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# Reconciling conflicting predictions about transience and persistence of management concepts in management fashion theory and new institutionalism

## Abstract.

**Purpose.** Although drawing from neoinstitutional theoretical apparatus and ontology, management fashion theory is understood as a theory that explains the transitory nature of popular ideas and practices while institutional theory explains their stabilization, persistence and further institutionalization. In a nutshell, it seems that being opposed to each other, these two theories describe and predict different, incommensurable diffusion trajectories and organizational behaviour patterns.

**Design/methodology/approach.** This paper makes an attempt towards further unification of management fashion theory with new institutionalism by offering an alternative understanding and conceptualization of institutional change and deinstitutionalization and by distinguishing emerging concepts from already popular fashions.

**Findings.** Most emerging concepts never achieve popularity and disappear while few of them receive massive media attention and diffuse widely becoming new management fashions. Once these concepts have achieved a wide popularity institutional forces would favor them and lead to further institutionalization. Institutional change is understood not as a deinstitutionalization of existing management fashion in terms of erosion, discontinuity or disappearance but as a decline in its media coverage while media attention focuses on the new fashionable concept. The former management fashion gets institutionalized, institutional change occurs in terms of shifting attention towards new fashion and diffusion and institutionalization cycle restarts. Institutional prediction of isomorphism and institutionalization as irreversible tendencies thus can be unified with management fashion theory prediction about the bell-shaped curves in fashions' popularity. Therefore, postulates and predictions of management fashion theory can be derived from new institutionalism and *vice versa*.

**Practical implications.** The paper aims to cover, generalize and explain different trajectories of various management and organizational concepts, deducing theoretical propositions from both institutional theory and management fashion theory. Theoretical and methodological ideas offered in this paper can be helpful in future research on management fashions and diffusion. Studies on the evolution of management concept can benefit from proposed categorization and causal relationships between different stages of the life cycle.

**Originality/value.** Unifying seemingly conflicting and disparate perspectives and views allows making organization theory more coherent in terms of both explanatory power and ontological commensurability. Following other mature sciences in this paper we share the same notion of progress, namely, the aim of achieving unification and demonstrating that different organizational theories still describe the same reality.

**Keywords:** management fashion, institutional theory, management concepts, diffusion, institutionalization, isomorphism, media attention.

## 1. Introduction.

New institutionalism and management fashion theory together offer the most coherent anti-rationalist view (Abrahamson, 1991; Abrahamson and Rosenkopf, 1993) on the institutional forces that drive decisions to adopt and diffusion rate of emerging and already established management concepts (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Tolbert and Zucker, 1983; Abrahamson, 1996). Both start with the social constructionist ontology (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Scott, 1987; Abrahamson, 1996; Benders and van Veen, 2001; Sturdy, 2004; Greenwood et al., 2008) and argue that organizations adopt innovations primarily for social gains, legitimizing themselves and demonstrating their social fitness by conforming to institutionally defined and validated definitions and notions of rationality, efficiency or progress (Ansari et al., 2010). Irrespective to real economic and technical value of management innovations, organizations are led by isomorphic pressures that favor legitimate practices and promote their further institutionalization. Adapting to shared beliefs, norms, and expectations, organizations create a demand for “rational” management solutions and supply side of the management fashion market arises and satisfies this demand.

A key difference between management fashion perspective and new institutionalism is that the former implies that together with the norms of rationality there exist also norms of progress: that is, instead of being guided solely by the isomorphic institutionalization force of match with institutional shared beliefs about reality, organizations experience another fundamental institutional demand – they are expected to conform to “*never-ending improvement process*” which implies adopting “*ever-improved techniques for managing organizations*” (Abrahamson, 1996:262), otherwise, organizations that do not conform to ever-changing institutional beliefs and understandings would appear as retrogrades lagging behind the progress and will lose institutional support. Institutional theory focuses on organizational concepts’ survival and persistence while management fashion approach is equipped with theory and methods that allow exploring the emergence and disappearance of new ideas and practices (Benders and van Veen, 2001; Benders et al., 2019; Denrell and Kovács, 2020). In some sense, institutional theory is prone to the survival bias (Shermer, 2014) because it pays attention to successful practices (Boxenbaum and Battilana, 2005; Sander and Tuschke, 2007; Furnari, 2014; Aksom, 2019) while management fashion theory focuses on how once popular ideas regularly disappear (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999).

Some organizational scholars have already noted that the model of transitory nature of institutional discourse and management concepts associated with them directly contradict institutional predictions about institutionalization and taken-for-grantedness of institutional myths (Perkmann and Spicer, 2008; Czarniawska, 2011). Institutional forces should favor popular and widely diffused management fashions, ensure their complete institutionalization and resist their abandonment (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Greenwood and Hinings, 1996). At the same time a thesis about the persistence, longevity and resistance to change of institutionally accepted values and activities (Oliver, 1992; Greenwood and Hinings, 1996) is directly challenged as management fashions do not seem to stay for a long time according to

1 management fashion theory. Instead of experiencing further institutionalization over time, the  
2 life of management fashions typically follows “*a bell-shaped curve with early adoption followed*  
3 *by widespread uptake and an eventual downturn*” (Perkmann and Spicer, 2008:812;  
4 Abrahamson, 1996; Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999). It seems from the management fashion  
5 theory that long-term isomorphic tendencies as described in new institutional theory is simply  
6 impossible due to regularly interrupting changes in the norms of progress. And vice versa,  
7 institutionalists would reply that institutional order favors stability and persistence, representing  
8 a barrier for new concepts and ideas and favoring popular management concepts.  
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10 In this paper we offer an alternative explanation and model of management fashions life cycle  
11 resolving perceived incommensurability between management fashion theory (MF) and  
12 institutional theory (IT). We argue that a transience of popular concepts and a demand for ever-  
13 more “progressive” ideas and solutions do not contradict institutionalist thesis on  
14 institutionalization, persistence and stability. We develop a set of propositions with regard to the  
15 evolution and dynamics of management concepts’ struggles over media attention, legitimacy and  
16 institutionalization. As a result, the paper extends the current literature of management fashion  
17 theory, organizational institutionalism and management concepts diffusion studies.  
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## 27 **2. Ontology, explanations and predictions of new institutionalism and management fashion** 28 **theory**

29 In this section we review and synthesize a literature which focuses on cultural construction of  
30 appropriate organizational behaviour and the most legitimate and taken-for-granted means to  
31 pursue these institutional ends. In doing so we link the writings of March, Meyer, Abrahamson  
32 and other organizational theorists in order to arrive with non-contradicting and natural theoretical  
33 depiction of causal chain that enables and reinforces the flow of management ideas and practices  
34 based on the need for conformity to widespread social understandings and institutionalized  
35 beliefs about success and rationality (Zucker, 1987; Ritti and Silver, 1986; Jepperson, 1991;  
36 Zilber, 2002; 2008; Li, 2017; Hallett and Hawbaker, 2020; Sumner, 1909). The social value of  
37 management techniques is assumed by the members of institutional environment because these  
38 practices reflect dominant institutional logics and implementing new management concepts  
39 means depicting themselves as rational entities (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Meyer, 1983;  
40 Mellemvik et al., 1988). Together rituals of 1) making choice (Feldman and March, 1981; March  
41 and Olsen, 1976), 2) making choice in favor of institutionally approved practice (Meyer and  
42 Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) and 3) the expectation that managers will regularly  
43 choose new, more progressive solutions create a market for management fashions (Abrahamson,  
44 1996). Below we would explain in more details why this conclusion inevitably follows and can  
45 be derived from institutional theories of diffusion and organizational decision making literature.  
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54 A key claim in institutional theory is that organizations are socially constructed phenomena  
55 which reflect in their structure and behaviour institutionally accepted and required myths about  
56 what counts as rational, appropriate, efficient and progressive (Meyer and Rowan, 1977;  
57 Jepperson, 2002; Zilber, 2002; 2008; Rowan, 2010). Conformity to these norms rather than  
58 concerns of pure technical efficiency and economic rationality allows organizations to improve  
59 their survival chances and succeed in their institutional field (Zucker, 1987; Oliver, 1991;  
60

