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## The Role of the Management Fashion Arena in the Cross-National Diffusion of Management Concepts: The Case of the Balanced Scorecard in the Scandinavian Countries

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**Abstract:** The diffusion of fashionable management concepts is an important research topic in management and organization studies. Researchers have pointed out that various actors such as consultants, conference organizers and the business media comprise the so-called “management fashion arena” around a management concept. However, a weakness of extant conceptualizations of management fashion arenas is in the lack of an explicit consideration of the dynamics between local and international actors. Drawing on the notion of “institutional duality”, we argue that the concept’s trajectory at the national level is shaped by both country-specific actors and international actors. Furthermore, we recognize that the presence and involvement of different types of actors may vary across different countries. Empirically, we analyze the level of involvement of actors such as consultants, professional groups, software firms, and conference organizers in the cross-national diffusion of the Balanced Scorecard (BSC) in the three Scandinavian countries. The comparative analysis of the data shows both similarities and differences between the three countries in terms of which actors have been the most influential players. Despite certain similarities and overlaps, the three markets can be considered largely national with key local players. Furthermore, country-specific actors appear to have played a particularly important role in the early phase in terms of establishing the concept in the local markets. These findings are used to elaborate on present conceptualizations of the management fashion arena, and to discuss the role of local and international actors in the cross-national diffusion of management concepts.

**Keywords:** management concepts; management fashions; management fashion arena; actors; diffusion; circulation; institutional duality; the Balanced Scorecard

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## 1. Introduction

Management concepts are “prescriptive, more or less coherent views on management, which are known by a particular label” ([1], p. 758). Fashionable management concepts, or “management fashions”, are those “management concepts that relatively speedily gain large shares in the public management discourse” ([2], p. 329). How and why some management concepts become widely diffused and fashionable, while others do not are important research questions in management and organization studies (e.g., [3–5]). Researchers have studied the spreading and “fashionization” of concepts such as Activity Based Costing [6–8], Business Process Reengineering [9,10], Knowledge Management [11–13], Total Quality Management [14–17], Talent Management [18,19], Lean [20], and the Balanced Scorecard [21,22]. An important finding in this literature is that “fashion-setting” actors such as consultants, conference organizers, business schools and the business media play important roles in the diffusion of management concepts [3,23–25]. Management fashion theorists refer to these types of actors as comprising the “management fashion arena” in relation to a particular management concept [2,11,26–30].

However, our understanding of the role of the management fashion arena in the cross-national diffusion of management concepts is limited. Although extant research has conceptualized the structure and dynamics of management fashion arenas, including the main actors involved (e.g., [2,26,27]), the management fashion literature has only to a limited extent taken into account the international dimension, meaning that the management fashion arena may be configured differently in different countries, and that the country-specific configuration may shape the local impact of management fashions.

The lack of an explicit consideration of the role of management fashion arena in cross-national diffusion processes is surprising since there is much comparative work in organization studies highlighting the role of local actors and institutions in shaping the adoption and implementation of management concepts, models and ideas as they are diffused across countries (e.g., [31–36]). For example, studies have looked at the transplantation of Japanese work practices to the American factory floor [37], the spread of innovative small-group activities in Japanese, Swedish and US organizations [38,39], the spread of environmental management standards in Europe and the US [40], the transfer of work and human resource management practices [34,35,41], the implementation of quality management and certification programs around the world [32,42], and the transfer of organizational practices within multinational corporations [43,44].

These studies have brought to our attention the fact that country-specific actors and institutions can greatly influence the diffusion and implementation of management concepts in different countries. For example, Guillen [45] argues that the constellation of country-specific actors (e.g., “management intellectuals”) shape the local reception of management concepts and ideas. Djelic [31] studied the export of the American model of corporate capitalism in three Western European countries, and found

that success of the transfer was shaped by local structural arrangements, geopolitical conditions and political actors. Similarly, Cole [38,39] highlighted the role of the “macro-political environment” or society-specific governance structures in shaping the reception of concepts. Specifically, Cole pointed to the roles played by public agencies, professional groups, and normative frameworks (e.g., awards) in explaining the success of small-group activities in Japan and Sweden. In the US, where this diffusion infrastructure was lacking, these ideas did not have the same impact. Taken as a whole, these studies show the importance of taking into account the wider organizational structure when studying the diffusion of concepts and ideas, and not only the diffusion agent and the adopter (cf. [46]).

Our study differs from several of these studies in that they focus on the cross-national diffusion of broader management models or philosophies such as scientific management, human relations or corporate capitalism (e.g., [31,45]). In contrast, we position our study within the management fashion literature (e.g., [2,3,47–50]), which arguably has a narrower focus on *management concepts*, as defined by Benders and Verlaar [1], Røvik [51] or Kieser [27].

We argue that fashion-setting actors such as consultants play a more important role in relation to management concepts than broader management philosophies for two reasons. First, it is easier to commercialize management concepts than broader management philosophies. A management concept such as the Balanced Scorecard is relatively easy to commercialize and popularize in various ways for consultants and software firms [52]. In contrast, fashion-setting actors have shown less interest in the notion of Beyond Budgeting because it can be considered more of a management philosophy than a management concept, and is harder to commercialize [53]. Further along the spectrum are management philosophies or models that reflect macro-trends in management thinking. For fashion-setting actors, however, these macro-trends are typically difficult to commodify and sell as “solutions” to potential clients.

Thus, we argue that analyzing the management fashion arena (e.g., commercial actors such as consultants and software firms) becomes relatively more important in the context of the reception management concepts, whereas society-level institutions such as political actors, public agencies, and unions are relatively more important when considering the reception of management philosophies and ideologies.

Against this background, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the role of the management fashion arena in the diffusion of the Balanced Scorecard (BSC) concept in the three Scandinavian countries. Studying the influence of the management fashion arena in the cross-national diffusion process is important because as Abrahamson noted, “management fashion markets probably differ across countries both in the frequency and duration of management fashions” ([3], pp. 262–263). Country-specific actors and institutions may influence the propensity of “fashion consumers” to adopt or reject management fashions. Therefore, a detailed comparative study of local actors involved in different management fashion markets could provide valuable insights into the potential role of the management fashion arena in the cross-national diffusion of management concepts.

The BSC in the Scandinavian countries provides a good setting for researching the role of the management fashion arena for at least two reasons. First, the BSC is one of most influential management concepts of our times ([54], p. 12), and exhibits many of the characteristics and hallmarks of a typical management fashion [21,22,52,55–58]. Earlier studies indicate that the BSC has become popular in the Scandinavian countries [21,59–64], and several Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish organizations are currently members of the official BSC “Hall of Fame”. Second, the Scandinavian

countries provide an ideal setting to study the role of the local management fashion arena. Since these three countries are similar in terms of, e.g., management style [65,66], stakeholder thinking [67], work organization [68], and other aspects of social and economic life [69], differences in the concept's adoption and impact may be attributed to local factors such as the (non)presence and activities of fashion-setting actors.

This paper contributes to the management fashion literature in two ways. First, we focus on the role of the management fashion arena in the cross-national diffusion of management concepts. Drawing on the concept of "institutional duality" [43,44] we take into account that the concept's trajectory at the national level, at the same, is shaped by both local actors and international actors. Furthermore, we recognize that the presence and involvement of different types of actors may vary across different countries.

