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

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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
management fashion theory. Instead of experiencing further institutionalization over time, the life of management fashions typically follows “a bell-shaped curve with early adoption followed by widespread uptake and an eventual downturn” (Perkmann and Spicer, 2008:812; Abrahamson, 1996; Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999). It seems from the management fashion theory that long-term isomorphic tendencies as described in new institutional theory is simply impossible due to regularly interrupting changes in the norms of progress. And vice versa, institutionalists would reply that institutional order favors stability and persistence, representing a barrier for new concepts and ideas and favoring popular management concepts.

In this paper we offer an alternative explanation and model of management fashions life cycle resolving perceived incommensurability between management fashion theory (MF) and institutional theory (IT). We argue that a transience of popular concepts and a demand for ever-more “progressive” ideas and solutions do not contradict institutionalist thesis on institutionalization, persistence and stability. We develop a set of propositions with regard to the evolution and dynamics of management concepts’ struggles over media attention, legitimacy and institutionalization. As a result, the paper extends the current literature of management fashion theory, organizational institutionalism and management concepts diffusion studies.

2. Ontology, explanations and predictions of new institutionalism and management fashion theory

In this section we review and synthesize a literature which focuses on cultural construction of appropriate organizational behaviour and the most legitimate and taken-for-granted means to pursue these institutional ends. In doing so we link the writings of March, Meyer, Abrahamson and other organizational theorists in order to arrive with non-contradicting and natural theoretical depiction of causal chain that enables and reinforces the flow of management ideas and practices based on the need for conformity to widespread social understandings and institutionalized beliefs about success and rationality (Zucker, 1987; Ritti and Silver, 1986; Jepperson, 1991; Zilber, 2002; 2008; Li, 2017; Hallett and Hawbaker, 2020; Sumner, 1909). The social value of management techniques is assumed by the members of institutional environment because these practices reflect dominant institutional logics and implementing new management concepts means depicting themselves as rational entities (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Meyer, 1983; Mellemvik et al., 1988). Together rituals of 1) making choice (Feldman and March, 1981; March and Olsen, 1976), 2) making choice in favor of institutionally approved practice (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) and 3) the expectation that managers will regularly choose new, more progressive solutions create a market for management fashions (Abrahamson, 1996). Below we would explain in more details why this conclusion inevitably follows and can be derived from institutional theories of diffusion and organizational decision making literature.

A key claim in institutional theory is that organizations are socially constructed phenomena which reflect in their structure and behaviour institutionally accepted and required myths about what counts as rational, appropriate, efficient and progressive (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Jepperson, 2002; Zilber, 2002; 2008; Rowan, 2010). Conformity to these norms rather than concerns of pure technical efficiency and economic rationality allows organizations to improve their survival chances and succeed in their institutional field (Zucker, 1987; Oliver, 1991;
Greenwood and Hinings, 1996; Suddaby, 2010). After all, what is appropriate, rational and efficient is, in turn, institutionally defined by the given environment (Jepperson, 2002). Organizations adapt to what they believe society expects of them (Boxenbaum and Jonsson, 2008:78; Greenwood and Meyer, 2008), sharing the same environment they adopt same practices and structures and by adopting institutional standards they contribute to institutional isomorphism and homogeneity at macro level (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Kraatz and Zajac, 1996). Sustained institutional order allows widely diffused and accepted practices and concepts to persist even after losing any technical and economic value. Over time, institutional pressures prevent organizations from deviation and non-conformity and inertial resistance ensures both organizational homogeneity and institutional proliferation and maintenance of widely diffused ideas and practices. Management fashion theory is built on the basis of this causal relationship and ontological foundations of socially constructed reality, institutional pressures towards conformity with popular practices and isomorphism (Abrahamson, 1996). Abrahamson started with the premise that management fashions are cultural phenomena which arise and exist in response to institutionally constructed norms of rationality and progress. In this way, Green, for example, considers this theory as the “management fashion variant of neoinstitutionalism” (2004:653).

