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MANAGERS' AWARENESS OF FASHIONABLE MANAGEMENT CONCEPTS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

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.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last fifteen 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: 254). Based on this idea, studies focused on the process of creation and diffusion of these fashionable 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 1991; Abrahamson 1996; Abrahamson and 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 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 and 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 (e.g., Alvarez, Mazza et al. 2005; Frenkel 2005; Scarbrough, Robertson et al. 2005) and the carriers of management concepts as consultants (Huczynski 1993; Clark and Salaman 1996; Jackson 1996; Clark and Greatbach 2004), professional organisations (Swan and Newell 1995; Greenwood, Hinings et al. 2002), gurus (Fincham 1995; Benders, van den Berg et al. 1998; Fincham and Evans 1999) and academics (Danell, Engwall et al. 1997; Graham and Williams 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 and Joerges 1996; Scarbrough and Swan 2001).

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 (e.g.,Gill and Whittle 1992; Fincham 1995;Abrahamson 1996; Jackson 1996; Kieser 1997; Abrahamson and 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 to it 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 (Watson and Baggml-Chiappini 1998). 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 (Kieser 1997; Benders 1999; Benders and van Veen 2001; Green 2004; Sturdy 2004; Morris and Lancaster 2006).

Hence, knowledge and behaviour 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 den Berg et al. 1998; Benders and van Veen 2001; Doorewaard and van Bijsterveld 2001; Lozeau, Langley et al. 2002). 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 et al. 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; Benders and van Bijsterveld 2000). *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, Mittal 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 fashionable concepts, 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 (for example within an organization) decide to act, some kind of individual `awareness' of the available concepts is needed.

We used the term 'awareness' of concepts because we were particularly interested in the cognitive registration of concepts by managers without making any ex post assumption in terms of their level of understanding, of the underlying cognitive processes or how managers got in touch with these concepts. Alternative theoretical labels - such as `knowledge' - have all kinds of implications which are beyond the purposes of this study. A close theoretical concept might be `sense making'. Sense making is a common model used in the information processing literature that describes how knowledge is selected, organized, transformed, stored and utilised before decision making is possible (e.g. Lewin 1947; Isabella 1990; Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991; Schneider and Angelmar 1993; Corner, Kinicki et al. 1994; Schwenk 1995; e.g. Barr 1998; Fiol and O'Connor 2002). Daft and Weick (1984: 286) defined sense making as the process of scanning, interpreting/giving meaning and eventually action.

Sense making also states that there are reciprocal influences between subjects and objects (Weick 1979), which fits with 'interpretative viability' of concepts or the fact that each receiver puts its own spin on the concept and is involved in acquiring discourse as mentioned above. This is often given the term 'enactment' indicating that subjects construe interpretations and then act as if such interpretations are true (Daft and Weick 1984; Porac, Thomas et al. 1989; Weick 1995).

Within sense making, the scanning aspect is probably most interesting in the context of our research question. Scanning can be seen as monitoring or noticing and providing data, as searching the environment to identify important events or issues that might affect an organization (e.g., Kiesler and Sproull 1982; Daft and Weick 1984). In the context of this article, it would mean that managers try to be informed about new management concepts. Noticing is an *attentional* process in which actors capture (Louis and Sutton 1991) some stimuli as cues for further processing such as editing, interpreting and remembering (Kiesler and Sproull 1982). Noticing is at least as important as interpreting (Starbuck and Milliken 1988). Interpreting focuses on subtleties and interdependencies, whereas noticing picks up major events and gross trends (Starbuck and Milliken 1988). Interpreting has many distinct aspects, such as comprehending, understanding, explaining, attributing, extrapolating and predicting (Starbuck and Milliken 1988), but the common act is, as mentioned, placing stimuli in frameworks. The distinction between these stages (scanning and interpreting) may not be applied too severely, as for example noticing stimuli and interpreting them often happen at the same time. And within the context of this article, the precise theoretical aspects of these cognitive processes were not our main focus. A differentiation in a few different levels of `awareness' sufficed here, as described further. Once managers are aware of a concept, they have noticed it and might have given some kind of interpretation to it for example, by editing it for their situation and recognizing them as being useful. This awareness is a critical and necessary stage before action is possible such as convincing their colleagues about the necessity to apply the concept in their organization (Doorewaard and van Bijsterveld 2001).

About these different steps that individuals go through before any concept related action is possible, hardly any research has been executed. Termed differently, the cognitive processes of individual managers related to fashionable management concepts or the phase between sending a concept to a wide audience and the actual organizational application (be it adoption or entrenchment) of a concept is an unexplored area, notwithstanding being a crucial momentum in the dissemination of a concept.

