to SA8000. The propensity to integration seems currently to involve more the two ISO standards and to a lesser extent other standards such as SA8000 (although a growing interest for this certification is recorded).

**SA8000 and Other CSR Standards**

The increasing need for protection and improvement of working conditions led to the rise of several models that aim to encourage ethical behavior in companies. A considerable body of literature compares the SA8000 with these different CSR models; in this work we group them in universal models, industry/country specific models, and ad hoc corporate codes.

**Universal models**

The **AccountAbility 1000 (AA1000)** is a standard used for assessing the performance of companies in the field of ethical and social sustainable development. It is based on three principles (inclusivity, materiality, and responsiveness) strongly related to the relationship and the dialogue with stakeholders. The benefits that the company could get by adopting this standard mainly consist in strengthening the relationship with stakeholders and improving their participation and trust (Beschorner and Müller, 2007; Lozano and Huisingh, 2011; Reynolds and Yuthas, 2008). The literature highlights similarities between SA8000 and AA1000 (e.g., applicability to every company size and sector, orientation to continuous improvement of management systems, common benefits, a similar analytical-rational process-based methodological approach), but especially some important differences. Among these, AA1000 seems to let every organization define the scope of the management system; on the contrary SA8000 is stiffer, being focused on the conditions of the workplace and the protection of workers’ rights. Also the relationship with suppliers is different, since SA8000 asks to fulfill some social mandatory requirements, not requested by AA1000 (Beschorner and Müller, 2007). Finally, two important differences concern, on one side the lack in SA8000 of precise information about reporting methods, on the other the fact that SA8000 does not call explicitly for the interaction between stakeholders, emphasized instead by AA1000 (Beschorner and Müller, 2007; Gilbert and Rasche, 2007; Gilbert et al., 2010; Göbbels and Jonker, 2003).
The **Global Reporting Initiative (GRI)** model is aimed at diffusing guidelines about sustainability reporting. A sustainability report enables organizations to report sustainability information in a way that is similar to financial reporting, using comparable data, with agreed disclosures and metrics (Bhimani and Soonawalla, 2005; O'Rourke, 2003; Ruževičius and Serafinas, 2007). According to Lozano and Huisingh (2011), GRI seems to be the most adopted model for sustainability reporting. Literature highlights that the common aspects between GRI and SA8000 does not involve norms or specific principles, but rather an interest in reporting activities. Another common element is the high costs incurred for data collecting (Gilbert et al., 2010; Koerber, 2010). Compared to SA8000 (more focused on social issues), GRI has a broader scope, strongly dealing with environmental issues too (Reynolds and Yuthas, 2008; Tschopp, 2005). Bhimani and Soonawalla’s study (2005) emphasize that the standards SA8000, ISO 9001 and GRI can be considered complementary, where SA8000 is focused on working conditions, ISO 9001 on quality management systems and GRI provides guidelines for reporting activities.

The **Global Compact (GC)** is a United Nations initiative to encourage organizations to adopt sustainable and socially responsible policies. It promotes ten principles concerning human rights, labor standards, environment and anti-corruption. Global Compact does not certify that companies have fulfilled the GC principles; companies annually only declare their progress about the implementation of GC principles. Some authors believe that without any effective monitoring and enforcement provisions, the Global Compact substantially fails to hold corporations accountable (Gilbert et al., 2010; Rasche, 2009, 2010a). The normative framework of the two models is another difference reported by the literature: unlike SA8000, GC neither provides quantitative standards, nor it requires performance measurement (Robins, 2005; Rasche, 2009).

The **ISO 26000** standard offers guidance on socially responsible behaviors. This is a quite new standard (it was released on 2010) and its potential benefits and specific limitations are currently not well discussed (Christmann and Taylor, 2006; Kortelainen, 2008; Lozano and Huisingh, 2011). The literature only highlights some differences between ISO 26000 and SA8000: the ISO 26000 standard does not contain requirements; it is not certifiable; it uses a multi-stakeholder approach (Castka and Balzarova, 2007, 2008; Gilbert et al., 2010; Koerber, 2010; Rasche, 2010b).

**Industry or country-specific models**

The **FLA Workplace Code** is an industry-specific standard for textile and garment industries, mainly adopted by North-American firms. It aims to ensure humane working conditions for employees (Rasche, 2009). The literature highlights that FLA, like SA8000, is structured so that to facilitate its comprehension and consequent implementation (Mueller et al., 2009; O'Rourke, 2006). Both FLA and SA8000 deal with minimum wages for employees (“living wage” in SA8000, “prevailing wage” in FLA), while only SA8000 considers the right of free association and bargaining for workers (sometimes in contrast to national regulations). The effects and criticalities of the two certifications seems to be different also because SA8000 certifies individual manufacturing facilities, while FLA whole companies (O'Rourke, 2003). Mueller et al. (2009) have studied the level of legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders that can be ensured by SA8000 and FLA. The evaluation has considered several aspects, (e.g., degree of involvement of stakeholders in standard’s development and in the process improvement, compliance with the standard requirements) and has shown that FLA seems to lead to a higher level of legitimacy.