Second, commentators have noted that there has been very little comparative research on how concepts are diffused in different countries and communities [23,47]. Instead, a common characteristic of previous studies of fashionable concepts is that they typically have been carried out in a single country. To this point, researchers have pointed out that we may find "sectoral and/or national patterns in the reception of fashions" ([9], p. 214), and that it therefore would be fruitful to design comparative studies.

In doing this, this three-country study answers calls by Newell, Robertson and Swan [47] for more comparative research on management fashions. The study provides a detailed empirical investigation of the various actors involved the three management fashion arenas around the BSC. This answers Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall's [23] calls for more research on the different types of actors involved in the management knowledge industry. Moreover, the study follows Malmi's ([7], p. 669) recommendation that "a detailed study on the interplay of academics, consultants, professional associations, and the media in creating management fashions could contribute substantially to our understanding of how and why new ideas are introduced in organizations". Similarly, van Veen, *et al.* ([70], p. 162) called for "systematic attention for all actors in all phases of a life cycle and attention for the movements of relevant individuals between different roles in the process".

The empirical data reported in this paper illustrate how both local country-specific actors and international actors are involved in the national management fashion markets built around the BSC. The data show how these actors via different types of competitive and cooperative behavior influence the emergence and evolution of the concept at the national level. The data show that the three markets can be considered largely national with key local players. At the same, the national markets are not insulated from international influences from actors such as the large multinational consulting firms and management gurus.

The rest of the paper is structured in the following way: In part two, we outline current conceptualizations of the management fashion arena, and point out what we perceive as the shortcomings of these conceptualizations. Based on this discussion, we introduce an alternative perspective on the management fashion arena, which we argue more explicitly accounts for the dynamics between local and international actors in the diffusion process. In part three, we describe the research approach employed in the empirical study. In part four, we describe the empirical findings and perform a comparative analysis of the three local management fashion arenas. The findings are in part five discussed in light of the theoretical literature on management fashions. We elaborate on

present conceptualizations of the management fashion arena, and discuss the role of local and international actors in the cross-national diffusion of management concepts. The paper ends with a short summary of the key findings, a discussion of the study’s shortcomings and ideas for future research in the area.

## 2. The Management Fashion Arena and the Cross-National Diffusion of Management Concepts

### 2.1. The Management Fashion Arena

#### 2.1.1. The Actors Involved in the Management Fashion Arena

Management fashion theory views the diffusion of management concepts as taking place within a so-called “management fashion arena” [2,11,26–28,30]. The main actors involved in the arena include consultants, gurus, business schools, and the business media (see Figure 1). A brief description of the main actors and their main functions can be found in Table 1.

**Figure 1.** The management fashion arena (adapted from [2,26,27]).



**Table 1.** The main actors involved in the management fashion arena.

Actor type	Role(s)	Central reference(s)
Consulting firms	Consulting firms assist client organizations in the implementation of management concepts. Generalist firms offer services related to a wide range of concepts, while specialist consultancies tend to focus on one aspect, such as IT, HR or strategy.	[2,71,72]
Software firms	Software firms tend to focus on the technical aspects of concepts. They develop complementary products that assist in the implementation of management concepts.	[11,73]
Management gurus	Management gurus present management concepts and ideas in books, conferences and seminars. Gurus can operate on a global scale, or be local gurus.	[74–77]

Table 1. Cont.

Actor type	Role(s)	Central reference(s)
Business schools	Academics employed at business schools publish articles about concepts in academic and practitioner-oriented journals. Concepts are also frequently incorporated into courses and materials in educational programs, particularly MBA programs and executive education.	[78]
Conference organizers	Conference organizers arrange conferences and seminars focusing on particular management concepts. These are often held in close cooperation with consultants and software firms, who speak at these conferences and present their products and services.	[21,27,79]
Business media	The business media function as a channel which transmits information about new concepts. Examples of business media include books, professional journals, magazines, newspapers, websites and DVDs.	[80,81]
Publishers/book editors	Publishing companies produce books about management concepts. Book editors serve as gatekeepers who decide which ideas get published.	[26,76]
Professional organizations	Professional organizations have normative function in legitimizing new concepts and ideas by talking about concepts in newsletters, meetings and seminars.	[79,82]
Analysts and shareholders	Security analysts may positively evaluate companies who are using particular management concepts and further increase the popularity of concepts.	[83]
Famous managers	Well-known managers, e.g., “hero managers” serve as opinion leaders and models to other organizations, who in turn may imitate their behavior.	[74]

Consulting firms are typically considered to be the most important and central actor in the management fashion arena [2], as these firms also contribute to the work of the other actors in the arena. For example, consultants frequently write articles about concepts in the business media, give talks at management conferences and seminars, and team up with software firms in order to offer more “complete solutions” to clients. In addition to the “core group” of actors such as conference organizers, business schools and management gurus, Clark [26] highlights the importance of peripheral actors such as book editors and ghost writers of management books. These peripheral actors work in the shadows of the more central actors and have more of a supporting role in the arena.

### 2.1.2. Cooperation and Competition between Actors in the Management Fashion Arena

Kieser [27] suggests that in the management fashion arena different groups of participants play cooperative games and have vested, and oftentimes commercial, interests in that the management concept becomes successful. As Klincewicz [11] points out, the competitive dynamics between the different actors in the arena can be characterized as collaboration as well as competition, *i.e.*, what Brandenburg and Nalebuff [84] refer to as “co-opetition”. This dynamic plays out both within one

actor type (e.g., consulting firms), and across different actor types involved in the arena (e.g., consultancies and software firms). For instance, different consulting firms compete by offering similar services related to a concept, but their interests are also aligned in that they all usually benefit from increasing the concept's overall popularity in the market, and the total market size [11].

This dynamic also works across actor types since actors such as consultants and software firms have complementary products and services [11]. There might be a certain level of overlap between these types of actors in terms of the products and services provided, but they tend to focus on different aspects of management concepts. For example, management consultants focus more on the content of the management concept (e.g., education of users, creation of templates and handbooks), whereas software firms focus on developing technical solutions which help in the implementation of the concept (e.g., software packages and tools).

Cooperation between different types of actors in creating new products and services related to the concept also increases the lucrativeness of the market via so-called "multiplier effects" [11]. The development of one type of product or service (e.g., software packages) increases the demand for other types of complementary products and services (e.g., handbooks or training lessons on how to use the software). In many cases, these complementary products and services are offered by other actors in the arena such as consulting firms, professional groups, and conference organizers [11].

It can also oftentimes be observed that different types of actors "colonize" different niches around a fashionable management concept [13]. For example, a consultancy that specializes in IT is likely to focus on the information technology aspects of a concept, whereas a HR consultancy is likely to focus on the human performance aspects of a concept.

Even though there are many types of cooperative behavior in management fashion arenas, actors also *compete* for market share. The higher the number of actors in the arena, the higher the need for actors to differentiate their market offerings in order to appeal to potential adopters [11]. For example, if there are many competing consulting firms in the market (*i.e.*, a fragmented consultancy market) offering services related to a particular concept, these consulting firms will try to differentiate their offerings from their competitors. For instance, a consultancy may develop their own version of the concept highlighting a particular aspect, or brand the concept in a certain way so that it stands out from the crowd [79].

