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A Systematic Literature Review on Theories Utilized Investigating Third-Parties in Sustainable Supply Chain Management

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to revise the literature on how theories have been utilized in investigating third-parties (for example, Non-Governmental Organizations, certifying organizations, among others) in Sustainable Supply Chain Management. Based on that, we derive future research directions. For revising the literature in a structured manner, the articles use the systematic literature review as the method of choice. Only half of the identified articles utilize theories for investigating third-parties in Sustainable Supply Chain Management. In addition, major theories are overweighed. This predomination leads to influencing the conceptualization of third-parties in Sustainable Supply Chain Management. Future research opportunities exist in broadening the utilization of theories and methods applied in the field, investing in under-explored aspects and broadening the scope of testing and building frameworks. Based on the synthesizing, propositions supplement future research directions. The novelty of this article lies in its investigation of how theories have been used in investigating and conceptualizing third-parties in Sustainable Supply Chain Management. By that, it contributes with a state-of-the-art view on the important topic of sustainability and how third-parties could solve sustainability challenges. With that, the article is a first attempt and step for extending the academic literature and practice with rethinking classic ways of managing sustainability and utilize out of the box ideas.

Keywords: Supply Chain Management, Sustainability, Systematic Literature Review, Third-Parties

SCSTI: 82.01.11
JEL Code: Q01, Q56, M14, M16

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1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization, climate change, and the increasing world population changed the business environment for firms over the last decades. Driven by suppliers, customers and political requirements, firms realize the need to enhance further and consider sustainability, i.e. considering economic, ecological and social aspects simultaneously, in their supply chains. Considering of many interests in their supply chain management makes sustainability a challenging agenda for firms. However, we are still at the beginning of this journey, as a recent report by Bain & Company shows that only 4% of the firms surveyed have fully achieved their sustainability goals (Davis-Peccoud et al., 2018).

Incidents like the Rana Plaza collapse showed that manufacturers in the global north as responsible by their customers for their supply chain in the global south (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2013). A vignette-based study supports this view, showing that consumers ascribe responsibility for supply chain governance to the purchasing company (Hartmann & Moeller, 2014; Rao, 2002). Logically, firms want to avoid e.g. reputational damage, by ensuring that their global business partners, mainly suppliers, comply with the firms` understanding of sustainability (Reuter et al., 2010). This has led to a shift of tasks and responsibilities in the supply chain for firms (Woetzel et al., 2020). Ensuring sustainability in supply chains is generally a very complex issue, as social and environmental sustainability, unlike economic sustainability, is focused on many suppliers, customers, and relevant dimensions and key figures. In order to deal with these challenges and meet self-defined commitments, firms are using strategies like buying certified products, mapping and monitoring the supply chain, participating in programs and initiatives or engaging and collaborating with others. The increased development of concepts managing sustainability in supply chains shows that supply chain management plays an important role and thus increases in its complexity.

However, firms such as Mars have noticed that they need help transforming their supply chains regarding sustainability or solely relying on internal mechanisms. Mars began working with various actors to achieve its sustainability goals in its supply chain (Ionova, 2018).

Still, the literature needs to gain knowledge and remain unclear in which way and to what extent these different actors (following called third-parties) enhance firms' Sustainable Supply Chain Management (SSCM). Third-parties are organizations like NGOs, competitors, firms from the same industry, or standardization organizations.

Academic literature calls for the inclusion of third-parties in SSCM research (Pagell & Shevchenko, 2014) and stresses the supporting character of divergent stakeholders (Gimenez & Tachizawa, 2012). While some stakeholders are more interested in social issues, others focus on ecological issues (Pagell & Shevchenko, 2014). While some stakeholders draw their attention to firms solely, others exert pressure on firms or offer firms their specific resources (Ciliberti et al., 2011; Gimenez & Tachizawa, 2012; Rodríguez et al., 2016). As stated, research has mostly overlooked third-parties in the supply chain as valuable contributors and looked at SSCM solely viewing the traditional buyer-supplier dyads (Soosay & Hyland, 2015). It is thus important to narrow down and focus on third-parties. Looking at third-parties is interesting and necessary for various reasons.

Third-parties own knowledge and expertise firms might not have. This could be, on the one hand, external knowledge like technical knowledge on processes for auditing or controlling sustainability-related processes. On the other hand, the knowledge could be network-related in terms of providing access to networks with different partners like other NGOs at the sourcing point or bringing together actors from different regions and with different interests at e.g. conferences.

As third-parties could have no contractual relationship with firms, they have an intermediary position and are not influenced by the firms. This relationship brings the advantage that third-

parties have a high degree of freedom in e.g. criticizing firms.

Well known academic articles have been published contributing to the spread of knowledge and the maturity of the field on SSCM (e.g. Carter and Easton (2011), Carter and Rogers (2008), Carter et al. (2015), and Seuring and Müller (2008)). However, some of these authors acknowledge the lack of theory utilization and call for a more sophisticated use (Carter & Easton, 2011). This is alarming as theory is critical to sound results and can provide insights. Using theoretical perspectives increases knowledge creation quality (Walton et al., 1998) and enhances the reliability of the results. This ultimately leads to building a fundamental understanding of aspects as empirical evidence complements theoretical works.

Although, to grow as a discipline SSCM needs a theoretical base, whether from well-established concepts or looking for the unknown from a grounded perspective (Carter & Easton, 2011). In order for researchers to provide theoretically based research, the first step must know what theories and how they have been applied. In light of these past shortcomings, the aim of this article is to provide a holistic review of the theories utilized in investigating third-parties in SSCM. Hence, we believe that the missing holistic investigation and inclusion of third-parties in SSCM and how theories have been applied for investigation undermines the field to growth and prevents further insights.

Therefore, this article's primary motivation is to understand better and identify the use of theories in SSCM regarding third-parties and guide future research. In particular, we aim to investigate the following research questions:

1) What are the dominant theories used in the field?

2) How have theories been used for investigating third-parties in SSCM?

3) What are fruitful research directions?

To answer these questions, we use the systematic literature review approach, which suits our aims of mapping the theories and their applications regarding third-parties.

Previous reviews in the field have primarily focused on either the dimension of sustainability, a broad focus on stakeholders or ignoring actors about the theories used (Carter and Rogers (2008), Seuring and Müller (2008), Touboulic and Walker (2015)). In particular, theoretical perspectives have not been a primary focus of past reviews. If any, theory was considered briefly in a subsection (e.g. in Carter and Easton (2011)) or did not further drill down the theoretical application regarding third-parties (e.g. Touboulic and Walker (2015)).