1 Greenwood and Hinings, 1996; Suddaby, 2010). After all, what is appropriate, rational and  
2 efficient is, in turn, institutionally defined by the given environment (Jepperson, 2002).  
3 Organizations adapt to what they believe society expects of them (Boxenbaum and Jonsson,  
4 2008:78; Greenwood and Meyer, 2008), sharing the same environment they adopt same practices  
5 and structures and by adopting institutional standards they contribute to institutional  
6 isomorphism and homogeneity at macro level (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Kraatz and Zajac,  
7 1996). Sustained institutional order allows widely diffused and accepted practices and concepts  
8 to persist even after losing any technical and economic value. Over time, institutional pressures  
9 prevent organizations from deviation and non-conformity and inertial resistance ensures both  
10 organizational homogeneity and institutional proliferation and maintenance of widely diffused  
11 ideas and practices. Management fashion theory is built on the basis of this causal relationship  
12 and ontological foundations of socially constructed reality, institutional pressures towards  
13 conformity with popular practices and isomorphism (Abrahamson, 1996). Abrahamson started  
14 with the premise that management fashions are cultural phenomena which arise and exist in  
15 response to institutionally constructed norms of rationality and progress. In this way, Green, for  
16 example, considers this theory as the “*management fashion variant of neoinstitutionalism*”  
17 (2004:653).

18 “Belief” is a central notion and category in management fashion vocabulary (Benders and van  
19 Veen, 2001; Benders et al., 2019) and this reliance on constructionist ontology allows direct  
20 correspondence between MF theory and IT. As DiMaggio and Powell (1983) predicted and  
21 Tolbert and Zucker (1983) demonstrated, over time as certain practices gained a high level of  
22 popularity in the field, organizations begin valuing these practices for their social significance  
23 and adopt them in order to be “*isomorphic with norms of appropriate conduct*” (Suddaby and  
24 Greenwood, 2009:176). This prediction is based on the notion of social value that  
25 institutionalized practice offers to adopters. Abrahamson and Rosenkopf embedded this claim  
26 into the diffusion and management fashion literature arguing that “*the mere fact that many*  
27 *organizations have adopted an innovation, and not individual organizations' assessment of its*  
28 *efficiency or returns, becomes the cue that it is normal, or even legitimate, for organizations to*  
29 *use this innovation*” and “*organizations that do not use the innovation tend to appear abnormal*  
30 *and illegitimate to their stakeholders; these organizations tend to adopt the innovation because*  
31 *of the fear of lost stakeholder support*” (1993:492). A shared reality about what constitutes a  
32 proper and rational organization is built around common taken-for-granted beliefs about the  
33 definitions of this reality irrespective of whether institutionally approved solutions really offer  
34 those benefits they promise<sup>1</sup>. Institutional context that surrounds organizations and determines  
35 their priorities generates widespread social understandings (Greenwood et al., 2008) which  
36 organizations perceive as objective and external reality. Jepperson emphasizes that even the  
37 principles of rational organizing are themselves socially constructed (2002:236) and any  
38 definition of success loses its meaning beyond the institutional context<sup>2</sup>. Even interest and power  
39 cannot be understood beyond the context of respective institutional logic which provides a  
40 meaning system for actors who, in turn, derive their agency from the culture (Friedland and  
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<sup>1</sup> In fact, Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999:709) emphasized that their definition of management fashion  
and the very use of this term does not imply that fashions either are or are not dysfunctional.

<sup>2</sup> Even the neoinstitutional thesis about early adopters' ability to make independent choices based on  
economic and technical concerns and rationally can be read as “rationality” predefined by given local  
cultural context.



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2 Alford, 1991; Cooper et al., 2008; Meyer and Jepperson, 2000; Jepperson, 2002; Green, 2004;  
3 Meyer, 2008). Shared, taken-for-granted beliefs fuel, maintain and reinforce the institutional  
4 infrastructure for supply and demand for “rational” and “progressive” solutions. These beliefs  
5 are embodied in their quintessential forms – rational myths, which in Abrahamson’s theory are  
6 relabeled as “management fashions”. Both share the qualities of institution which Meyer  
7 provided in his founding paper on institutional theory:  
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11 *“The effects of myths inhere, not in the fact that individuals believe them, but in the fact that they*  
12 *“know” everyone else does, and thus that “for all practical purposes” the myths are true”*  
13 (Meyer, 1977:75).  
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16 Later on, Meyer and Rowan and Abrahamson extended this definition from education systems to  
17 popular organizational ideas, practices and structures. Drawing from the core institutional idea  
18 which can be traced back to Selznick (1957) with regard to the organizational practices as having  
19 social value *per se*<sup>3</sup> they built their definitions of rational myth and management fashion as  
20 almost interchangeable notions. Both understood as derivatives from the institutionally  
21 constructed norms of rationality, modernity and progress and both draw their power from  
22 institutional order. For example, accounting as a myth allows depicting organization as rational  
23 and purposive entity with clear purposes and control mechanisms (Mellempvik et al., 1988;  
24 Meyer, 1983). Management and management accounting concepts such as Activity-Based  
25 Costing, Balanced Scorecard or Beyond Budgeting offer the same quintessential benefits in  
26 terms of contributing to decision making and control (Malmi and Brown, 2008). In this case,  
27 myths serve the ultimate function of legitimating, *“by locating organization clearly in*  
28 *environmentally-established categories”* (Meyer, 1983:235). The higher the degree of  
29 institutionalization in a given organizational field, the stronger are certain norms and beliefs  
30 about particular definitions of success, efficiency, rationality and progress. The more uncertain  
31 this environment is the stronger are mimetic forces which lead organizations to model  
32 themselves against other organizations since it is unclear for them what constitutes important  
33 ends to pursue and how to attain the goals (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Abrahamson, 1996).  
34 Meyer and Rowan’s definitions of institutionalization (*“the processes by which social processes,*  
35 *obligations, or actualities come to take on a rulelike status in social thought and action”*) and the  
36 nature of organizational practices (which *“enter into social life primarily as facts which must be*  
37 *taken into account by actors”*) provide a necessary basis for understanding myths as either  
38 institutionalized practices or as logics that define which management fashions to be considered  
39 as efficient techniques at the forefront of management progress.  
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48 As such, management fashion is defined as a *“relatively transitory collective belief, disseminated*  
49 *by management fashion setters that a management technique is at the forefront of management*  
50 *progress”* (Abrahamson, 1996:257). The flow of management fashions, their emergence,  
51 diffusion and consumption is predefined by the very logic of institutional dynamics  
52 (Abrahamson, 1996; Kieser, 1997; Abrahamson and Piazza, 2019; Piazza and Abrahamson,  
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57 <sup>3</sup> Selznick defined institutionalization as a special kind of taken-for-grantedness when organization or  
58 organizational practices have a status of social value in itself (Selznick, 1957; Scott, 1987; Oliver, 1992;  
59 Zbaracki, 1998; Green, 2004). Over time technical foundations become eclipsed with institutional  
60 meaning. Therefore, *“to institutionalize is to infuse with value beyond the technical requirements of the*  
*task at hand”* (Selznick, 1957: 17).

