



RESEARCH ARTICLE

The nature of management frameworks

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(Received 3 January 2019; accepted 16 November 2019; first published online 17 December 2019)

Abstract

A management framework (like the Business Model Canvas or SWOT) is a combination of interlinked items that support a particular approach to a specific objective. Various management frameworks are widely used even though their origins, adoption, and value remain vague. Previous research tried to decipher the adoption of these management frameworks, whereas considerably less attention was devoted to the theoretical explanation of the development and value of the frameworks. This paper investigates the nature of management frameworks in particular realms using analogical reasoning between biological and social systems, and mostly draws on memetics, intersubjective reality, and the network effect. By using memetics, the explanations on the origins of well-known frameworks are complemented. Second, the paper shows the role of the network effect in the growing value of a framework until it becomes an intersubjective reality. Finally, such a framework is explained as autopoietic within a particular realm.

Keywords: frameworks; memetics; network effect; autopoietic systems; intersubjectivity

Introduction

Managers and consultants use a wide variety of frameworks to support their analysis and/or decision-making. Many researchers and practitioners have had difficulty advocating for the usefulness of management frameworks (Hill & Westbrook, 1997; Miller, Hartwick, & Le Breton-Miller, 2004; Spell, 1999). Only a few theorists or practitioners ask themselves why a certain management framework, for example, the Business Model Canvas ('BMC'), has become a *de facto* standard in their realm. The unique value of well-known frameworks employed in organizations seems to be only one of the reasons why numerous frameworks have spread swiftly (Sturdy, 2004). Other reasons for the existence and use of management frameworks are the following: First, they decrease the number of uncertainties when a new phenomenon is tackled. Second, frameworks can support the achievement of organizational strategies and prompt 'intra-company connectedness' (Lambert, García-Dastugue, & Croxton, 2005). Third, the use of management frameworks adds to managers' reputations by showing that a manager is credible and capable of dealing with uncertainties in the future (Mamman, 2002). Finally, frameworks can depict features of various phenomena (Priem & Butler, 2001), compare and guide numerous organizational practices (Heylighen, 1998), support the execution of tasks (Andrew & Evans, 2011), and refute or confirm a particular management approach (Schwartz & Carroll, 2008). For instance, the BMC has become an apt ontology for investigating organizations on a new level-of-analysis (business model). Also, the BMC can guide a number of marketing-, logistics-, and strategy-related activities in the domain of managers.

As frameworks such as the BMC gain enough popularity within a particular realm, they become widely used by managers, researchers, and consultants to provide a supporting rationale for decisions (Jung & Lee, 2016).

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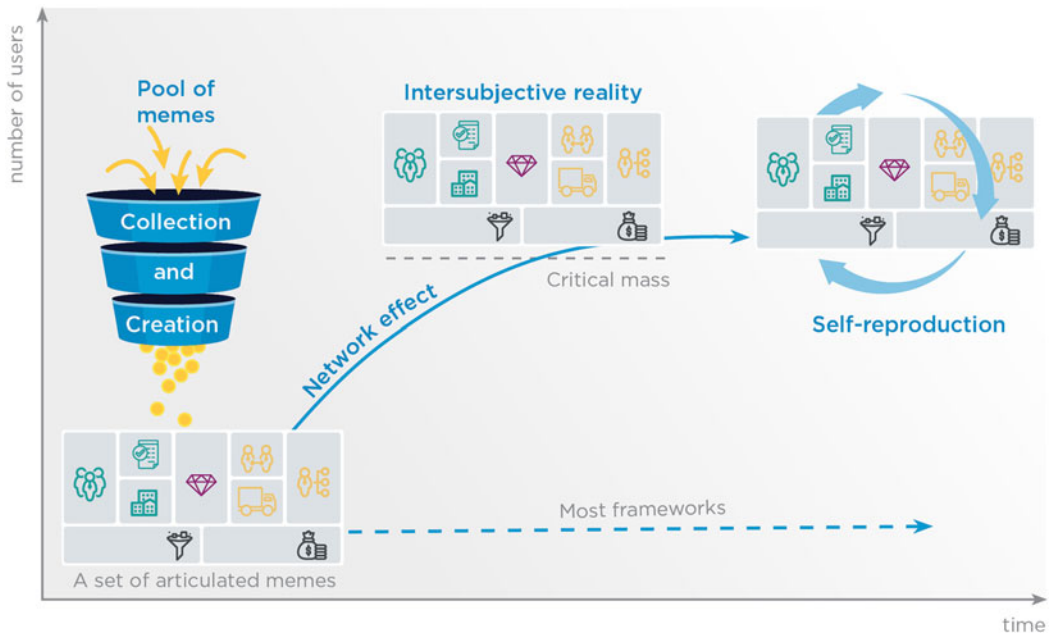


Figure 1. The development, adoption, and value of management frameworks

We argue that memetics offers a comprehensive explanation of the way in which frameworks are developed. Memetics is the study of the transmission of the so-called memes between people in particular realms (Whitty, 2005). We draw on the understanding of a meme as a cultural element with the ability to replicate, similar to the biological replication of a gene, and the ability to pass from one human being to another (Dawkins, 1976; Lord, 2012).