Hence, the novelty of this review lies in its focus on theory application in SSCM regarding third-parties. Therefore, this article makes following contributions. First, it provides academic literature on third-parties as actors in SSCM. Second, it provides an investigation, as first of its kind, on the theoretical perspectives utilized for investigation. Based on that, it proposes future research opportunities.

The article is structured as follows. First, we briefly introduce the methodological steps of the systematic literature review. Second, we provide descriptives and afterwards show how theories have been used for investigating third-parties in SSCM. Third, based on the findings, we propose future research directions.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Planning literature search and identifying relevant literature

The systematic literature methodology starts with the definition of which criteria should be met by the literature searched (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009). In various journals journals, we sampled the articles rather inclusive and did not search in pre-selected journals (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009; Durach et al., 2017). To meet a minimum quality, we applied quality-related criteria using the Journal Impact Factor of the Journal Citation Report 2017 with at least a rating

of 1 (Schorsch et al., 2017; Tarí, 2011). If the journal was not ranked in the Journal Citation Report we applied the Academic Journal Guide 2018 by the Chartered Association of Business Schools ranking of three or higher (Nurunnabi et al., 2018). Second criterion was the focus on articles published between 1987 and 2019. We chose 1987 as the starting point as it was the year in which the Brundtland Report was published (Brundtland, 1987), which was the first definition of sustainability in modern society and is still used. Third, we set the scope on English articles only, as English is the research language and ensures the accessibility and comparability of the results internationally.

Next, considering quality-related and content-related criteria presents in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Inclusion & exclusion criteria for articles

	Inclusion & exclusion criteria for articles	**Rationale for utilizing the inclusion & exclusion criteria for articles**
Quality-related criteria	Peer reviewed articles in journals with impact factor ≥ 1.0 in the Journal Citation Report 2017 and if not applicable using Academic Journal Guide 2018 ≥ 3.	To ensure minimum quality level and reduce sampling bias.
Content-related criteria	Review scope is on articles published since 1987.	First introduction of "Sustainability"-definition by Brundtland Report.
	Article language is in English.	English is the research language and ensures accessibility and comparability of the results.
	Sustainability includes at least ecological or social dimension.	Articles solely dealing with economic sustainability are excluded.
	Third-party and its contribution.	Definition of third-party based Clarkson (1995) secondary stakeholder. Furthermore, the third-party needs to have a contribution in the studies' result part.
	Examining inter-organizational view.	Publications should look at the supply chain from an inter-organizations view rather than from an intra-organizations (internal) view, as this article focuses on supply chains.
	Original Research (i.e., literature reviews, editorials, and meta-theories were excluded).	This article is looking for original theoretical and empirical contributions as they shed new light on research and are more precise and specific in terms of their unit of analysis.
Note: Compiled by authors		

Content-related criteria ensured that we met relevant literature and narrowed it down to our scope. We therefore build the search string consisting of three categories: sustainability-related, third-party-related, and supply chain-related. The first prerequisite was the inclusion of sustainability criteria whether ecological and/or social in possible combination with the economic pillar. Here we excluded humanitarian logistics/supply chains or disaster relief-related articles as we only focus on traditional management articles having a focus on ensuring sustainability in business supply chains. Furthermore, we excluded articles on the willingness to pay using, e.g. eco-labels. The research objective is not to tackle environmental or social sustainability

challenges. Instead, it is to see consumers' behavior, i.e. the willingness to pay a price premium. Second, the article needed to contain a contribution of a third-party, which is defined according to Clarkson (1995) and our previous discussion. In addition, we only included articles in which the third-party contributes to the inter-organizational supply chain in the findings section. Third, the publication looks at the supply chain from an inter-organizational rather than an intra-organizational (internal) view as we focus on supply chains. Here, we focus our search on articles dealing with a business relationship of for-profit organizations and respectively excluded articles dealing with e.g. hospitals, countries or NGOs' supply chain management. This is in line with our focus on business supply chains. We excluded articles where the third-party did not contribute to the inter-organizational supply chain. Our last applied quality criteria were the originality of the research regarding its type and source of data. In this step, we excluded articles like literature reviews, editorials and meta-theories relying on secondary or tertiary data as we focus on original research. Only original research sheds new light on the research as they are rigorous and traceable in applied methods and are more precise and specific in terms of their unit of analysis.

To understand the relevant terms and increase the sample's quality, we compiled a list of keywords used in prior works in the sustainability and supply chain domain. We based this first sampling of keywords on publications by Gimenez and Tachizawa (2012), Pilbeam et al. (2012), Kembro et al. (2014), and Tachizawa and Wong (2014). This starting list of potentially relevant keywords was extended iteratively by relying on our first unsystematic search. Following Durach et al. (2017), experts and scholars were further included to discuss and refine the search string to maximize the number of relevant hits while minimizing the number of irrelevant ones (Duff, 1996). We divided the keywords into the following categories: third-party, sustainability and supply chain management. The keywords were then used to build the search string using Boolean connectors (AND, OR) and were combined with the asterisk wildcard (*) (see following table).

TABLE 2. Search strings for database search

Database	Search string
Business Source Complete	(TI(stakeholder* OR "multi-stakeholder*" OR initiative* OR partner* OR alliance OR association OR "third part*" OR "third-part*" OR nontraditional OR "non-traditional" OR "non-corporate" OR nonprofit OR "non-profit" OR nongovern* OR "non-govern*" OR NGO OR "cross-sector" OR "bridging organi&ation*" OR intermediar* OR „non chain actor*" OR „non-chain actor*" OR „multi-sector*" OR „multi sector*" OR "non-business*" OR "horizontal collaboration" OR certif* OR standard* OR audit*) OR AB(stakeholder* OR "multi-stakeholder*" OR initiative* OR partner* OR alliance OR association OR "third part*" OR "third-part*" OR nontraditional OR "non-traditional" OR "non-corporate" OR nonprofit OR "non-profit" OR nongovern* OR "non-govern*" OR NGO OR "cross-sector" OR "bridging organi&ation*" OR intermediar* OR „non chain actor*" OR „non-chain actor*" OR „multi-sector*" OR „multi sector*" OR "non-business*" OR "horizontal collaboration" OR certif* OR standard* OR audit*) OR DE(stakeholder* OR "multi-stakeholder*" OR initiative* OR partner* OR alliance OR association OR "third part*" OR "third-part*" OR nontraditional OR "non-traditional" OR "non-corporate" OR nonprofit OR "non-profit" OR nongovern* OR "non-govern*" OR NGO OR "cross-sector" OR "bridging organi&ation*" OR intermediar* OR „non chain actor*" OR „non-chain actor*" OR „multi-sector*" OR „multi sector*" OR "non-business*" OR "horizontal collaboration" OR certif* OR standard* OR audit*))