“Belief” is a central notion and category in management fashion vocabulary (Benders and van Veen, 2001; Benders et al., 2019) and this reliance on constructionist ontology allows direct correspondence between MF theory and IT. As DiMaggio and Powell (1983) predicted and Tolbert and Zucker (1983) demonstrated, over time as certain practices gained a high level of popularity in the field, organizations begin valuing these practices for their social significance and adopt them in order to be “isomorphic with norms of appropriate conduct” (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2009:176). This prediction is based on the notion of social value that institutionalized practice offers to adopters. Abrahamson and Rosenkopf embedded this claim into the diffusion and management fashion literature arguing that “the mere fact that many organizations have adopted an innovation, and not individual organizations' assessment of its efficiency or returns, becomes the cue that it is normal, or even legitimate, for organizations to use this innovation” and “organizations that do not use the innovation tend to appear abnormal and illegitimate to their stakeholders; these organizations tend to adopt the innovation because of the fear of lost stakeholder support” (1993:492). A shared reality about what constitutes a proper and rational organization is built around common taken-for-granted beliefs about the definitions of this reality irrespective of whether institutionally approved solutions really offer those benefits they promise1. Institutional context that surrounds organizations and determines their priorities generates widespread social understandings (Greenwood et al., 2008) which organizations perceive as objective and external reality. Jepperson emphasizes that even the principles of rational organizing are themselves socially constructed (2002:236) and any definition of success loses its meaning beyond the institutional context2. Even interest and power cannot be understood beyond the context of respective institutional logic which provides a meaning system for actors who, in turn, derive their agency from the culture (Friedland and

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1 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.

2 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.
Alford, 1991; Cooper et al., 2008; Meyer and Jepperson, 2000; Jepperson, 2002; Green, 2004; Meyer, 2008). Shared, taken-for-granted beliefs fuel, maintain and reinforce the institutional infrastructure for supply and demand for “rational” and “progressive” solutions. These beliefs are embodied in their quintessential forms – rational myths, which in Abrahamson’s theory are relabeled as “management fashions”. Both share the qualities of institution which Meyer provided in his founding paper on institutional theory:

“The effects of myths inhere, not in the fact that individuals believe them, but in the fact that they "know" everyone else does, and thus that "for all practical purposes" the myths are true” (Meyer, 1977:75).

Later on, Meyer and Rowan and Abrahamson extended this definition from education systems to popular organizational ideas, practices and structures. Drawing from the core institutional idea which can be traced back to Selznick (1957) with regard to the organizational practices as having social value per se they built their definitions of rational myth and management fashion as almost interchangeable notions. Both understood as derivatives from the institutionally constructed norms of rationality, modernity and progress and both draw their power from institutional order. For example, accounting as a myth allows depicting organization as rational and purposive entity with clear purposes and control mechanisms (Mellmvik et al., 1988; Meyer, 1983). Management and management accounting concepts such as Activity-Based Costing, Balanced Scorecard or Beyond Budgeting offer the same quintessential benefits in terms of contributing to decision making and control (Malmi and Brown, 2008). In this case, myths serve the ultimate function of legitimating, “by locating organization clearly in environmentally-established categories” (Meyer, 1983:235). The higher the degree of institutionalization in a given organizational field, the stronger are certain norms and beliefs about particular definitions of success, efficiency, rationality and progress. The more uncertain this environment is the stronger are mimetic forces which lead organizations to model themselves against other organizations since it is unclear for them what constitutes important ends to pursue and how to attain the goals (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Abrahamson, 1996).

Meyer and Rowan’s definitions of institutionalization (“the processes by which social processes, obligations, or actualities come to take on a rulelike status in social thought and action”) and the nature of organizational practices (which “enter into social life primarily as facts which must be taken into account by actors”) provide a necessary basis for understanding myths as either institutionalized practices or as logics that define which management fashions to be considered as efficient techniques at the forefront of management progress.

As such, management fashion is defined as a “relatively transitory collective belief, disseminated by management fashion setters that a management technique is at the forefront of management progress” (Abrahamson, 1996:257). The flow of management fashions, their emergence, diffusion and consumption is predefined by the very logic of institutional dynamics (Abrahamson, 1996; Kieser, 1997; Abrahamson and Piazza, 2019; Piazza and Abrahamson,

3 Selznick defined institutionalization as a special kind of taken-for-grantedness when organization or organizational practices have a status of social value in itself (Selznick, 1957; Scott, 1987; Oliver, 1992; Zbaracki, 1998; Green, 2004). Over time technical foundations become eclipsed with institutional 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 (Melllemvik 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
management techniques” (Abrahamson, 1996:257). This development allows filling the gap in the former institutional system of causal relationship which was silent about the origins and genesis of new popular practices and the fate of existing institutions in the face of newly emerged fashions (Furnari, 2014). Abrahamson’s approach is the most natural and elegant way to introduce change and turnover of popular practices into institutional picture of organizational life and dynamics of institutional fields. However, there are major points of intersection where management fashion theory seems to describe a different logic of institutional life cycle and diffusion patterns than institutional theory does.