We claim that the origins of management frameworks can usually be traced back to the creator and to the period in which it was conceived. In case of the BMC, the creation happened during the post-millennial expansion of e-businesses (2004) whilst the author was Alexander Osterwalder (Osterwalder, 2004). Our study explains how contemporary management ideas – memes – from a certain time period and a particular realm contributed to the emergence of a framework. Management ideas on which a framework is built ‘do not spring forth full blown but are made somewhere by somebody’ (Peterson, 1979), and, analogously, the dissemination of these ideas is an outcome of active transmission among people (Bazin & Naccache, 2016; Braganza, Awazu, & Desouza, 2009). When a renowned management framework achieves critical mass, the rate of adoption becomes self-sustaining. Management frameworks that gained critical mass self-reproduce through management education, consultancies, business trainings, and give rise to their expected value with the continuous assistance of the network effect. This development is shown in Figure 1.

To understand ‘how people interpret, act, and ascribe meaning’ (McCabe, 2002) to management frameworks, we integrate intersubjective reality. Within the adoption of management frameworks, intersubjectivity resonates as ‘mutual engagement and participation between independent subjects, which directly conditions their respective experience’ (de Quincey, 2000). As an intersubjective reality for two or more independent subjects, a framework entails engagement. Within the engagement of the subjects, management frameworks communicate shared beliefs and allow for mutual understanding (Luhmann, 1992). Each of the subjects can reasonably assume that the other subject is familiar with the framework and it is then less difficult (i.e., less cognitively demanding) to discuss a shared belief in a particular realm.

The structure of this paper is as follows: First, we review the existing body of knowledge on management frameworks. Then, elaborating on the analogy between social and biological systems, we utilize the theory of memetics to undertake an explanation of the existence of well-known management frameworks. We then introduce the concepts of intersubjectivity and network effect to encompass the determinants of a management framework's success in particular realms where the frameworks are being continuously reproduced. Finally, we discuss theoretical contributions and avenues for future research regarding observations of management frameworks.

Management Frameworks

In organizations, frameworks enable a comparison of principles and techniques (Rezaei, Chiew, & Lee, 2014), hold or support a theory (Swanson, 2007), and are seen as sets of premises, values, and practices that promote dealing with contemporary issues (Andrew & Evans, 2011). Management frameworks 'emerge from people's minds and enter into a form that can be perceived by others' (Heylighen, 1998). This paper combines several terms from various fields, many of them with different definitions and colloquial uses. Table 1 introduces the main terms that are used in this paper.

Even though many studies discuss the development of novelties and their diffusion, management frameworks require – to some extent – realm-specific reasoning (Cornelissen & Durand, 2014). However, due to the complexity of management phenomena, previous research not only advocates plausibility of multiple-lens perspective but also firmly believes in the complementarity of compound theoretical approach (Okhuysen & Bonardi, 2011). Notwithstanding the (dis)similarity of compounded perspectives, the compound approach that seeks for analogies can yield alternative insights on existing phenomena (Oswick, Fleming, & Hanlon, 2011).

The question arose whether frameworks are valuable or solely sets of ideas shared among people who have similar attitudes (Schwartz & Carroll, 2008). Framework development remains an ambiguous field (Andrew & Evans, 2011; Priem & Butler, 2001). We claim that every framework is inherently fictional; it does not exist in the real world. Frameworks cannot be attached to specific observations but are seen as an abstract statement of the elements of these observations. Thus, the 'scientific correctness' of management frameworks cannot be tested, and they are – by definition – nonfalsifiable.

Namely, almost anything can be divided based on two dimensions and shown in a matrix. For example, SWOT divides factors based on internal/external origin and favorable/unfavorable traits; the Kraljic purchasing portfolio model divides items based on financial impacts and supply risks (Kraljic, 1983), and the BMC is a business model 'ontology' which includes certain business model elements. Because falsification has been neglected by management society (Armstrong, 1983), theories are sometimes declared ambiguously, without allowing other theorists to refute the theory or its framework. Management society could benefit from Popper's essential principles of testing theories, where 'testing' means deliberate efforts to falsify the theory until this falsification fails (Faran, 2009; Popper, 1961). Other typical examples of successful arbitrary frameworks include Carter and Roger's (Carter & Rogers, 2008) sustainable management framework, the balanced scorecard (Kaplan & Norton, 1995), Porter's five forces (Porter, 1989), and aforementioned Kraljic's purchasing portfolio matrix.

While BMC or SWOT as frameworks is *per se* nonfalsifiable, their results in practice are questionable. Typical procedural guidelines consist largely of catch-all questions devoid of explicit theoretical underpinnings and often produce shallow, misleading results (Valentin, 2001). For example, the usefulness of SWOT analysis is highly questionable since organizations failed to reap any benefits from the 'meaningless descriptions' resulting from SWOT analyses (Hill & Westbrook, 1997). The example of SWOT analysis demonstrates that managers prefer frameworks that generate descriptions in a simplistic manner to process the information more effectively. Also, managers favor 'understandable, feasible, and internally consistent' outcomes (Postma