	AND (TI(sustainab* OR CSR OR "social* responsib*" OR environment* OR green OR ecologic* OR compliance OR governance) OR AB(sustainab* OR CSR OR "social* responsib*" OR environment* OR green OR ecologic* OR compliance OR governance) OR DE(sustainab* OR CSR OR "social* responsib*" OR environment* OR green OR ecologic* OR compliance OR governance)) AND (TI("supply chain*" OR SCM OR "suppl* network*" OR interorgani?ation* OR "inter-organi?ation*" OR purchas* OR procur* OR buyer OR supplier OR "value chain*") OR AB("supply chain*" OR SCM OR "suppl* network*" OR interorgani?ation* OR "inter-organi?ation*" OR purchas* OR procur* OR buyer OR supplier OR "value chain*") OR DE("supply chain*" OR SCM OR "suppl* network*" OR interorgani?ation* OR "inter-organi?ation*" OR purchas* OR procur* OR buyer OR supplier OR "value chain*"))
ABI Inform	(TI(stakeholder* OR "multi-stakeholder*" OR initiative* OR partner* OR alliance OR association OR "third part*" OR "third-part*" OR nontraditional OR "non-traditional" OR "non-corporate" OR nonprofit OR "non-profit" OR nongovern* OR "non-govern*" OR NGO OR "cross-sector" OR "bridging organi&ation*" OR intermediar* OR „non chain actor*" OR „non-chain actor*" OR „multi-sector*" OR „multi sector*" OR "non-business*" OR "horizontal collaboration" OR certif* OR standard* OR audit*) OR AB(stakeholder* OR "multi-stakeholder*" OR initiative* OR partner* OR alliance OR association OR "third part*" OR "third-part*" OR nontraditional OR "non-traditional" OR "non-corporate" OR nonprofit OR "non-profit" OR nongovern* OR "non-govern*" OR NGO OR "cross-sector" OR "bridging organi&ation*" OR intermediar* OR „non chain actor*" OR „non-chain actor*" OR „multi-sector*" OR „multi sector*" OR "non-business*" OR "horizontal collaboration" OR certif* OR standard* OR audit*) OR SU(stakeholder* OR "multi-stakeholder*" OR initiative* OR partner* OR alliance OR association OR "third part*" OR "third-part*" OR nontraditional OR "non-traditional" OR "non-corporate" OR nonprofit OR "non-profit" OR nongovern* OR "non-govern*" OR NGO OR "cross-sector" OR "bridging organi&ation*" OR intermediar* OR „non chain actor*" OR „non-chain actor*" OR „multi-sector*" OR „multi sector*" OR "non-business*" OR "horizontal collaboration" OR certif* OR standard* OR audit*)) AND (TI(sustainab* OR CSR OR "social* responsib*" OR environment* OR green OR ecologic* OR compliance OR governance) OR AB(sustainab* OR CSR OR "social* responsib*" OR environment* OR green OR ecologic* OR compliance OR governance) OR SU(sustainab* OR CSR OR "social* responsib*" OR environment* OR green OR ecologic* OR compliance OR governance)) AND (TI("supply chain*" OR SCM OR "suppl* network*" OR interorgani?ation* OR "inter-organi?ation*" OR purchas* OR procur* OR buyer OR supplier OR "value chain*") OR AB("supply chain*" OR SCM OR "suppl* network*" OR interorgani?ation* OR "inter-organi?ation*" OR purchas* OR procur* OR buyer OR supplier OR "value chain*")

	OR SU("supply chain*" OR SCM OR "suppl* network*" OR interorgani?ation* OR "inter-organi?ation*" OR purchas* OR procur* OR buyer OR supplier OR "value chain*"))
Note: Compiled by authors	

For the following reasons, we looked for relevant management literature in two full-text databases: Business Source Complete (by EBSCO) and ABI/Informs (by Proquest). First, this approach reduces the sampling bias, as acknowledged by Durach et al. (2017) and is applied by Schorsch et al. (2017), Tachizawa and Wong (2014), Tarí (2011), Soosay and Hyland (2015), and Nurunnabi et al. (2018). Second, the utilization of two databases suits our multi-disciplinary scope, particularly regarding the broad existence of different third-parties. Third, using more than one database, we are able to increase the completeness and match relevant literature for our research objective. The search was conducted in publication titles, abstracts and their respective descriptors (EBSCO) or subjects (ABI) for publications between 1987 and December 2019. To reduce the number of irrelevant hits, we pre-selected academic articles and journals only, English-language articles, and set the filter for publications from 1987 onwards as stated above. We started with the Business Source Complete database and retrieved a sample of 5,897 hits. After removing duplicates and non-English articles that passed the database search, we got a sample of 5,823 articles. The ABI/Informs database completed our sample. After applying the above-mentioned criteria of the Business Source Complete database to the ABI Informs database, we retrieved another 2,284 articles leading to a final sample of 8,107 potentially relevant articles. We then applied the quality-related criteria relying on the Journal Impact Factor of the Journal Citation Report 2017 with a rating of 1 or higher (Schorsch et al., 2017; Tarí, 2011). If the Journal Impact Factor was not applicable, we referred to the Academic Journal Guide 2018 by the Chartered Association of Business Schools ranked three or higher, as used by Nurunnabi et al. (2018). This led to our final sample of 4,363 potentially relevant articles.

2.2 Selection of literature

The potentially relevant articles were screened based on the abstracts using a coding sheet. The coding sheet ensured including and excluding articles based on our pre-defined content-related criteria. The decision based on the abstract was rather inclusive to ensure that every potentially relevant article was included. This ensured including relevant articles due to the diversity of third-parties and SSCM. Of the potentially relevant articles, 256 fit our scope. The full article analysis yielded a final sample of 51 publications. Most of the excluded research either dealt with a dyadic view of focal firms and third-parties with no indication that they regard the supply chain from an inter-organizational perspective or contribution and rather provide insights on the intra-organizational contribution of a third-party on the firms' internal management like process improvements. Other articles were excluded due to their focus on the collaboration between focal firms and suppliers without taking into consideration a third-party and its contribution. Other articles were excluded due to their use of secondary data, like systematic literature reviews.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Descriptive results

3.1.1 Distribution of articles over time

Although the search for articles started in 1987, the first articles meeting our criteria appeared

from 2002 onwards. The following decade, the publications were on a relatively low level ranging from one to three publications a year. From 2015 on, there has been a strong increase and thus, from our point of view, signalling a strong interest in the topic. An explanation for that is the Rana Plaza Collapse in 2013, which affected the interest in sustainability topics worldwide. Due to the delay in research and publication processes, we see an increase in 2015. The majority, more than half of the articles, are published beginning of 2017. This shows that the topic has gained very recent relevance in research. An explanation for that could be the Paris Agreement for Climate Action in late 2017, which further increased the interest in ecological topics besides social ones. This interest is then clearly increasing in 2018, as the number of relevant articles has more than doubled compared to 2017.