HYPOTHESES

If we introduce "the levels of awareness of managers" to the demand side of the fashion process, it seems likely that the population of managers is not as homogenous as is often (implicitly) assumed. We distinguished in present research three different levels of awareness. To start with, managers can differ in the quantity of concepts they are aware of. This has to do with the dissemination within a population over time. A well-known classification scheme of dissemination or diffusion of innovations distinguishes between innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards (Rogers, 1995, p.22). Accordingly, within a broad population of managers differences in their awareness of a management concept could be found. And considering that we are looking at multiple fashionable concepts at the same time, it can be concluded that some managers are expected to be aware of a larger set of management concepts than their counterparts. This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Managers differ in terms of the *absolute number* of fashionable management concepts they are aware of.

A second level of awareness has to do with the underlying cognitive process and can be defined as the extent to which managers are aware of the content of each specific concept. This raises a complicated issue. On the one hand, the existing literature shows that a concept's content is extremely hard to define in detail, considering that concepts are `interpretatively viable' (Benders and van Veen 2001; Giroux 2006). This means that their precise content is unstable and changes over time allowing more and more interpretations. Notwithstanding, many studies used print media traces of labels of concepts in order to reconstruct aspects of the diffusion within a population. Such citation analysis traces the occurrence of the concept's label and usually results in bell-shaped diffusion patterns (e.g., Abrahamson 1996; Carson, Lanier et al. 1997; Clark and Salaman 1998; Abrahamson and Fairchild 1999). However, using print media traces creates a few problems. First, presence of the concepts in the media does not match the awareness of content of specific concepts on the level of the individual manager. Next, fashionable management concepts are studied based on their "verbatim similarities", and less on the details of its content. Hence, we suggest that it is necessary to start paying attention to what extent individual managers are aware of the content of specific concepts

Hypothesis 2: Managers will differ in the extent to which they are aware of the content of specific concepts.

The third level of awareness is related to the broader subject matter of specific concepts. In management fashion theory, concepts are usually treated as being similar in terms of the fashion process and overlook the fact that they vary in terms of content. However, fashionable concepts cover different subject matters, ranging from strategy (e.g., core competence), HRM (e.g., employability) or business processes (e.g., Business Process Reengineering or BPR). As a result, it is to be expected that specific subgroups in the management population notice and are very much aware of some concepts compared to others. This becomes even more likely when we realize that different players on the supply side, such as consultants and professional groups, sponsor, exploit and translate concepts to their respective audiences (Mazza and Alvarez 2000; Scarbrough and Swan 2001). This translation can be seen as mediating the spread and assimilation of fashionable concepts such that it better fits the characteristics of a specific sub group in the management population (Scarbrough, Robertson et al. 2005). This mediating role may also result that some concepts are noticed and known to specific subgroups in different degrees which finally result in differences of awareness of different concepts.

If it is likely that different sub groups of managers are differently aware of different concepts, the question emerges which managers notice and are aware of which concepts and why is that? It seems reasonable to assume that managers will be aware of the issues they deal with on a daily basis and that these issues will be different for different groups of managers. As category-consistent information is recalled better than category-inconsistent information, this leads to selective attention and forgetting where inconsistent information goes. Selective attention depends on category accessibility or availability of stored category depending on for example experience (Corner, Kinicki et al. 1994).

This matches closely with observations of Scarbrough, Robertson and Swan (2005). They studied the definition and interpretations of the fashionable management concept `Knowledge Management' in the areas of Human Resource and Information Systems. Although they analysed publications in professional media (which is a supply side activity) and not individual managers themselves, they did show that Knowledge Management is mainly debated in Information System outlets (87% versus 13% in HR outlets). This indicates that it is likely to find a close relation between a particular concept and the functional area of managers.

At the same time, the study showed that one concept can resonate in different functional areas simultaneously (i.e., in their case Human Resource Management and Information Systems) and that a concept is not completely exclusive to one functional area. This leads to the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3: Managers are more aware of concepts pertaining to their own functional area than within other areas.

Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999 p. 712) went one step further and suggested that groups of concepts can be clustered in what they called a "management fashion niche". They considered niches as "*recurrent sources of demand for new discourse promoting fashionable management techniques for rationally managing particular types of organizational components*". This definition means that a niche is constituted by a basic type of managerial issue or problem (such as for example `managing employees' or `quality') that becomes surrounded by a series of fashionable management concepts over time. Hence, not only there are subgroups of managers who look alike in terms of which concepts they are aware off (hypothesis 3), but also multiple concepts themselves can cluster together and will over time constitute a niche in which some subgroups of managers will be very interested.