The **CSC 9000 T (China Social Compliance 9000)** is an industry specific management system for social compliance for China’s textile and apparel sector. It was developed considering the
Chinese laws/regulations and some international conventions. Literature shows that this system affects dimensions already included in SA8000 and further aspects like labor contracts and protection against violence and abuses. CSC 9000 T, designed for the Chinese legislative environment (in particular with regard to labor laws), differs from SA8000 also for the quantitative parameters set by some requirements (Ramasamy and Garriga, 2009). According to the same authors, the main difference between SA8000 and the Chinese standard regards the procedures of assessment on congruence of business practices with the principles of CSC 9000 T; unlike SA8000 that requires audits carried out by an external control body, in the Chinese standard compliance can be assessed internally by the organization itself and this risks to undermine the tool.

Ad hoc corporate codes of conduct

Among corporate codes, the models developed by Nike and Inditex seem to be the most mentioned by the literature (O’Rourke, 2003, 2006; Ramasamy and Garriga, 2009). After a scandal related to labor exploitation in Indonesia, in the early ’90s Nike adopted an ethical code focused on the improvement of working conditions in its supply chain, leading innovation in design and implementation of its compliance system. The Spanish firm Inditex developed instead a code of conduct based on eleven fields, with an interesting focus on environmental and subcontracting themes, topics not considered by SA8000. Literature shows that the main differences between these corporate codes and SA8000 seem to concern the management system and the influence on labor contracts, but also the relationship with others members of the supply network (deeper in SA8000, less significant in ad hoc models). Moreover corporate codes involve the use of a reward system to stimulate the active participation of suppliers (mechanism not included in SA8000), whose effects are still unclear. An important common point concerns the use of third-party monitoring, required by both these models of CSR (Ramasamy and Garriga, 2009).

RESEARCH AGENDA

The systematic review of literature on SA8000, that we have developed and presented in this study, allows us to highlight some methodological and theoretical weaknesses and some thematic gaps in the academic debate. First, as far as the methodological aspects are concerned, more than 60% of the reviewed works is conceptual in nature. This may challenge the validity of some results. Existing literature, for instance, points out a number of possible strengths of SA8000 (e.g., deeper knowledge of the supply chain, increase of productivity, improvement in the corporate image, staff turnover and absenteeism reduction), but many of these are not supported by empirical data. Similarly, the obstacles faced while obtaining and maintaining the SA8000 certification have been recognized and discussed mainly through conceptual analyses or anecdotal evidences. In addition, the few empirical contributions (i.e., 12 case studies, 4 surveys) seem to rely on geographically biased samples. While on the one hand, the SA8000 certification is widespread among firms located in emerging countries (e.g., China, India); on the other hand, nearly all the analyzed samples consist of firms headquartered in Western developed countries. Second, SA8000 literature lacks theoretical foundations. Only three (out of forty-nine) studies are in fact grounded on well-established management theories (i.e., TCE, PAT, and stakeholder theory). Third, many specific thematic gaps exist. The studies conducted so far have for instance not been able to provide an exhaustive overview on costs of obtaining and maintaining the SA8000 certification. Even the literature that jointly analyses SA8000 with ISO 9000 and 14000
standards investigates only the process of integration of the different management systems and does not deal with its costs. In addition, the timing, the main phases, the activities to perform, and the organizational implications recordable both during the certification process and during the consequent ongoing management stage have been substantially neglected by existing literature. Finally, previous research on the influences of contextual factors (e.g., firm size, country, industry, product complexity, production volumes, and preexisting certifications) on the obtainment of the certification and its ongoing management is scant and anecdotal.

In the reminder of this section we attempt to propose a research agenda on SA8000, presenting two prominent theoretical perspectives (namely principal agent theory, and transaction cost economics) and offering some spurs on how they can be adopted to enhance the knowledge body on the SA8000 certification.

The Principal Agent Theory (PAT) emerged in the early 1970s, when Ross, Jensen and other scholars started analyzing the agency relations (e.g., the problems than can arise when the desires of principals and agents conflict, the methodologies for risk sharing when principals and agents have different attitude towards risks). It has then been applied in several research areas such as accounting (e.g., Demski and Feltham, 1978), finance (e.g., Fama, 1980), marketing (Basu et al., 1985), political science (Mitnick, 1986), organizational behavior (e.g., Eisenhardt, 1985, 1988), and sociology (e.g., Eccles, 1985).

