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164 on Sat, 24 Aug 2013 23: 34: 16 PM All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions c Academy of Management Review 1996, Vol. 21, No. 1. 254-285. MANAGEMENT FASHIONERICABRAHAMSON Columbia University Management fashion setters disseminate management fashions, transitory collective beliefs that certain management techniques are at the forefront of management progress. These fashion settersconsulting firms, management gurus, business mass-media publicanot simply force fashions onto gulltions, and business schools-do ible managers.

To sustain their images as fashion setters, they must lead in a race (a) to sense the emergent collective preferences of managers for new management techniques, (b) to develop hetorics that describe these techniques as the forefront of management progress, and (c) to disseminate these rhetorics back to managers and organizational stakeholders before other fashion setters. Fashion setters who fall behind in this race (e. g. , business schools or certain scholarly professional societies) are condemned to be perceived as lagging rather than leading management progress, as peripheral to the business community, and as undeserving of societal support. This article is not a plea for business school scholars to become

slaves to management fashion. Rather, it urges these scholars not only to study the management-fashion-setting process and to explain when and how it fails to serve shareholders, employees, managers, students, and other stakeholders, but also to intervene in this process in order to render it a more technically useful, collective learning process for these stakeholders.

Modes, vogues, fads, fashions, rages, and crazes frequently revolutionize many aspects of cultural life. Theories of fashion, however, focus narrowly on fashions in aesthetic forms which, like clothing or haute cuisine, gratify our senses and emotional well-being. This focus on aesthetic fashions has two consequences. First, it confines fashion studies either to forms that have traditionally been considered trivial, such as men's beards (Robinson, 1976) or to forms that are traditionally associated with women or children: dresses (Barthes, 1983; Richardson ; Kroeber, 1940), interior design, cooking, or children's names and toys (Lauer & Lauer, 1981). Second, theories of fashion in aesthetic forms are used unmodified to explain fashions in technical forms, such as management techniques. The author would like to thank Barbara Czarniawska-Joerges in particular for encouraging and helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

Thanks also to three anonymous AMR reviewers, Warren Boeker, Anders Forsell, Donald Hambrick, Bernward Joerges, Jim Kuhn, Rita McGrath, Kerstin Sahlin-Anderson, Tony Spibey, Richard Rottenburg, Guje Sevon, Pamela Tolbert, Michael Tushman, and Ruth Wageman. 54 This content downloaded from 149. 171. 67. 164 on Sat, 24 Aug 2013 23: 34: 16 PM All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions 1996 Abrahamson 255 These theories of

management fashion suggest that organizational performance gaps opened  
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by technical and economic environmental changes do not shape the demand for management fashions; sociopsychological forces do instead.

In another article, for instance, I adopted Blumer's (1969) argument that fashion demand is guided by managers' collective aesthetic tastes (Abrahamson, 1991). Likewise, Mintzberg (1979) observed that swings between organizational centralization and decentralization resemble the movements of women's hemlines. The popular management press is even more cynical and strident, attributing the demand for management fashions to other sociopsychological forces, such as childlike excitement (Business Week, 1986), mass conformity (Wall Street Journal, 1993), and even to something akin to manias or episodes of mass hysteria (Harvard Business Review, 1994). These academic and popular sociopsychological treatments of management fashion cast it as something from which management scholars should remain disengaged, lest they join the ranks of "snake-oil salesmen." I argue in this article that management fashion should not be treated as a special case of aesthetic fashion. Aesthetic and management fashions differ in two important ways, and failing to recognize these differences obscures why management scholars must not only study, but also intervene in the management-fashion-setting process.

First, whereas aesthetic fashions need only appear beautiful and modern, fashionable management techniques must appear both rational (efficient means to important ends) and progressive (new as well as improved relative to older management techniques). Many management fashion setters-consulting firms, management gurus, business mass-media publications, and business schools-compete in a race to define which management techniques

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lead rational management progress. Fashion setters who do not participate successfully in this race, business schools and professional scholarly societies, for example (Hambrick, 1994), will be perceived as lagging rather than leading management progress, as being peripheral to the business community, and as being undeserving of societal support. Hence, this article warns that scholars in business schools must both study and intervene in the management-fashion-setting process; otherwise these business schools' long-term viability will be at risk. Swings in management fashion, far from being cosmetic and trivial, are in fact deadly serious matters for business schools and the scholars staffing them. Second, I argue that whereas sociopsychological forces alone shape the demand for aesthetic fashions, such forces compete with technical and economic forces to shape the demand for management fashions.

Put differently, managers do not adopt management fashions only because of sociopsychological forces. They also adopt management fashions in a desire to learn about management techniques that would help them respond to organizational performance gaps opened up by real technical and economic environmental changes. Management fashion setting, consequently, can serve as a technical learning process for many managers. This content downloaded from 149.