In accordance with Cole (1979; 1989), Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999) empirically studied the sequence of Job Enrichment in the seventies, Quality Circles in the beginning of the eighties, Total Quality Management at the end of the eighties and Business Process Reengineering in the nineties. Using citation indexes, they found the expected patterns in the citation indexes in terms of recurring waves that hardly overlap. They subsequently concluded that "… *demand for each of the new fashions resulted from the collapse of demand for the previous fashion*" (Abrahamson and Fairchild 1999: p. 723). Their data-analysis showed a sequence of the studied fashions. However, the analysis was not conclusive on the strength of the suggested causal link between the collapse of a previous fashion and the subsequent demand for a new fashion.

There are two reasons why this causal link was not firmly established. First, Abrahamson and Fairchild looked at citation indexes which expressed activities on the supply side of the market, and did not actually study how individual managers would exchange an old concept for a new one. Second, Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999) followed the definitions of Cole (1979; 1989) and considered all the concepts they studied as an expression of the same employee-management issue. Still, it is equally possible to define these concepts as opposing, in which case they might belong to different niches.

For instance, Job Enrichment was considered a tool to increase the quality of work. It can be argued that Business Process Reengineering (BPR) was not interested in the aspect of job enrichment. BPR was rather an approach to redesign work processes in order to serve customers better, to fully exploit the potentials of the information technology leading to cost savings (Hammer and Champy 2001). The role of the employee was often rather marginal. In the end, BPR was almost similar to downsizing (Benders 1999), which is definitely not an employee friendly characteristic. So content wise, it could also be argued that these concepts belong to different niches, which then leaves them unrelated. Hence, it is not directly clear whether or not, how and to what extent concepts cluster around different niches.

A much stricter empirical test of the existence of niches would be the presence of clusters of concepts which sub groups of managers are collectively more or less aware of. In other words, if managers are indeed more aware about the concepts of their own functional area, they will not only know more about one specific concept (hypothesis 3), but also about groups of concepts in their specific domain. And if this is true, sub groups of concepts can be formed which empirically delineate conceptual niches in which Abrahamson and Fairchilds' (1999) timely sequences of conceptual replacement might take place. This leads to the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 4: Sub groups of managers differ in their awareness of clusters of related concepts.

The observed differences in awareness of fashionable concepts of managers raise explanatory questions. Which managers know what and especially why? For hypothesis 3 and 4, we already analyzed an important contextual explanatory factor: the functional area they are active in. Besides this contextual factor, it seems likely that individual characteristics will influence awareness levels. This idea fits closely with more general research which contends that various factors influence mental models or the thinking of managers. (e.g., Dearborn and Simon 1958; Walsh 1988; Simon 1991; Sutcliffe 1994; Waller, Huber et al. 1995; Beyer, George et al. 1997; Zhang and Chignell 2001; Daniels and Johnson 2002; Mezias and Starbuck 2003).

For our research we focused on five different factors that might affect awareness levels: educational level, work experience, gender, position and sector. Other potential explanations (such as reading behavior or more specific career information) were left for future research in which specific attention can be paid to more sophisticated measures and operationalizations.

To start with, it has been put forward that education influences mental models or the thinking of managers (Simon 1991; Zhang and Chignell 2001; Mezias and Starbuck 2003). Hence, it seems likely that managers' educational background affects the awareness of managers about fashionable management concepts. Management is not a profession in the sense that there is codified body of knowledge that individuals should have in order to be allowed to start operating in the field. It is not a profession with clear entry requirements – for instance in terms of formal education - but a rather broad occupational category in which people with several kinds of background operate. However, it seems plausible that especially managers with a higher education have a stronger focus on the cognitive aspects of their jobs. As a result, one might expect that they inform themselves better about new developments in the field of management and as a result, they will be more aware of different management concepts. As a result, we can formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: Managers with a higher education are more aware of different concepts than managers with a lower education.

A second factor that might play a role is the amount of work experience managers have. Management skills are for a large part dependent on on-the-job experience. As a result, more experienced managers have been confronted with larger sets of managerial questions. So it seems likely that they have been confronted with more different concepts. Additionally, more experience goes hand in hand with more tenure and more tenure involves that one has been confronted with more fashionable concepts over time. This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 6: Older managers with more tenure are more aware of different concepts than younger managers with less tenure.

Next, we will focus on potential gender differences. Opposite views apply to gender differences in organizational settings, but most research points to some sex differences due to differences in men's and women's socialization (Davis 1999). While hard factors such as rationality, competition, assertiveness and dominance are valued by boys, girls value soft factors such as relations, cooperation, and emotional closeness (Burleson, Kunkel et al. 1996). Eddleston and colleagues (2006) demonstrated that male managers regarded status-based career satisfiers as more important than female managers. Both points suggest that men would be more focused on management concepts than women and as a result, men will be more aware of management concepts.

