

# Disruptive Innovation – A Consolidated Model for the Dissemination of Management Ideas

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## Abstract

There is an ongoing debate about the use and scope of Clayton M. Christensen's idea of disruptive innovation, including the question of whether it is a management buzz phrase or a valuable theory. This discussion considers the general question of how innovation in the field of management theories and concepts finds its way to the different target groups. This conceptual paper combines the different concepts of the creation and dissemination of management trends in a basic framework based on a short review of models for the dissemination of management ideas. This framework allows an analysis of the character of new management ideas like disruptive innovation. By measuring the impact of the theory on the academic sphere using a bibliometric statistic of the number of academic publications on Google scholar and Scopus and a meta-analysis of research papers, we show the significant influence of disruptive innovation beyond pure management fads.

**Keywords:** Disruptive Innovation, Disruption, Management Fashion, Management Trend.

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## 1 Introduction

If we consider the question of whether a management idea is a management theory or a management trend with a long-term influence, or just a short-term management fashion we need a precise idea of the dissemination process of management ideas. There are a number of articles and books describing the timeline of big management trends (Daft, 2000; Skačkusienė, 2022) and there are different models describing various aspects of the dissemination process (Abrahamson, 1996; Fink, 2003; Fink and Knoblach, 2008; Kieser, 1997; Kieser, 1997a; Köhl, 2016; Mazza et al., 2001; Möslin, 2005). An integrative model of the dissemination process has still not been proposed and thus a research gap may be seen to exist. To show the scholarly and practical usefulness of such a model it could be used to analyze the dissemination of a specific management idea. Therefore, we use the integrated model to close a second research gap, the lack of classification of disruptive innovation either as a management theory or a management fashion.

This article first combines the theory of management fashions and the generation and dissemination of management theories and tools into a consolidated model. This is the prerequisite for further analysis of our use-case disruptive innovation to define the distinction between management theory and management fashion. To gain an impression of why some theories are more visible than others and dominate public awareness, it will be necessary to integrate aspects of the communication and publishing business into this model. Furthermore, it is necessary to show

the mechanisms of the life cycle management of theories and publications as well as the role of newsworthiness of theories described by news factors, and the role of agenda-setting. The model will allow us to use data from the success story of disruptive innovation to get a clear impression about the character of the theory or fashion, which in turn will enable us to add some more facts to a still open debate.

The goal of this paper is to show how a brief description of the dissemination process of management ideas could be used to analyze and classify management theories, concepts and trends. It provides as an example a clear positioning of the idea of disruptive innovation on the continuum between valuable management theories and pure management fads or fashions. The paper includes a description of the core value of the idea of disruptive innovation with its usage, and the constraints and limitations of the concept of disruptive innovations from a theoretical and practical perspective. To achieve the goal, it will be necessary to take three main steps to show the usefulness of the dissemination model and to clarify the idea of disruptive innovation and its relation to scholarly research and practical business:

1. Define a conceptual framework of generation and dissemination of management trends and fashions.
2. Show the contribution of the model by analyzing the theory, application in management practices, and scholarly discussion of disruptive innovation using a meta-analysis of scholarly research and bibliometric data of disruptive innovation as a trend or fashion according to the framework represented in our model of step 1.
3. Describe the scope of disruptive innovation as a scholarly field of discussion and a practical tool.

The paper is using the following structure: We analyze the dissemination of management ideas, characterize management theories, trends and fashions and end in a general framework of the dissemination of management ideas and innovations. In the next section the example of disruptive innovation is characterized in its core idea and the dissemination process. The process of dissemination will be analyzed in a separate section using some basic bibliometric tools to get a more detailed impression about the process and to be able to judge whether the idea of disruptive innovation is a fashion or an idea of a long-time value. This result is discussed in detail before we end up in the conclusion about the framework of dissemination of management ideas and the final conclusions about disruptive innovations, before we close with a closer look on the limitations of our paper and the possibilities of complementary research.

## 2 Management as a scholarly dimension and its theories, trends, and fashions

Management as an academic discipline is sometimes criticized as an 'unscientific' topic, and this has prompted a number of discussions – especially in Europe, where a differentiated vocabulary for management topics has been established.