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Business schools can, and indeed must, study and intervene in this collective learning process, in order to render it more technically functional. The first of

this article's three parts defines the term management fashion in a way that emphasizes how it differs from aesthetic fashion.

The second part advances a theory of management fashion, drawing principally on two literatures in organizational theory: the neoinstitutional theory literature (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott & Meyer, 1994) and the production of culture literature (Blau, 1993; DiMaggio & Hirsch, 1976; Hirsch, 1972, 1986; Peterson, 1976, 1979). The third part uses this theory of management fashion as a framework to review a variety of prescriptions advanced by management scholars, for management scholars interested in influencing management practice (Astley & Zammuto, 1992; Bettis, 1991; Beyer, 1992; Donaldson, 1992; Nystrom & Starbuck, 1977; Starbuck & Nystrom, 1981). The article closes with a plea to management scholars not only to study the management-fashion-setting process and explain when and how it fails to serve the needs of shareholders, employees, managers, students, and other business school stakeholders, but also to intervene in this fashion-setting process, in order to make it a more technically useful collective learning process for these stakeholders. MANAGEMENT

REDEFINING FASHION We experience fashions as rapid, bell-shaped swings in the popularity of management techniques.

This alone, however, cannot serve as a definition, because a number of processes could cause such swings. ' For this reason, I argued in an earlier article that we should label these swings " management fashions" only when they are the product of a management-fashion-setting process involving particular management fashion setters-organizations and individuals who

dedicate themselves to producing and disseminating management  
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knowledge (Abrahamson, 1991). My earlier treatment of management fashion as both a process (fashion setting) and its outcomes (management fashions) is useful here in defining management fashion. It does not explain, however, why many managers would gain and lose interest in management techniques launched by management fashion setters. In this article, I argue that waves of interest in management techniques occur when national norms of both rationality and progress govern managerial behavior.

Norms of managerial rationality are societal expectations that managers will use. A swing in the popularity of a management technique might occur, for example, if a government regulator mandated the use of a management technique and then withdrew this mandate. Alternatively, a popularity swing might occur because a management technique that gained popularity because it helped narrow a performance gap caused by an environmental change lost this popularity when the environment changed again, narrowing this performance gap. This content downloaded from 149.171.67.164 on Sat, 24 Aug 2013 23:34:16 PM All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions 1996 Abrahamson 257 management techniques that are the most efficient means to important ends.

Norms of managerial progress are societal expectations that, over time, managers will use new and improved management techniques. Together, norms of managerial rationality and progress create the need for a flow of management techniques that organizational stakeholders believe are rational, at the forefront of management progress, and that managers can adopt in order to appear in conformity with these norms. The management-

fashion-setting process produces the continuous flow of management  
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techniques believed to be rational and progressive. It is for this reason that I define management fashion setting as the process by which management fashion setters continuously redefine both theirs and fashion followers' collective beliefs about which management techniques lead rational management progress. These shared beliefs about management progress cannot remain stable for too long; otherwise, progress will not seem to occur. A management fashion, therefore, is a relatively transitory collective belief, disseminated by management fashion setters, that a management technique leads rational management progress.

This definition suggests that management fashions can differ in scope: The collectivity that believes that a management technique is at the forefront of management progress can be large or small. Management fashions also can vary in duration: The belief that a management technique is at the forefront of management progress can be more or less transitory. Quality circles (QCs) exemplify management fashion. During the early 1980s, fashion setters promoted the transient belief that QCs were at the forefront of management progress. The rhetoric that fashion setters used to promote this belief survives in popular management press articles, as well as in the proceedings of meetings of fashion setters who actively promoted the QC fashion.

An examination of the number of these articles and the size of these proceedings volumes reveals the transient backing that fashion setters gave to QCs. Figure 1 indicates that the number of articles on QCs listed yearly in the ABIInforndatabase grew rapidly in the early 1980s, yet this trend was reversed after 1983. By 1986, this measure returned to its prepopularity level, reflecting the swing in QCs' popularity. The International Association of <https://assignbuster.com/abrahamson-e-1996-management-fashion-academy-of-management-review-21-1-254-285-flashcard/>



Quality Circles (IAQC), an association of practitioners and consultants, meets yearly and publishes the proceedings of these meetings.

Figure 1 reveals a bell-shaped pattern in the thickness of the yearly IAQC proceedings volumes. Surveys reveal that the bell-shaped popularity pattern of QCs among fashion setters also occurred among fashion followers. Nearly one third of U. S. organizations with more than 500 employees reported adopting QCs between 1980 and 1982 (New York Stock Exchange, 1982).