3. Perceived shortcomings in management fashion literature: diffusion, adoption, institutionalization and deinstitutionalization

Since Abrahamson’s (1996) seminal paper has offered a theory of the emergence, diffusion and consumption patterns and dynamics of management fashions, two lines of criticism were offered. First, there is a methodological and empirical shortcoming given that diffusion and adoption rate cannot be indicated by media attention (Benders and van Veen, 2001; Clark, 2004; Erlingsdottir and Lindberg, 2005; Røvik, 2011). It can be argued that rapid upswings and equally rapid downturns of media attention neither indicate high adoption rates nor they capture the disappearance of the concept after the hype is over. This criticism relates also to a broader neoinstitutional research where highly diffused practices are assumed as being also highly institutionalized (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2009; Suddaby, 2010). In contrast, critics argue that highly diffused practices may also be institutionally illegitimate (Fiss et al., 2012; Reinmoeller and Ansari, 2016). Colyvas and Jonsson, for example, clearly distinguish between diffusion and institutionalization:

“Many things spread, often like wildfire, without ever becoming institutionalized. The ubiquity of a practice may suggest that it has become widely accepted, but activities that diffuse may never develop a foundation that enables them to persist. In contrast, there are procedures that are institutionalized—upheld by either law or strong beliefs—but not widely used or pursued” (2011:27).

Second criticism follows from the first one and blames management fashion theory in being silent about the fate of management concepts after the hype around them is over (Røvik, 2011; Heusinkveld et al., 2013). Claiming that attention to management fashions in media is characterized by the bell-shaped curves is not the same as claiming that the life of management fashions typically follows a bell-shaped curve with early adoption followed by widespread uptake and an eventual downturn and disappearance in praxis. Abrahamson did not answer directly whether a management fashion disappears when new fashion hype enters the market and media attention shifts the focus towards a new promising solution. There are two potential answers to this question. First, once popular management fashion disappears from media, organizations abandon it as the hype is over. It seems to be an implication that management fashion theory assumes. Second answer is more optimistic and implies two variants developed in later studies on fashions and suggested by classic institutional arguments: 1) once fashionable concept returns to its technical roots and serves as an efficient solution for performance improvement in some organizations (David and Strang, 2006) and, alternatively, 2) this
management fashion is institutionalized and turns into a taken-for-granted organizational standard no matter whether and how efficient and useful in practice. Which line of reasoning is more preferable in analyzing the fate of management fashions?

Benders and van Veen (2001) rightly noted that popularity of a topic in the press (that is, print media indicators) neither closely predicts a rate of adoption and diffusion level nor indicates the disappearance of management fashion. In other words, we cannot understand from media attention whether a management technique is further institutionalized or abandoned (deinstitutionalized⁴) and forgotten. We can assume that since a certain management fashion dominates in the informational space in general and in business media and academic literature in particular, there is a high level of diffusion at this point of time. And we have no less reason to suppose that media attention does not imply a widespread diffusion.

The third line of criticism attacks the very causal structure of management fashion theory and its incompatibility with institutional theory. Institutional theory claims that organizations are driven by institutionally defined and shared within organizational fields norms of rationality and management fashion theory adds that organizations must also conform to the norms of progress. The former implies imitating the most popular practices and decisions (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) and the later means organizations exist and operate in environment where also exists a shared, taken-for-granted expectation of a never-ending improvement process. Therefore, popular practices cannot stay too long: otherwise, “progress” would not occur and organizations risk to be judged as non-rational and thus illegitimate (Abrahamson, 1996). In a recent article Abrahamson et al. (2015) focused on the clash between these two theories – theories of institutions and fashions. Institutional theory claims that institutionalization is a fundamental and defining force while fashion theory predicts the transience and disappearance of once popular concepts. Similarly, Perkmann and Spicer point out the incommensurability of Abrahamson’s theory with new institutionalism:

“This limitation is a consequence of Abrahamson’s (1996) ambivalent usage of neo-institutionalist theory. On one hand, he argues that fashion discourses appeal to the general value of rationality, in line with Meyer and Rowan’s (1977) argument that organizations tend to adopt legitimate structures... and new management ideas diffuse primarily via isomorphic pressures across organizations. On the other hand, however, he points to the counterinstitutionalizing forces that prevent the practices from being stabilized. The fashion-setting industry subverts institutionalizing forces by continuously producing new fashions. This means the very structure of Abrahamson’s argument prevents him from explaining why and when management fashions would lead to institutionalization” (2008:814).