2020). The later specifies for field members key reference points to be guided by. For example, as Feldman and March (1981) noted the concept of intelligent choice, that is, decision making, is a quintessence of rationality in modern society. Abrahamson (1996:256-257) extends this concept by adding that there is another norm of managerial rationality which also implies making decisions in favor of new fashionable solutions, that is, conforming to social expectations that managers will use new and improved management techniques. Later on, Meyer paraphrased this phenomenon as a socially constructed requirement for being a purposive actor when being actor is more important than acting; agentic actorhood is a central good in modern social and cultural systems (Meyer, 2008:804). Being an actor means routinely making decisions, and routinized decision making in institutional environment implies adopting new modern solutions and techniques. The chain of institutional causal relationships built by Meyer, March and Abrahamson is now completed and closed. Institutionally constructed definitions of “rational” and “progressive” actorhood require actors to adopt new “rational” and “progressive” practices. The supply and demand for management fashions in this environment are natural and inevitable.

All variants of institutional theory ranging from Berger and Luckmann (1967), Selznick (1957), Meyer (1975; 1983) and Zucker (1977) to Abrahamson (1996) and Burns and Scapens (2000) arrive at the understanding of institutionalization as *“the social process by which individuals come to accept a shared definition of social reality - a conception whose validity is seen as independent of the actor's own views or actions but is taken for granted as defining the “way things are” and/or the “way things are to be done”* (Scott, 1987:496). Actors accept, perceive and transmit what is socially defined as real and taken-for-granted part of objective reality, including new management fashions. Given that there is no institution-free conception of success, efficiency and progress (or it cannot be distinguished and compared against some neutral reality), scholars prefer to study the belief system related to actors since the benefits of adopting organizational concepts are seen to relate to the belief systems of organizational actors (Järvinen, 2006:21). Myths, after all, imply believing rather than knowing (Mellembvik et al., 1988:112; Tymoshenko, 1991). Actors usually do not have a direct experience with the practice they adopt but instead they deal with rationalizations and socially constructed understandings and beliefs about these practices (Sahlin and Wedlin, 2008; Zilber, 2008:162; Nielsen et al., 2020). Green reinforces Abrahamson’s claim that *“a management technique does not have to be an improvement over the stat of the art... more technically efficient...it must only differ significantly”* (1996:265) and notes that new practices do not have to be effective – *“actors only have to believe that they are beneficial”* (2004:655). Management fashions are consumed because there is an institutionally shared belief that new management ideas and practices promise progress and performance improvement. Supply and demand for management fashion (or rational myths) emerge, sustain and proliferate on the basis of accepted social definitions and understandings: there need not be a link with real technical progress in order for management fashions to exist and diffuse.

The reliance on this social constructionist basement makes management fashion theory clearly embedded into neoinstitutional framework as an elegant, consistent and non-contradicting extension and specification of institutional theory of isomorphism and persistence. The most important extension and development of institutional theory relates to the specification of the norms of progress – *“societal expectations that, over time, managers will use new and improved*



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2 *management techniques*” (Abrahamson, 1996:257). This development allows filling the gap in  
3 the former institutional system of causal relationship which was silent about the origins and  
4 genesis of new popular practices and the fate of existing institutions in the face of newly  
5 emerged fashions (Furnari, 2014). Abrahamson’s approach is the most natural and elegant way  
6 to introduce change and turnover of popular practices into institutional picture of organizational  
7 life and dynamics of institutional fields. However, there are major points of intersection where  
8 management fashion theory seems to describe a different logic of institutional life cycle and  
9 diffusion patterns than institutional theory does.  
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### 15 **3. Perceived shortcomings in management fashion literature: diffusion, adoption,** 16 **institutionalization and deinstitutionalization** 17