Lawler and Mohrman (1985) estimated that 90% of the Fortune 500 companies had adopted QCs during this period. At the same time, they also predicted an

This content downloaded from 149. 171. 67.

164 on Sat, 24 Aug 2013 23: 34: 16 PM All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions 258 Academy of Management Review January FIGURE 1 Print-Media Indicators of Quality Circles 45-. 4035 30- 1015- 0- I I III 8 77 78 79 80 81 82 YEAR 83 84 85 86 87 \_1EW\_ Number of articles -Width of International Association of Quality Circles Proceedings in decimeters. impending decline in the use of QCs. A survey by Castorina and Wood (1988) indicated that more than 80% of Fortune 500 companies that adopted QCs in the 1980s had abandoned them by 1987.

Evidence in the print media also indicated that management fashions may not be a recent phenomenon. Certain management techniques have repeatedly gained and lost popularity since the turn of the century. Figure 2, for example, reveals three swings in the number of articles about employee stock ownership published between 1914 and 1986. Certain obstacles still

block careful theorizing about management fashions. Researchers often

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implicitly believe that management fashions hold sway only in relatively trivial management matters. This implicit belief exists because words like fashion and fad, because of their previous uses in primarily aesthetic realms, now connote the terms unimportant and trivial, when they are used in technical realms, such as management.

It is this article's contention that such an a priori assumption may be unfounded (Czarniawska-Joerges & Joerges, 1990). More generally, management researchers should remain open to the possibility that This content downloaded from 149. 171. 67. 164 on Sat, 24 Aug 2013 23: 34: 16 PM All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions 1996 Abrahamson 259

FIGURE 2 Prevalence in the Number of Articles on Employee-Stock-Ownership Programs 30 2826 24 22 20 18Z 16141210 86- o 42- 0 14 22 30 38 46 54 62 70 78 86 YEAR not only management, but also marketing, finance, accounting, operations, as well as almost every area of technical endeavor are open to the swings of fashion. Theorists should therefore attempt to develop theories of fashion in technical realms, without assuming outright that these theories will explain fashions only in either aesthetic matters or in trivial technical matters.

In the next section, I develop such a theory of management fashion in three parts, which correspond to the three parts of Figure 3. First, I develop the argument that management fashions are about the appearance of rationality and progress. Here, I draw primarily on the neoinstitutional theory literature (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott & Meyer, 1994). I suggest, in accordance with the top part of Figure 3, that in certain countries, norms of rationality and progress create a management fashion market for rhetorics2 championing

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rational and progressive management techniques. In the second part of this section, I draw on the production of culture literature to conceptualize the mutual influence, depicted 2 A rhetoric is spoken and written discourse that justifies the use of a set of techniques for managing organizations or their employees (Barley & Kunda, 1992). This content downloaded from 149.

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3 A General Model of Management Fashion Setting Norms of Rationality and

Progress Management Fashion Market Supply by Management Fashion

Setters Demandby Management Fashion Users | Sociopsychological and

Technoeconomic Forces in the middle of Figure 3, between the

management-fashion-setting community that supplies these rhetorics and

the management-fashion-using community that demands them (Blau, 1993;

DiMaggio & Hirsch, 1976; Hirsch, 1972, 1986; Peterson, 1976, 1979). This

focus on supply and demand can reveal how business school scholars might

better intervene in management fashion setting. In the third part, I examine

forces depicted at the bottom of Figure 3, which are external to the

management-fashion-setting market, but nevertheless influence

management fashion demand.

A focus on such forces helps to explain the timing of management fashion

swings, the direction of management fashion trends, and when business

school scholars might effectively intervene in the shaping of management

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Abrahamson 261 A THEORY OF MANAGEMENTFASHION Norms of Rationality

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and Progress My preliminary sketch of management fashion suggests that it is largely a cultural phenomenon, shaped by norms of rationality and progress.

Therefore, my theory of fashion draws and builds upon one perspective that focuses on such normative influences: neoinstitutional theory. More specifically, there currently exists many variants of neoinstitutional theory. (See Scott, 1987; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991, for reviews. Therefore, I concentrate on Meyer and Rowan's (1977) variant, because of its focus on norms of rationality (See also Meyer & Scott, 1992; Scott & Meyer, 1994.

) Norms of rationality. Meyer and Rowan (1977) asserted that organizational stakeholders expect managers to manage their organizations and employees rationally-that is, by the most efficient means to important ends. In many contexts, however, it is ambiguous not only what constitutes important ends for managers to pursue, but also what are the most efficient means to pursue these ends (March & Olsen, 1976). Under these circumstances, managers must create the appearance that they are conforming to norms of rationality.