As already reported, Ciliberti et al. (2011) are the only authors who investigated SA8000 through this theoretical lens. They analyzed how SA8000 could improve communication between business partners within the supply chain, reducing the information asymmetry between certified companies (principals) and their business partners (agents). They also showed that SA8000 certification contributes to some extent to solve the moral hazard problem (faced by SMEs) and the adverse selection problem (in particular in the negotiation of new contracts with current suppliers).

Future researches could attempt to deepen the contribution of SA8000 to the reduction of information asymmetry between the certified firm (principal) and its business partners (agents), also analysing methodologies and tools able to allow this result.

Even the relation between the firm and its employees has been seen as a principal-agent relation. In this perspective, previous PAT studies showed that performance-related incentives can be ineffective (and also have a negative effect) in many organization since the exchange relationship becomes much more narrowly economic (e.g., Staw, 1989) and agents are less likely to help their coworkers (e.g., Drago and Garvey, 1998). It could therefore be interesting to analyse how the introduction of an ethical certification (e.g., SA8000) can affect the relations between the firm (principal) and its employees (agents).

The Transaction Cost Economics (TCE) theory – based on Coase’s (1937) work and further advanced by Williamson (1975, 1979, 1981, 1985) – studies what is the governance structure (i.e., hierarchy, market, and hybrid forms) that minimizes transaction costs and postulates that this choice depends on the complexity and the characteristics of transactions (e.g., asset specificity, transaction uncertainty, and frequency).

This theory was adopted by one of the reviewed works (i.e., Christmann and Taylor, 2006). As we explained in section 3, these authors studied the conditions that affect the quality of implementation (i.e., symbolic vs. substantive) of certifiable standards and highlighted the followings: (1) the importance of the issue (addressed by the certification) for the supplier; (2) the frequency of monitoring by the customer; (3) the customers’ reliance on supplier certification programs; (4) the combination of importance of the issue for the customer and the costs of switching suppliers; and (5) the combination of importance of the issue for the customer and the level of supplier relationship-specific investments. Such results are obtained by analysing a
sample of ISO 9000 certified firms. While Christmann and Taylor (2006) argued that the pattern of strategic behaviours are similar regardless of the analysed standard (e.g., ISO 9000, ISO 14000, and SA8000), in our view future research is needed to extend their results to SA8000 certified firms.

The TCE provides in our view at least three opportunities for future research on SA8000. First, considering the possible obstacles in the obtainment and ongoing management of the certification, a number of arguments might be adduced to sustain that SA8000 leads to increase both external (e.g., less potential suppliers, expensive controls on suppliers) and internal (e.g., reduced internal flexibility, increased human resource management costs) transaction costs. At the moment these are only hypotheses that need to be further elaborated and empirically tested.

Second, it would be interesting to analyze the impact of SA8000 on the selected governance structure (i.e., hierarchy, market and hybrid forms) during both the certification and the ongoing management phases. While on the one hand we may in fact propose many arguments to support that SA8000 certification tends to shift the governance mode towards hierarchy (e.g., limits in supplier selection, improvement of the relationship with suppliers); on the other hand, many arguments may justify a shift towards market (e.g., reduction of the information asymmetry, reduction of the uncertainty).

Third, the entry modes most frequently adopted by Western SA8000 certified companies that want to source in low cost countries (areas where the usual practices are more far from SA8000 requirements) might be investigated. We could for instance hypothesise that these companies would prefer equity entry modes, reducing transaction costs and protecting themselves from opportunistic behaviors by suppliers.

CONCLUSION

This paper reports on the state of the literature about SA8000. The literature review is based on the analysis of 49 works, of which 46 articles published in scientific journals and 3 books. All documents have been classified by year of publication, publication outlet, research approach and methodology. Four main issues have been identified: advantages/motivations, obstacles, comparison of SA8000 with ISO standards and other CSR models. The discussion on the advantages for companies resulting from the adoption of the standard has been divided according to the affected functions: purchasing, production, marketing, research & development, finance, and human resources. The obstacles have been classified into three groups: obstacles faced in getting the certification; obstacles faced in the ongoing management of the certification; and obstacles faced in both these phases. The section devoted to SA8000, ISO 9000, and ISO 14000 has highlighted common points and differences between these standards, along with opportunities and problems of the process of integration of the aforementioned standards. Similarly, the comparison of SA8000 with other CSR models has allowed to highlight similarities and differences among SA8000 and other models used for CSR management.

Despite 15 years of research on the topic, our analyses show that much remains to be investigated on SA8000, providing stronger theoretical foundations and facing some (unanswered) key questions.

In conclusion and synthesis, this paper summarizes and frames the debate on a core topic and proposes a number of avenues for future research, while also prescribing the application of well-established theoretical frameworks to study the phenomenon (e.g., principal agent theory, and transaction cost economics).

REFERENCES