Hypothesis 7*:* Male managers are more aware of different management concepts than female managers.

We expect that awareness of concepts also relates to the hierarchical level of managers. It can be argued that administrative employees and managers at lower positions are more concerned with day to day activities and are not so interested in fashionable concepts. On the contrary, higher ranked managers have more power to take decisions and might look for concepts helping them doing so.

Hypothesis 8: Managers at higher hierarchical positions are more aware of different management concepts than managers at lower hierarchical positions.

Fifth and finally, one might expect differences in terms of the sector (consultancy, private or public) one is working. The highest awareness levels of management concepts are expected to be present in the consulting industry. People working in the consulting industry are often considered brokers of management knowledge (Abrahamson and Fairchild 2001). Hence, they should be aware of most concepts, since in some way dealing with management concepts is their profession. Secondly, we expect managers in the private sector to be more aware of concepts considering that these concepts are mostly developed for the specific problems they encounter. And finally, we expect managers in the public sector to be least aware of different concepts.

Hypothesis 9: Depending on the sector, respondents are more or less aware of the different concepts.

Methodological considerations and sample:

To test these hypotheses, we needed data on which managers are aware of which management concepts. To start with, we needed to construct a list of management concepts managers might be aware of. First, a list of 187 management concepts pertaining to various management sub domains was composed based on an in-depth analysis of the New Economy Era (1995-2005) business strategy and organizational literature in the peer reviewed and more executive oriented press. Three independent researchers withheld based on common knowledge 60 management concepts.

Subsequently, we needed to confront a set of managers with the list of concepts and see to what extent they are aware of these concepts.

However, organizing a representative sample of managers is not an easy task since no representative lists that cover the complete management population exists. As it was our intention to access a broader management public, an Internet survey was put in place, which was open to a large audience. Internet self-administered surveying have received a growing interest among researchers as a means of data collection for scientific research (e.g., Stanton 1998; Simsek and Veiga 2001; Truell 2003). We made use of the facilities offered by a leading Belgian business magazine. This magazine launched a frequently visited website that contains - beside job offers - dossiers concerning specific career themes and formation, and is geared towards the Dutch speaking part of Belgium.

To measure "the extent of awareness", a 5-point Likert scale was used. It was explained that 1 indicates that "I am not aware of this concept, I have never heard/noticed it"; 2 indicated that "I have heard/noticed this concept once before, but I am not aware of the exact content"; 3 indicated "I can describe the concept somehow"; 4 indicated "I know the concept fairly good" and 5 indicated "I perfectly can explain the concept". Given the fact that this question measured subjective perceptions of the personal awareness, it was not possible to trace how the respondents really understood the different concepts, or termed differently how these concepts were interpret. Considering the interpretive viability of concepts, this is probably the best solution, especially when one focuses on larger sets of concepts. The scores in the study then reflect how well managers are aware of the 60 fashionable management concepts.

Using this data collection instrument, 681 useful responses were gathered mainly from administrative personnel and lower and middle managers. The distribution of $N = 681$ respondents (393 male, 288 female) according to position, sector/industry, functional domain and education is respectively shown in Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4.

Insert Table 1-4 About Here

ANALYSIS

In the next paragraphs, we will handle each hypothesis separately, present detailed descriptive statistics of the relevant variables and execute the appropriate statistical tests.

The first hypothesis stated that managers differ in terms of the absolute number of fashionable management concepts they are aware of. Table 5 presents the percentages of managers that indicated that they are aware of each of the concepts (at least a given score of 2 on the Likert scale as described above). Table 6 shows the descriptive statistics of the awareness of fashionable management concepts.

Insert Table 5 & 6 About Here

When moving down the lists of Table 5, it can be observed that most concepts scored at least a 2 or higher on the Likert scale. Considering the clear results of Table 5, we can accept hypothesis 1: managers differ substantially in terms of the absolute number of fashionable management concepts they are aware of. The respondents show large differences in terms of conceptual awareness. Overall, they might report to be rather well informed but there are also large differences between them.

The more detailed descriptive statisitics in Table 6 show that the concepts receiving the highest means are E-business, followed by E-government, Dot.com and decentralization. This involves that managers are well aware of these concepts, since a 5 point Likert scale was used as described above. When moving down the list, it can be seen that concepts received relatively high but varied scores. Out of 60 concepts, 25 concepts received a mean value of 3, which indicates that these concepts are relatively well known. In general, this suggests that managers are aware of quite a large set of different concepts. On the low end of the list, the concept managers are least aware of was `Hyper Turbulence'. The standard deviations of the concepts further corroborate this result. The standard deviations varied quite substantially which suggests that there are some differences within the extent of awareness (not at all to perfectly) in our group of respondents. Hypothesis 2 stated that managers differ in terms the extent of awareness of different fashionable management concepts. Looking at the results of Table 6, we clearly see that there is a lot of variance in our sample of respondents, so we can accept hypothesis 2.