Meyer and Rowan (1977) suggested that managers create the appearance of rationality by using or appearing to use management techniques that generally are believed by organizational stakeholders in a specific context to be rational ways of managing organizations and employees. They describe such rational management techniques as “ prescriptions that identify various social purposes as technical ones and specify ...

he appropriate means to pursue these technical purposes rationally” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977: 343-344). In other words, rational management techniques are labels that denote for organizational stakeholders both certain managerial goals that effective managers should pursue, as well as the means to pursue these goals efficiently. The label quality circle, for example, denotes both the pursuit of product quality as a goal of paramount importance, and the means to attain this goal efficiently: organizing meetings of workers during which they discuss among themselves ways of enhancing product quality. Managers appear rational if they appear to use management techniques, such as quality circles, that stakeholders believe are efficient means to important ends. Meyer and Rowan (1977) argued that if managers do not appear to use such techniques, then stakeholders’ expectations that the organization is run rationally will tend to be disappointed, and stakeholders will tend to withdraw their support from the organization, thereby increasing likelihood that this organization and its managers will fail.

It is not a straightforward task to extend Meyer and Rowan’s (1977) argument to incorporate the notion that not only norms of rationality, but also norms of progress govern managerial behavior. It is straightforward that if, (a) under conditions of ambiguity, norms of rationality cause managers to use management techniques perceived as rational in order to This content downloaded from 149. 171. 67.

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appearance of rational management and to avoid stakeholder sanctions, <https://assignbuster.com/abrahamson-e-1996-management-fashion-academy-of-management-review-21-1-254-285-flashcard/>

then (b) under conditions of ambiguity, norms of progress should cause managers to adopt management techniques perceived as progressive in order to create the appearance of management progress and to avoid such sanctions. Two aspects of this argument are not straightforward. First, it is unclear what defined so-called norms of progress. Second, it is also unclear how management techniques come to be considered both rational and progressive, rather than irrational and retrogressive, that is, as violations of tried and true rules of rational management.

Norms of progress. In this article, I define a management innovation as “ a significant departure from the state of the art at the time it first appears” (Kimberly, 1981: 86). Not all innovations are improvements. Therefore, I use the term progress to mean both innovation and improvement as judged by an evolving set of criteria.

This definition evolves from the notion that norms of progress do not generate expectations of progress judged against some invariant end or utopia (Lasch, 1991). Rather, they generate expectations of a never-ending improvement process judged by criteria that are repeatedly redefined in and by this process itself. Norms of scientific progress are the exemplar: They create expectations of greater understanding according to theoretical and methodological criteria repeatedly redefined by the scientific process itself. In direct parallel, norms of management progress create an expectation of ever-improved techniques for managing organizations and individuals, judged by everimproving criteria for judging what constitutes managerial improvements. These criteria, be they quality, flexibility, profits, speed, client satisfaction, or risk reduction, are inherently subjective and are neither <https://assignbuster.com/abrahamson-e-1996-management-fashion-academy-of-management-review-21-1-254-285-flashcard/>

absolute, fixed, nor universal (Granovetter, 1979). It also cannot be assumed that norms of management progress are themselves universal.

Indeed, research on national cultural values suggest equal strength across national cultures, suggesting an initial test of this article's theory of management fashion (Hofstede, 1980; Inkeles & Smith, 1974). 3

Management fashion markets probably differ across countries in More specifically, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's (1961) classical typology of national cultures contains two dimensions-human-nature orientation and value orientation-that may be particularly telling in determining in which nations strong norms of management progress will be found and management fashions will tend to hold sway. The human-nature dimension distinguishes national cultures with respect to their assumptions about whether or not individuals are adaptable or perfectible. The time-orientation dimension distinguishes national cultures that focus on the future, the present, or the past.

The culture of the U. S. , for example, assumes that individuals are adaptable to a dynamic, changing future. This cultural orientation may explain U.

S. culture's strong norms of progress, as well as the large market of the United States for self-help books advocating progressive techniques for managing not only mental and physical health, but also organizations and their employees. By contrast, norms of progress may tend to be weaker in national cultures that assume that individuals are either not perfectible or perfectible primarily along paths dictated by custom This content downloaded from 149. 171.

67. 164 on Sat, 24 Aug 2013 23: 34: 16 PM All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions 1996 Abrahamson 263 both the frequency and duration of management fashions. If norms of management rationality and progress drive the market for management fashions, then Proposition 1 follows:

Proposition 1: There will tend to be more frequent and shorter lived management fashions in nations that have relatively stronger norms of rational management progress. Deviance or progress? The use of apparently new management techniques can make their users appear irrational and retrogressive (violators of tried and true rules of rational management) to organizational stakeholders, rather than rational and progressive (Perrow, 1970; Starbuck & Nystrom, 1981).