We argue in this paper that this apparent contradiction represents a paradox only at first glance. Both persistence and transience can be explained and reconciled in a single model. We offer an alternative explanation of the coexistence of management fashion bell-shaped life-cycles with

⁴ For example, Berg and Madsen (2020) recently explored the decline of ABC publications in accounting journals in the 2010s. This is a rather interesting case given that the perceived decline of interest from academics and business journals may reflect both institutionalization and disappearance of the concept from organizational practice. ABC has almost completely disappeared from top accounting journals since the late 2000s but this 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.
isomorphic forces that prevent popular practices from deinstitutionalization and instead ensure their further proliferation and institutionalization (Tolbert and Zucker, 1983; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). A change in media attention and disappearance of once popular management labels from the media do not preclude their further diffusion and institutionalization and thus do not contradict with institutional predictions of isomorphic trends. A simultaneous institutional demand for both persistence and progress opens up an opportunity for institutionalization of widely diffused concepts and explains the emergence of new concepts. Moreover, when considered as a two aspects of the same phenomenon, persistence and transience are understood as mutually inclusive and must coexist as both predefined by the very logic of institutional norms that maintain field level order. Institutionally constructed norms require organizations to maintain taken-for-granted practices (for example, budgeting) and searching for new, progressive solutions (for example, Activity-Based Costing, Balanced Scorecard or Beyond Budgeting) that would complement existing taken-for-granted routines. Both norms represent a hallmark of institutionally constructed model of rational actors that organizations must satisfy in order to appear legitimate (March and Feldman, 1981; Meyer et al., 1997; Meyer and Jepperson, 2000; Meyer, 2008).

The following conclusions are drawn:

1) Most emerging concepts never achieve popularity and disappear at the beginning of their life cycle while few management techniques achieve massive popularity in media and diffuse widely becoming new “progressive” management fashions. Once these concepts have achieved wide popularity institutional forces would favor them and lead to further institutionalization. Institutional inertia prevents popular, almost taken-for-granted practices from abandonment and rejection; instead, institutional theory predicts further popularity and isomorphic convergence unless this practice has achieved a status of taken-for-granted standard.

2) The disappearance of the label in the media does not signal its rejection and disappearance from practice (deinstitutionalization). At the same time, deinstitutionalization and institutional change mean simply a change in media attention but not in the abandonment of the concept from organizational everyday activity.

3) As organizations are expected to conform to both requirements to adopt and maintain taken-for-granted practices and looking for new progressive solutions it is institutionally predefined that they would adopt popular practices by contributing to their institutionalization and thus searching for new solutions (both imperatives embody the quintessence of socially constructed institutional norms for stability and rationality – the former requires for institutionalized practices while the later requires demonstrating rationality and modernity in decision making).

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

“powerful forces emerge that lead them [organizations] to become more similar to one another... Early adopters of organizational innovations are commonly driven by a desire to improve
performance... As an innovation spreads, a threshold is reached beyond which adoption provides legitimacy rather than improves performance” (1983:148-149).

Furthermore, institutional theory predicts organizational aspiration for legitimacy gains and resistance to deinstitutionalization so that management fashions’ diffusion must move towards complete institutionalization and taken-for-grantedness while being immune from rejection and ignorance (this is fair for established in media popular fashions, not for just emerged concepts which early adopters are free to reject). Management fashions thus do not disappear but move towards complete institutionalization (for example, TQM or Balanced Scorecard). Interpreting management fashion theory as a theory that predicts the disappearance of popular practices and techniques once they disappear from media coverage means violating the main postulate of institutional theory which forbids the disappearance of legitimacy-offering practices and instead predicts their proliferation. This misunderstanding stems from the confusion of equating the disappearance from media coverage with the trajectory of tangible diffusion (Clark, 2004)\textsuperscript{5}.