### 2.1.3. Interactions between Actors in the Management Fashion Arena

The previous section discussed how actors in the arena both compete and cooperate. In doing so, the actors interact in various ways. The literature on management fashions has also widely addressed other types of interactions between different types of actors in the management fashion arena. For example, research has pointed out that there are frequent linkages and overlaps between actors, and actors may assume more than one role and wear different hats in different situations (e.g., consultant/academic) [23,24,26]. This section provides a brief review of studies that have looked at interactions between actors in the management fashion arena.

Much research has focused on the interactions between consultants and other types of actors. For example, one stream of research has focused on the consultant-client relationship and pointed out this relationship is not as "one-sided" as depicted in traditional accounts (e.g., the client as a rather passive

recipient of what the consultant offers). Instead, the consultant-client relationship is dynamic and dialectic [85,86].

Studies have also shown that software firms interact with other actors in the arena [11,73]. Software firms tend to form alliances with consulting firms, and present their products at conferences/seminars and in the business media.

The business media also interact closely with other actors. Many types of actors (e.g., business school professors, consultants, and practitioners) are involved in the business media writing articles about management concepts ([87], p. 16). For example, consultants tend to write their fair share of the articles about management concepts in the business media, particularly in the early phase of the concept's life-cycle [87]. These articles in many instances stylized cases or disguised advertisements for the consultancy's services related to the new concept [87].

Much has also been written about how management gurus interact with other actors [74]. It has been pointed out that gurus may associate themselves with business schools or consulting firms [75]. Other researchers have studied how gurus interact with their managerial audiences in live speaking engagements, e.g., the use of humor and other rhetorical techniques [77]. Moreover, researchers have studied management gurus' use of rhetorical and stylistic devices in management texts [88]. Finally, one stream of research has looked at how gurus' interactions with supporting personnel such as book editors and ghost-writers [89].

Conferences and seminars serve as a meeting-place where different actors from the management fashion arena interact. Kieser pointed out that conferences and seminars constitute an "arena within an arena" ([27], p. 64). Particularly, consulting firms and software firms are important content providers in conferences and seminars. To this point, researchers have pointed out that there is a symbiotic relationship between consulting firms and seminar organizers [90].

Professional organizations are closely associated with commercial seminar organizers. Due to the frequent interactions between professional organizations and seminar organizers (e.g., co-hosting of training courses, seminars for members), professional organizations are likely to become associated with management concepts that are talked about in their conferences and seminars. Hence, the professional organizations may acquire a vested interest in preserving and improving the concept and its related practices [91].

Finally, researchers have noted how business school academics interact with other actors in the arena. For instance, academics may do extensive consulting work in relation to management concepts (e.g., [92]). In addition, some academics associate themselves closely with management fashions and give speeches in conferences and seminars [27].

## 2.2. Shortcomings of Extant Conceptualizations of Management Fashion Arenas

Thus far we have outlined a generic management fashion arena, comprised of different types of actors, who compete, cooperate and interact in various ways. However, in our view, extant conceptualizations of management fashion arena lack an explicit consideration of the international dimension, *i.e.*, how the national management fashion arena is related to arenas in other countries and the role of "global actors" such as the large international consulting firms, software firms, and management gurus, whose activities may span multiple continents and regions. We argue that

management fashion theorists have only to a limited extent taken into account the international dimension, e.g., how management fashion arenas may be configured differently in different countries, and how differences in the configuration of national management fashion arenas may shape the local impact of management fashions.

The lack of an explicit consideration of the role of management fashion arena in cross-national diffusion processes is surprising given that there is much comparative work in organization and management studies highlighting the role of local actors and institutions in shaping the adoption and implementation of management concepts, models and ideas as they are diffused across countries (e.g., [31–36]).

We argue that the configuration of the management fashion arena, *i.e.*, the actors that determine a country’s “diffusion infrastructure” [93], may vary across countries. Different national management arenas are likely to be configured differently because of cultural and institutional factors (cf. [45]). In addition, a given local arena may be more or less connected to and influenced by the international management fashion arena due to other factors such as the country’s size and language.

Hence, we argue that research on management fashion arenas should take into account that there is one larger international arena around a concept, made up of all the actors supporting and promoting the concept at the international level, and numerous smaller national arenas. Similarly, if one looks at each actor type identified in Section 2.1.1. (e.g., consultants, gurus, or software firms), it is possible to distinguish between international and local consulting firms, gurus, business media, *etc.*

2.3. The International Dimension

2.3.1. The National Management Fashion Arena

The national management fashion arena is made up of the actors who are active within a particular national market (see Table 2). Each national arena is likely to be configured differently, as different types of actors may have more or less importance in a given national context. This is due to the country’s institutional pattern, which is shaped by the country’s unique history, traditions and business practices (cf. [45,94]).

**Table 2.** Local and international actors involved in management fashion arenas.

	<b>The national management fashion arena</b>	<b>The international management fashion arena</b>
<i>Consulting firms</i>	Local firms and local offices of the international firms	International consulting firms (e.g., Accenture, Deloitte) Specialized consulting firms focused on a particular management concept
<i>Software firms</i>	Local software firms and local offices of international firms	International software firms (e.g., Oracle, Microsoft, and Hyperion)
<i>Management gurus</i>	Local management gurus (“lesser gurus”)	International gurus (e.g., Michael Porter, Gary Hamel, Robert Kaplan and Tom Peters)

Table 2. Cont.

	<b>The national management fashion arena</b>	<b>The international management fashion arena</b>
<i>Business schools</i>	Local business school professors	Top-ranked business schools (e.g., Harvard Business School) Influential business school professors (e.g., Michael Porter and Robert Kaplan)
<i>Conference organizers</i>	Local conference organizers	International conference organizers (e.g., Confex)
<i>Business media</i>	Local business media (e.g., journals, magazines and newspapers with national circulation)	International book publishers (e.g., Harvard Business School Press) Important financial newspapers (e.g., the Financial Times and Wall Street Journal)
<i>Publishers/book editors</i>	Local publishers and editors serve as gatekeepers (decide which ideas get published and translated to the local language)	International publishers (e.g., Harvard Business School Press)
<i>Professional organizations</i>	Professional organizations play important roles at the national level	Mostly local
<i>Analysts and shareholders</i>	Financial analysts cover firms listed on the national stock exchange	Mostly local
<i>Famous managers</i>	Local managers of large national organizations	Famous managers (e.g., Jack Welch, Bill Gates) Well-known users of particular management concepts (e.g., featured in bestselling books)

Several studies in the management fashion tradition hint at the importance of the institutional context and local fashion-setting actors in shaping the impact of management concepts at the national level. Newell, Robertson and Swan [47] pointed to the role of the institutional context in shaping the local impact of fashions. In a similar vein, Benders, van den Berg and van Bijsterveld [9] noted that fashionable concepts can be interpreted and received differently across countries, and that actors such as consultants are heavily involved in the local reception process.

In addition, Cole has pointed out the role of a country's "macro-political environment" in shaping the trajectory of management concepts at the national level ([39], p. 561). The macro-political environment comprises actors and institutions such as trade associations, unions and public agencies that are influential in a given country, and act as gatekeepers, standard-setters, and support structures for new concepts and ideas. Cole [39] argues that these actors at the national level can explain why management concepts and ideas popularize and become institutionalized in some countries, while they may be rejected in other countries.