This raises the following question: If norms of progress call for a flow of apparently rational and progressive techniques to sustain the appearance of continuing rational progress, then how do organizational stakeholders come to perceive these techniques as rational and progressive rather than as irrational and retrogressive? My answer is that there is a management-fashion-setting community of fashion setters. It is this management-fashion-setting community that shapes transitory collective beliefs among management fashion followers that certain management techniques are rational and at the forefront of management progress. Put differently, management fashions do not emerge spontaneously as a result of the inventive behaviors of managers. They are cultural commodities deliberately produced by fashion setters in order to be marketed to fashion followers. I turn next to a body of theory and research uniquely suited to studying the production of management fashions: the



literature on the production of culture (Peterson, 1976, 1979). The Production of Management Culture As Peterson wrote, “ The production of culture perspective begins with the observation that symbolic elements of culture do not spring forth full blown but are made somewhere by someone” (1979: 152).

Theories and studies of fashion from this perspective have gone a long way toward dispelling the notion that cultural innovations become mass fashions by direct popular demand (Blau, 1993; Blumer, 1968, 1969; DiMaggio, 1982, 1987; DiMaggio & Hirsch, 1976; Hirsch, 1972, 1986; Peterson & Berger, 1975). Entire industries often stand between the creators of innovations and the masses who use these innovations if they become fashionable. These industries produce the cultural fashions that the masses consume. In this section, I generalize the theory of sartorial, literary, musical, and and traditions. Weaker norms of management weaker market for management fashions.

progress would create a commensurably This content downloaded from 149.171.67.164 on Sat, 24 Aug 2013 23:34:16 PM All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions 264 Academy of Management Review January cinematographic fashion found in the production of culture literature to the realm of management fashion.

Hirsch (1972), in particular, focused on organizations in the publishing, record, and motion picture industries that mediate between, on the one hand, writers, musicians, or actors, and on the other hand, consumers of literary, musical, or cinematographic mass fashions. He described a four-fold

fashion-setting process (see also, DiMaggio & Hirsch, 1976). First, cultural innovations are created in show-business, musical, or literary circles. Second, fashion-setting organizations use talent scouts to penetrate these artistic circles and to discover new talents and cultural innovations. Talent scouts select a small set of manuscripts, scores, or scripts from the vast array of literary, musical, and cinematographic innovations.

Third, fashion setters process these innovations with an eye to the market to which they are targeted. Manuscripts are edited and published. Scores are refined and recorded. Scripts are rewritten and enacted.

Fourth, fashion setters attempt to disseminate the cultural products that they have processed. They advertise these products and sometimes go so far as to attempt to co-opt mass-media gatekeepers (critics, editors, etc. ), in order to bring these products to the public's attention. As a result of this four-fold process (creation, selection, processing, and dissemination), fashion-setting industries supply mass audiences with a limited set of innovations that are candidates for becoming mass fashions.

These innovations may or may not become mass fashions, depending on fashion followers' demand for these innovations (Blumer, 1968, 1969; DiMaggio & Hirsch, 1976). Members of organizations that set fashions, therefore, either thrive or falter, depending on their ability to sense and satiate incipient preferences shaping fashion demand for cultural innovations. In line with Hirsch's (1972) model, Figure 4 depicts the creation, selection, processing, and dissemination by fashion suppliers of rhetorics championing certain management techniques. In the United States, various

scholars have claimed that a variety of organizations and individuals populate a management-fashion-setting community: management consultants, business schools, and business-press organizations (Abrahamson, 1991; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Hirsch, 1986; Kimberly, 1981; Meyer, 1992; Mintzberg, 1979; Strang & Meyer, 1994) as well as academic gurus, consultant gurus, and hero managers (Huczynski, 1993).

The bottom box in Figure 4 depicts the creation, selection, processing, and dissemination of management fashions by management fashion suppliers. The arrow leading out of the right bubble indicates that during the creation stage, fashion setters sense incipient preferences guiding fashion demand and create many management techniques. During the selection stage, they select those techniques that they believe will satiate this demand. The arrow leading out of the left bubble suggests that during the processing stage, fashion setters articulate rhetorics championing the management techniques they select.

During the dissemination stage, This content downloaded from 149. 171. 67. 164 on Sat, 24 Aug 2013 23: 34: 16 PM All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions 1996 Abrahamson 265

FIGURE 4 Fashion-Setting Management Fashion Market ..