Table 1. Key terminology

Term	Definition
Management Framework	A management framework is a combination of interlinked items that supports a particular approach to a specific objective ('Framework,' Business Dictionary). As such, a management framework is nonfalsifiable. It is a set of articulated memes.
Meme	A meme can be thought of as a specific idea: one with the capacity for copying itself from mind to mind and from person to person, thereby multiplying its presence within a particular realm (Lord, 2012).
Management Fashion	A management fashion is a relatively transitory collective belief, disseminated by management fashion-setters, e.g., a management technique that drives rational management decision-making (Abrahamson, 1996). For the purpose of this paper, management fashion can represent a management framework that has reached a critical mass and has become an intersubjective phenomenon.
Fashion-Setters	Fashion-setters are organizations and individuals who dedicate themselves to producing and disseminating management fashions (Abrahamson, 1991).
Management Novelty	A management novelty is a newly invented framework, process, technique, structure, construct, or concept.
Origin	The origin of a management framework stems from floating memes and represents the time period and the author of a management framework if applicable. The origin of a management framework, unlike for the other management novelties, can usually be traced back to its author and/or date when it was conceived.
Critical Mass	Critical mass is a sufficient number of people in a particular realm who adopt a management framework, leading further to a self-sustaining rate of adoption of a framework (adapted from Luhmann, 1986; Markus, 1987; Marwell, Oliver, & Prael, 1988; Rogers, 1976; Schoder, 2000).
Adoption	Adoption is the initial use of a framework in practice initiated by researchers, practitioners, managers, and consultants (adapted from Boyne et al., 2005). Adoption is composed of actions required or implied by the management novelty and commitment to it by users of that novelty (Kostova & Roth, 2002).
Network Effect	The network effect is the circumstance in which the net value of an action (consuming a good, subscribing to a telephone service, or adopting a management framework) is positively affected by the number of users taking equivalent actions (Liebowitz & Margolis, 1994).
Intersubjective Reality	Intersubjective reality or intersubjective phenomenon is a well-known management framework that has a sufficient number of users. Intersubjective reality implies mutual engagement among independent subjects, which directly conditions their respective experiences (de Quincey, 2000).
Autopoiesis	Autopoiesis occurs when a management framework becomes an intersubjective reality and is further self-reproduced to newcomers to a particular realm through the use in management education, e.g., lectures, workshops, and conferences.
Realm	A realm is a group of people to which certain specific characteristics pertain that distinguishes one realm from another. For example, researchers, practitioners, and consultants in the realm of business management usually possess in-depth knowledge about management novelties, while they may only be acquainted with and, consequently, less susceptible to phenomena in engineering or medicine.

& Liebl, 2005). On the other hand, a framework's ease-of-use accounts for the oversimplified division of various factors based on two dimensions (Beck, 1982). Consequently, cumbersome environments perplexed with uncertainties are represented too simplistically (Bell & Rochford, 2016). This is why 'the more carefully and systematically managers analyze a complex and uncertain environment, the more successful the strategies they formulate will be,' premise of SWOT analysis often results in meaningless descriptions (Postma & Liebl, 2005) and only adds to generalities and ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984; Ford & Ford, 1995). Useful outcomes, if any, can result from using

SWOT analysis; however, the empirical research has shown that ‘no-one (in organizations, particularly) used the outcomes later’ (Hill & Westbrook, 1997).

However, it remains unknown which framework will *a priori* turn out to be successful. Researchers generate novel management frameworks with an underlying relationship between their constitutive elements – memes – without devoting considerable attention to testing the causality of those relationships (adapted from Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). So far, almost no attention was devoted to gauging how the ‘surface evaluations’ resulting out of SWOT helped (or not) developing strategies and decision-making (Bell & Rochford, 2016). Only few attempts to investigate whether a framework delivers new value have been studied after it has been adopted for a while and with the use of rudimentary experiments such as the ‘table-napkin test’ (Arjen, 2015; Snowden, 2011).

The origins of management frameworks

In line with Birkinshaw, Hamel, and Mol (2008), we argue that a management framework is a management innovation in a certain moment. That innovation is an organized expression of memes. Most frameworks can be attributed to a few individuals who organized the expression of memes. At the time of the BMC development, some of the contemporary ideas floating in the meme pool were related to a business model. The sporadic and inconsistent use of the terms related to the business model established the need for a proper framework. Osterwalder (2004) was one of the few researchers who developed an ‘ontology’ for the business model concept. He drew on contemporary ideas with the greatest psychological appeal and relevance for a business model research. Using his own creativity, he conveniently labelled and organized a set of articulated memes – the BMC.

Those expressions of memes have some merits that enable the surge of a certain framework among its alternatives in competition for preeminence (Goldkuhl, 1996; Schwartz & Carroll, 2008). Among these merits, sense-making is of key importance (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003). For example, Kurtz and Snowden (2003) emphasized that their framework is a sense-making tool, whose value is not logical arguments or empirical verifications but rather the enhanced sense-making and decision-making capabilities.

In a similar vein, our study demonstrates how a partly-arbitrary management framework usually lacks rigorous foundations, acts as a shared belief, and hence structures the cognition of a reality within management (adapted from Marquis & Lounsbury, 2007). Rather, management frameworks are developed as sets of the seized meme(s) – articulated ‘management ideas.’ Memes are small carriers of on-going contemporary beliefs (e.g., companies need to be aware of the value proposition of their products) in particular realms. When organizations started observing their business models, ontology such as the BMC seized memes that addressed organizational requirements (e.g., the need to re-think the value proposition) and were both relevant and timely to the needs of the framework users.

Towards Understanding the Nature of Particular Realms

Well-known frameworks tend to be ‘ubiquitous’ in their use within the management realm (Bell & Rochford, 2016), due to the simplicity of frameworks such as SWOT and the BMC. It should not be forgotten that the majority of created frameworks do not gain a large number of users (beyond the creator him or herself): thousands of frameworks are created in companies, academia, and consulting reports but the most remain unused. The BMC, for instance, has been disseminated to management and gained a sufficient number of users with the mechanisms underlying the nature of well-known management frameworks (adapted from Huczynski, 1993; Williams, 2000).

In management, a framework is often understood as a ‘false proxy’ for inspecting the real-world situations (Bell & Rochford, 2016; Meyer & Land, 2005). Whilst this line of thinking

explains why frameworks, such as the BMC, Porter's five forces, the balanced scorecard, or the SWOT matrix, are, despite their several shortcomings, continuously used, analogical reasoning for comparisons of biological and social systems enhances our understanding of the creation and transmission of the origins of frameworks.