Using slightly different terms, Strang and Kim [93] pointed out that there are different "diffusion infrastructures" in different countries, meaning the pathways and routes through which management concepts are spread. Taken together, these studies suggest that it is important to study the configuration

of the national management fashion arena since it constitutes the local diffusion infrastructure, and influences how easily a management concept “flows” [51] in a local national setting.

The relative importance of different actors may vary across countries. For example, consulting firms may have a particularly strong position in some countries, due to factors such as a well-developed client and alumni network [95]. Such factors may increase the local market’s demand for consulting services.

In addition, in some national markets locally based actors may have a stronger position than typical international actors. For example, the local market might have a preference for gurus or spokespersons that are able to communicate in the local language and understand the local business culture. In some countries, we may observe that local consulting firms have a stronger market position relative to the big international firms due to first-mover advantages, an existing loyal client base, and local know-how. For example, a previous study of the BSC in Swedish pointed out the importance played by local actors in adapting the concept to local market preferences [21]. In addition, previous research has pointed out that there are local gurus operating in local markets who would be considered “lesser gurus” (cf. [96]) on a global scale, but still have star power and a following in their local home markets.

### 2.3.2. The International Management Fashion Arena

The international management fashion arena consists of actors such as international spokesmen and gurus, the large multinational consulting firms, top-ranked business schools and business school professors, international business media, large software firms and well-known multinational companies (see Table 2). Various scholars have pointed out the importance played by international actors in shaping the impact of management concepts in different parts of the world [23,97,98].

In the case of the BSC, these actors include the concept’s creators Kaplan and Norton (KN) who are travelling around the world talking about and promoting their concept [52], other competing BSC gurus such as David Niven (e.g., [99]), the large international consulting firms (including KN’s own consulting organization), and influential publishers of books and magazines such as Harvard Business School Press.

To a varying degree, the international arena will influence the respective national arenas around a concept. Powerful international actors usually try to establish a foothold in local markets in order to secure speaking engagements and consulting work. For instance, in the case of the BSC concept, KN are influencing the popularization of the BSC in various ways; e.g., through the activities of their international consulting organization, by speaking at conferences around the world, and via their books which are sold in most parts of the world, and even translated to numerous local languages (cf. [52]).

In the next section, we outline our theoretical perspective on management fashion arenas which takes into account that the reception of management concepts is shaped by both country-specific actors and internationally-based actors.

## 2.4. Management Fashion Arenas and Institutional Duality

### 2.4.1. The Notion of Institutional Duality

The notion of institutional duality has primarily been used to study the adoption of management practices in multinational corporations [43,44]. In the context of multinational corporations,

institutional duality refers to the situation where the foreign subsidiary has to respond to the dual pressures of both host country's institutional patterns and the international parent organization's pressures towards standardization and harmonization.

#### 2.4.2. Why the Notion of Institutional Duality?

We have chosen to use the notion of institutional duality since it takes into account that the concept's trajectory at the national level is shaped by both local actors and international actors, and that the presence and involvement of different types of actors may vary across different countries. Also, in many cases, the actors involved in the cross-national diffusion process are multinational organizations such as the large consulting and software firms. For example, while global consulting firms are diffusing global standardized concepts, their local offices are frequently adapting and tailoring their repertoire of concept to fit with local market demand and pressures from the institutional environment. We argue that current conceptualizations of management fashion arenas can be advanced by taking into account the notion of institutional duality. As pointed out earlier in this literature review, management fashion researchers have primarily studied the reception of concepts in single settings, and focused little on how the reception is shaped by cross-national differences in the configuration of fashion arenas. The notion of duality is useful for thinking about how the trajectory of management concepts is shaped by both country-specific actors and multinational actors, whose activities span different continents, regions and countries.

#### 2.4.3. The Duality of Management Fashion Arenas

Although national management fashion markets are shaped by countries' institutional profile and patterns, they are not completely insulated from international influences from other countries' arenas (e.g., neighboring countries) or international/world actors. As Kostova and Roth [43] point out, there will be two sets of isomorphic pressures working at the same time. Locally, there will be pressures towards within-country harmonization, and these pressures stem from locally-based actors involved in the national arena. In addition, global actors will influence the local arena by providing discourse about the concept in leading managerial publications and conferences, and by establishing beachheads in local management fashion markets (e.g., local offices).

Thus, the within-country domain defines the isomorphic pressures that organizations within that national setting face from fashion-setting actors. These pressures may be regulative, normative or cognitive in nature [100]. In a given country, there are institutional patterns specific to that country [43]. A country's institutional profile influences what types of actors are most influential, and the diffusion infrastructure that is available.

The international domain defines the isomorphic pressures that organizations within the national setting face from actors in other countries and global actors. These pressures stem from actors from the management fashion arenas in other countries, or leading international spokesmen and propagators of management concepts.

The next section outlines the research approach used to study the role of the management fashion arena in the cross-national diffusion of the BSC in Scandinavia.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Approach

The research reported in this paper was carried out as part of a larger research project on the BSC in Scandinavia [101]. The research approach was largely qualitative and explorative in nature. Another way to describe the research approach is by using Alvesson and Skjöldberg [102] term “abduction”. Abduction is a research approach in which there is a back-and-forth relationship between theory and data.

The overall aim of the research reported in this paper was to obtain an understanding of the configuration of the three management fashion arenas, and the work and activities of the most important players in each of the three BSC arenas. In order to answer this research question, the study needed data about the most influential actors in each country. Qualitative interviews with field experts such as BSC consultants were deemed to be the most suitable research method for collecting data about the local BSC markets. Consultants were chosen as informants since they are generally considered to be the most central actors in the management fashion arena, and are involved in activities together with other types of actors (e.g., software firms and conference organizers).

In our view, it would have been difficult to obtain the same in-depth information in a structured survey. A survey would not have allowed for asking follow-up questions and examining certain issues in depth. Another complicating factor was that the informants in many cases were difficult to identify, and indirect procedures such as snowballing [103] had to be utilized.

The second research method employed in the study involved analyzing various types of archival data sources and conducting research on the Internet. This served two purposes. First, it allowed for the identification of potential important actors involved in the local markets, and whose background and activities could be traced and tracked. Second, these data complemented and corroborated the interview data, and allowed for a more balanced and nuanced picture of the configuration of three BSC markets.

#### 3.2. Data Collection

##### 3.2.1. Interviews with Actors

Interviews with actors on the supply-side of three management fashion markets constitute the main source of data in this study. A theoretical sample was used, and the goal was to obtain variation in terms of size, local/international affiliation, and consultancy profile. Details about the informants in the theoretical sample can be found in Table 3 below. The informants were identified by reading local BSC books and articles, conference brochures, or by contacting consulting firms directly. In some cases, the informants were recruited via a snowballing procedure where one informant referred the researcher to a colleague.

A total of 22 interviews were carried out with actors from three BSC markets. The informants were supply-side actors such as consultants or experts who had an overview of their respective BSC market. The informants were mostly experienced consultants that had participated actively in the local BSC market. Many of the informants were senior consultants responsible for “BSC services” within their consulting firm.