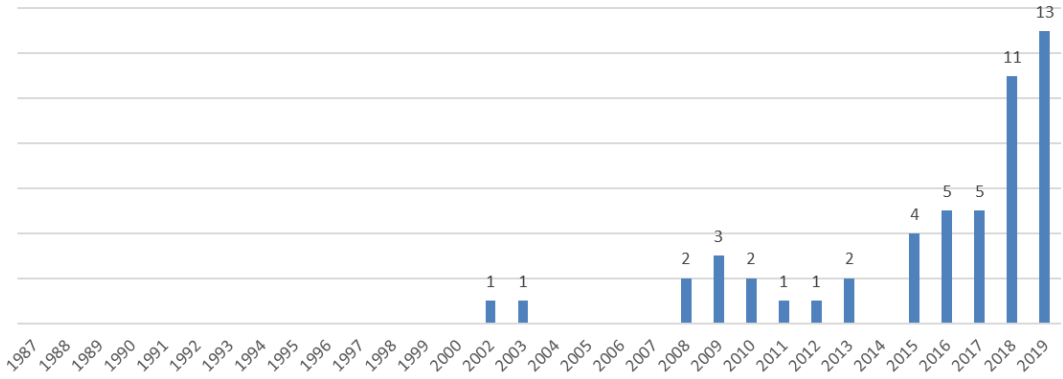

FIGURE 1. Distribution of number of articles per year

Note: Compiled by authors

3.1.2 Distribution of articles in journals

The distribution of articles across journals is equilibrated. Each journal is responsible for at most five articles, corresponding to about 10% of the published articles. This indicates that the topic of third-parties has attracted the interest of different fields of research. Interestingly, no SCM-specific journals are among the top 3 journals by many articles. This shows that, on the one hand, the interest for third-parties as actors in sustainable supply chains is not yet "mainstream" in the SCM discipline. On the other hand, it also shows multi-disciplinary interest. Despite the variety of publications in journals, with the low number of relevant articles, we have to underpin that third-parties are so far a purely understudied topic.

TABLE 3. Distribution of articles in journals

Journal	Count
Business Strategy and the Environment	5
International Journal of Production Economics	5
Journal of Cleaner Production	4
Journal of Business Ethics	3
Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management	3
International Journal of Physical Distribution & Logistics Management	3
Regulation & Governance	2
International Journal of Operations & Production Management	2
Production and Operations Management	2

ILR Review	2
Supply Chain Management: An International Journal	2
Journal of Economic Geography	1
Journal of Supply Chain Management	1
Journal of Industrial Ecology	1
International Journal of Operations and Production Management	1
Electronic Commerce Research and Applications	1
Environmental and Resource Economics	1
Journal of Environmental Economics & Management	1
Ecological Economics	1
Journal of Operations Management	1
Production Planning & Control	1
New political economy	1
Asia Pacific Viewpoint	1
Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal	1
Annals of Operations Research	1
Agriculture and Human Values	1
Sustainable Development	1
Accounting and Business Research	1
Journal of Agrarian Change	1
Total	**51**
Note: Compiled by authors	

3.2 Theory application in third-party-SSCM literature

3.2.1 Importance of theory

In order to provide insights from the past and giving opportunity to the future we developed this review by looking from various perspectives on the field. The key element for this section is the theory, as it is a prerequisite to publication in top journals (Carter & Easton, 2011). Whether to confirm existing theories or develop new ones, they all work toward the same goals – enlighten blind spots and contribute knowledge to a certain objective. This leads to building a fundamental understanding of aspects, which is the aim of this article. In particular, this is necessary for understanding third-parties as actors in SSCM and, by that establishing SSCM as an academic and practice-based part of the SCM discipline. With that, we close the academic-practice gap, as theoretical work needs to be based on and complemented with empirical evidence. However, there is a risk when using well-established theories: missing new perspectives as the theory specifies where to look. Although understanding third-parties and growing as a discipline, SSCM needs a theoretical base, whether it is coming from well-established concepts or looking for the unknown from a grounded perspective (Carter & Easton, 2011). For researchers to provide theoretically based research, the first step must know what theories and how they have been applied. In light of these past shortcomings, we provide a holistic review of theories for investigating third-parties in SSCM.

3.2.2 Theories applied

There has been a lack of effort in research to build on the existing theories to develop new perspectives. Only a small proportion of articles use theories as a basis. Thus, in more than half of the articles, authors tend to present their empirical findings without attempting to explore theoretical concepts. Of the theories used, the focus is mainly on major theories traditionally assigned to other academic fields. In particular, Stakeholder Theory, Transaction Cost

Economics, and Institutional Theory are among the top three theories used, consistent with Touboulic and Walker (2015). Figure 2 shows that the three theories proportionally are more cited and used. In particular, they sum up to more than 40% of the papers utilizing these top three theories. Some articles use more than one theory.

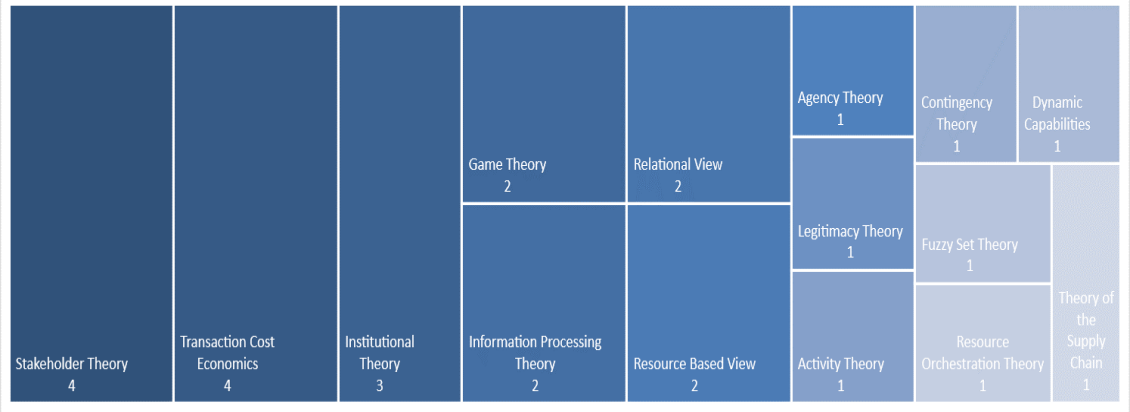

FIGURE 2. Theories applied with count of articles utilizing the respective theory