So while institutional theory predicts isomorphism and excludes entropic forces towards deinstitutionalization (Aksom, 2020), management fashion theory predicts change in media attention and inevitable emergence of new fashions. Together this synthesis explains 1) the existence of institutionalized practices and 2) the emergence of fashions in highly institutionalized field. In particular, our model reconciles institutional forces that prevent the emergence of new practices in highly institutionalized fields and the emergence and proliferation of management fashions. Only few novel concepts succeed and diffuse widely due to institutional pressures and this explains why so many ideas and concepts fail in their early stage but naturally incorporates the institutional norm of progress which postulates that organizations, while maintaining taken-for-granted institutionalized practices should also demand new progressive solutions.

We argue that when considering the life cycle of management fashion through the lenses of institutional theory it becomes apparent that the logic of institutional dynamics favors fashionable concepts and prevents them from deinstitutionalization. It is a master hypothesis in institutional theory which constitutes a key causal relationship (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scott, 1991; Kraatz and Zajac, 1996; Aksom et al., 2020; Aksom and Tymchenko, 2020). Following the institutional line of reasoning, we would recall that in organizational fields a trend that is clearly observed at the macro level is isomorphism, that is, once organizational practice achieves such a degree of popularity that a bandwagon-like diffusion occurs, a threshold is reached when organizations begin imitate each other and this intensive diffusion wave results in complete institutionalization when practice becomes taken-for-granted (Tolbert and Zucker, 1983; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Institutional theory argues against the possibility of unproblematic abandonment of highly popular practices: moreover, inertial resistance emerges which prevents organizations not only from deinstitutionalization of institutionally accepted practices but also prevents them from even considering such possibility (Zucker, 1987; Aksom and Tymchenko, 2020; Aksom, 2020).

\textsuperscript{5} Media coverage may not guarantee diffusion like in the case of Beyond Budgeting (see Libby and Lindsay, 2010) but guarantees that once popular in media management fashion diffuses widely (like BSC) its further fate is associated solely with institutionalization.
In the next section we will argue that deinstitutionalization concerns only a change in media attention when the discourse around the former management fashion disappears and new discourse and celebratory rhetoric emerge in support of new fashionable concept. In this vein, institutional change is not a deinstitutionalization of existing taken-for-granted practices but a change in media attention and other supply side actors.

4. Transition of management fashions, institutionalization and institutional change

We depart from viewing institutional change as a rise and fall, the emergence, popularity and disappearance of fashionable practices. An increase and decline in media attention may signal not a disappearance of management idea but its successful institutionalization. Institutional change can be understood and conceptualized not as disappearance of institutionally accepted practice but as a decline of fashion boom once fashionable practice is sustained and institutionalized as a taken-for-granted practice. Institutionalized practice from now on becomes a standard and its diffusion and adoptions do not depend anymore on media attention and supply side efforts. For example, in management accounting business and academic research a decline in media coverage and attention to Activity-Based Costing and Balanced Scorecard does not mean these concepts are no more relevant and had disappeared as obsolete and useless. On the contrary, a decline in their media popularity signals their institutionalization as a standard management accounting and control routines. Media attention has been focused on these practices in the 1990s and the 2000s respectively but while nowadays a fashion boom decreased, Balanced Scorecard and Activity-Based Costing are taken-for-granted elements in most modern organizations. At the same time, a lack of media attention prevents Beyond Budgeting from reaching a point where it receives a critical mass of adoptions. Without sufficient media support Beyond Budgeting never achieved a needed level of popularity and thus a little number of adoptions took place.

Therefore, institutional change in these cases implies a change in media attention, when media coverage switches from one fashionable concept to another but this change does not imply the disappearance of the former fashion. This interpretation of institutional change helps to embed the transitory nature of management fashion into the logical structure of institutional theory and explains the transitory nature of media attention while allowing accepting that institutionalization is a final stage in management fashion life cycle. In this form, Abrahamson’s theory fits both Meyer and Rowan’s and DiMaggio and Powell’s formulations of institutional theory:

1. Management fashions arise and diffuse widely in response to institutionally constructed definitions of rationality, modernity and progress. The later implies that new “rational”, “advanced” solution should emerge so organizations could have adopted them in order to depict themselves as rational and progressive “units in the system”;
2. Increase in popularity and adoptions resembles DiMaggio and Powell’s isomorphism thesis;
3. DiMaggio and Powell did not directly pronounce that new fashionable solutions cannot emerge and diffuse in already institutionalized field while this thesis can be derived from Meyer and Rowan and of course, from Abrahamson (1996);
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 Abarahamson’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).