**Table 3.** Details about the informants in the theoretical sample.

<b>Informant</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Size</b>	<b>Type of consultancy</b>	<b>Consultancy profile</b>
1	Norway	Small	Independent	Specialist
2	Norway	Large	Multinational	Generalist
3	Norway	Large	Multinational	Generalist
4	Norway	Small	Multinational	Specialist
5	Norway	Small	Multinational	Specialist
6	Norway	Large	Multinational	Generalist
7	Norway	Small	Independent	Specialist
8	Norway	Large	Multinational	Generalist
9	Norway	Large	Multinational	Generalist
10	Norway	Large	Multinational	Generalist
11	Sweden	Large	Multinational	Generalist
12	Sweden	Large	Multinational	Generalist
13	Sweden	Large	Multinational	Generalist
14	Sweden	Large	Multinational	Specialist
15	Sweden	Large	Multinational	Generalist
16	Sweden	Large	Multinational	Specialist
17	Sweden	Small	Independent	Specialist
18	Denmark	Large	Multinational	Generalist
19	Denmark	Large	Multinational	Generalist
20	Denmark	Large	Multinational	Generalist
21	Denmark	Small	Independent	Specialist
22	Denmark	Small	Independent	Specialist

As a second source of interview data, the paper draws on 39 interviews with users of the BSC in Scandinavia. Many of these users had direct experiences with the actors in the local BSC arena as a result of attending conferences or consultant-client relationships.

The interviews were semi-structured, and followed an interview schedule, although there was some flexibility to adapt the structure of the interview to the experiences of the individual informant. The interview schedule covered several themes, including the consultants' views, experiences and their perceptions of the development of the concept in their local markets. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 min, and were recorded on an iPod and transcribed.

### 3.2.2. Other Data Sources

The study also utilized a variety of other sources of data, including written materials such as local BSC books, articles, master's theses, conference invitations and brochures. Internet searches and website analyses were also used to identify important actors and events in the each of the three markets. The Internet data were collected over a seven-year period from 2004–2011. The tracing of actors activities' happened in a semi-structured way, and keywords were used (e.g., "BSC", "management concept"). In other cases, relevant websites were accessed directly (e.g., local consulting firms, conference organizers, book publishers).

### 3.3. Data Analysis

#### 3.3.1. Issue-Focused Approach

The interview transcripts were analyzed using an issue-focused approach [104], where the unit of analysis was the respective issue. The analysis was directed toward comparisons between different informants. Hence, it was important that the information given by the different informants was comparable. Comparability was ensured by using a semi-structured interview schedule.

#### 3.3.2. Coding, Sorting and Integration

The analysis followed Miles and Huberman's [105] stages of analyzing qualitative data: coding, sorting, and integration. In the first step, the interview transcripts were coded manually by hand. In hindsight a software package such as nVivo could have been used, but since the interviews were relatively structured and fully transcribed by one of the researchers we believe this was less of an issue than in the case of unstructured interviews. The next step involved organizing interview excerpts according to concepts and categories. The third and final step involved making sense of the sorted interview data. Throughout the data analysis process, data matrices and displays were used to capture the complexity of the qualitative data. This allowed for comparisons of similarities and differences in the data material.

### 3.4. Implications of the Research Approach

The chosen research approach has several implications. The goal of the research has been to paint an overall "picture" ([50], p. 649) rather than provide a complete overview of all the actors involved in the three markets, which is arguably unrealistic given time and resource constraints. The focus of the research has been on tracing the most important actors involved the three national markets, and the respective roles of local and international actors.

Interviews with experts from consulting firms have been the primary source of data, and a possible weakness is that the data are based on these actors' recollections, which may be subject to biases and distortions. However, as mentioned, the interview data were corroborated by data gathered from other sources. In the research process, several pragmatic choices had to be made as researching management concepts is difficult and costly [106]. This is particularly the case when studying the cross-national diffusion of management concepts, as the researcher has to collect data in several countries.

## 4. The BSC Arenas in the Three Scandinavian Countries

### 4.1. Emergence and Development of the National BSC Arenas

The data in Table 4 show that the Swedish and Norwegian arenas emerged in the mid-1990s, with Sweden being the early mover. In Sweden, the data show that there was some activity by supply-side actors (e.g., conferences/seminars) as far back as in 1994, which is similar to the findings of Ax and Bjørnenak [21]. For example, one early adopter concept in Norway noted: "*I think the first thing that*

happened in Scandinavia was a seminar in Stockholm in 1994". This was backed up by another informant: "Some of us went to a conference in Stockholm in 1994 or 1995..."

**Table 4.** The local emergence and pioneering actors.

	<b>Local emergence</b>	<b>Pioneering actors</b>
Sweden	1994	Conference/seminar organizers, consulting firms
Norway	1995–1996	Consulting firms, professional organization
Denmark	1997–1998	Consulting firm

In Norway, the arena became more established in 1995–1996 when the first media article about BSC was published [107] and the most significant professional organization for business school graduates starting offering seminars about the BSC. The interview data indicate that Denmark lagged a bit behind Sweden and Norway, but that the consulting firm Aston Promentor spearheaded the dissemination of the BSC in Denmark in the late 1990s and became the most central actor in the Danish BSC arena. As mentioned by one Danish informant: "Aston Promentor was the most important pioneer. They had their glory days back in the 1990s". In a similar vein, another informant noted: "The only pioneer I can think of is Promentor. (...) They had a distinct profile in the market, and they are the ones that have preached this the most."

As a whole, the data show the important role played by local actors in the emergence and establishment of the concept in the three national markets. The interview data showed that these actors were considered BSC pioneers and became strongly associated with the local "BSC movements".

#### 4.2. The Role of Consulting Firms

The data indicate that consulting firms have been very active in all three countries, and can be considered the most central actor in the fashion arena. However, it appears that consulting firms have played a particularly important role in Sweden (cf. [21]). Swedish consulting firms were early movers in Scandinavia, and got a head start in the market. Most of the consultants interviewed in Sweden claimed to have adopted the concept in the mid to late 1990s. The Norwegian and Danish consultants generally lagged by a few years. While the Norwegian consultants predominantly adopted the concept in the late 1990s, the Danes (with the exception of two early movers) did not adopt the concept after the turn of the century.

It is not surprising that Swedish consulting firms took the lead in Scandinavia given that Sweden has traditionally had a well-developed and mature market for consultancy services [108], particularly in comparison to Norway where smaller, local accounting firms have played an important role as advisors (cf. [109]).

In Sweden, the bigger consulting firms have been active since around 1995 organizing seminars and authoring media articles and books [21,64]. The Swedish data suggest that consultants with ties to business schools have been central actors, particularly in the mid to late 1990s. Two consulting firms that took the lead in working with the BSC were local consulting firm CEPRO and KN's consulting firm Renaissance Solutions which set up a branch in Swedish in the mid-1990s. KN's firm later changed its name to Balanced Scorecard Collaborative AB in 1999.

The Swedish affiliate of KN's consulting firm has been of considerable importance not only as a promoter of the BSC in Sweden, but also in the rest of Scandinavia. This firm has promoted the BSC in seminars both in Norway and Denmark, and has certified local BSC software packages. KN's consulting organization has teamed up with local consultancies in both Norway and Denmark, and together they have arranged seminars, certified software, and inducted local organizations into KN's "BSC Hall of Fame."