Luhmann (2018) drew on biological systems to derive his own definition of social systems 'as of systems that reproduce their own elements on the basis of their own elements.' Such systems are called *autopoietic systems* (Luhmann, 1986). Both biological and social systems are characterized by their self-referential nature. Luhmann devoted substantial attention to enhance the understanding of analogies between biological and social systems and what consequences such reasoning could have had (Seidl & Becker, 2005). Thus, he did not only 'duplicate' the principles of self-reproduction from biological systems, rather, Luhmann established a more generic, *trans-disciplinary autopoiesis*, in which he abstracted and applied generalizable insights to social systems.

In social domains such as the particular realm of management, the self-referential nature manifests throughout specific pathway mechanisms – a 'chain-of-events' (adapted from Luhmann, 2018). Those pathway mechanisms reveal how and why the elements of a particular realm, namely management frameworks, reproduce as a result of being used. Unlike biological systems, social systems grow on the basis of communication (Luhmann, 1995). Elements of meaning that 'communicate' can be management frameworks. Communications activate during management education, consultancies, business trainings, lectures, conferences, and imply a mutual engagement between the users of a management framework. In that 'ritualized manner' within management (Meyer & Land, 2005), a management framework then continues to 'communicate' as an 'element of meaning' to self-reproduce itself in order to prevail over the alternatives (adapted from Luhmann, 1992).

A framework resonates articulated meaning derived from its memes (Dawkins, 1976). The conceptualization of a meme stems from the analogy with genes in biological systems and draws on the concept of replication (Dawkins, 1976). For Dawkins, genes and memes are successful replicators due to their inherently-embedded high *copying-fidelity*, an aptitude that allows a meme to set itself apart from a pool of memes.

A meme is, in a broad sense, a constitutive element of culture. In a narrow sense, memes are specific ideas with the ability to replicate themselves among people's psyches to affect particular realms (Lord, 2012). Analogously to the reproduction in biological systems, the transmission of cultural elements, namely memes, can account for the evolution of a new management novelty (adapted from Dawkins, 1976). Prior to becoming a piece of a framework, memes can either coexist with the rival memes in a meme pool or cause the extinction of their predecessors (Morris & Lancaster, 2006), but a new meme has to bring something that is believed to be at least at the same or a higher level than its predecessors (Whitney & Tesone, 2001). This train of thought explains why fresh management ideas imply the obsolescence of previous management fashions. Memes are transmitted through biological, physiological, and social ways (Whitty, 2005); however, a human influence is necessary for the transmission of memes (Dawkins, 1976). Researchers, in particular, are accountable for lecturing or writing about floating memes in a particular realm. However, what facilitates the replication of ideas, thoughts, and culture in that particular realm are unique characteristics of memes, namely *copying-fidelity*, *fecundity*, and *longevity* (Dawkins, 1976).

For Dawkins, some memes are subjects to 'continuous mutation' – when an idea is passed from researcher to researcher, it is likely to change. On the contrary, memes with greater psychological appeal and fidelity transmit with 'blending.' An idea (e.g., sustainability is of key importance for organizations) is blended with rival memes when researchers advance the existing well-known frameworks. Sustainability as an idea was self-perpetuating because of a strong psychological appeal and, therefore, easily coincided with the existing framework. This train of thought explains the development of frameworks such as Triple-layer BMC that drew on Osterwalder's BMC (Joyce & Paquin, 2016).

Within transmission, memes *propagate*, *imitate*, and *parasitize*. First, when a meme is incepted in one's mind, it propagates itself by leaping from one mind to another. Among the memes in a meme pool, those with 'psychological appeal' are more successful in remaining alive and become contagious (Dawkins, 1976). This appeal is similar for well-known frameworks and accountable for some frameworks prevailing over the alternatives. Frameworks with aforementioned unique characteristics and thus a greater 'survival value' then replicate with imitation. Fecundity of a meme is of key importance in spreading management ideas. Without a sufficient number of particular copies, management frameworks will not reach a critical mass of people familiar with it. Dawkins (1976), for instance, suggested that 'a rough measure of its [meme] survival value could be obtained by counting the number of times it is referred to in successive years in scientific journals' (Dawkins, 1976).

Memes will not reproduce just by themselves; reproducing is dependent upon how the replicating process of memes interacts with externalities, such as employees, stakeholders, communities, and other articulated ideas (O'Mahoney, 2007). As memetics holistically redeems 'a human construct as a collection of feelings, expectations, and sensations, cleverly conjured up, fashioned, and conveniently labelled by the human brain' (Whitty, 2005), its rhetorical viral and memetic properties have found their way into managerial discourse (Green, 2004). In management, the development of ideas, concepts, conceptual models, methodologies, and practices may all be driven by memes. Successful memes have a longevity that is sufficient to enable the emergence of the so-called 'environmental niches' (Lisack, 2003) and subsequently act as 'catalysts' in the survival of the most contagious and psychologically appealing management frameworks.