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
they adopt new practices at all. Management fashion theory adds to this core a hypothesis about
the existence of supply-side that creates, selects and disseminates fashions.

In their recent paper Abrahamson et al. (2015) described a period of mid-life uncertainty as a
transition stage which is crucial for the fate of the management fashion: it follows after the
fashion period and defines whether management fashions have prospered in becoming
institutional standards or they would be discarded by fashion forces that follow the norms of
progress and transience. During this period, Abrahamson et al. (2015) argue, “it becomes highly
uncertain which will dominate: fashion forces, causing techniques’ disappearance, or,
institutionalization forces, causing their relative persistence... which render it highly uncertain
whether an organizational technique will or will not disappear during this period” (2015:18).
We argue that this uncertainty period is applicable only to the proto-fashion period as it is only
an early stage of innovations life cycle which is characterized by uncertainty: it can be ignored
and disappear at the very beginning or it can succeed and proliferate, being noticed by media.
This first period when there is uncertainty whether an emerging concept can diffuse and succeed
converges and can be unified with the first stage of diffusion in institutional theory.

The most common reaction to the emergence of new management concepts in mature
institutional environment is ignorance. As Sanders and Tuschke noted, “the need for legitimacy
would seem to work against adoption and diffusion” (2007:33) in novel contexts for
institutionally contested practices. But even in the absence of obvious opponents and without
visible, direct contradictions with prevailed institutional myths, new practices and concepts
would face ignorance as there are already natural, taken-for-granted means, approaches,
solutions and traditions that leave no room for any alternatives. Because of ignorance, most new
concepts simply do not progress beyond an early stage, “when the cumulative number of
adoptions is too low to trigger isomorphic responses” (Compagni et al., 2015:242). If fashion-
setting communities do not pick up and promote a certain newly emerged concept, it has no
further prospects in becoming fashion and institution.

While it is true that early adopters are driven by rational assessment of technical value that
innovation promises (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Tolbert and Zucker, 1983) and one can even
accept that early adopters are interested in both economic and social benefits (Abrahamson and
Rosenkopf, 1993; Staw and Epstein, Kennedy and Fiss, 2009), it is also true that these early
adopters are nevertheless heavily influenced by established institutional context. Thus, early
adopters may be reasonably interested in adopting new, potentially technically more advanced
solutions but these motivations are eclipsed by prevailing institutional myths. Therefore, only
really powerful promotion by the fashion-setting communities may help overcome this initial
institutional pressure towards ignorance and turn new management concept into fashion. Both
efficient and inefficient innovation can succeed or fail with the same chances: this argument is
consistent with both management fashion theory and new institutionalism (Meyer and Rowan,

Business media, academic literature and conferences perform a gatekeeping role which “may
block or facilitate the further dissemination of ideas” (Nijholt et al., 2014:471). Popular media
serves two functions: it helps drawing attention to emerging concepts (Abrahamson, 1996;
Alvarez et al., 2005; Madsen and Slatten, 2013; Nijholt et al., 2014) and it serves as a means of
legitimating management ideas and solutions (Mazza and Alvarez, 2000; Rüling, 2005). This key
role of popular media is defining for further prospects of any emerging concept and will be discussed below.

4.1.2. Becoming a management fashion

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

4.1.3. Institutionalization

Institutional theory postulates, first and foremost, institutionalization, isomorphic convergence and pressures towards adopting legitimate practices and against the ignorance of adoption. The uncertainty period that can cause innovations’ disappearance is a pre-institutional period when these innovations do not have yet social value and no shared normative meaning is assigned to them. Before institutionalization these emerging innovations have only instrumental utility and the absence of social meaning and institutional value put them at risk of being ignored and rejected at the early stage of their evolution. It is an institutionalization that promotes stability and persistence and shields popular practices from abandonment and deinstitutionalization. Business media contributes to this direction towards institutionalization as it serves a legitimating function (Mazza and Alvarez, 2000). Functioning as an arena where the legitimacy of management ideas and practices is produced, business press has a great impact on emerging techniques and concepts in terms (ignorance in media is a death sentence for most new concepts) but contributes to legitimation and institutionalization of those that survived initial selection stages and became fashions. Paraphrasing Deephouse (1996), management fashions legitimate. As Staw and Epstein (2000) found, fashionable management concepts do not necessarily increase performance but benefit organizations in terms of reputation and social approval and managers in terms of higher salaries. Therefore, management fashions can be compared to institutions in terms of social benefits for those who conform to them. The logic of adopting management fashion resembles the logic of adopting institutional practices.