The third hypothesis stated that managers are more aware of a concept in their own functional field than in other fields. To test this hypothesis a further operationalisation seemed necessary. We decided to test this hypothesis for a few clear subgroups of managers. In the questionnaire, it was asked in which functional domain the respondents were active. Subsequently, we decided to focus on specific concepts that we consider stronger related to one functional area than to the others. We tested if managers active in marketing were more aware of the concept `one-to-one-marketing' (Peppers and Rogers 1993), if managers active in IT were more aware of 'Business Process Reengineering', if HR managers were more aware of 'Empowerment' (Ferlie and Pettigrew 1996; Ghoshal, Bartlett et al. 1999; Leach, Wall et al. 2003; Seibert, Silver et al. 2004) and finally, if managers active in the field of strategy (probably top management Hambrick and Mason 1984) were more aware of 'Corporate Governance' (Forbes and Milliken 1999; Sundaram and Inkpen 2004). Additionally, we expected that this group of strategic managers would be most aware of all concepts taken together, since the strategic task demands a large overview over organizations involving that different concepts of different fields are relevant (Daniels and Johnson 2002). This not necessarily implies that this group of managers will know the most about every concept separately, but that strategic managers are expected to be the second-best informed subgroup on each of the other concepts, except for these concepts particularly pertaining to the strategic function. In Table 7 the mean scores that point to awareness of particular concepts per group of functional domain managers are shown.

Insert Table 7 About Here

The results show that the expectations are exactly met. Managers working in Sales and Marketing were most aware about one-to-one-marketing, IT managers appeared to be most aware about Business Process Reengineering, HR managers had a higher awareness about Empowerment and Strategic Managers appeared to be most aware about Corporate Governance as show by the mean awareness sum scores of the concerned managers pertaining to the concerned management concepts. Also, strategic managers were second in terms of their awareness of each of the three first mentioned concepts. In addition, the mean total awareness sum score pertaining to all concepts indicated that strategic managers were aware about all concepts compared to the managers in other functional domains.

The differences between the mean awareness sum scores of the subgroups based on functional background were also tested. We executed an analysis of variance to each of these variables, showing that the differences between the means are statistically significant.

Insert Table 8 About Here

Accepting hypothesis 3 gave a first indication that managers are more aware of the concepts in their own field than to other fields. It didn't show, however, if and how concepts cluster together and if these clusters are closely tied to sub groups in the population of managers, as we formulated in hypothesis 4. In order to test this hypothesis, we first needed evidence for the existing of niches. This could be obtained by applying a Multiple Correspondence Analysis. If management concepts do cluster we should find a set of different dimensions in our dataset and these dimensions should be interpretable in terms of their content. So to start with, we estimated the model and left the number of potential dimensions open. At first, the results seemed satisfactory in terms of statistical results. It clearly led to three different dimensions (Eigen values are 20.3; 12.4 ; 6.4; Variances are 33.8 % ; 20.6 %; 10.7 %). However, it was difficult to interpret the three dimensions in a meaningful way since many concepts were strongly related to multiple dimensions. Only a meaningful interpretation could be given to the first dimension. This first dimension seemed to correlate strongly with almost all concepts, which suggested that this dimension represents a "general awareness" dimension at best and not a specific subset as we expected. As a result, hypothesis 4 must be rejected. No meaningful clusters of concepts could be found in the list we have used. A more elaborate discussion will follow later.

With the remaining 5 hypotheses, we tried to explain the variance in awareness levels of managers. In order to test these hypotheses, it was necessary to develop an operationalisation which expressed the overall awareness of the respondents of the complete list of constructs. For this purpose, we constructed an *awareness sum score* by adding up all scores on the Likert scales per respondent. This sum score can be considered a measure for the overall awareness for a person of the given concepts in the list. The mean score on the awareness sum score was 168.5, the standard deviation was 41.9 and the minimum and maximum on the awareness sum score ranged between 71 and 271.