The Role of Memetics in Understanding Management Frameworks

An intriguing question comes to mind: how are memes seized, and how do they fall into (the theory of) management (Whitney, Tesone, & Blackwell, 2003)? Management novelties have been recognized as possible examples of memes spreading through business discourse (O'Mahoney, 2007; Price, 2012). Memes facilitate message transmission or opinion sharing within particular realms (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). The expected yield of memetics in management is a better understanding of the structures, processes, and origins of management ideas and, consequently, management novelties. Baldrige and Okimi (1982) argued that management novelty first strikes the business community, then the government, and finally academia. On the contrary, several authors agree that frameworks emerge mainly through academic publications. Essentially, some frameworks succeed and become communications that are self-reproduced continuously. During self-reproduction, frameworks do not change substantially despite being spread widely since the frameworks are sets of successful and already explicitly expressed memes.

Furthermore, for the development of a successful framework, the way in which management ideas (memes) have been seized and contextualized is important (Benders & Van Veen, 2001; Mamman, 2002). Fashion-setters – those who present management frameworks as a universally applicable solution in a particular realm (see e.g., Abrahamson, 1996) – are eager to identify the needs of organizations and managers. Moreover, fashion-setters need to successfully present novel frameworks as the solution to organizational issues and transmit this opinion across the board as soon as possible. Another objective of fashion-setters is to assist managers in detecting and evaluating new management frameworks (Clark, 2004). That being said, contingent management frameworks often 'linger' since their longevity is dependent upon how well the memes are refined and organized (Røvik, 2011).

Various management frameworks originating in memes prosper due to their replicating ability and result in a surge of a new management fashion (e.g., the BMC). The determinants for enhancing the replication of a meme and, consequently, management novelty remain vague. One of the deterrents might be the level of ambiguity associated with a novelty due to limited knowledge about its value (Birkinshaw, Hamel, & Mol, 2008; Røvik, 2011). Management novelties will

continue entering the business as fashions because it is almost impossible to evaluate an idea's outcome in advance without perfect foresight about its value (Jung & Lee, 2016; Scarbrough & Swan, 2001). What managers often rely on is the expected value of a management novelty, which increases with the number of users. Usually, a novelty attracts more users due to its appeal and as a result of memes having been contagious.

Adoption of Management Frameworks

Adopting frameworks has become a craze because it allows organizations to signal that they are progressive (Nohria & Berkley, 1994). A framework comes with benefits and drawbacks (Lambert, García-Dastugue, & Croxton, 2005). Because the alternatives, outcomes, and value of a framework are often not considered, the adoption of a framework requires scant effort and is easily facilitated (Secchi & Gullekson, 2015). The adoption of a management framework is not mainly determined by the rigor of developing frameworks (Iivari, 2007) but by other determinants, such as interorganizational memetic pressures that encourage managers to put a novel management framework into practice (Lawton & Wholey, 1993). After development, the framework's widespread adoption is dependent upon the network effect and its ability to self-reproduce after it had become an intersubjective reality. Without the self-reproduction of a framework, the use in a particular realm would degrade and entail new management frameworks to originate (adapted from Luhmann, 1986). By extending this train of thought, the current study demonstrates how a *trans-disciplinary concept of autopoiesis* applies to management.

Abrahamson (1996) established the term 'management fashion' and developed a stepping stone toward understanding the success of adopted management novelties. He used Meyer and Rowan's (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) explanation of why managers seek appropriate management frameworks: to represent themselves as rational in front of stakeholders. Managers strive for the adoption of successful management frameworks and more or less efficiently use the novelties from the field of management to present themselves as rational. By doing so, the stakeholders perceive them as progressive (Spell, 1999).

When a number of users adopt a management novelty, others are prompted to join the bandwagon. Abrahamson and Rosenkopf (1993) argue that such pressures occur when nonadopters would like to follow early adopters. Analysis of this phenomenon enables the identification of the conditions under which organizations can limit the rise of potential management fashions (Secchi & Gullekson, 2015). Moreover, research has shown that the adoption of a management novelty is usually decoupled from the potential adjustments that might have to be made by the organization that adopts a framework (Scarbrough & Swan, 2001). Finally, when a framework reaches critical mass, efficiency concerns are replaced by social pressures from outside stakeholders, forcing organizations to employ frameworks without considering the adequateness of a framework in a different environment (Ansari, Fiss, & Zajac, 2010).

Management fashions, in a manner analogous to memes, compete for replication and obtainable resources in the broader managerial discourse (Pratt, 2016; Price, 2012). Frameworks are often adopted irrespective of other determinants, potentially causing damage to an organization or impeding the adoption of more suitable frameworks (Benders & Van Veen, 2001; Mamman, 2002). Clark (2004) claimed that management novelties are adopted and spread in two stages: first, the preferences of a novelty's potential consumers are identified, and second, a successful novelty reinforces these preferences, resulting in the consumers' belief that the novelty is at the 'forefront of managerial progress' (Abrahamson, 1996; Benders & Van Veen, 2001; Pratt, 2016). The future adoption continues at a self-sustaining rate as the number of users deem a management (fashion) framework to be a *de facto* standard within their realm. Instead of explaining a framework to others before its use, a framework becomes a self-reproductive communication. Since the use of a framework that has become an intersubjective reality for a particular realm is simplified, its expected value increases.

The Value of Management Frameworks

A framework assists by improving collaboration, disseminating information, and developing and maintaining initiatives, such as training programs (Rodrigues, 1995). Also, a framework can be deemed valuable if it is associated with successful management or improved management performance. The latter remains an important indicator of how valuable frameworks and other management novelties are in, for instance, the realm of the project (Raz & Michael, 2001) or forest managers (Trigkas, Anastopoulos, Papadopoulos, & Lazaridou, 2019). Those two examples indicate the possibility for a management framework to ‘communicate’ beyond the borders of a particular realm. Even though this seems to be in a stark contrast to Luhmann’s diction on ‘operatively closed’ autopoietic systems (Luhmann, 1995), we see this phenomenon as a result of some memes having mutated more substantially and partly as a mere consequence of a two-way exchange process between management and other domains. Managers who adopt the novelties are deemed innovative, progressive, and better regardless of the value that was extracted from a framework (Whitney & Tesone, 2001).