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19 Since Abrahamson’s (1996) seminal paper has offered a theory of the emergence, diffusion and  
20 consumption patterns and dynamics of management fashions, two lines of criticism were offered.  
21 First, there is a methodological and empirical shortcoming given that diffusion and adoption rate  
22 cannot be indicated by media attention (Benders and van Veen, 2001; Clark, 2004; Erlingsdottir  
23 and Lindberg, 2005; Røvik, 2011). It can be argued that rapid upswings and equally rapid  
24 downturns of media attention neither indicate high adoption rates nor they capture the  
25 disappearance of the concept after the hype is over. This criticism relates also to a broader  
26 neoinstitutional research where highly diffused practices are assumed as being also highly  
27 institutionalized (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2009; Suddaby, 2010). In contrast, critics argue that  
28 highly diffused practices may also be institutionally illegitimate (Fiss et al., 2012; Reinmoeller  
29 and Ansari, 2016). Colyvas and Jonsson, for example, clearly distinguish between diffusion and  
30 institutionalization:  
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36 *“Many things spread, often like wildfire, without ever becoming institutionalized. The ubiquity of*  
37 *a practice may suggest that it has become widely accepted, but activities that diffuse may never*  
38 *develop a foundation that enables them to persist. In contrast, there are procedures that are*  
39 *institutionalized—upheld by either law or strong beliefs—but not widely used or pursued”*  
40 *(2011:27).*  
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43 Second criticism follows from the first one and blames management fashion theory in being  
44 silent about the fate of management concepts after the hype around them is over (Røvik, 2011;  
45 Heusinkveld et al., 2013). Claiming that attention to management fashions in media is  
46 characterized by the bell-shaped curves is not the same as claiming that the life of management  
47 fashions typically follows a bell-shaped curve with early adoption followed by widespread  
48 uptake and an eventual downturn and disappearance in praxis. Abrahamson did not answer  
49 directly whether a management fashion disappears when new fashion hype enters the market and  
50 media attention shifts the focus towards a new promising solution. There are two potential  
51 answers to this question. First, once popular management fashion disappears from media,  
52 organizations abandon it as the hype is over. It seems to be an implication that management  
53 fashion theory assumes. Second answer is more optimistic and implies two variants developed in  
54 later studies on fashions and suggested by classic institutional arguments: 1) once fashionable  
55 concept returns to its technical roots and serves as an efficient solution for performance  
56 improvement in some organizations (David and Strang, 2006) and, alternatively, 2) this  
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2 management fashion is institutionalized and turns into a taken-for-granted organizational  
3 standard no matter whether and how efficient and useful in practice. Which line of reasoning is  
4 more preferable in analyzing the fate of management fashions?  
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7 Benders and van Veen (2001) rightly noted that popularity of a topic in the press (that is, print  
8 media indicators) neither closely predicts a rate of adoption and diffusion level nor indicates the  
9 disappearance of management fashion. In other words, we cannot understand from media  
10 attention whether a management technique is further institutionalized or abandoned  
11 (deinstitutionalized<sup>4</sup>) and forgotten. We can assume that since a certain management fashion  
12 dominates in the informational space in general and in business media and academic literature in  
13 particular, there is a high level of diffusion at this point of time. And we have no less reason to  
14 suppose that media attention does not imply a widespread diffusion.  
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18 The third line of criticism attacks the very causal structure of management fashion theory and its  
19 incompatibility with institutional theory. Institutional theory claims that organizations are driven  
20 by institutionally defined and shared within organizational fields norms of rationality and  
21 management fashion theory adds that organizations must also conform to the norms of progress.  
22 The former implies imitating the most popular practices and decisions (DiMaggio and Powell,  
23 1983) and the later means organizations exist and operate in environment where also exists a  
24 shared, taken-for-granted expectation of a never-ending improvement process. Therefore,  
25 popular practices cannot stay too long: otherwise, “progress” would not occur and organizations  
26 risk to be judged as non-rational and thus illegitimate (Abrahamson, 1996). In a recent article  
27 Abrahamson et al. (2015) focused on the clash between these two theories – theories of  
28 institutions and fashions. Institutional theory claims that institutionalization is a fundamental and  
29 defining force while fashion theory predicts the transience and disappearance of once popular  
30 concepts. Similarly, Perkmann and Spicer point out the incommensurability of Abrahamson’s  
31 theory with new institutionalism:  
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38 *“This limitation is a consequence of Abrahamson’s (1996) ambivalent usage of neo-*  
39 *institutionalist theory. On one hand, he argues that fashion discourses appeal to the general*  
40 *value of rationality, in line with Meyer and Rowan’s (1977) argument that organizations tend to*  
41 *adopt legitimate structures... and new management ideas diffuse primarily via isomorphic*  
42 *pressures across organizations. On the other hand, however, he points to the*  
43 *counterinstitutionalizing forces that prevent the practices from being stabilized. The fashion-*  
44 *setting industry subverts institutionalizing forces by continuously producing new fashions. This*  
45 *means the very structure of Abrahamson’s argument prevents him from explaining why and*  
46 *when management fashions would lead to institutionalization” (2008:814).*  
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51 We argue in this paper that this apparent contradiction represents a paradox only at first glance.  
52 Both persistence and transience can be explained and reconciled in a single model. We offer an  
53 alternative explanation of the coexistence of management fashion bell-shaped life-cycles with  
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56 <sup>4</sup> For example, Berg and Madsen (2020) recently explored the decline of ABC publications in accounting journals in  
57 the 2010s. This is a rather interesting case given that the perceived decline of interest from academics and  
58 business journals may reflect both institutionalization and disappearance of the concept from organizational  
59 practice. ABC has almost completely disappeared from top accounting journals since the late 2000s but this  
60 concept is nevertheless a gold standard in almost any cost management course and textbook. At the same time, its  
popularity is far from that of Balanced Scorecard.

1  
2 isomorphic forces that prevent popular practices from deinstitutionalization and instead ensure  
3 their further proliferation and institutionalization (Tolbert and Zucker, 1983; DiMaggio and  
4 Powell, 1983). A change in media attention and disappearance of once popular management  
5 labels from the media do not preclude their further diffusion and institutionalization and thus do  
6 not contradict with institutional predictions of isomorphic trends. A simultaneous institutional  
7 demand for both persistence and progress opens up an opportunity for institutionalization of  
8 widely diffused concepts and explains the emergence of new concepts. Moreover, when  
9 considered as a two aspects of the same phenomenon, persistence and transience are understood  
10 as mutually inclusive and must coexist as both predefined by the very logic of institutional norms  
11 that maintain field level order. Institutionally constructed norms require organizations to  
12 maintain taken-for-granted practices (for example, budgeting) and searching for new,  
13 progressive solutions (for example, Activity-Based Costing, Balanced Scorecard or Beyond  
14 Budgeting) that would complement existing taken-for-granted routines. Both norms represent a  
15 hallmark of institutionally constructed model of rational actors that organizations must satisfy in  
16 order to appear legitimate (March and Feldman, 1981; Meyer et al., 1997; Meyer and Jepperson,  
17 2000; Meyer, 2008).

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24 The following conclusions are drawn:

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26 1) Most emerging concepts never achieve popularity and disappear at the beginning of their  
27 life cycle while few management techniques achieve massive popularity in media and  
28 diffuse widely becoming new “progressive” management fashions. Once these concepts  
29 have achieved wide popularity institutional forces would favor them and lead to further  
30 institutionalization. Institutional inertia prevents popular, almost taken-for-granted  
31 practices from abandonment and rejection; instead, institutional theory predicts further  
32 popularity and isomorphic convergence unless this practice has achieved a status of  
33 taken-for-granted standard.
- 34  
35 2) The disappearance of the label in the media does not signal its rejection and  
36 disappearance from practice (deinstitutionalization). At the same time,  
37 deinstitutionalization and institutional change mean simply a change in media attention  
38 but not in the abandonment of the concept from organizational everyday activity.
- 39  
40 3) As organizations are expected to conform to both requirements to adopt and maintain  
41 taken-for-granted practices and looking for new progressive solutions it is institutionally  
42 predefined that they would adopt popular practices by contributing to their  
43 institutionalization and thus searching for new solutions (both imperatives embody the  
44 quintessence of socially constructed institutional norms for stability and rationality – the  
45 former requires for institutionalized practices while the later requires demonstrating  
46 rationality and modernity in decision making).

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52 This explanation is consistent with institutional theory of isomorphism which predicts that as  
53 innovation widely diffuses, a threshold is reached beyond which adoption offers legitimacy and  
54 from this point diffusion inevitably leads to institutionalization and isomorphic convergence  
55 (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983):

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58 *“powerful forces emerge that lead them [organizations] to become more similar to one another...  
59 Early adopters of organizational innovations are commonly driven by a desire to improve*

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2 *performance... As an innovation spreads, a threshold is reached beyond which adoption*  
3 *provides legitimacy rather than improves performance” (1983:148-149).*  
4