To test the remaining hypotheses, we applied a linear regression. In Table 9, the regression results are shown. There were significant gender differences in overall awareness of different concepts (β = -0,13 , p<0,01). Overall, male managers were more aware of different concepts than female managers. The variable was highly significant, so hypothesis 5 is confirmed. Second, educational level of managers was also relevant for explaining differences in total awareness of concepts (β = 0,13, p<0,01). The higher the educational level, the more managers were aware of different concepts. Hypothesis 6 is also confirmed. Thirdly, we hypothesized that length of work experience would positively relate the total awareness of different concepts. Contrary to our expectations, this variable was not significant so we can not accept hypothesis 7 (β = -0,01 , p >0,05). Hypothesis 8 is also confirmed. Within the regression analysis, higher hierarchical position resulted in higher levels of awareness (β = 0,13, p<0,01). Finally, hypothesis 9 related the sector of managers to their overall level of awareness. The results showed that this hypothesis can be partly accepted. Consultants were clearly most informed, followed by managers in the private sector (the reference group in the analysis) (β = 0,10, p>0,05). Finally managers in the public sector were the least informed about fashionable concepts, although they did not differ significantly from the private sector (β = -0,05, p>0,05).

Insert Table 9 About here

DISCUSSION

In this article, we studied a neglected aspect of the management fashion process: the cognitive processes of individual managers related to fashionable management concepts or the phase between sending a concept to a wide audience and the actual application (be it adoption or entrenchment) of a concept in a rather specific organizational context.

The results of the data-analyses raise two important issues related to the segmentation of the management population and the existence of niches. Overall, our data confirmed our expectations that the management population is not homogenous in its awareness of the total set of management concepts. The extent to which concepts are diffused through the population seems to vary quite substantially, resulting in different levels of awareness by different managers. Additionally, our analyses showed that these differences can be explained based on individual and contextual characteristics.

To start with, there were clear differences in the quantity of concepts managers are aware of and in the level of awareness per concept, which suggests that some groups of managers are much more interested in or confronted with these concepts than others. Subsequently, our results showed some important differentiating factors, amongst which the functional background of managers. It was clear that some concepts are focused on organizational issues that are relevant for some managers, and not for others. As expected, managers fulfilling functions in which an integrating overview was expected, were most aware of concepts in different fields. Segmentation along these functional lines defined to a large extent the (im)possibilities to spread within the management population as a whole. Within these segments, we subsequently saw that there are still substantial individual differences. We showed that also that individual characteristics as gender, educational level and contextual characteristics as hierarchical position and sector (partly), affected the level of awareness. This suggests that dissemination of a concept through the management population is not only dependent on characteristics of the concepts themselves, but also on characteristics of the population itself.

However, both the questions of segmentation as well as the explanatory issues, raised certain other interesting questions which cannot be answered. First, if different segments in the population are aware of different concepts, it might be interesting to pay more attention to differences in the way management fashions develop over time. It is possible that different segments are organized in different ways, which affects the fashion production processes and ultimately how new concepts are disseminated. In fact, this implies that there might be supply side differences that correlate with demand side differences and lead to different ways in which fashions develop within subpopulations over time. Second, the individual differences in awareness we have found, raise questions to what exactly determines whether or not managers are aware of concepts. On the one hand, this is a supply side issue because not all concepts are offered in the same way and at the same time to all managers. On the other side, it has been suggested in the literature (i.e., Abrahamson 1996) that individual differences matter, which will happen even within different segments. For the first time, we empirically corroborated this theoretical suggestion. However, more detailed empirical research might show who is more or less interested and what individual attributes (education, gender, age, personality, reading behavior, etc.) affect awareness levels. Third and crucial, awareness of concepts might correlate with how managers are approached by actors on the supply side and how this is directly linked to profits on the supply side of the market (who buys which books and magazines, who is invited for which seminars, who hires which consultants).

The process in which individual awareness transforms into organizational adoption and eventually leads to entrenchment needs further study. After being aware of concepts, managers need to decide how to enact upon it. It is quite obvious that awareness of concept, even when it is very detailed, does not necessarily lead to action. However, how organizational decisions are made either to drop or implement a concept, and which factors influence these managerial considerations, is still unclear.

The second issue we studied focused on the presence of fashion niches as introduced by Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999). Our research showed some empirical evidence when we analyzed four rather specific examples (on-to-one-marketing, Business Process Reengineering, employability, and corporate governance). However, when we tried to corroborate our findings in a larger set of concepts, we were not able to interpret the clustering of concepts and hence could not confirm this hypothesis. The dimensions raised by statistical analysis, could not be interpreted and did not point at certain mutually excluding sub groups of concepts. On the one hand, there is some empirical evidence for the existence of niches when we look at exemplary cases. But on the other hand, the evidence also suggests that the borders between these niches are rather unclear which undermines the essence of this theoretical concept.

SHORTCOMINGS AND AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The lack of evidence for the existence of niches could have been the result of the composition of the list of management concepts we used. The list contains concepts that were popular at the time of surveying and hence many of them are related to the New Economy era (1995-2005), nonetheless also other concepts such as BPR, corporate governance, which have a less direct link with this New Economy era.