In Norway, consultants from international consulting firms such as Deloitte & Touche and KPMG published early articles about the BSC (e.g., [107,110]), but it is harder to point to a specific consulting firm as a pioneer or leader in the local market. Instead, the Norwegian BSC consulting market has been more fragmented, as there have been smaller, specialized BSC consultants offering these services alongside the traditional consultancies.

Smaller niche consultancies focusing on the BSC have had high profiles in relation to these issues. These smaller firms have been active in the seminar industry and have created informal links between users of the BSC in Norway. One consultant pointed out the role played by local consultants: *"The interesting observation is that most active players have not been the global accounting firms, but the smaller, more specialized consulting firms. All the way down to single-person consulting firms which have specialized themselves in relation to the Balanced Scorecard, and have been running around preaching this."*

In Denmark, it was the consulting firm Aston Promentor in particular that really "pushed" the BSC concept in the late 1990s. After this firm was dissolved in the early 2000s, there has not really been a distinguishable leader on these issues in the Danish consultancy market, and the market has been more fragmented than it was in the early phase. As pointed out by a Danish consultant: *"If you consider all the big management consultancies in Denmark, they will have Balanced Scorecard as part of their services. But no spearhead such as Promentor used to be."*

The comparative analysis shows that consulting firms constitute the most important and central actor type in the BSC management fashion arena in all three countries. This finding is in line with previous research on the diffusion of the BSC which has highlighted the role of consultants in the diffusion and popularization process [21,22,52,58]. Moreover, the finding supports current conceptualizations of the management fashion arena which highlights the centrality of consultants vis-à-vis the rest of the actors in the arena [2].

#### 4.3. The Role of Software Firms

Software firms have been an important actor in all three countries. Most notably, software firms have cooperated closely with consultants. Most of the traditional consulting firms do not see the software firms as direct competitors since the software firms focus more on the technical aspects of the BSC concept. For example, the Norwegian firm Corporater has aligned itself with the influential international consulting firm PWC, and has managed to go from a small Norwegian start-up company to a global player in the BSC software market.

Software firms have also supported and funded conferences and seminars. For example, in Norway, the local software firm Corporater has sponsored several conferences in Norway in the 2000s, while in Denmark, SAS Institute has been heavily involved in BSC conferences since the late 2000s. KN's

consulting firm has also had significant influence on the software markets in the three countries via the certification of local software firms' BSC software solutions.

As mentioned, software firms tend to take part in these events to promote their products and services. The data suggest that the role played by software firms is somewhat understated in current conceptualizations of the management fashion arena. The findings from this study supports Klincewicz [11] suggestion to focus more on the role of software firms as actors in the fashion arena.

#### *4.4. The Role of Professional Associations*

Professional groups have been active in all three countries. Ax and Bjørnenak [21] documented the importance of several professional associations in the early phase of BSC diffusion in Sweden. In Norway, professional associations have been of particular importance. As one Norwegian consultant noted: "*Some actors have done a lot of seminars and conferences related to this, so that has of course been important for dissemination and creating awareness around these things*". The Norwegian association of business school graduates (Siviløkonomforeningen) started to offer seminars about BSC back in 1996, and these seminars attracted thousands of participants until the mid-2000s.

Another development in the early phase was the establishment of Balanced Scorecard Forum Norge, which was a networking group established in the late 1990s. This group arranged annual "BSC meetings" every year from the late 1990s to 2004. At this meeting the annual Balanced Scorecard Award for "best implementation" was presented. In the Danish case, professional groups such as DJØF have been involved in BSC-related activities, but not to the extent seen in Sweden and Norway.

#### *4.5. The Role of the Conference/Seminar Scene*

The importance of seminars and conferences has been considerable in all three Scandinavian countries. This was also indicated by the high number of users who in the interviews mentioned having participated in conferences and seminars. In Sweden, the large consultancies and seminar organizers were of particular importance in the early phase of BSC diffusion (see also [21]), since they attracted participants from other countries (e.g., Norwegian managers and consultants). In the interviews, many informants recalled that managers and consultancies got inspiration and ideas from seminars and conferences that took place in Sweden in 1994 and 1995.

In Denmark, the BSC seminar scene emerged somewhat later, but there have been various influential actors arranging seminars and large conferences featuring KN in recent years. In Norway, the smaller specialized consultancies have used seminars as a project winning strategy. In addition, in Norway and Sweden many seminars and conferences have been devoted to the issue of the BSC in the public sector, which has not been seen to the same extent in Denmark.

The data clearly show the importance of conference/seminar organizers in the fashion arena. The conference/seminar scene developed around the BSC can be viewed as a "diffusion hub" which brings together many different actors (e.g., consultants, software firms, academics, famous users) and potential adopters of the concept.

#### 4.6. *The Role of the Business Media*

The business press has played an important role in Sweden and Denmark, but not to the same extent in Norway. In Sweden there has been very intensive public discourse around the BSC concept, evidenced by best-selling books and numerous articles in various journals and periodicals [21,111]. The attention and awareness that the Swedish BSC books by Olve and colleagues [112–117] have created has been significant, not only in Sweden, but also abroad. Viewed as a whole, the media discourse has been more intense in Sweden than in Norway and Denmark. The number of articles and books written in Swedish is notably higher [64,111] than in the other two countries.

The business press in Denmark has been and still is very active in publishing books and articles about the BSC concept (e.g., [118]). In Denmark, the number of books is higher relative to the number of articles. Most of these books have been published by Børsen Forlag, which has actively promoted these books in the local business and management community. Børsen Forlag has published translations of several of KN's books (e.g., [119]) and several Danish BSC books focusing on Danish case studies and experiences (e.g., [118,120]).

In Norway, there has been little discourse about the BSC in the business media. Except for one fairly successful BSC book [121], the few books and reports dealing with BSC have mostly addressed the public sector and have not been geared towards the private sector [122–124]. As a whole, the number of articles and books has been rather low. In addition, no translation of KN's original books is currently available in Norway.

This might partly be due to the fact that there are not many outlets for such publications in Norway. In addition, it could also be explained by the fact that there has not been a prominent publisher of business-oriented literature in the Norwegian market. The market for business literature written in Norwegian or even translations has traditionally been small and probably not lucrative enough. For example, one consultant commented that the business newspapers in Norway have showed little interest in issues related to management control.

There are certain differences between the countries in terms of author affiliations. In Sweden, most of the early articles and books were written by authors coming from the consultancy or the academic domain. As noted earlier, the academic-consultant Olve and his colleagues published many of the early writings on BSC in Sweden. Jan Lindvall is another Swedish business school academic who wrote several articles about the BSC in the late 1990s and early 2000s [125–127]. In addition, Fredrik Nilsson was a Deloitte consultant and doctoral student who authored several of the early articles about BSC in Sweden [128,129].

In Norway, most of the early articles were written by authors from the consultancy or the practice domain. This can partly be explained by the fact that there were few academics focusing on issues related to the BSC during this period. From 2001 onwards, most of the reports have been written by public sector consultancies or governmental agencies [122–124,130]. In Denmark, a large share of the authors of both books and articles belong to the academic domain, e.g., Bukh's BSC books (e.g., [118,131]), and Nørreklit's critical articles (e.g., [88,132,133]).