Note: Compiled by authors

This explains why the numbers in the figure do not add up to the total number of articles. However, the import and use of existing theories to develop the understanding of third-parties and their role in SSCM needs to be improved. First, authors need to assess the compatibility of the theories they use because they were developed in a particular context and discipline and may only apply to those contexts. This means that articles may need to remember important parts of the objective they are trying to investigate (Carter & Easton, 2011; Touboulic & Walker, 2015). Despite the use of major theories and their shortcomings, we see that articles overall use a variety of theories, but only in a low volume. This indicates that the research field is still growing and hopefully, more minor theories will be used in the future. Only half of the articles are theoretically grounded or supporting theory extension, which is alarming as theory is key to sound results and can provide insights. So, one could state that research on third-parties in SSCM is actually divided in descriptive research as well as limited and fragmented in theoretical contributions. From our point of view, this shows that the field is still immature regarding its theoretical contributions, which is in line with other reviews in SSCM (Hoejmose & Adrien-Kirby, 2012; Pagell & Shevchenko, 2014; Touboulic & Walker, 2015).

3.2.3 Theory and research methods applied

3.2.3.1 Research methods applied

This research provide insights into the applied methods to understand the intersection of theory and methods. The vast majority of the articles are empirical. However, the articles are qualitative. In particular, case studies are the method of choice, indicating that the topic of third-parties in SSCM is still in an intermediary stage of development and is still gaining maturity. Only one article tries to bridge the gap and combines qualitative with quantitative research methods. Therefore, we see that the focus is still on penetrating the issue in depth. Due to the qualitative articles, a fragmented picture has developed so far. With our review, we provide an overview of this fragmented picture.

TABLE 4. Research methods applied

	Empirical	Non-Empirical	Sum
Qualitative	**35**	**1**	**36**
Action Research	1	0	1
Case Study	33	0	33
Conceptual	0	1	1
Design Science Approach	1	0	1
Qualitative/Quantitative	**1**	**0**	**1**
Quantitative	**9**	**5**	**14**
AHP	0	1	1
Cluster Analysis	1	0	1
Experiment	1	0	1
Modelling	0	4	4
Regression Analysis	2	0	2
Structural Equation Modelling	2	0	2
others	3	0	3
Sum	**45**	**6**	**51**
Note: Compiled by authors			

3.2.3.2 Theories and methods applied across the articles

In the first step, we have looked at the importance and utilization of theory in the literature. After we have described the methods applied, we now look at how theory and method match. Overall, we see a strong focus on qualitative work, whereas just half of the articles contribute qualitatively to a theoretical perspective. In particular, a case study is the method of choice. From a theoretical perspective, we see that the top theories used are major theories with no specific association with sustainability or SCM. While on the one hand, relying on these mature theories means that concepts are "fire-proofed" it also means that they are 1) rooted in their discipline, 2) are developed long ago, and 3) bringing empirical specifications with them like firm characteristics or social consensus at the time the theory was developed. This risks that using the theories "the new" or "the unknown" is, if at all, recognized in another perspective than it could be by using a more modern theory. So, it seems that the knowledge we have regarding third-parties in SSCM we just know from a few articles looking with the same "goggles".

Quantitative research has played a minor role so far. Research on third-parties in SSCM has not found a certain level of maturity yet where we can see that knowledge is considered an asset, and proxies can be deducted from the theories to investigate specific objectives. We can argue that research is still on an experience level meaning that doing research is like a journey rather than "spot-oriented".

TABLE 5. Theories and methods applied across the articles

	Method		
Theory	**qualitative**	**quantitative**	**mixed**
Stakeholder Theory	2	2	
Transaction Cost Economics	3	1	
Institutional Theory	1	2	
Game Theory		2	
Information Processing Theory	2		
Relational View	1	1	
Resource Based View	1	1	

Agency Theory	1		
Legitimacy Theory		1	
Activity Theory			1
Contingency Theory	1		
Dynamic Capabilities	1		
Fuzzy Set Theory		1	
Resource Orchestration Theory	1		
Theory of the Supply Chain	1		
Note: Compiled by authors			

3.3 Analysis on how theories have been used for investigating third-parties in SSCM

The following analysis focuses on the top three major theories identified in the descriptive section. This procedure is valid in the first step for the following reasons. First, major theories have a long-lasting history and are contextually rooted, leaving little room for building but instead testing the theory. However, as they originate in other disciplines, it is valuable to look at them as a first step to providing a holistic picture. Second, for the sake of limitation, we argue for focusing first on these major theories utilized as, from our point of view, they are at the forefront of research and with that providing momentum to the research field. Thus, this provides the opportunity to derive future research directions. Third, we used this approach as it is established by Touboulic and Walker (2015) and builds on a common understanding in academia. In each section, we first outline the individual articles and their findings. We summarise and synthesise the findings at the end of each section.

3.3.1 Stakeholder Theory

Key assumption of the Stakeholder Theory is that constituents (following called stakeholders) influence the firm. As such, stakeholders are defined as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (Freeman, 2014, p. 25). The relationship stakeholders have with firms comes from the firms' operations producing externalities and in turn affecting the stakeholders. The stakeholders can be viewed as internal (i.e. employees) or external (i.e. members of the community). In particular, both try to reduce the negative and increase the positive externalities (Zhu & Sarkis, 2004). Other authors view stakeholders from a primary and secondary perspective (Clarkson, 1995). The difference regarding them from an internal and external perspective lies in the view of the influence they have. Primary stakeholders directly influence the firms in close business relationships, whereas secondary stakeholders influence firms by influencing primary stakeholders or advocating for others. In this sense, primary stakeholders are for example, suppliers, employees, and customers. Secondary stakeholders are nongovernmental organizations, governments etc., which reflect our understanding of third-parties. Clarkson (1995) complements that in particular, governments play an extra role as they provide infrastructure, regulations, and laws that must be obeyed. However, stakeholders play a vital role in exerting pressure on firms to behave sustainably in their supply chains. Accordingly, firms respond to the claims of stakeholders to legitimize their existence and license to operate (Freeman, 2014).

Mani and Gunasekaran (2018) use the Stakeholder Theory to investigate the stakeholder forces on firms and their influence on enhancing their social sustainability in supply chains. Their results show that external stakeholders have a high value in exerting pressure on firms due to the lack of regulation and its inefficiencies. In particular, they show that the pressure positively links to firms adopting social sustainability.