In addition, some of the concepts have been worked out in detail in all kinds of publications (such as Business Process Reengineering, Mass Customization and Hyper Competition). But other concepts contained a less well-defined content (such as Digital Capital and Webs). As a result, there was a mixture of concepts in our list and some concepts could have fallen outside the definition of fashionable management concepts as intended by Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999) when working out their theory of management fashion niches.

As a result, the choice of supplying a variety of fashionable management concepts might influence the lack of a clear distinction between niches that relate to a shared management issue. In future data-collections, it seems advisable to integrate also a set of more classic fashionable management concepts so the suggested hypothesis can be tested with more rigor.

Related to these operationalization issues, our study research also led to some suggestions for future data-collections. Our data were not the result of a random sampling procedure and hence may contain some biases. For the data collection we used an Internet survey. As a result, the number or respondents was substantial and fitted our statistical requirements, but there was less control on who actually filled in the questionnaire. It is likely that expected relations between variables are stronger when the data collection is exclusively focused on dedicated managers, instead of interested respondents in general. A more focused sample may lead to stronger relations between variables and to more convincing acceptance or rejection of hypothesis. However, developing a high quality dataset like this will be hard, if not impossible.

CONCLUSIONS:

The empirical results showed that the demand side of the management fashion market is not homogenous at all. As mentioned earlier, little attention has been paid to the demand side of management fashions in management fashion studies. Especially, to what extent managers are aware of fashionable management concepts is a crucial and almost completely neglected phase in the dissemination of fashions, nonetheless these processes related to the individual cognitive reception seem vital. In the light of our results, different kinds of dynamics can be expected which are relevant for the understanding how concepts grow into real fashions. Our results were not conclusive in this respect, but did raise new questions and might stimulate further data-collections in order to gain a deeper understanding of this process.

This research focused on which manager knows what fashionable management concepts and how differences in awareness can be explained. For the first time, we empirically studied segmentation of the management population along lines of expertise, functions, and more personal characteristics as gender and education. More detailed studies of individual differences and similarities, which relate to such cognitive processes is an interesting research area to develop in more detail. However, such related questions require specific theorizing and new data collections, which is beyond the present scope of this article.

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics relating to Position of Respondents (N=681)

Position	Frequency	Percent of total Sample
Administrative personal	118	17.33
Professional employee	223	32.75
Middle management	225	33.04
Other	115	16.89
Total = 681		100.00

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics relating to the Sector/Industry of Respondents (N=681)

Industry/Sector	Frequency	Percent of total Sample
Private Company	369	54.19
Consultancy	75	11.01
University	30	4.41
Government	58	8.52
Other	149	21.88
Total (n=681)		100.00

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics relating to functional Domain of Respondents (N=681)

Functional domain	Frequency	Percent of total sample
Sales & Marketing	153	2,47
ICT	70	10.28
Production /logistics	84	12.33
Human Resources	47	6.90
Strategy	33	4.85
General administration	141	20.70
Self employed or the professions	37	5.43
Other	115	17.03
Total (n = 681)		100.00

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics relating Education (N=681)

Education	Frequency	Percent of total Sample
Primary education	8	1.17
Secondary eductaion	76	11.16
Higher education (short)	212	31.13
University or equal	284	41.70
Post university	101	14.83
Total (n=681)	681	100

Table 5: Awareness (percentage of the managers who gave a score of 2 and more) of Fashionable Management Concepts (N=681)

Management Concept	% awareness	Management Concept	% awareness
E-business	99,41	Virtual Corporation	76,80
Cyberspace	99,12	Business Process Reengineering	76,65
Egovement	97,50	one-to-one-marketing	76,06
Flexible Organization	97,36	Knowledge creation	75,33
Dot.com	97,06	Value added network	74,74
Decentralization	96,48	Innovation network	73,72
Ecosystems	95,01	Flexible networks	72,69
CRM	95,01	Flexible firm	70,34
Digital Network	94,86	Dynamic network	69,60
Internal Network	94,57	Modular organization	68,72
E-market	92,95	Sustainable development	68,28
Continuous change	91,92	Mass-customization	67,84
Global network organization	91,63	Digital Corporation	67,55
Virtual network	91,34	Nonlinear thinking	67,40
Virtual organization	91,19	Cosmopolitan organization	60,94
Webs	88,84	Discontinuous change	59,91
Value creation	88,11	Intrapreneurial Organization	58,44
Corporate governance	85,90	Indivdualized corporation	56,39
Knowledge economy	85,46	Dyanamic capabilitIes	56,09
Strategic Network	84,14	Plug and play company	55,21
Network organization	83,85	Digital capital	54,63
Information organization	83,85	Boundaryless company	54,48
Network economy	83,41	Collaborative design	53,45
Empowerment	83,41	AMT	53,45
Knowledge workers	83,41	Hypercompetition	52,42
E-economy	82,53	Rightsizing	42,29
Self organization	81,50	Delayering	42,29
Information age	77,83	Bricks and mortar	28,05
New economy	77,68	Hyperturbulence	23,94
Change Enablement	77,39	Click and mortars	19,97