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l ... : : : . . . , -l ll 1. : : : , , Z: j] i: i. X . : : , 11 2: ; , c 1. l l- l. s : : ; : : : l: ll. 11 .

l . -... ll ; " : l. : : ; - , 1. : : ' . . . . . 1- , . l. : : ; l; ... 1-1llll . l . . . . . l ll: l 11- . . ,

.. ;.. l; : l-lll. llil-11 . 11 111 l. l- . . l 1. l" , : : l: ..... . . . . % : : : : , . . l.... ,

11, .. : . % : A-1- . : e W X 11v %%: . . . . : . %% : : " %: - % .. : . . . : :

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.! : ll : . ll : : : : : : , ; , e . . ll... . . l A. D! RT ... \_ k. li . INEK. .. -! l: l;!! . ; Z1'. : . . . .

- , 1: X . : : : : : : : : : : : : : : : , , . : ; - : : ' : . t , . : : -... , 111, . -... , -... . . -lll : -\_-

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e . . -". :; ; ; ; l... e : : X: X : -r; 1-: : : : X%... . 1 1.. -1, ... \_ , , - : r , .  
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l..... : , ; , . l . ; l: 1. 1 - l ..... ]l. % , . . . . 1. - : : : l : ; , , l. . . . .  
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z-1: - -..... : . . ll..... l. . : : ; ; c: - . 1-1 . . . , , : : : 2: : -1-111-, - ; -" : :  
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l , : : : l . % . - . - l. 1. . . % ; ; s : : , 1l: 7: : : - ; ; ; is: . , l. . ll% . l . : : .  
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1, ; : . . - . ; l : . . ; ; , : : : . . , l- . , ll . F . 1. .... . . . . . ; : : : : ; d ,  
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 2 . : : : : , , : . % . , : ... , l : l : : : , . ... , X : : : : l 2 - : ' : .. : XX : : e ..... : . .....  
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 ..... - ll . - . l . l ... l , X ..... : ..... : : : : : 1 ... 1 , - , : l ... : - . : : : : ' :  
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 l : : : : : : ] - : : : : ft - . : : : : : 11l .. brs : 11l , gg : - . 11 , : : l . , ... 1 . 11 , 11l . l ... ..  
 ... - l - \_ 11 : - : 1 . ... - ... - . 1 . i : : : : , ..... : ! : i : - : : , l — ..... : : . 1 . 111 , : : : : : , i ,  
 111 . 1 - 111 , : : : : : : 11 - : : ... 11 : . : : . X : : ! : : , - , , ; 4 . ..... X : l . 1 X  
 X , , ; j i ! j . % . ... . , , : ii : l . . l . ll ll ll . , . : X : l : : cs , l : : , 1 . l : l : l : - . 1 : . . % . .  
 - .. " l ... .. ; : : : : l ; , : ... : : .. ll . l ... : : . : : : : Z : ll ll . l : 1 : ll ... : l : : ] :  
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 - , , ... - ... . 1 . l . 11 . 1 . 1 11 .. 111 . . 1 .. 11 . 1 . 11 111 . . 1 l ... 1 . 1 . 11 . 1 . ; ...  
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PM All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions 266 Academy of

Management Review January involve either inventing management techniques that only appear to be old management techniques

improvements or rediscovering/reinventing that were invented previously and forgotten. Many critics have noted this " old wine in new bottles"

phenomenon (e. g . , Kimberly, 1981). Most management innovations may be <https://assignbuster.com/abrahamson-e-1996-management-fashion-academy-of-management-review-21-1-254-285-flashcard/>

created by managers. Galbraith (1980: 162) asserted: I know of no new form of organization that was invented by organization theorists while advancing the theory. I have seen no new form emerge from the test tubes of organization theory. Instead, the researchers record what the inventive practitioner creates and give it labels like grids, system 4, or matrix organization. Alternatively, certain fashion setters may invent, rediscover, or reinvent the management technique they attempt to launch into fashion. W. Edwards Demming and others are frequently credited with the invention of the TQM approach, and BCG consultants have been credited with the BCG matrix, for example. Selection. Virtually nothing is known about the selection stage of management fashion supply. It is reasonable to assume that fashion setters can always select the techniques they attempt to launch into fashion from a broad variety of new, recently created management techniques, as well as from a bevy of old, forgotten management techniques. Either or both of two very distinct selection processes might operate, however, depending on whether it is managers or fashion setters who create management innovations. One selection process resembles the process described by Hirsch (1972), in which artists invent cultural innovations in artistic circles located outside the fashion-setting community, and fashion setters scout out such innovations, select a few, and bring them into the fashion setting community for processing and dissemination. Likewise, management innovations may be invented by managers and selected into the community by management fashion setters management-fashion-setting into contact with these managers. who come A second selection process also could operate, if it is fashion setters who either create management innovations or resurrect old and forgotten management techniques. Fashion setters may <https://assignbuster.com/abrahamson-e-1996-management-fashion-academy-of-management-review-21-1-254-285-flashcard/>