A framework can be deemed a ‘communication.’ As a communication, the purpose of a framework is to reveal the assumptions of other researchers, managers, and consultants, and to enhance the connectedness within a particular (management) realm (Heemskerk, Wilson, & Pavao-Zuckerman, 2003). In a similar vein to Luhmann (1986), we do not refer to the conventional understanding of communication as of information exchange between the messenger and recipient but as of a process that entails mutual engagement among the users in a particular realm. For example, the BMC as a communication in management facilitates business model innovation by, for example, shifting the focus on the elements and dimensions necessary for a re-design. The BMC is a ‘communication’ produced as a part of a particular realm (management society).

Frameworks allow managers and researchers from the realm to abstract information or procedures, notwithstanding the physical distance between them (Martín, Martínez, Martínez Carod, Aranda, & Cechich, 2003). By abstracting information and communicating via a framework, managers and researchers match one mind with another (Duranti, 2010) and contribute to establishing an intersubjective reality for a particular realm (adapted from Postma & Liebl, 2005; Tenaglia & Noonan, 1992). The boundaries of the society are the boundaries of a framework’s role of communication (Luhmann, 1992, 1995), whereas the role of a management framework within another realm can be different. While in the management realm, frameworks in general support mutual engagement, they can be used in other realms as either source of new information or support abstracting information in distant domains.

Since the adoption of management frameworks entails the inclusion of multiple users from a particular realm, the frameworks are deemed ‘genuinely social’ (adapted from Luhmann, 1997). The well-known frameworks are not lingering in one’s own mind; rather, they are an explicit intersubjective reality for an entire realm. As an intersubjective reality, a framework communicates a ‘single system of meaning’ (Luhmann, 1997). It also hinders the efforts, if any, to search for an alternative novelty, and subsequently enhances mutual understanding between the users of a framework.

The value of a certain framework can be magnified when its use entails interactions among people, organizations, and technology and when the framework’s adequacy for overcoming barriers in decision-making can be recognized (Klein & Myers, 1999). The framework can become a common ground for interactions and elaborations. For instance, the more recent discussions about digital transformation have organized around a digital transformation framework (Westerman, Calmédjane, Bonnet, Ferraris, & McAfee, 2011). Its ease of use, due to a matrix layout and the simplicity of ‘dividing the digital transformation’ into three pillars, supports the framework in becoming an intersubjective reality in several realms, such as strategic management and the information systems. The value of the digital transformation framework has increased because

its introduction to new users can now be seamless, and its users are therefore required to use less cognitive resources.

In line with Gibson and Tesone (2001), we assert that management frameworks should be adopted when they fit existing organizational practices. For instance, the BMC framework can only be a useful framework for firms that focus on their business models. Second, prior to the widespread use of a framework, managers, team leaders, and researchers should provide specific, measurable, and attainable outcomes and answers to how a framework can facilitate the accomplishment of a specific approach.

The existence of many frameworks established a need for ‘testing, enhancing, and embellishing’ of these frameworks (Banville & Landry, 1989). However, models for predicting the success of a viral management novelty in its early stages or for forecasting the ‘longevity of a meme’ have not yet been developed (Bauckhage, 2011). As it is difficult to *ex-ante* evaluate the usefulness of a framework (Sturdy, 2004), the answers to the question of the value of frameworks are inadequate (Heusinkveld, Sturdy, & Werr, 2011).

Interestingly, the research on whether the outcomes of management frameworks are decoupled from or translated into practice has so far been inconclusive (Røvik, 2011). Dirk (1999) claims that the purpose of the research is to draw management novelties from ‘confused, vague, and inchoate’ experience and practices. However, the user should determine whether a framework is vaguely conceptualized, how its elements are linked to and based (or not) on empirical groundings, and if the framework overlaps with other (related) management novelties (adapted from Dembek, Singh, & Bhakoo, 2016). In line with Pech and Slade (2004), we argue that managers’ decisions for the adoption of a framework are partly evidence-based; however, the choice is inevitably arbitrary to a certain extent. Abrahamson (1996) discovered that this inclination could be encouraged by fashion-setters, who promote a certain management novelty. Even though fashion-setters play only supporting roles in the success of a management framework, they can induce the network effect and increase the likelihood of a framework achieving its critical mass (Clark, 2004). Fashion-setters persuade managers to believe that some of these novelties are of greater value than existing tools, even though the metrics for defining the ‘newness’ of a management framework are almost nonexistent (Volberda, Van Den Bosch, & Heij, 2013).

Even though the value of management frameworks can be easily elicited if they are well-known, simple, and explainable ‘universally applicable quick-fix solutions’ (Birnbaum, 2000), criteria for evaluating the simplicity and explanatory nature of a framework are subjective and neither absolute nor universal (Granovetter, 1979; Schwartz & Carroll, 2008). Therefore, it is nearly impossible to predict which framework will reach critical mass in the academic or business communities. After it reaches its critical mass, a framework becomes an intersubjective reality, and it is highly likely that it will self-reproduce.