#### *4.7. The Role of Business Schools*

In Sweden, there have been several academics that have contributed quite heavily to BSC discourse (e.g., Olve, Lindvall, Nilsson). These academics have also had linkages to other actors in the arena, such as consulting and seminar organizers (e.g., Olve's numerous presentations about the BSC in Swedish conferences and seminars or Nilsson's consulting work). Similarly, in Denmark there have been several active academics such as Bukh (author of best-selling books, numerous conference appearances and keynote speeches). Several authors of the Danish articles have come from academia, and there has even been a strong critic questioning the usefulness of the concept and undermining the concept's status as a management concept [88]. In contrast to Sweden and Denmark, academics in Norway have been more passive and neutral, and have contributed relatively little to the discourse (for one exception, see [134]).

#### *4.8. The Role of User Organizations*

The most well-known cases of BSC implementation in Scandinavia are Swedish, particularly the cases put on public display in, for instance, Olve's bestselling BSC book [112]. There are also several current Swedish members of the "BSC Hall of Fame." Currently, there are two Norwegian members of the "BSC Hall of Fame," but only one Danish member. As a whole, it is reasonable to argue that prestigious user organizations have had a somewhat more important role as role models and opinion leaders in Sweden than in Denmark and Norway.

#### *4.9. The Role of Other Peripheral Actors*

In addition to the main actors described above, other peripheral actors can also be identified. For example, in both Norway and Denmark there have been websites devoted to disseminating information about the BSC such as BSC World Norge and Teamroom BSC. For example, BSC World Norge was one of one first websites in the world devoted solely to the BSC, and was run by the founder of BSC Forum Norge, the user network mentioned in Section 4.4.

#### *4.10. Summary of the Importance of the Various Actor Types in the Three Countries*

The analysis in this section has shown that the relative importance of the different actors in the arena varies across the three national markets. The main findings are summarized in Table 5. We found that the formation of an arena happened first in Sweden, followed by Norway, and then Denmark. However, the three arenas have been configured slightly differently. Different types of actors have had the leading roles in the three markets.

The comparative analysis shows similarities between the countries, as important actor types such as consulting, software firms and conference/seminar organizers have been important in all three markets. Among the other actor types, there are interesting differences between the three arenas. For example, the business media have been important in Sweden and Denmark, but not to the same degree in Norway. In Denmark, the important role played by a book publisher is notable.

**Table 5.** The relative importance of the various actors 1992–2011.

	<i>Sweden</i>	<i>Norway</i>	<i>Denmark</i>
Consulting firms	High	High	High
Software firms	Medium-high	High	Medium-high
Professional organizations	Medium	High	Medium
Conference/seminar organizers	High	High	Medium
Business media	High	Low	High
Business schools	High	Low	Medium
User organizations	High	Medium	Medium-Low
Peripheral actors	Low	Low	Low

The role of business schools also varies across the three arenas. Business schools' academics have been important in Sweden and Denmark, but not to the same extent in Norway where academics have been more passive. Professional organizations have been particularly important in Norway and in Sweden, but slightly less influential in Denmark. Finally, in terms of organizations and managers acting as role models, Swedish organizations have had the most visibility, while Danish organizations have been less visible.

#### 4.11. Local and International Actors Involved in the Scandinavian BSC Arenas

Finally, this section discusses in more detail the role of local and international actors in the Scandinavian BSC arenas. The data in Table 6 show that the relative importance of local and international actors varies across the different actor types. The table shows that local actors have been relatively more influential than international actors, although there is variation across actor types. The international influences have mainly come from international consulting firms (e.g., KN's consulting firm), software firms and the business media (e.g., Harvard Business Review and KN's BSC books). These international actors have had a standardizing effect, as KN's consulting organization in Sweden has propagated the "official" version of the BSC, whereas local actors have adapted the concept to fit the local institutional context (see also [21]).

**Table 6.** The importance of local and international actors 1992–2011.

	<b>Local</b>	<b>International</b>
Consulting firms	High	High
Software firms	Medium	Medium-high
Professional organizations	High	Low
Conference/seminar organizers	High	Low
Business media	High	Medium
Business schools	Medium	Low
User organizations	Medium	Low
Peripheral actors	Low	Low

The empirical material clearly shows the importance of country-specific actors, particularly as pioneers in the early stage of the diffusion process. These country-specific actors include local book publishers, smaller local specialized BSC consultancies, and local professional organizations and

groups. However, despite the strong presence of local actors, the national arenas are not “closed systems” insulated from the influence of international fashion-setting actors. Rather, the borders are blurred as the three national arenas are also influenced by the larger international arena around the BSC concept.

The data show that there are overlaps between the three management fashion arenas. An actor such as KN’s consulting firm is operating in all three countries. In addition, all three arenas are influenced by many of the same international actors, such as the large international consulting firms who have established local offices in the three countries. Furthermore, all three markets appear receptive to international actors and outside influence. The openness of the Scandinavian markets to international influences is not surprising since the Scandinavian countries are small, open economies where English can be considered an unofficial second language, particularly in the realm of business.

Despite the overlaps between the three countries, the markets are still largely national with key, identifiable players, such as academics and consultants in Sweden, professional organizations and software firms in Norway, and business school academics and book publishers in Denmark.

In the next section of the paper, these findings will be discussed in relation to our existing theoretical conceptualizations of management fashion arenas.

## 5. Discussion

The notion of a management fashion arena has been the main theoretical framework used in this paper. In the theoretical part, we introduced the notion of institutional duality. In the context of management fashion arenas, duality means that the national arena is influenced by both local country-specific actors and international actors whose activities may span different regions and countries. In the discussion, we will use the results from the empirical analysis to discuss this theoretical perspective in more detail, and to discuss how this perspective can be used in future research on the role of the management fashion arena in the cross-national diffusion of management concepts.

The discussion centers around four theoretical themes that were raised in the theoretical background of the paper: first, cooperative and competitive behavior between actors in the management fashion arena; second, interactions between actors in the arena; third, the international dimension; and fourth, the notion of institutional duality in the context of management fashion arenas.

### 5.1. Cooperation and Competition between Actors

The notion that the different actors not only compete, but also cooperate in order to increase the management concept’s total market size is well established in extant conceptualizations of the management fashion arena [2,11,27]. As pointed out in Section 2.1.2, the literature on management fashions has addressed many forms of cooperation and competition between actors involved in management fashion arenas.

As pointed out by Perkmann and Spicer [135], a diverse group of actors who provide different types of “institutional work” related to a concept is important for a concept to become widely diffused and institutionalized. The analysis of the data shows that the three national management fashion arenas are complex, as there is a constellation of different actors involved.

This study has shown many instances of *cooperative* behavior and interplay between actors in the three arenas. Particularly, the empirical data show consultants cooperate closely with software firms, and present their “complete solutions” at conferences and seminars. Hence, these actors carry out different types of institutional work, as consultants focus on educating potential adopters about the concept, while software firms focus on developing technical tools that can help with the implementation process in the adopting organization. Furthermore, software tools objectify the abstract BSC concept [52], and concepts that are associated with tangible products are generally harder to reverse [11].

Finally, the data also show that actors cooperate and form alliances not only with other actors within their local market, but also with actors based in the neighboring countries. In particular, KN’s consulting organization has had the leading role in this respect in Scandinavia, since it has initiated alliances with local consulting firms and conference/seminar organizers. In many ways, this organization functions as a “boundary spanner” in the cross-national diffusion of the BSC in Scandinavia (see also [52]).