select among techniques they themselves or other fashion setters have invented or rediscovered. Other management fashion setters may then imitate these selection decisions. Why do management fashion setters select certain management techniques and not others? The answer is twofold and dynamic: Fashion setters not only (a) sense and satiate incipient demand for new types of management fashions, but they also (b) shape and focus this demand by articulating for fashion followers the particular techniques that fit the types followers prefer. I now examine each process in turn. This content downloaded from 149. 171. 67. 164 on Sat, 24 Aug 2013 23: 34: 16 PM All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions 996 Abrahamson 267 First, as the bottom of Figure 4 indicates, and as I will argue in the next subsection, new sociopsychological and technoeconomic forces excreate new demand for particular ternal to the fashion-setting-market types of management techniques. Global competition heats up; for example, customers become more sensitive to product or service quality, and managers seek out new techniques that could help them deal with performance gaps caused by these environmental changes. Initially, fashion setters sense only dimly the incipient demand for new fashions and struggle to select management techniques that they believe might satiate this incipient demand. Second, when management fashion setters select and disseminate these techniques, some become fashionable and diffuse. These fashions shape fashion users' incipient preferences, guiding demand for upcoming fashions. These fashions also clarify somewhat for fashion setters both the type of management fashions in demand and what the next fashion they select should look like. A nonmanagerial innovation illustrates this process. When some customers

responded positively to cars with rounded bodies in the 1980s and  
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purchased them, they reinforced other customers' tastes for a more rounded car silhouette. This positive response also alerted car designers that the following year's model would sell if they selected an even more rounded silhouette, triggering the ongoing fashion trend toward ever more rounded car bodies. 4 Like car bodies, management techniques that become fashionable may further focus managers' preferences, generating preferences for related management fashions. This causes fashion setters to recognize and select related management fashions, causing a management fashion trend. The quality circle fashion, for instance, can be seen as a precursor of a number of related management fashions belonging to a total quality fashion trend (Dean ; Bowen, 1994). In sum, it is important to remember that there exists a reciprocal relation between what fashion setters select and what fashion consumers prefer and demand (Blumer, 1968, 1969). Processing. When a management technique is selected by fashion setters, in what sense do they process it? Processing involves the elaboration of a rhetoric that can convince fashion followers that a management technique is both rational and at the forefront of management progress. How does a rhetoric create the belief that a management technique is rational? It must create the belief that the technique allows managers to pursue an important managerial goal in the most efficient fashion. It must, therefore, articulate (a) why it is imperative for managers to pursue 4 Of course, there is a limit to just how rounded a car body can become, just as there are limits to the length or shortness of hemlines. Robinson (1958) argued that when fashion trends cannot progress any further, fashions switch swiftly and abruptly to the midpoint of another dimension, along which a new fashion trend can proceed (rounded car

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bodies become increasingly wider, for example). This content downloaded from 149. 171. 67. 164 on Sat, 24 Aug 2013 23: 34: 16 PM All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions 68 Academy of Management Review January

this goal and (b) why this technique provides the most efficient means to attain these goals. I examine, in turn, how rhetorics achieve each of these dual objectives. Rhetorics create the belief that managers must pursue certain goals by highlighting organizational performance gaps whose goal it should be for managers to narrow. Rhetorics do this in different ways. Some rhetorics present a gap with great drama and fanfare, in order to highlight why narrowing such a gap is an effective managerial goal. They attempt to frighten managers by revealing threats of managerial demise if such a performance gap is ignored, and to entice them with sublime opportunities for managerial stardom if this gap is attended to (Chen ; Meindl, 1991).

Other rhetorics discuss careful scientific evidence bearing on the existence and importance of such performance gaps. The rhetoric also must create the belief that the technique it champions is the most efficient means to attaining an important goal. Arguments run the gamut from (a) descriptions of techniques whose use by a few currently successful companies is used to justify claims about the efficiency of these techniques in narrowing performance gaps for all companies, to (b) quasi-theoretical statements of how these techniques cause performance gaps to narrow, to (c) full-fledged empirically validated, scientific theories of the causes of such effects.

Arguments of the first type have the following form: Quality circles were used at the time of the Japanese miracle; therefore, implant them in any and all U. S. firms, and watch the U. S. miracle happen. Scientific grounding, usually provided by citations or miscitations of business school research, is <https://assignbuster.com/abrahamson-e-1996-management-fashion-academy-of-management-review-21-1-254-285-flashcard/>

sometimes added to give these rhetorics a patina of rationality. At the other extreme, arguments of the third type are carefully grounded in scientific research produced by business schools. The job-enrichment fashion, for example, was backed by a solid body of empirical research produced by business school scholars. Rhetorics must not only create the belief that the techniques they champion are rational, but also that they are at the forefront of management progress. Rhetorics vary in how they achieve this end.