Table 6: Awareness levels of Fashionable Management Concepts (N=681)

Management concept	Mean	Standard deviation	Management concept	Mean	Standard deviation
E-business	4.35	0.86	Network organization	2.79	1.19
E-government	4.21	1.07	Sustainable development	2.67	1.49
Dot.com	4.15	1.13	Knowledge creation	2.66	1.27
Decentralization	4.13	1.08	Value Added network	2.64	1.31
Cyberspace	3.99	1.06	Virtual corporation	2.61	1.24
Flexible organization	3.91	1.05	New economy	2.60	1.25
CRM	3.91	1.19	Mass-customization	2.60	1.43
Internal-network	3.87	1.18	Flexible firm	2.45	1.25
Digital-network	3.66	1.18	Flexible networks	2.45	1.22
E-market	3.65	1.20	Innovation network	2.44	1.20
Continuous change	3.63	1.27	Modular organization	2.43	1.28
Webs	3.54	1.34	Nonlinear thinking	2.37	1.25
Virtual network	3.36	1.27	Dynamic network	2.32	1.18
Virtual organization	3.33	1.23	Digital corporation	2.31	1.19
Value creation	3.32	1.35	Cosmopolitan organization	2.21	1.24
Ecosystems	3.27	1.16	Intrapreneur	2.19	1.30
Knowledge economy	3.23	1.36	Plug and play company	2.16	1.29
Global network organization	3.23	1.20	Discontinuous change	2.11	1.16
Empowerment	3.15	1.42	Boundaryless company	2.09	1.24
Corporate Governance	3.10	1.34	Hypercompetition	2.03	1.23
Bus-process-reengineering	3.06	1.52	Dynamic capabilities	1.99	1.12
Information age	3.06	1.48	Collaborative-design	1.99	1.15
E-economy	3.04	1.34	Digital capital	1.98	1.13
Knowledge workers	3.00	1.33	Individualized corporation	1.96	1.08
one-to-one-marketing	3.00	1.51	AMT	1.96	1.13
Change enablement	2.98	1.44	Rightsizing	1.85	1.20
Information organization	2.89	1.22	Delayering	1.80	1.13
Strategic network	2.87	1.23	Bricks and mortar	1.58	1.13
Self organization	2.82	1.27	Click and mortars	1.39	0.95
Network economy	2.81	1.23	Hyperturbulence	1.37	0.78

Table 7: Mean Awareness Scores of Managers with different Functional Background

Functional domain	N	one-to-one-marketing	Bus-process-reengineering	Empowerment	Corporate governance	Mean Sum Score
Sales & Marketing	153	**3.56**	2.97	3.18	3.12	175.59
EDP/ICT dep.	70	3.27	**4.01**	3.14	3.23	183.54
Human Resources	47	2.98	3.23	**4.09**	3.15	167.36
Production and/or logisitics dep.	84	2.33	3.18	2.98	2.70	154.68
General administration	141	2.74	2.84	2.84	3.02	161.77
Strategic management	33	3.55	3.58	3.39	**3.91**	**187.39**
Self employed or the professions	37	2.95	2.89	3.05	3.35	170.11
Other	116	2.76	2.63	3.18	3.04	162.97
Total	681	3.00	3.06	3.15	3.10	168.52

Tabel 8: ANOVA Results of the Differences of Means in Awareness Scores of Managers with different Functional Backgrounds.

Management Concept	F	df	p
one-to-one-marketing	7.73	7, 673	0.000
Bus-process-reengineering	7.00	7, 673	0.000
Empowerment	4.40	7, 673	0.000
Corporate governance	3.23	7, 673	0.002
Sum Score	5.21	7, 673	0.000

Table 9: Summary of Regressions Analysis for Variables predicting Total Awareness of Fashionable Management Concepts (N=681).

	B	β	p
Constant	146.90		,00 **
Gender	-11.11	-0,13	,00 **
Education	6.34	0,13	,00 **
Work experience	-.18	-0,01	0,89
Position	3.92	0,13	,00 **
Consultancy	13.66	0,1	,01 *
Government	-4187	-0,05	0,25

$R^2 = 0.092$, F = 10.356, p = 0.00** p< .01, * p< .05)