A number of examples that confirm the logic of such a trajectory can be found in the modern management consulting industry and organizational structures (Heusinkveld and Benders, 2012).
Among them are the balanced scorecard (Ax and Bjørnenak, 2005; Madsen, 2014; Madsen and Slåtten, 2013; 2015; Madsen et al., 2019), benchmarking (Madsen et al., 2017), Blue Ocean Strategy (Madsen and Slåtten, 2019), SWOT analysis (Madsen, 2016), Corporate Social Responsibility, Total Quality Management (Madsen, 2020) or Activity Based Costing. All these management innovations had their boom in media attention but their diffusion and institutionalization continued even after they passed their respective peaks in discourse intensity (Madsen, 2020a; b; David and Strang, 2006). In particular, Madsen has found that “while the initial outsourcing hype and craze of the late 1980s and early 1990s has waned, outsourcing has shown considerable staying power as a management concept” (2017:178). David and Strang (2006) demonstrated that the end of the boom around the TQM has not resulted in concept’s disappearance; on the contrary, this once fashionable practice sustained and returned to its technical roots (Madsen, 2020b).

5. From fashion to institution

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

There are two conditions to be met for management concepts in order to succeed in institutionalization – 1) to outperform other emerging concepts in its route towards the status of fashionable concept and 2) enjoy real adoptions instead of merely media coverage. For example, when management concepts are widely highlighted and discussed in media it is still not enough for being considered as management fashions and moreover, as candidates for institutionalization. A fashionable concept can be favored by media but still not diffuse. An example is the Beyond Budgeting concept which despite enormous media attention from business press and, more recently, academic literature, demonstrates only a modest rate of adoption (Aksom, 2019; Becker et al., 2020). Another popular example of low adoption rates despite the great interest among practitioners and academics is Activity-Based Costing during the 1990s and the early 2000s (Innes and Mitchell, 1995; Clarke et al., 1999; Cohen et al., 2005; Berg and Madsen, 2020). In Røvik’s (2011) virus theory terms it can be argued that the concept faces ignorance such as non-adoption or isolation (Johanson and Madsen, 2019). It is an early stage of the life cycle when new practices can be evaluated by field members with more or less critical judgments and, in particular, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and Tolbert and Zucker (1983) allowed the possibility of ignoring newly emerged concepts if actors consider them as not effective and progressive even though these judgments are made within institutionally constructed definitions of effectiveness and progress. As such:

**Proposition 1.** Media attention is necessary but not sufficient condition for new management techniques to be considered as management fashions and candidates for institutionalization since even media attention does not guarantee diffusion. Popular concepts can be ignored by adopters which preclude them from further institutionalization. Only those fashions that enjoy media popularity and have high levels of adoption turn into institutions.

**Proposition 2.** Most emerging concepts do not enjoy media attention and disappear during their early stage of diffusion, giving way to few concepts that become fashions and, subsequently, institutions.

**Proposition 3.** Once an emerging concept survives and becomes management fashion its only diffusion trajectory is towards institutionalization. Institutional change can be thus understood not as a deinstitutionalization of existing popular practices but as a change in shared beliefs accompanied by the emergence of new concepts that will fit these new institutional definitions and become new fashions and then institutions.