Management Frameworks as Intersubjective Reality

Intersubjectivity can be interpreted ‘as the matching of one person’s mental state with another’s mental state’ (Duranti, 2010). Intersubjectivity activates whenever people’s thoughts and feelings are mutually influenced (Liebowitz & Margolis, 1994). Moreover, intersubjectivity is not only the convergence of these thoughts among multiple participants but, more importantly, convergence among the doers of an action – users of the frameworks who depict ‘interactional and social reality’ (Schegloff, 1992). Intersubjectivity plays an important role in human experience, and it can open new frontiers for understanding how people perceive, adopt, and distribute management novelties. Hereby both Luhmann (1995) and Husserl (1980) emphasize the process of ‘phenomenological reduction,’ especially for researchers from particular realms where strong beliefs are often shared. In a simplified manner, a user from a particular realm can be aware of the nature of the management frameworks only if the user dismisses its firm beliefs, and witnesses the

framework as such. Even though the reduction importantly complements the understanding of how we (should) interpret management novelties, the theory of intersubjectivity cannot completely explain a transmission of shared beliefs between users from a particular realm (Luhmann, 1995). However, by employing the theory of intersubjectivity, one can enhance its understanding of social implications of a shared belief.

In fact, intersubjectivity is a state in which people maintain the premise that their perception of a proper management novelty, namely, a framework, is the same as other people's perception (adapted from Duranti, 2010). In other words, a framework becomes an intersubjective phenomenon when it is known well enough in a particular realm that it can be expected that the other people from that realm are familiar with the framework (e.g., a manager can ask for the BMC analysis with a reasonable assumption that his or her subordinates will know what the BMC is). A management framework becomes a common ground for a particular realm as a result of individuals believing that others share the same beliefs (Husserl, 1970). Since the spread of well-known management frameworks requires shared systems of meaning among participants (Trompenaars, 1995), intersubjectivity is an existential prerequisite that can lead to mutual understanding.

Mutual understanding is not solely an outcome of interactions between the users from a particular realm. The understanding is largely dependent upon the 'appeal' of communications. The frameworks facilitate mutual understanding in a particular realm by communicating a shared system of meaning (Luhmann, 1986). More importantly, mutual understanding reaffirms the 'position' of a well-known framework and the establishment of the existing realms. The issue is that realms such as management society work as 'comprehensive social systems' (Bechmann & Stehr, 2002), meaning the realms are reluctant to accept alternatives to intersubjective realities.

Because users come from different backgrounds, certain frameworks are well known in one realm, while they might not have reached another (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2009). Considering that partly arbitrary frameworks are not 'ontically pre-given' (adapted from Luhmann, 1995), that is, their structures do not exist before memes are collected, a new framework usually enters a different realm in its adapted form. For instance, the Triple-layer BMC (Joyce & Paquin, 2016), an upgrade of the original BMC, continuously attract more users from environmentalism and sustainability.

Intersubjectivity is not an experience limited to within an organization's boundaries since it can influence various interactive participants (Karayiannis & Fullbrook, 2002). This is especially important for frameworks used as a medium for inter-organizational connectedness. Intersubjectivity is what guides a framework as a set of articulated memes to inhabit people within interactions initiated by communications. This process is swift, since memes are considered to be very proactive during social interaction (Shepherd & McKelvey, 2009). Users perceive management frameworks and organize them on the basis of intersubjectivity (Lord, 2012), meaning that the management frameworks become palatable to users in particular realms as the sharing of similar beliefs further increases the adoption among users and, subsequently, the expected value of the frameworks.

The Network Effect

The network effect happens when 'the value of an action is affected by the number of agents taking equivalent actions' (Liebowitz & Margolis, 1994). In management, the network effect occurs when the utility a given user derives from a novelty depends upon the number of other users who are in that particular realm (Minniti, 2005). With the increasing number of existing users of a framework, more new users are enticed into the users' network (Leibenstein, 1950). The network effect drives a framework to gain a sufficient number of users (critical mass) to the point where it becomes an intersubjective reality. Then, well-known frameworks self-reproduce and reinforce their position by establishing a wider network of relations (Maturana & Varela, 1980). For instance, whenever a researcher or lecturer introduces the BMC to the audience, it reproduces

the framework by implying mutual engagement of new users. As the framework is being reproduced and the number of users grows, the network effect is also greater. Further, a framework in a particular realm maintains, grows, and strengthens relations between the users with its self-reproduction.

Ample decisions, including the adoption of management novelties, are to some extent the result of the network effect, mainly due to the ‘network externalities’ (Liebowitz & Margolis, 1994) that the network effect entails. People are thought to be ‘docile’ (Simon, 1993) – having an affinity for information received from other users – which is why users of a framework provide affirmation in a particular realm by clearing the alternative available resources out of one’s mind (Bardone, 2011). Maier (1995) emphasizes the importance of communication when the network effect occurs, enabling users to exchange opinions. The outcome of this mutual process, which infects our thoughts, ideas, and the development or adoption of management frameworks (Liebowitz & Margolis, 1994), is that a framework then represents an intersubjective reality – a common ground for a particular realm.

The network effect is not a linear information transfer but a process of interrelating and sense-making between two or more entities (Jacky, Sue, Harry, & Donald, 1999). The network effect enables information sharing among potential users and promotes additional adoptions (Minniti, 2005). Some users start using a framework not because of the comparison of actual and desired utility but due to their anticipation of the expected utility (Thun, Größler, & Milling, 2000). The network effect results in a higher number of users and, hence, indirectly facilitates the expected value of a framework.

To express it in the words of Luhmann ‘it is the network of communications that ‘produces’ the communications’ (Luhmann, 1992). However, in a similar vein to Luhmann (1992), we believe the value of the communications (frameworks) is context-dependent: by encouraging more people to use the same management framework, its expected value rises, thereby making the framework more viable, more palatable, and less vague in its adoption.