5 Furthermore, institutional theory predicts organizational aspiration for legitimacy gains and  
6 resistance to deinstitutionalization so that management fashions’ diffusion must move towards  
7 complete institutionalization and taken-for-grantedness while being immune from rejection and  
8 ignorance (this is fair for established in media popular fashions, not for just emerged concepts  
9 which early adopters are free to reject). Management fashions thus do not disappear but move  
10 towards complete institutionalization (for example, TQM or Balanced Scorecard). Interpreting  
11 management fashion theory as a theory that predicts the disappearance of popular practices and  
12 techniques once they disappear from media coverage means violating the main postulate of  
13 institutional theory which forbids the disappearance of legitimacy-offering practices and instead  
14 predicts their proliferation. This misunderstanding stems from the confusion of equating the  
15 disappearance from media coverage with the trajectory of tangible diffusion (Clark, 2004)<sup>5</sup>.  
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21 So while institutional theory predicts isomorphism and excludes entropic forces towards  
22 deinstitutionalization (Aksom, 2020), management fashion theory predicts change in media  
23 attention and inevitable emergence of new fashions. Together this synthesis explains 1) the  
24 existence of institutionalized practices and 2) the emergence of fashions in highly  
25 institutionalized field. In particular, our model reconciles institutional forces that prevent the  
26 emergence of new practices in highly institutionalized fields and the emergence and proliferation  
27 of management fashions. Only few novel concepts succeed and diffuse widely due to  
28 institutional pressures and this explains why so many ideas and concepts fail in their early stage  
29 but naturally incorporates the institutional norm of progress which postulates that organizations,  
30 while maintaining taken-for-granted institutionalized practices should also demand new  
31 progressive solutions.  
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36 We argue that when considering the life cycle of management fashion through the lenses of  
37 institutional theory it becomes apparent that the logic of institutional dynamics favors  
38 fashionable concepts and prevents them from deinstitutionalization. It is a master hypothesis in  
39 institutional theory which constitutes a key causal relationship (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983;  
40 Scott, 1991; Kraatz and Zajac, 1996; Aksom et al., 2020; Aksom and Tymchenko, 2020).  
41 Following the institutional line of reasoning, we would recall that in organizational fields a trend  
42 that is clearly observed at the macro level is isomorphism, that is, once organizational practice  
43 achieves such a degree of popularity that a bandwagon-like diffusion occurs, a threshold is  
44 reached when organizations begin imitate each other and this intensive diffusion wave results in  
45 complete institutionalization when practice becomes taken-for-granted (Tolbert and Zucker,  
46 1983; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Institutional theory argues against the possibility of  
47 unproblematic abandonment of highly popular practices: moreover, inertial resistance emerges  
48 which prevents organizations not only from deinstitutionalization of institutionally accepted  
49 practices but also prevents them from even considering such possibility (Zucker, 1987; Aksom  
50 and Tymchenko, 2020; Aksom, 2020).  
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59 <sup>5</sup> Media coverage may not guarantee diffusion like in the case of Beyond Budgeting (see Libby and Lindsay, 2010)  
60 but guarantees that once popular in media management fashion diffuses widely (like BSC) its further fate is  
associated solely with institutionalization.

1  
2 In the next section we will argue that deinstitutionalization concerns only a change in media  
3 attention when the discourse around the former management fashion disappears and new  
4 discourse and celebratory rhetoric emerge in support of new fashionable concept. In this vein,  
5 institutional change is not a deinstitutionalization of existing taken-for-granted practices but a  
6 change in media attention and other supply side actors.  
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#### 10 11 **4. Transition of management fashions, institutionalization and institutional change**

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13 We depart from viewing institutional change as a rise and fall, the emergence, popularity and  
14 disappearance of fashionable practices. An increase and decline in media attention may signal  
15 not a disappearance of management idea but its successful institutionalization. Institutional  
16 change can be understood and conceptualized not as disappearance of institutionally accepted  
17 practice but as a decline of fashion boom once fashionable practice is sustained and  
18 institutionalized as a taken-for-granted practice. Institutionalized practice from now on becomes  
19 a standard and its diffusion and adoptions do not depend anymore on media attention and supply  
20 side efforts. For example, in management accounting business and academic research a decline  
21 in media coverage and attention to Activity-Based Costing and Balanced Scorecard does not  
22 mean these concepts are no more relevant and had disappeared as obsolete and useless. On the  
23 contrary, a decline in their media popularity signals their institutionalization as a standard  
24 management accounting and control routines. Media attention has been focused on these  
25 practices in the 1990s and the 2000s respectively but while nowadays a fashion boom decreased,  
26 Balanced Scorecard and Activity-Based Costing are taken-for-granted elements in most modern  
27 organizations. At the same time, a lack of media attention prevents Beyond Budgeting from  
28 reaching a point where it receives a critical mass of adoptions. Without sufficient media support  
29 Beyond Budgeting never achieved a needed level of popularity and thus a little number of  
30 adoptions took place.  
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38 Therefore, institutional change in these cases implies a change in media attention, when media  
39 coverage switches from one fashionable concept to another but this change does not imply the  
40 disappearance of the former fashion. This interpretation of institutional change helps to embed  
41 the transitory nature of management fashion into the logical structure of institutional theory and  
42 explains the transitory nature of media attention while allowing accepting that institutionalization  
43 is a final stage in management fashion life cycle. In this form, Abrahamson's theory fits both  
44 Meyer and Rowan's and DiMaggio and Powell's formulations of institutional theory:  
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- 48 1. Management fashions arise and diffuse widely in response to institutionally constructed  
49 definitions of rationality, modernity and progress. The later implies that new "rational",  
50 "advanced" solution should emerge so organizations could have adopted them in order to  
51 depict themselves as rational and progressive "units in the system";
- 52 2. Increase in popularity and adoptions resembles DiMaggio and Powell's isomorphism  
53 thesis;
- 54 3. DiMaggio and Powell did not directly pronounce that new fashionable solutions cannot  
55 emerge and diffuse in already institutionalized field while this thesis can be derived from  
56 Meyer and Rowan and of course, from Abrahamson (1996);  
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4. New management fashion leads to a new field homogenization while the former popular concept is already institutionalized (an example is an organization which could easily have had both ABC and BSC simultaneously).
5. Old popular concepts do not disappear: institutional change only implies a shift in the media coverage which Abrahamson's theory describes.

This reconstructed correspondence between management fashion theory and new institutionalism now allows building the model of management innovations life cycle that fits both transience and persistence predictions that these two theories offer (Table 1).

----- Insert Table 1 about here -----

#### **4.1. Three stages of management concepts evolution**

As some diffusion researchers noted, scholars rarely examine the full diffusion trajectory of management concepts (Strang and Still, 2004; Røvik, 2011; Heusinkveld and Benders, 2012; Aksom, 2020). In particular, Abrahamson et al. (2015) argue that such examination should cover all stages, from emergence to disappearance. Even ignorance is important signal that should be analyzed in order to understand the prospects of further evolution (Røvik, 2011; Aksom, 2019; Johanson and Madsen, 2019). In this section we offer a three stage model of management concepts diffusion trajectory and evolution. In doing so, we replace several traditional stages in order to reconcile management fashion theory and new institutionalism. We begin outlining our alternative model with the revision of the claim that the main shortcoming of management fashion literature as well as other diffusion studies is their inability to detect and follow innovations' rejection and bandwagon abandonment after the peak of media attention has been passed (Abrahamson et al., 2015).