At the early stage of diffusion actors are free to judge newly emerged management techniques with no institutional bandwagon influences exerted upon them (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Aksom, 2020). At this early stage innovation does not offer legitimacy and thus organizations do not extract social benefits but take a risk of being first adopters. Irrespective of whether an innovation really efficient and improves performance it is risky to adopt during the early stage of diffusion but it is unlikely that it will be ignored during the later phases of bandwagon diffusion (again, irrespective of real economic and technical benefits). Saying that “few management fashions would survive the initial celebrations” (Perkmann and Spicer, 2008:812) means violating a central institutional thesis on the legitimating power of popular and celebrated
concepts. Rather “few emerging concepts would survive the early stage of life cycle and turn into fashion” while “practice persist when the discourse began to disappear, indicating they became institutionalized” (2008:813). Once a concept achieves a status of management fashion and enjoys intensive media attention, its further evolution is directed towards institutionalization. From now on institutional isomorphic forces prevent deinstitutionalization and decline in adoption rates (Aksom, 2020). This distinction between fashion and emerging concept instead of disentangling fashion and institution is a key for understanding the logic of management concepts evolution given the existence of both institutional pressures towards isomorphism and transitory nature of fashions and media attention. Instead of asking under what conditions a management fashion becomes more permanently diffused we propose to argue that it is an achieved status of management fashion that is itself constitutes a stage in a life cycle that guarantees further institutionalization.

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

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

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

Conclusions. Unifying seemingly diverging and conflicting perspectives and theories is seen by many researchers as a way towards theoretical progress and, as a result, increasing understanding of phenomena (Maxwell, 2014; Modell et al., 2017). If this is a case then reconciling and unifying contradicting assumptions and predictions in management fashion theory and new institutionalism is the right choice for theoretical development in organization studies and diffusion research. The aim of this study was to show that institutional theory and management fashion theory can be consistently combined and unified (Aksom and Firsova, 2020). In this paper we have addressed a paradox that stems from the perceived incommensurability between management fashion theory and new institutionalism (Abrahamson et al., 2015). It has been argued in previous research that these theories at best can be considered and applied in isolation since they postulate two opposite and incompatible forces - institutional isomorphism and norms of progress and transience. We started from a premise that the logic of institutional order does not deny the existence of both forces as organizations should demonstrate both stability in
preferences (adopting and maintaining taken-for-granted practices) and searching for new solutions thus demonstrating their presence at the forefront of management progress. While management fashion theory prescribes that popular concepts and techniques demonstrate a bell shaped curve in their diffusion trajectory, we argued that those concepts that have achieved a status of management fashion cannot disappear when the media attention is over: from now on its diffusion conforms to institutional forces which privilege and ensure its further institutionalization.

We reinterpret Abrahamson’s thesis on transitory nature of management fashion by distinguishing between transitory media attention and real diffusion and adoption rates of the concept. Media attention defines the success or failure of an emerging concept, serving the function of selection force. Furthermore, media attention can produce management fashions but it has no influence on their further fate: institutional trajectory towards institutionalization is a dominant force that protects fashions from being rejected and deinstitutionalized (Aksom and Tymchenko, 2020; Aksom, 2020). Institutional theory has emerged in order to answer why “many organizational forms and procedures can exist without obvious technical or economic value” (Staw and Epstein, 2000:524). Management fashions survive, persist and achieve a taken-for-granted status even after the media boom is over: the institutional environment ensures the stability and maintenance for even obsolete and useless practices. Abrahamson himself built his theory around the neutral definition of management fashions, assuming that from the beginning they can offer no technical and economic value and still succeed and turn into fashions and institutions (Abrahamson, 1996).

The norms of progress nevertheless do require a transition in shared beliefs and definitions but this transition occurs without abandoning existing fashions. New emerging concepts compete for media attention and as Zucker (1988) noted for institutional literature – “few innovations are widely adopted” but we can assume that this observation is fair only for emerging concepts while few of them turn into fashion. But once an emerging concept survives and becomes management fashion its only diffusion trajectory is towards institutionalization. Institutional change can be thus understood as a change in shared beliefs accompanied by the emergence of new concepts that will fit these new institutional definitions and become new fashions and then institutions.

Overall, 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. The model presented in this paper allows reconciling and satisfy both MF and IT predictions, showing the place for both institutional forces that promote stability, persistence, inertia and resistance to change and norms of progress that require bringing new organizational practices besides already existing institutions. 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.

It is hoped that the theoretical framework is generalizable across a broad variety of contexts and this paper can motivate subsequent studies on the emergence, diffusion, maintainance, disappearance and non-abandonment of management concepts at different stages of institutionalization and media attention. Future research can directly explore whether popular management concepts fade away after the hype in media is over. Similarly, it can be fruitful to
delve deeper into the motivation of early adopters, non-adopters and those who consider abandoning once popular fashions.

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References


**Appendix A.**

<table>
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<th>Institutional explanation</th>
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