Park-Poaps and Rees (2010) investigate stakeholder forces, which lead to an orientation on social sustainability as Mani does. They found two dimensions relevant to our research objective: internal direction and external partnership. Their results show that industry peers are significant for the internal direction and to the external partnership. In particular, they show that industry peer pressure builds internal values for firms working towards sustainability. Nevertheless, they also show that industry peers pressuring the firms towards working on sustainability in their supply chains regarding their suppliers.

Thorlakson (2018) uses the Stakeholder Theory to investigate why and how firms change their sourcing practices. His results show that stakeholder forces influence the sourcing practice preferred by firms. While in the beginning, firms utilized industry initiatives due to pressure by the media, they turned to utilize a commitment to sustainability certification. NGOs started to question and pressure firms, so they changed towards own-supply chain programs individually working on suppliers' sustainability.

Huq et al. (2016) take up the findings from Mani and Gunasekaran (2018), Park-Poaps and Rees (2010) and Thorlakson (2018). They investigate how external factors lead to the development of social management capabilities for ensuring social sustainability in supply chains. Their findings show that disasters like the Rana Plaza collapse is a trigger for stakeholders. In turn, the stakeholders following exerting pressure on firms to transform and enhance their sustainability agenda in their respective supply chains. In particular, they show that firms with low- or medium-level social management capabilities were motivated due to the pressure to develop more outstanding social management capabilities quickly. The buying firm following developed auditing capabilities to audit its suppliers on sustainability.

Stakeholder Theory has been used to investigate the influence of third-parties on firms. The attention of the third-parties on the firms stem from the activities of the firms, which third-parties see as relevant to them. In particular, Mani and Gunasekaran (2018), Park-Poaps and Rees (2010) and Thorlakson (2018) show that third-parties have a high impact on the firms' SSCM. Huq and others take up on the findings and extend the results showing that the pressure of third-parties leads to firms building up social management capabilities, i.e. audit capabilities for ensuring sustainability in their supply chains (Huq et al., 2016). However, Thorlakson (2018) shows that stakeholders have a changing role with different interests regarding the currently used governance approach. Their changing role means that different third-parties address the firms in different ways. This is in line with findings of Huq et al. (2016), as industry shocks leading to increased pressure of third-parties triggering and driving the sustainability agenda of firms. This also means, that from time to time industry shocks lead to a recalibration and shift of third-parties' focus, which in turn leads to differing sustainability agendas of firms. Besides showing the positive results of stakeholders on the transformation of SSCM they show that policies and regulations alone are only effective if other third-parties are monitoring or auditing them (Delmas & Toffel, 2004; Fox, 2004).

3.3.2 Transaction Cost Economics

Key assumption of the Transaction Cost Economics Theory (TCE) is that make or buy decisions are determined by both the price of the purchased item and its transaction costs (Williamson, 1973). The transaction costs occur ex-ante or ex-post of transactions (Williamson, 2008). Ex-ante costs can occur in information-seeking processes or in negotiating contractual terms. Ex-post costs can occur in enforcing contractual agreements, like monitoring processes (Rindfleisch & Heide, 1997). Consequently, firms are continuously in search for the optimal governance mode for their transactions, which is the one with the lowest total costs (Williamson, 1998). The TCE rests on two key assumptions, human behavior and dimensions of transactions. The first assumption is human behavior like bounded rationality (constraints of decision makers'

cognitive capabilities and rationality) and opportunism (tendency towards self-seeking interest deceiving others). Opportunism is, in particular, challenging in SCM as participants in the supply chain have little or no transparency, leaving them vulnerable and exploitable. The second is the main dimensions of transactions, like asset specificity and uncertainty (Rindfleisch & Heide, 1997).

Ciliberti and others investigate how a third-parties' standard (SA8000, a social standard) improves the information flows through the supply chain, so that information asymmetries are reduced, trust is built, and coordination in the supply chain is facilitated (Ciliberti et al., 2009). By relying on the TCE perspective, their results show that due to the utilization of the third-parties' standard both ex-ante and ex-post transaction costs are reduced. In particular, they show that ex-ante costs for buying firms for searching and negotiating suppliers are reduced. As suppliers obey the standard rules, buying firms can pick suppliers accordingly, and in addition, no further negotiation is needed, as the rules of the standard are mandatory. Ex-post, they show that due to the utilization of standards and the respective monitoring of obeying to the standards rules, the buying firm also reduces its monitoring and enforcement costs. Further, bonding costs for both the supplier and buying firm are reduced as the certification of the standard shows to other actors the certificate holders' compliance with the standard. Bonding costs are, in this sense, costs that an organization bears, showing that it sticks to certain rules provided by a binding standard (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). In comparison to monitoring costs, which are carried by the principal, the bonding costs are carried by the agent. However, they both have the same purpose and incur to collect information on the behavior of the agent.

The use TCE to identify contextual factors influencing firms' governance mode to ensure sustainability in their supply chains (Meinlschmidt et al., 2018). Their results show that environmental uncertainty consists of third-party pressure and product and industry salience. Although, third-parties like NGOs, unions and media have no contractual relationship with buying firms, they pressure them and are powerful to advocate on behalf of others. The same holds for third-parties from the industry. In particular, firms are of focal interest to third-parties if they are visible in the market and their respective industry. In their results, Meinlschmidt show that the higher the stakeholder salience, respective industry salience is, the higher the firms' perceived sustainability risk is. Besides environmental uncertainty, they show that behavioral uncertainty influences perceived sustainability risk of firms. In particular, they show that past sustainability-related incidents at supplier sites or in the peer industry increase the perceived sustainability risk of firms. Meinlschmidt explains this as firms experience incidents at their related supply chain, i.e. supplier sites, they build up awareness and the perception to risks to future problems. In addition to investigating the influence of TCEs contextual pressures from a third-party point of view on the perceived sustainability risks they also provided evidence on how third-parties are part of the solution. They show that there are two types of approaches (third-parties) firms utilize to ensure sustainability in their supply chain. They consider the alliance-based, and compliance-based approaches as hybrid approaches firms utilize when perceiving a medium level of sustainability risk. Both approaches require a medium level of resources from the firms. The alliance-based approach (participating in industry alliances) enables firms to rely on the alliances' standards and its provided services i.e. monitor suppliers. As the alliance provides mutually agreed certifications for buyers and suppliers, transaction costs are reduced (Tate et al., 2011). The compliance-based approach, however shows no significant effect on enhancing sustainability in supply chains. This somewhat symbolic act of having codes of conducts suppliers sign is regarded as greenwashing (Blome et al., 2017; Lund-Thomsen & Lindgreen, 2014).