Discussion

The development and adoption of management frameworks have been fostered substantially due to managers’ great efforts to represent themselves as progressive and rational in front of stakeholders (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Managers are believed to have been adopting ‘bold theory,’ ‘breaking new ground,’ and ‘innovative research’ (Arjen, 2015) as management frameworks are sometimes ostensibly at the forefront of novelties. One of the first aims of the current study was to demonstrate how a management framework is developed from memes with greater psychological appeal and curated by the creator. The person-component plays an important role in the identification and collection of floating memes that ‘parasitize’ a particular realm as well as in dissemination of the frameworks.

Memetics teaches us about the time-dependency and relevance of floating management ideas and explains why certain frameworks became psychologically-appealing in particular time periods. Had the internet not enabled the surge of online companies that have been operating in fundamentally different ways than traditional brick-and-mortar ventures (DaSilva & Trkman, 2014), management reality might not have been interested in the BMC and rather focused on a new unit-of-analysis. Ultimately, in a manner similar to Teresa Bolivar-Ramos (Teresa, 2019), our findings support the importance of other determinants in a ‘chain-of-events’ that underlies the nature of well-known management frameworks as of (self-)reproductive elements in particular realms.

Building on prior research (Hill & Westbrook, 1997; Valentin, 2001), our paper highlights the lack of falsifiability. Because well-known frameworks are often designed in a form of matrices and building blocks to convey simplicity and psychological appeal, they have been continuously used as universally-applicable management tools and ‘jointly-social communications’ that imply an

iterated process of mutual engagement of users from a particular realm. Ultimately, we assert that the scholars from the management society try to decipher the value of management frameworks by engaging in a continuous, interrelated process of sense-making.

As researchers, we should be interested in testing rival management novelties to increase their precision. Whether it is called ‘dialectical interrogation’ (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011) or simply ‘questioning,’ the presence of a number of well-known frameworks established the need for a future research to challenge the theoretical grounding, applicability, and value of those frameworks. Memes do not possess the ability to ‘know’ or ‘plan’ the future (Hill & Westbrook, 1997; Pech, 2003a, 2011b; Valentin, 2001) and thus cannot be precise predictors of a framework’s success. In fact, memes tend to be an integral part of management frameworks due to their psychological appeal and ability to transmit ‘practices and rules’ into forms of management novelties (Volberda, Van Den Bosch, & Heij, 2013).

Given the challenges to translate good management ideas into practice (see e.g., Ferguson & Blackman, 2017), this study corroborates how and why a framework becomes a common ground for a management realm. In a broad sense, the purpose of a framework in becoming an intersubjective reality is to communicate a shared system of meaning. However, most frameworks are suggested but do not become widely used (as shown in Figure 1).

Particular realms have been deemed operationally-closed systems in which management novelties are adopted by the individuals belonging to a particular realm. Due to firm boundaries of such realms, self-reproduction of its own elements, namely management frameworks, increases and reinforces their own position and hinders the efforts to develop and adopt an alternative (adapted from Cornelissen & Durand, 2012; Letscher, 1990; Luhmann, 1992). A management framework that finds its way into a different realm in a ‘modified version’ has to, therefore, vary on average more than its counterparts.

Intersubjectivity supports our explanation of the nature of management frameworks by introducing the concept of a realm in which individuals ascribe meaning to objects that can be humanly understood, such as the frameworks (adapted from Husserl, 1970). As users do not make an effort to question its existence and value, a different reality (e.g., an alternative framework) becomes a less desirable choice because the use of the common ground is preferred as it can be assumed that everyone within the realm is familiar with the framework. Only if the adopted framework improved a particular approach such as rational decision-making (Karataş-Özkan & Murphy, 2010) and facilitated organizational goals, such as ‘functional effectiveness’ (Patel, 2017), then the framework would be valuable.

Conclusion

The central concern of this paper was to enhance the understanding of the origins of management frameworks through memetics. We provide an alternative perspective on the adoption and value of management frameworks by theorizing about the network effect, intersubjectivity, and autopoietic social systems.

Our study moves beyond deciphering the introduction and adoption of innovations throughout communication channels (see e.g., Strang & Soule, 1998) and attempts to explain why several management frameworks have spread in business discourse without a clear understanding of the value of a particular framework. We asserted that the expectations about the value of a framework are a result of the critical mass of a framework’s users. The continuous (and increasing) use of a framework is a result of a network effect that reaches a threshold when a framework becomes an intersubjective phenomenon. As an intersubjective phenomenon, a framework starts to self-reproduce and communicates a shared belief to facilitate mutual engagement in a particular realm.

This paper shows that intersubjectivity should be considered an integral part of explanations of the reproduction of management novelties that are socially constructed (Duranti, 2010; Zanotti,

2007). Intersubjectivity allows us to understand how memes leave ‘footprints’ and teaches us why well-known management frameworks will be more palatable if accompanied by mind-compatible memes. Following the idea of people being ‘docile’ (Simon, 1993), we acknowledge the importance of fashion-setters and their role in promoting the management frameworks to prevail over other alternatives. Ultimately, the current study shows that the success of a management novelty ‘is often found from applying all domains of reality, intersubjective, in particular’ (McKeown, 2019).

Acknowledgements. Peter Trkman and Marko Budler acknowledge the support of the Slovenian Research Agency (core research project Business analytics and business models in supply chains, J5-9329). Marko Budler also acknowledges the support of Slovenian Research Agency in young researchers program.

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