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# Managers' awareness of fashionable management concepts: An empirical study

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## KEYWORDS

Management concept;  
Management fashion;  
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**Summary** Literature on fashionable management concepts has a strong focus on the supply side. Attention to the demand side is usually restricted to implementation questions. However, between supply and implementation, there is an 'awareness phase', which has been neglected up till now. The level of awareness will vary between managers. As a result, one might expect that depending on certain contextual and individual characteristics, different subgroups of managers are aware of various concepts in different ways. As a result, the management population is not homogenous, but rather segmented. Hypotheses have been formulated to explain this segmentation based on contextual and individual characteristics. These hypotheses have been tested with 60 different management concepts on a Belgian sample of 681 respondents. The results showed the expected segmentation, but also raised interesting explanatory questions.

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## Introduction

Over the last 15 years, the emergence and disappearance of new management concepts in the management community received a growing interest of management scholars. In a variety of studies, many aspects of these fashions in management thinking have been studied from different perspectives. Especially, the characteristics of the fashion process received a lot of attention. Management fashion was then defined as: "*transitory collective beliefs that certain techniques are at the forefront of management progress*" (Abrahamson, 1996, p. 254). Based on this idea, studies focused on the process of creation and diffusion of these fashion-

able concepts within the management population. This way, progress has been made in understanding this intriguing phenomenon.

The underlying model of most of this work, Management Fashion Theory or neo-institutional view of management fashions (Abrahamson, 1996; Abrahamson & Fairchild, 2001), suggested both a supply and a demand side. Most academic attention has subsequently been paid to the supply side. The level of popularity of a concept is usually measured by looking at citation indexes, which is essentially an indication of suppliers' activities. Such citation indexes do not look at the demand side itself. Managers demanding fashions are rather seen as a homogenous group, who in a dichotomous way, either implement or do not implement fashionable concepts. In this, the Management Fashion

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Theory stream hardly has given any systematic thought to which extent different managers are aware of concepts and how they perceive and interpret fashionable management concepts in different contexts. In this paper, we started to fill this theoretically and empirically unexplored territory between the supply of fashionable concepts and the actual implementation. This way we increase our understanding about the managers' awareness of concepts as a sign of the diffusion of concepts in the management population.

In this paper, we focused on the actual demand side: the managers themselves. Our main goal was to explore their levels of awareness of fashionable concepts. Awareness may range from being completely ignorant (absence of awareness), to scanning and noticing, to knowing the full details and to interpreting (Daft & Weick, 1984; Walsh, 1994). When analyzing these differences in awareness, it became also possible to further explore the heterogeneity of the management population and to look for explanatory factors for the observed differences. The central question we raised was: which fashionable management concepts are managers (not) aware of. Can differences in awareness be explained on the basis of some individual and contextual characteristics? We quantitatively explored these issues by using a list of 60 different management concepts in a sample of 681 Belgian respondents.

## Theoretical background

As mentioned, studies related to management fashions usually focused on the supply side of the market. Major attention was given to concepts' presence in media and the carriers of management concepts as consultants, professional organisations, gurus and academics (Alvarez, Luis, & Jesper, 2005). Especially, the creation and diffusion process of management fashions and the different roles of these professional communicators in translating the message to their respective publics have been addressed (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996).

Also some, be it to a much lesser extent and usually merely theoretical, attention has been given to the demand side. Especially arguments why managers might buy fashions have been theoretically highlighted (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999) with hardly any empirical work. It is striking that this other side of the market – the demand side – has been scarcely studied. Who really listen to messages concerning fashionable concepts and how these persons actually handle these messages, is still an open area where many new insights are to be expected. Managers may not be seen as solely passive receivers, as an audience victimized by the clever tricks of management fashion setters and transmission agents. In fact, management concepts must be seen as enabling new thoughts and have an active aspect in which the receivers themselves clearly play a role. There is a forceful potential in the narrative for what might be called the shaping of the receiver's subjectivity and stance towards issues. Each receiver puts its own spin on the stories and is involved in acquiring discourse (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996). Some critiques of neo-institutional fashion theory consolidated this line of reasoning and explicitly disapproved of the over-emphasis of the supply side and the

strict distinction between producers and consumers (Benders, 1999; Benders & van Veen, 2001). Hence, knowledge and behavior of the demand side or "the consuming managers" is crucial in the understanding of the emergence, diffusion and disappearance of fashionable management concepts.

Once we focus on the consumption of management concepts, it turns out that the empirical attention to this aspect is also rather limited. These scant systematic studies related particularly to how concepts are implemented (Benders & van Veen, 2001; Doorewaard & van Bijsterveld, 2001). Often, when discussing the implementation of management concepts, a distinction between adoption and entrenchment was made. *Adoption* refers to the selection and initial use by an organization that had not used the concept previously (Zeitz, Mittal, & McAulay, 1999). This initial use refers to the talking, to discourse about the management concept within the organization, and eventually – but not necessarily – some minor activity (Benders, 1999). *Entrenchment* then, means the presence of a retained management concept, which turned into a real practice within an organization, such that the abandonment of it is unlikely (Zeitz et al., 1999).

In this article, we were especially interested in the phase before the adoption of a concept by an organization. Adoption implies an organizational act and assumes a decision making process within organizations that has led to a positive choice for a certain concept. However, before a decision is possible, managers need to be aware of the existence of fashionable concepts and they have to make sense of it. Termed differently, a cognitive process needs to take place before any action can be taken. In addition, before managers can collectively (e.g., within an organization) decide to act, some kind of individual 'awareness' of the available concepts is needed.

We define 'awareness' of fashionable concepts as the extent to which individual managers have cognitively registered the existence of a concept and the extent to which they perceive themselves as knowledgeable about its content. This definition is rather broad and offers the possibility to study the spread of concepts in a population of managers and to categorize managers in terms of their level of awareness, ranging from complete unawareness to being able to perfectly explain its content. This definition of awareness does not make any assumptions about the details of the underlying cognitive processes, the views managers have on a particular concept, nor how managers got in touch with these concepts. This approach is close to 'brand awareness' as is used in the field of marketing. Brand awareness is related to the strength of a brand in the memory of a consumer as reflected by a consumers' ability to identify it (Keller, 2003, p. 453).

To define awareness of management concepts in line with brand awareness in the marketing approach is useful considering the straightforward purpose of this article. However, the underlying dynamic of cognitive processes seem more complicated in the case of management concepts considering that these concepts are knowledge products. This knowledge aspect of concepts has implications beyond the definition of a brand as being a 'name, term, sign, symbol, or design' (Keller, 2003, p. 3). Management concepts can play an important role in the process of 'sense-

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