##### **4.1.1. Emergence – further diffusion or ignorance and disappearance**

In his founding paper Abrahamson made rather modest description of the early stage of management innovations evolution and development acknowledging that “*virtually nothing is known about the selection stage of management fashion supply*” (1996:266). Institutional theory, which is generally focused on institutionalization and institutional maintenance of stability and homogeneity, simply delineates its boundaries of application, focusing on explaining and predicting the patterns and trajectories of popular innovations diffusion and maintenance even after more efficient solutions have emerged (Furnari, 2014; Aksom et al., 2020). Institutional forces are introduced in the theory in order to explain why practices continue successfully diffusing even when their adoptions cannot be anymore explained by their contributions to efficiency (Friedland and Alford, 1991:243). At best, institutionalists explain early adopters' motivation arguing that early adoptions are primarily explained by the search for technical or economic benefits while institutionalization is recognized when “*motivations for adoption progressively shift as innovations diffuse*” (Compagni et al., 2015:244) In other words, institutionalists explore and explain why organizations adopt certain practices rather whether

1 they adopt new practices at all. Management fashion theory adds to this core a hypothesis about  
2 the existence of supply-side that creates, selects and disseminates fashions.  
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5 In their recent paper Abrahamson et al. (2015) described a period of mid-life uncertainty as a  
6 transition stage which is crucial for the fate of the management fashion: it follows after the  
7 fashion period and defines whether management fashions have prospered in becoming  
8 institutional standards or they would be discarded by fashion forces that follow the norms of  
9 progress and transience. During this period, Abrahamson et al. (2015) argue, "*it becomes highly*  
10 *uncertain which will dominate: fashion forces, causing techniques' disappearance, or,*  
11 *institutionalization forces, causing their relative persistence...which render it highly uncertain*  
12 *whether an organizational technique will or will not disappear during this period"* (2015:18).  
13 We argue that this uncertainty period is applicable only to the proto-fashion period as it is only  
14 an early stage of innovations life cycle which is characterized by uncertainty: it can be ignored  
15 and disappear at the very beginning or it can succeed and proliferate, being noticed by media.  
16 This first period when there is uncertainty whether an emerging concept can diffuse and succeed  
17 converges and can be unified with the first stage of diffusion in institutional theory.  
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23 The most common reaction to the emergence of new management concepts in mature  
24 institutional environment is ignorance. As Sanders and Tuschke noted, "*the need for legitimacy*  
25 *would seem to work against adoption and diffusion"* (2007:33) in novel contexts for  
26 institutionally contested practices. But even in the absence of obvious opponents and without  
27 visible, direct contradictions with prevailed institutional myths, new practices and concepts  
28 would face ignorance as there are already natural, taken-for-granted means, approaches,  
29 solutions and traditions that leave no room for any alternatives. Because of ignorance, most new  
30 concepts simply do not progress beyond an early stage, "*when the cumulative number of*  
31 *adoptions is too low to trigger isomorphic responses"* (Compagni et al., 2015:242). If fashion-  
32 setting communities do not pick up and promote a certain newly emerged concept, it has no  
33 further prospects in becoming fashion and institution.  
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39 While it is true that early adopters are driven by rational assessment of technical value that  
40 innovation promises (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Tolbert and Zucker, 1983) and one can even  
41 accept that early adopters are interested in both economic and social benefits (Abrahamson and  
42 Rosenkopf, 1993; Staw and Epstein, Kennedy and Fiss, 2009), it is also true that these early  
43 adopters are nevertheless heavily influenced by established institutional context. Thus, early  
44 adopters may be reasonably interested in adopting new, potentially technically more advanced  
45 solutions but these motivations are eclipsed by prevailing institutional myths. Therefore, only  
46 really powerful promotion by the fashion-setting communities may help overcome this initial  
47 institutional pressure towards ignorance and turn new management concept into fashion. Both  
48 efficient and inefficient innovation can succeed or fail with the same chances: this argument is  
49 consistent with both management fashion theory and new institutionalism (Meyer and Rowan,  
50 1977; Abrahamson, 1991).  
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55 Business media, academic literature and conferences perform a gatekeeping role which "*may*  
56 *block or facilitate the further dissemination of ideas"* (Nijholt et al., 2014:471). Popular media  
57 serves two functions: it helps drawing attention to emerging concepts (Abrahamson, 1996;  
58 Alvarez et al., 2005; Madsen and Slatten, 2013; Nijholt et al., 2014) and it serves as a means of  
59 legitimating management ideas and solutions (Mazza and Alvarez, 2000; Ruling, 2005). This key  
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1  
2 role of popular media is defining for further prospects of any emerging concept and will be  
3 discussed below.  
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#### 8 **4.1.2. Becoming a management fashion**

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10 It is a post-fashion period which Abrahamson et al. (2015) claim to be characterized by  
11 uncertainty. In contrast, we argue that the period of uncertainty used to dominate the early stage  
12 of proto-fashions while those that survived this natural selection get protection from institutional  
13 forces that ensure their further dissemination, adoptions and institutionalization (Aksom, 2020).  
14 “*When management fashion setters select and disseminate these techniques, some become*  
15 *fashionable and diffuse*” (Abrahamson, 1996:267) but, continuing this line of thought, the  
16 conclusion that can be drawn is that those few management innovations that survive turn into  
17 fashions and their further trajectory cannot be changed in a way other than subsequent  
18 institutionalization and taken for grantedness (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). A period of  
19 intensive media attention when management fashions are at the peak of their popularity does not  
20 end up with the subsequent disappearance of these fashions. If their high rates of media  
21 presence really reflect high adoption rates then no reversal is possible: diffusion and adoption  
22 become a matter of normative and mimetic acceptance and imitation, reinforcing  
23 institutionalization. According to isomorphism theory the only outcome is homogeneity and  
24 taken-for-grantedness (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer et al., 1997).  
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#### 30 **4.1.3. Institutionalization**

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32 Institutional theory postulates, first and foremost, institutionalization, isomorphic convergence  
33 and pressures towards adopting legitimate practices and against the ignorance of adoption. The  
34 uncertainty period that can cause innovations’ disappearance is a pre-institutional period when  
35 these innovations do not have yet social value and no shared normative meaning is assigned to  
36 them. Before institutionalization these emerging innovations have only instrumental utility and  
37 the absence of social meaning and institutional value put them at risk of being ignored and  
38 rejected at the early stage of their evolution. It is an institutionalization that promotes stability  
39 and persistence and shields popular practices from abandonment and deinstitutionalization.  
40 Business media contributes to this direction towards institutionalization as it serves a  
41 legitimating function (Mazza and Alvarez, 2000). Functioning as an arena where the legitimacy  
42 of management ideas and practices is produced, business press has a great impact on emerging  
43 techniques and concepts in terms (ignorance in media is a death sentence for most new concepts)  
44 but contributes to legitimation and institutionalization of those that survived initial selection  
45 stages and became fashions. Paraphrasing Deephouse (1996), management fashions legitimate.  
46 As Staw and Epstein (2000) found, fashionable management concepts do not necessarily  
47 increase performance but benefit organizations in terms of reputation and social approval and  
48 managers in terms of higher salaries. Therefore, management fashions can be compared to  
49 institutions in terms of social benefits for those who conform to them. The logic of adopting  
50 management fashion resembles the logic of adopting institutional practices.  
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58 A number of examples that confirm the logic of such a trajectory can be found in the modern  
59 management consulting industry and organizational structures (Heusinkveld and Benders, 2012).  
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2 Among them are the balanced scorecard (Ax and Bjørnenak, 2005; Madsen, 2014; Madsen and  
3 Slåtten, 2013; 2015; Madsen et al., 2019), benchmarking (Madsen et al., 2017), Blue Ocean  
4 Strategy (Madsen and Slåtten, 2019), SWOT analysis (Madsen, 2016), Corporate Social  
5 Responsibility, Total Quality Management (Madsen, 2020) or Activity Based Costing. All these  
6 management innovations had their boom in media attention but their diffusion and  
7 institutionalization continued even after they passed their respective peaks in discourse intensity  
8 (Madsen, 2020a; b; David and Strang, 2006). In particular, Madsen has found that “*while the*  
9 *initial outsourcing hype and craze of the late 1980s and early 1990s has waned, outsourcing has*  
10 *shown considerable staying power as a management concept*” (2017:178). David and Strang  
11 (2006) demonstrated that the end of the boom around the TQM has not resulted in concept’s  
12 disappearance: on the contrary, this once fashionable practice sustained and returned to its  
13 technical roots (Madsen, 2020b).  
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## 21 **5. From fashion to institution**