Rosen and others used parts of the Transaction Cost Economics to investigate the role of third-parties in the development and implementation of supplier management programs to enhance

environmental sustainability in the computer industry (Rosen et al., 2002). Their results show that the development of a third-party standard is the result of the absence of government regulations. However, the voluntary standard reduces transaction costs for utilizing members, both ex-ante and ex-post. Ex-ante the transaction costs for negotiation and discussing specifics of the data exchange between the supply chain members is reduced. This is due to the fixed terms and scope of information for environmental elements, which needs to be exchanged using the standard. Ex-post, the transaction costs for monitoring are also reduced, as the standard legitimizes the information provided by the supplier. Therefore, while utilizing and relying on the standard, both the supplier and the buyer have reduced transaction costs i.e. coordination due to the guidelines and set of rules provided by the standard.

Xu and others utilize Transaction Cost Economics to investigate leveraging industry standards to improve the environmental sustainability in supply chains (Xu et al., 2018). Their findings show that utilizing a third-party industry standard is a highly asset-specific investment for the participants. In particular, the industry standard specifies business processes and their respective data to be exchanged between the participants. This needs higher system integration, leading to better participants understanding of their own and their partners' processes. Consequently, using the industry standard creates a greater positive interdependence on the utilizing participants, leading to improved inter-organizational relationships and collaboration as well as control of the participants. This ultimately leads to an enhanced environmental sustainability of the participants.

TCE has a long history in SCM originally used to explain sourcing phenomena (Grover & Malhotra, 2003). Recently, it has been used to investigate phenomena in SSCM, too (Delmas & Montiel, 2009). From the above findings, we see two different streams of its application. On the one hand, Xu et al. (2018), Ciliberti et al. (2009), and Rosen et al. (2002) look at the transaction costs themselves, while Meinlschmidt et al. (2018) look at the contextual factors of the TCE explaining the use of the governance mode. However, they all show that due to uncertainty firms externalize SSCM practices to enhance their sustainability (Vachon & Klassen, 2006). Xu et al. (2018), Ciliberti et al. (2009) and Rosen et al. (2002) show that firms rely on third-parties and their provided standards. Utilizing these standards reduces transaction costs for firms ex-ante and ex-post. The standards reduce information asymmetry and improve the transparency, coordination and relationship between the utilizing supply chain partners. In that, Meinlschmidt et al. (2018) not just show that third-parties influence and increase the perceived sustainability risk of firms due to stakeholder pressure (third-party) but that they are a solution for reducing the risk, too. They show that third-parties are used in a hybrid mode of governance with a medium level of resource intensity needed by the firms This is in line with the findings of Ciliberti et al. (2009), providing evidence of how third-parties reduce transaction costs ex-post in monitoring or marketing sustainability performance. However, in the case of Meinlschmidt et al. (2018) third-parties ensure sustainability in the supply chain by enabling firms to rely on the third-parties' standards and provided services. Due to mutually agreed certifications, the transaction costs are therefore reduced for both buyers and suppliers (Tate et al., 2011). On the contrary, the compliance-based approach does not significantly enhance sustainability in supply chains. This rather symbolic act of having codes of conducts suppliers sign could be regarded as greenwashing (Lund-Thomsen & Lindgreen, 2014; Blome et al., 2017).

3.3.3 Institutional Theory

The institutional theory assumes that firms' practices and strategies are influenced and shaped by the environment in which firms operate (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). These environments influence firms in the form of external pressures, so-called institutional pressures. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue that firms are confronted by three institutional pressures: coercive, mimetic, and normative. Coercive pressures are exerted on firms by other organizations upon which the

firms are dependent or by cultural expectations in the society within which the firm works (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Mimetic pressures originate from firms' response modeling themselves after other more successful firms (Bhakoo & Choi, 2013; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Normative pressures come from firms' professionalization and mainly originate from customers' ethical values and ecological thinking (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Zhang et al. (2017) use the Institutional Theory to investigate supplier development practices. They find that to develop supply chain and social responsibility, and firms apply audits performed by third-parties. However, the application and utilization of third-parties' audits are a response to institutional pressures and are regarded as indirect supplier development practices.

Mani and Gunasekaran (2018) apply the Institutional Theory to identify influences on firms to develop socially responsible supply chains. Their results show that regulatory pressure from third-parties positively affects social sustainability adoption as the regulatory mechanisms still play a crucial role in enforcing laws. Furthermore, they show that social sustainability adoption results in suppliers' social performance, which increases the suppliers' customers' (focal firm) lead time, quality and reliability of products. This improves the supplier's performance as the focal firms' operational performance increases.

Xu et al. (2018) use the Institutional Theory to investigate how the use of an industry-standard enables knowledge sharing, process integration, environmental collaboration, and control among supply chain partners, leading to the environmental performance of firms. Their results show the importance of firms participating in third-parties with other members. Participation in standards consortia positively moderates the effects of industry standards use on knowledge sharing and process integration. In particular, while participating in third-parties firms attend various events like site visits. These site visits increase the mimetic pressure the firms are exposed to. In turn, these firms are then encouraged to work on their environmental performance e.g. in using and adapting the third-parties provided system and standard. In addition, attending third-parties' events is regarded as a reminder of the firms' need to enhance their process integration and information sharing and, ultimately, their environmental performance. They view this as normative pressure on the firms to use the third-parties standard effectively to reach the overall goal of all participants.

The above findings show that third-parties are, on the one side, the initiator of sustainability transformation and, on the other hand, the result of pressures. In contrast, Mani and Gunasekaran (2018) show third-parties pressuring firms to work on their sustainability agendas. Zhang et al. (2017) show that third-parties could solve the pressures from the third-parties. While Mani and Gunasekaran (2018) findings are in line with previous literature showing that coercive pressures through laws and government regulations improve environmental awareness and drive environmental management practices (Sarkis et al., 2011). Xu et al. (2018) findings are similar, as they show that institutional pressures lead to using of third-parties. If firms than are utilizing them and participating e.g. on events this leads to further pressure as the participants in the third-party are all working toward the same goal. Zhang et al. (2017) findings provide evidence and show that by utilizing a third-party for supplier development, the firms are responding to the institutional pressures and securing their positions and legitimacy by conforming to pressures. However, applying the Institutional Theory shows a high congruence with findings from the Stakeholder Theory. In particular, it shows that third-parties are mimetic pressures. In that, they influence firms to transform their sustainability agenda.

4. TOWARDS FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

It is striking that overall just half of the articles actually use theories. Most of the articles rather have an explanatory or descriptive character. Overall, the most popular theories utilized fail to holistically capture sustainability and third-parties in SSCM.