Certain rhetorics clearly indicate how a management technique constitutes an innovation, or reveal the history of successes and failures of a management innovation being brought back into fashion. These rhetorics also disclose scientific evidence, indicating that the management technique provides an improvement over techniques currently in use, as judged by carefully articulated criteria. Other management rhetorics provide no careful evidence that techniques constitute improvements. Moreover, they present old and forgotten management goals and innovations as if they had just been invented. Dissemination. We know little about the dissemination of progressive management rhetorics from management fashion setters to users. Hirsch (1972: 643) argued that we should view “ the mass media in their gatekeeping role as a primary institutional regulator of innovation” and that This content downloaded from 149. 171. 67. 164 on Sat, 24 Aug 2013 23: 34: 16 PM All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions 996

Abrahamson 269 “ the diffusion of particular fads and fashions is either blocked or facilitated at this strategic checkpoint” (Hirsch, 1972: 649).

Indeed, mass-media publications reach broad audiences and, therefore, have the potential to draw widespread attention to progressive management

rhetorics championing particular management techniques. Burns and Wholey  
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(1993), for example, found that press coverage bearing on the use of matrix forms in hospitals correlated with their adoption across hospitals. There are two reasons, however, why it may be necessary to move to a finer grained conceptualization of mass-media effects on the dissemination of management fashions. First, a variety of publications may contribute directly to the dissemination of management fashions (Barley, Meyer, ; Gash, 1988; Dunbar, 1983). Diverse groups of fashion setters, for example, have developed their own publication to disseminate their rhetorics: McKenzie Quarterly (consultants), Business Week (journalists), Academy of Management Executive (academics). The Academy of Management Executive, in particular, has a “ Research Translations” section in each issue, in which the academic rhetoric of academic studies is translated into a rhetoric understandable to practitioners. Management gurus, moreover, use the book-publishing industry to disseminate their rhetorics (Huczynski, 1993), as do management educators use the textbook industry to disseminate their rhetorics. Therefore, it may be necessary to distinguish the impacts of different types of publications on which techniques become fashionable and diffuse. There is a second reason why a finer grained conceptualization is necessary. Whereas certain fashion setters may disseminate their rhetorics directly to managers through the publications they control, other fashion setters may do so indirectly, when publications they do not control appropriate their rhetorics. It is generally assumed, for example, that academic fashion setters exert most of their influence in such an indirect fashion (Beyer, 1992). Barley, Meyer, and Gash (1988), however, in a rare study of its kind, studied how corporate culture rhetoric spreads between the academic and popular-management press. Their study <https://assignbuster.com/abrahamson-e-1996-management-fashion-academy-of-management-review-21-1-254-285-flashcard/>

suggested that the corporate culture rhetoric, developed in the popular-management press, shaped the academic press's rhetoric, rather than vice versa. Their study raised the disquieting possibility that the popular-management press tends to lead the dissemination of progressive-management rhetorics, whereas the academic-management press tends to lag. Alternatively, such a lag may reflect attempts by management scholars to directly influence management practitioners by using their rhetoric. Clearly, more research, like that of Barley, Meyer, and Gash (1988), which uses print-media traces to study management-fashion dissemination, is needed to establish the existence of such lags. Moreover, more research will be required to ascertain what are the long-term consequence of these lags, if they should be reversed, and whether such a reversal is possible. My theory of fashion suggests, however, that fashion setters who appear to lag rather than lead management progress also will tend to lose their stakeholders' support. Beyer (1992: 471), for example, This content downloaded from 149.171.67.164 on Sat, 24 Aug 2013 23:34:16 PM All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions 270 Academy of Management Review January warned that an "occasional trickle of concepts [from management scholars to practitioners] hardly seems a sufficient rationale to sustain the social legitimacy and financial support of all of the faculty, Ph. D. programs, and research projects in our field." Parallel to this line of reasoning, my theory of management fashion suggests that fashion setters who tend to lag in the dissemination of progressive management rhetorics also will tend to be perceived as lagging behind management progress and, consequently, as undeserving of their stakeholders' support. In this section, I began by discussing how norms of rationality and progress open up markets for <https://assignbuster.com/abrahamson-e-1996-management-fashion-academy-of-management-review-21-1-254-285-flashcard/>

management fashions. I then turned to a description of the fashion-setting process in this market by which management techniques are created and selected, rhetorics championing these techniques are processed, and these rhetorics are disseminated to fashion followers in order to launch fashions. My argument suggests the following proposition. Proposition 2: If there exists unmet demand for a certain type of management technique, then one or more techniques belonging to this type will become fashionable if they are created, selected, processed, and disseminated by the management-fashion-setting community. The literature bearing on the diffusion of innovative