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23 In this section we argue that when a popular in media and widely diffused management concept  
24 achieves a high level of popularity and adoption rates the only further trajectory in its life cycle  
25 is towards institutionalization. This explanation aims to resolve the perceived tension in MF and  
26 IT predictions with regard to the evolution of management concepts (Madsen et., 2017), the  
27 possibility and likelihood of their institutionalization and/or deinstitutionalization and the  
28 conflicting dynamics of institutional isomorphic forces and management fashions’ transitory  
29 nature and the bell shaped curve in public attention. Perkmann and Spicer (2008) addressed this  
30 paradox of incommensurability between management fashion theory and neoinstitutional focus  
31 on converging pressures towards stability, inertia and homogeneity. Management fashion theory  
32 predicts that few fashions survive the initial celebrations fading away and disappearing after the  
33 hype is over while institutional theory predicts that popular practices will continue to diffuse  
34 (Aksom and Tymchenko, 2020; Aksom, 2020). According to IT, their evolution fueled by  
35 legitimacy gains inevitably reinforces their wide dissemination unless these practices achieve the  
36 status of taken-for-granted. Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999) distinguished between the status of  
37 being a management fashion and the next stage in the lifecycle – institutionalization, which does  
38 not necessarily follow by default. Moreover, even the founders of institutional theory  
39 acknowledged that few innovations are widely adopted and institutionalized (Zucker, 1988:26).  
40 In fact, DiMaggio and Powell’s prediction of isomorphic convergence and institutionalization  
41 holds only for few organizational practices that succeeded in competition and survived among  
42 dozens or hundreds of other emerging techniques that failed and disappeared before media  
43 attention has noticed them<sup>6</sup>. Management fashion scholars naturally developed this observation  
44 and put it at the center of management fashion theory. Abrahamson’s initial thesis on the  
45 transience of collective beliefs and bell-shaped curve of popularity has been interpreted as  
46 evidence of subsequent disappearance of once popular management fashions. Therefore, the  
47 conclusion that has been immediately drawn is that contrary to institutional predictions, popular  
48 practices rarely turn into institutions and instead simply disappear, leaving space for new future  
49 fashions. Management fashion theory is believed to be a theory that denies the long-term impact  
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<sup>6</sup> Institutional theory, in fact, focuses on broad diffusion and institutionalization, avoiding such questions as the emergence and decline of practices and ideas (Furnari, 2014; Bentzen, 2019).



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2 of legitimate practices and replaces isomorphism with the model of a regular turnover of  
3 temporally popular concepts that only look like institutional standards.  
4

5 There are two conditions to be met for management concepts in order to succeed in  
6 institutionalization – 1) to outperform other emerging concepts in its route towards the status of  
7 fashionable concept and 2) enjoy real adoptions instead of merely media coverage. For example,  
8 when management concepts are widely highlighted and discussed in media it is still not enough  
9 for being considered as management fashions and moreover, as candidates for  
10 institutionalization. A fashionable concept can be favored by media but still not diffuse. An  
11 example is the Beyond Budgeting concept which despite enormous media attention from  
12 business press and, more recently, academic literature, demonstrates only a modest rate of  
13 adoption (Aksom, 2019; Becker et al., 2020). Another popular example of low adoption rates  
14 despite the great interest among practitioners and academics is Activity-Based Costing during  
15 the 1990s and the early 2000s (Innes and Mitchell, 1995; Clarke et al., 1999; Cohen et al., 2005;  
16 Berg and Madsen, 2020). In Røvik's (2011) virus theory terms it can be argued that the concept  
17 faces ignorance such as non-adoption or isolation (Johanson and Madsen, 2019). It is an early  
18 stage of the life cycle when new practices can be evaluated by field members with more or less  
19 critical judgments and, in particular, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and Tolbert and Zucker  
20 (1983) allowed the possibility of ignoring newly emerged concepts if actors consider them as not  
21 effective and progressive even though these judgments are made within institutionally  
22 constructed definitions of effectiveness and progress. As such:  
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30 **Proposition 1.** Media attention is necessary but not sufficient condition for new management  
31 techniques to be considered as management fashions and candidates for institutionalization since  
32 even media attention does not guarantee diffusion. Popular concepts can be ignored by adopters  
33 which preclude them from further institutionalization. Only those fashions that enjoy media  
34 popularity and have high levels of adoption turn into institutions.  
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37 **Proposition 2.** Most emerging concepts do not enjoy media attention and disappear during their  
38 early stage of diffusion, giving way to few concepts that become fashions and, subsequently,  
39 institutions.  
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42 **Proposition 3.** Once an emerging concept survives and becomes management fashion its only  
43 diffusion trajectory is towards institutionalization. Institutional change can be thus understood  
44 not as a deinstitutionalization of existing popular practices but as a change in shared beliefs  
45 accompanied by the emergence of new concepts that will fit these new institutional definitions  
46 and become new fashions and then institutions.  
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50 At the early stage of diffusion actors are free to judge newly emerged management techniques  
51 with no institutional bandwagon influences exerted upon them (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983;  
52 Aksom, 2020). At this early stage innovation does not offer legitimacy and thus organizations do  
53 not extract social benefits but take a risk of being first adopters. Irrespective of whether an  
54 innovation really efficient and improves performance it is risky to adopt during the early stage of  
55 diffusion but it is unlikely that it will be ignored during the later phases of bandwagon diffusion  
56 (again, irrespective of real economic and technical benefits). Saying that "*few management*  
57 *fashions would survive the initial celebrations*" (Perkmann and Spicer, 2008:812) means  
58 violating a central institutional thesis on the legitimating power of popular and celebrated  
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1  
2 concepts. Rather “*few emerging concepts would survive the early stage of life cycle and turn into*  
3 *fashion*” while “*practice persist when the discourse began to disappear, indicating they became*  
4 *institutionalized*” (2008:813). Once a concept achieves a status of management fashion and  
5 enjoys intensive media attention, its further evolution is directed towards institutionalization.  
6 From now on institutional isomorphic forces prevent deinstitutionalization and decline in  
7 adoption rates (Aksom, 2020). This distinction between fashion and emerging concept instead of  
8 disentangling fashion and institution is a key for understanding the logic of management  
9 concepts evolution given the existence of both institutional pressures towards isomorphism and  
10 transitory nature of fashions and media attention. Instead of asking under what conditions a  
11 management fashion becomes more permanently diffused we propose to argue that it is an  
12 achieved status of management fashion that is itself constitutes a stage in a life cycle that  
13 guarantees further institutionalization.