To date, third-parties in SSCM have been primarily investigated qualitatively. In order to investigate third-parties in SSCM in a balanced way, research should utilize theories from other fields (outside the major theories) and extend the utilization of research methods. Therefore, extending the utilization of research methods, in particular utilizing quantitative methods could first proof the qualitative developed concepts, second detail and contrast various theoretical perspectives and third balance the research landscape overall by testing against a broader perspective (e.g. quantity). Ultimately, this will lead to maturity in the research field.

However, this leads to our first two propositions:

P1: Utilizing, testing and extending other theories outside the major theories utilized so far will help the field to gain maturity and develop its own theory.

P2: While pursuing balancing theories, researchers should utilize more quantitative research methods for testing and balancing results in the field.

As our findings provide results mostly on third-parties on an organizational level, we see potential to shift the focus from rather major theoretical perspectives to minor theoretical perspectives. This shift will lead to a more holistic view on third-parties in SSCM and ultimately will lead to more multilevel research as it is filling white spots in SSCM overall and captures the multi-dimensional practice of third-parties in SSCM (Astley and Van de Ven, 1983; Klein et al., 1999). On the journey to more multilevel research, minor perspectives such as the focus on leadership and firms' culture (Doppelt, 2003; Dunphy et al., 2003) will enlighten the roles individuals in third-parties play in contributing to the firms' SSCM and achieving the associated goals. In particular, we see individuals as success factors to decisions and interactions towards meeting sustainability goals. Therefore, we propose:

P3: To fully understand third-parties in SSCM researchers need to apply more multilevel research. Meeting this research objective, we argue for contrastive research focusing on minor theoretical perspectives.

From our point of view, SSCM and the role of third-parties as an evolution of (SCM) business activities and relationships has not been considered in depth yet. This can be further investigated by utilizing different theoretical lenses for understanding in depth the lifecycle of relationships. First, following our previous propositions we see an opportunity for investigating the roles of third-parties e.g. by utilizing Natural Capitalism (Hawken et al., 1999) or Evolutionary Theory (Nelson and Winter, 1982) to investigate how firms adapt to changing environments and what role third-parties play in the development of knowledge. Second, in addition, Organisational Change Theory could be utilized for further drilling down to minor theoretical perspectives. By that, it could help looking into behavioral aspects of change in firms and what role third-parties play in that. Third, contrasting the previous, Social Exchange Theory (Emerson, 1976) or Social Network Theory (Granovetter, 1973) could be used to investigate how firms adapt to their changing environments and sustainability challenges by building up relationships (weak VS strong ties) with third-parties. Investigating, not just the why but also the how (i.e. development of social capital) could be interesting. In line with that, we propose:

P4: Rather than viewing SSCM and the roles of third-parties from a static and revolutionary standpoint, investigating in particular the relation to firms' (sustainability) performance, we encourage future research to look at it from an evolutionary perspective understanding the lifecycle of relationships and transformations in firms' activities.

As we show in our descriptives and analysis section, less than half of the articles utilizing theories. This means that half of the articles are from our point of view purely descriptive. Despite the current low levels of theory utilization, we see a momentum in utilization of theories. In particular, we welcome the growing number of not just theory building efforts (qualitative methods) but also theory testing efforts (quantitative methods) in recent articles. This direction on the one side will provide further insights and on the other side provide directions for future

research. However, the growing utilization and development of theories either qualitative or quantitative in nature should further rely and capitalize connections with practice. This is valuable as firms are facing real-world challenges of sustainability but theories could provide frameworks for dealing with these challenges. To put it in the words of Lewin "there is nothing as practical as a good theory." (Lewin, 1943, p. 118) This leads to our final proposition:

P5: To develop the research field of third-parties in SSCM, and move beyond descriptive research, further theory building and testing is necessary in relying on and applying frameworks in practice.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This systematic literature review provided an overview of how theories have been used for investigating third-parties in SSCM.

In our analysis, the investigation on third-parties is still in its infancy, as most articles do not utilize any theory. In addition, the articles that utilize theories rely mainly on significant theories, which historically stem from other disciplines. This comes with the cost of limiting and framing results to the theories' origin instead of looking at the topic from a new perspective or even inductively or grounded, producing new insights.

Based on our investigation, we propose future research directions to fill the gaps in the role of third-parties in SSCM . However, the fragile theoretical investigation is a concern that needs to be addressed in future research. Despite the fragile utilization of theories, testing and further developing existing frameworks is good advice for the field to grow consistently. This is in line with Carter and Easton (2011), who propose utilizing multiple theoretical perspectives for investigating sustainability and respective third-parties. Besides, we encourage theory building by exploiting empirical richness and developing new theoretical perspectives. By that, researchers need to identify the unusual and sometimes foggy to create knowledge.

This systematic literature reviews contributes to research threefold. First, by systematically reviewing the academic literature on sustainability and third-parties, this article provides a state of the art view on the relevant topic of sustainability. In addition, it looks on the theory utilization in academia, which is the origin of most academic work. Second, by synthesizing the literature this article contributes giving a novel perspective on the literature. It argues that theories have been used in a limited way leading to a narrowed perspective on sustainability and third-parties. Following, the paper contributes by calling for further research. Third, based on the synthesizing of the results this article provides a research agenda with propositions. These propositions could be used for further investigating the topic of sustainability and third-parties. The propositions can be used in qualitative and quantitative research adding knowledge to the literature.

By calling for further research, we acknowledge the shortcomings of the systematic literature review. We especially acknowledge the drawbacks of the literature sampling criteria and the analysis. Therefore, we call for reproducing our results periodically first to reproduce and consolidate our results and, more importantly, review the development of the field.

Lastly, we want to point out the managerial implications. The Financial and Economic Crisis in 2008 and the recent Corona Crisis did not diminish the interest in sustainability and the role third parties play. On the contrary, both crises encouraged actors to rethink and find new ways and solutions to how sustainability issues can be solved together in collaboration. Enhancing the relationship between academia and practice is essential to test theoretical investigations and validate the results. Besides, moving closer to collaborating, organizations should rethink how they view and control, e.g. their stakeholders. The synthesis has shown that research utilizes major theories like stakeholder theory, transaction cost economics and institutional theory. As practice uses research, the organization's view and control of stakeholders logically rely on these

theoretical constructs. From the paper's point of view, it could be good advice if organizations view and control their stakeholders in various ways by extending their point of view based on these significant theories.

However, this systematic literature review is a first step towards investigating theoretical dynamics to broaden and confirm our findings on third-parties in SSCM.

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