### 5.2. Interactions between Actors

As pointed out in Section 2.1.3, interactions between different actors have also been debated extensively in the extant literature on management fashions, e.g., consultant-client relationships, guru-audience interactions, and the symbiotic relationships between consultants, professional organizations and conference organizers.

The data presented in this paper show frequent linkages, overlaps and interactions between the different actors involved in the three national arenas [23,24]. For example, in Section 4.7 we showed how business schools academics in both Sweden and Denmark have been involved in activities such as conferences/seminars, consulting work, and the development of BSC literature.

Across all three cases, the importance of conferences and seminars in fostering interactions between actors is notable. The conference/seminar scene functions as a “diffusion hub” where many different actors, e.g., consultants, software firms and managers interact and exchange information and experiences about the BSC. In addition, the data show that professional organizations are closely aligned with conference organizers, and that they in many ways have a symbiotic relationship. The centrality of the conference/seminar scene was also highlighted by Kieser who suggested that conferences and seminars can be seen as an arena within the management fashion arena [27].

### 5.3. The International Dimension

In our view, the lack of an explicit consideration of the international dimension is a weakness in current conceptualizations of the management fashion arena. As pointed out in the theoretical part of the paper, this is due to the fact that the most studies of management fashions have been carried out in a single setting [47].

Therefore, in the theoretical part we outlined the main distinctions between what we labeled the “national” and the “international” management fashion arena. The data show that the three national arenas are not “closed systems” but interrelated. The data also show linkages, and as pointed out in the previous sections, interactions between actors operating in different national markets. In addition, the

actors in the three national arenas are connected to the “international BSC arena”, as they are influenced by internationally-based actors (e.g., multinational consulting firms and management gurus) whose activities have spanned across all three national arenas.

The findings underscore the importance of local players in pioneering and establishing the use of the concept in the local markets. Still, although the markets can be viewed as largely national, international actors have influenced the local markets via local consulting offices and business media publications.

#### *5.4. The Duality of Management Fashion Arenas*

The paper has drawn on the notion of “institutional duality” [43,44]. Previously, this theoretical view has been used in the context of the adoption and transfer of management practices by multinational corporations. We argue that the notion of institutional duality can be also be used as a theoretical framework in the context of the cross-national diffusion of management concepts and fashions. Viewing management fashion arenas using the framework of institutional duality takes into account that the concept’s trajectory at the national level is shaped by both local actors and international actors, and that the presence and involvement of different types of actors may vary across different countries.

We argue that, in the national management fashion market, organizations are faced by two types of isomorphic pressures. First, there are pressures from local actors in the national management fashion arena. These actors are influenced by the local institutional context and tend to shape the reception of the concept, generally leading to “national effects” and more divergence. Second, there are pressures from international actors such as global management consultancies and management gurus whose activities may span continents, regions and countries and have a “standardizing” effect on the local market, generally leading to “global effects” and more convergence.

As the data show, in many cases, the actors involved in the cross-national diffusion of the BSC are multinational organizations such as the large consulting and software firms. For example, while global consulting firms are diffusing global standardized versions of the BSC concept, their local offices may adapt and tailor the concept to fit with local market demand and pressures from the institutional environment [21].

## **6. Conclusions**

### *6.1. Summary*

This paper has focused on the role of the management fashion arena in the cross-national diffusion of management concepts. The empirical setting has been the BSC in the Scandinavian countries. Using a qualitative research approach, combining interviews with consultants, users and various other data sources, we have studied the main actors involved in the cross-national diffusion process and the concept’s evolution in the three respective markets.

Although much has been written about the cross-national diffusion of management concepts and ideas, many of these studies have focused on broader management philosophies or macro-trends in management thinking. We have positioned our study within management fashion theory which focuses

more narrowly on *management concepts*, and puts relatively more emphasis on the role of commercial actors involved in the management fashion arena than on society-level actors. Since we have studied three countries with similar institutional profiles, it is arguably easier to distil the importance of fashion-setting actors in shaping the diffusion of the concept in the three countries.

We argue that the paper makes two contributions to the literature on fashionable management concepts. First, we extend current conceptualizations of the management fashion arenas by explicitly taking into account the international dimension, and distinguishing between the various national management fashion arenas and the international management fashion arena built around a management concept. By drawing on the notion of institutional duality, we highlight the dynamics between local and international actors in the cross-national diffusion process. Second, we have carried out a three-country study which answers the calls in the literature for more comparative empirical research on management concepts and fashions. The findings show that pioneering actors influence the local emergence of concepts, and that the relative importance of different types of actors varies across the countries.

## 6.2. Shortcomings and Future Work

First, one weakness of the research reported in this paper is that the countries chosen are similar and closely related both in terms of institutional profile (e.g., [65,66,68]), size and geographical location. It would have been interesting to study countries that diverge more in terms of “business systems” [94]. However, despite the fact that the countries share many commonalities, the data show that the markets are still largely national with key identifiable players.

Second, it is possible to argue the fact that Sweden was the “leader” with respect to the emergence of the concept in the 1990s could be explained by other factors rather than by the actors in the fashion arena. For example, one could make a case that a factor such as macroeconomics is driving the phenomenon. However, the cited literature on the countries’ institutional profiles does not provide clear indications that Sweden was a significantly more mature economy than Norway and Denmark in the 1990s. Research does, however, point out that the Swedish consultancy market has a longer history and is more mature than in, for example, Norway [108], which indicates that the diffusion infrastructure may have been better in Sweden than in the two other countries.

Third, the research approach employed in the paper paints an overall “picture” ([50], p. 649) and does not necessarily provide a complete overview of all the activities of the actors involved in the three countries. The interviews also relied on the actors’ recollections of past events, which may be subject to biases and distortions such as post hoc rationalization [136]. To mitigate this problem, available archival data and secondary data from other studies were used to corroborate the interview data.

Fourth, the focus in this study was on the main actor types identified in early research on the management fashion arena [27] such as consulting firms, the business media, professional organizations and business schools. In this study, we found that other types of actors such as software firms play key roles in the management fashion arena. Therefore, future studies should focus more on the role of software firms and various actors operating on the Internet (e.g., social media), as their relative importance in the management fashion arena is likely to increase as a result of the digitization of management and accounting [2,11]. With specific reference to actors such as software firms, Jung

and Kieser ([2], p. 339) note that "... hitherto largely neglected participants in the management fashion arena and their interrelationships with consultants deserve a closer investigation..." Future studies could focus more explicitly on other types of actors such as book editors and publishing houses [26,76] as they seem to have played an important role in the diffusion of the BSC, particularly in Denmark.

Lastly, future studies should aim to study the establishment and workings of actors in the management fashion arena longitudinally. As van Veen, Bezemer and Karsten [70] point out, future studies should examine all actors involved in the evolution of a concept over time. One possibility would be to combine management fashion theory with social network theory to map how actors in the arena develop ties and relationships over time, and how concepts are circulated between different actors in the arena. In addition, as we have argued in this paper, it is important to study the ties and relationships between actors in national and international arenas, which could improve our understanding of how fashionable management concepts are diffused across borders.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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