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19 It appears that the two-stage model of diffusion and institutionalization (Tolbert and Zucker,  
20 1983; Staw and Epstein, 2000; Kennedy and Fiss, 2009) is not so much about motivations; rather  
21 it is a theory about “*what actors cannot do and why rather than what they can and what is their*  
22 *motivation*” (Aksom, 2020:21). While institutional researchers argue that both early and later  
23 adopters can be interested in both economic and social gains, institutional forces prevent early  
24 adopters from recognizing the need and possibility to implement new concepts in mature  
25 environments and later adopters from abandoning taken-for-granted practices:

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29 “*While institutionalization model may not clearly and accurately reflect adopters’ motivation,*  
30 *this institutional trajectory clearly captures and indicates a gradual decrease in the possibility*  
31 *for abandoning once adopted practice. They may have different and often mixed motivation for*  
32 *adoption, but ever increasing institutional forces towards isomorphism restrict and reduce their*  
33 *ability for deinstitutionalization at each stage of institutionalization. The main implication here*  
34 *for the two-stage diffusion model of institutionalization is that the second stage is not so much*  
35 *about adopters’ search for social gains but rather about their inability to deviate and resist*  
36 *institutional pressures*” (Aksom, 2020:22).

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40 Without these restrictions on institutional explanations institutional theory ends up in suggesting  
41 that both early and later adopters are free to adopt and abandon novel concepts and  
42 institutionalized standards, enjoying both economic and social benefits.

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45 **Conclusions.** Unifying seemingly diverging and conflicting perspectives and theories is seen by  
46 many researchers as a way towards theoretical progress and, as a result, increasing understanding  
47 of phenomena (Maxwell, 2014; Modell et al., 2017). If this is a case then reconciling and  
48 unifying contradicting assumptions and predictions in management fashion theory and new  
49 institutionalism is the right choice for theoretical development in organization studies and  
50 diffusion research. The aim of this study was to show that institutional theory and management  
51 fashion theory can be consistently combined and unified (Aksom and Firsova, 2020). In this  
52 paper we have addressed a paradox that stems from the perceived incommensurability between  
53 management fashion theory and new institutionalism (Abrahamson et al., 2015). It has been  
54 argued in previous research that these theories at best can be considered and applied in isolation  
55 since they postulate two opposite and incompatible forces - institutional isomorphism and norms  
56 of progress and transience. We started from a premise that the logic of institutional order does  
57 not deny the existence of both forces as organizations should demonstrate both stability in  
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1 preferences (adopting and maintaining taken-for-granted practices) and searching for new  
2 solutions thus demonstrating their presence at the forefront of management progress. While  
3 management fashion theory prescribes that popular concepts and techniques demonstrate a bell  
4 shaped curve in their diffusion trajectory, we argued that those concepts that have achieved a  
5 status of management fashion cannot disappear when the media attention is over: from now on  
6 its diffusion conforms to institutional forces which privilege and ensure its further  
7 institutionalization.  
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11 We reinterpret Abrahamson's thesis on transitory nature of management fashion by  
12 distinguishing between transitory media attention and real diffusion and adoption rates of the  
13 concept. Media attention defines the success or failure of an emerging concept, serving the  
14 function of selection force. Furthermore, media attention can produce management fashions but  
15 it has no influence on their further fate: institutional trajectory towards institutionalization is a  
16 dominant force that protects fashions from being rejected and deinstitutionalized (Aksom and  
17 Tymchenko, 2020; Aksom, 2020). Institutional theory has emerged in order to answer why  
18 "*many organizational forms and procedures can exist without obvious technical or economic*  
19 *value*" (Staw and Epstein, 2000:524). Management fashions survive, persist and achieve a taken-  
20 for-granted status even after the media boom is over: the institutional environment ensures the  
21 stability and maintenance for even obsolete and useless practices. Abrahamson himself built his  
22 theory around the neutral definition of management fashions, assuming that from the beginning  
23 they can offer no technical and economic value and still succeed and turn into fashions and  
24 institutions (Abrahamson, 1996).  
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31 The norms of progress nevertheless do require a transition in shared beliefs and definitions but  
32 this transition occurs without abandoning existing fashions. New emerging concepts compete for  
33 media attention and as Zucker (1988) noted for institutional literature – "*few innovations are*  
34 *widely adopted*" but we can assume that this observation is fair only for emerging concepts while  
35 few of them turn into fashion. But once an emerging concept survives and becomes management  
36 fashion its only diffusion trajectory is towards institutionalization. Institutional change can be  
37 thus understood as a change in shared beliefs accompanied by the emergence of new concepts  
38 that will fit these new institutional definitions and become new fashions and then institutions.  
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43 Overall, the paper aims to cover, generalize and explain different trajectories of various  
44 management and organizational concepts, deducing theoretical propositions from both  
45 institutional theory and management fashion theory. The model presented in this paper allows  
46 reconciling and satisfy both MF and IT predictions, showing the place for both institutional  
47 forces that promote stability, persistence, inertia and resistance to change and norms of progress  
48 that require bringing new organizational practices besides already existing institutions.  
49 Theoretical and methodological ideas offered in this paper can be helpful in future research on  
50 management fashions and diffusion. Studies on the evolution of management concept can benefit  
51 from proposed categorization and causal relationships between different stages of the life cycle.  
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55 It is hoped that the theoretical framework is generalizable across a broad variety of contexts and  
56 this paper can motivate subsequent studies on the emergence, diffusion, maintenance,  
57 disappearance and non-abandonment of management concepts at different stages of  
58 institutionalization and media attention. Future research can directly explore whether popular  
59 management concepts fade away after the hype in media is over. Similarly, it can be fruitful to  
60

1 delve deeper into the motivation of early adopters, non-adopters and those who consider  
2 abandoning once popular fashions.  
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6 comments on the penultimate draft of this paper and to the Editor and reviewers of this journal  
7 for their helpful suggestions.  
8  
9

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## Appendix A.

Stages in management concepts lifecycle	Status of management concepts	Characteristics	Institutional explanation
Uncertainty period	Emerging concept	Most emerging management ideas, concepts and techniques disappear at the very early stage, bearing no support from fashion setting community and demand side	This period is characterized in institutional theory as an early stage of diffusion when institutional forces do not drive decision to adopt and early adopters can relatively independently judge a new concept. Ignorance is the most common reaction.
Media attention period	Management fashion	Those few concepts that survive initial stage of natural selection and head to head competition between other new ideas enjoy media celebration and become new management fashion that diffuse widely due to institutional support	Motivations for adoption progressively shift as innovations diffuse and management fashions are adopted primarily because of their social value as a legitimacy promising practice
Institutionalization period	Taken-for-granted institutional practice	When media attention decreases and management fashion is no longer highlighted in press, it nevertheless does not disappear; in	Institutional theory predicts that popular practices with a high rate of adoption will further enjoy widespread diffusion until institutionalization is

		contrary, its further trajectory is channeled and reinforced by institutional forces towards complete institutionalization	completed and this concept becomes a taken-for-granted standard.
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**Table 1. Three distinct periods through which management concepts transit and develop.**

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Institutionalization period	Taken-for-granted institutional practice	When media attention decreases and management fashion is no longer highlighted in press, it nevertheless doesn't disappear; in contrary, its further trajectory is channeled and reinforced by institutional forces towards complete institutionalization	Institutional theory predicts that popular practices with a high rate of adoption will further enjoy widespread diffusion until institutionalization is completed and this concept becomes a taken-for-granted standard

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