The definitions of management often use descriptive approaches and depend on a theory (Wren and Bedeian, 2020; Miles, 2012). In addition to theories, we also have management trends, which could meet our needs for new input and improvement. Management trends are time-based evolutions of a long-term sustainable character (von Groddeck and Schwarz, 2013), which can be described in three ways: identifying and describing a long-term trend in its time-based evolution (descriptive function); explaining causalities and identifiable descriptors that lead to the trend (explanatory function); or extrapolating the future development of the trend (prognostic function).

There are two different types of management trends (Nicolai and Simon, 2001). The first type describes basic new structures of problem-solving. The second type is conceptual fashions, which could be linked to individual authors or consulting companies. A management fashion or fad is "a social phenomenon that is partly reflected in artifacts such as books, articles, seminars, organization charts, corporate mission statements, and the stories that are told in organizations" (Rüling, 2002, p. 2).

If we analyze the relationship between these two types of management trends, there will be different concepts of fashions that are integrated into an overall trend. The question of whether a theory has the potential to become a trend depends on the *zeitgeist*, but also depends on influencing factors such as the total reach of communication tools, the attractiveness of the rhetoric, the individuality vs. continuity of the accepted theory, the reputation of the authors, and the variety of applications and methodology, which are all potentially relevant to the reception of the theory (Kieser, 2007).

In complementing the structure published by Alfred Kieser (Kieser, 2007), we have to keep in mind that the communication process in the scientific community changed significantly with the use of digital media (and especially social media). This not only affects the scientific communication to the general public, but also presents a challenge for scientific communication within the scientific community. The target group of academic peers is part of a communication strategy, in that they create awareness, which is a relevant success factor for management theories and even more important when it comes to the transfer to practitioners. Especially when creating and covering the narrative, a combination of English-dominated business slang (Rust, 2018) and a restricted code of the mother tongue pervades the professional environment in many regions. We can see two different types of time-based developments (Fink and Knoblach, 2008): There are volatile fashions or trends that change their original content or direction; and stable fashions or trends which keep their direction and core content as intended by the authors.

According to Eric Abrahamson, management fashions can be defined using a kind of "management-fashion-setting process" (Abrahamson, 1996, p. 256), which includes "particular management fashion setters". Another way to separate a management fashion from the trend of management thoughts is to analyze the speech and structure of argumentation used. It is necessary to find the right way of transporting the ideas and messages to the readers and users (Nicolai and Simon, 2001). The merely self-referential approach of pure science in generating new ideas is often limited in reach when it comes to the integration of experiences from practitioners, but the management fashions have their own limitations (e. g., in their wording), which is the other side of the coin. The use of graphics like those in management handbooks (Daft, 2000) shows the development from grounding theories to "recent historical trends" (Ghemawat, 2000).

## **2.1 Frameworks of management trends and fashions and the role of academics, business and consulting (ABC)**

There are different roles for the three sources A (academics), B (business), and C (consulting) when it comes to generating and distributing new management ideas. This know-how, which could be a new theoretical approach, a tool, or simply a trend or fashion, has a strong affinity to product life cycles or fashions that we know from other fields of business. The life cycle of management trends and fashions has become a significant field of research, because it is quite important to understand the development and distribution of management ideas in general.

The first publications on this topic date from the 1960s and 1970s (Woodward, 1965; Rumelt, 1974; Mintzberg, 1979), but in the early 1980s the boom of management knowledge began. When aggregating the different management ideas of this time, there is often speculation about whether

it really was the need for new ideas or rather the growing number of scholars following the principle of 'publish or perish' which led to this significant growth of new management concepts.

In the 1990s, a number of publications were dedicated to different target groups in academia, practice, or intermediaries like consultants (Eccles and Nohria, 1992; Shapiro, 1995). Many ideas were developed which were often supported by the cooperation of the authors with the business and management press (Alvarez and Mazza, 1997). Ruling (2002) shows that it is not easy to define management fashion in a way that is relevant enough to cover the scientific demands. Instead of management fashion, he uses the expression "popular management concepts", but this label does not cover the core problem of the time-based relevance of certain topics. If we define management fashions as "relatively transitory collective beliefs, disseminated by the discourse of management knowledge entrepreneurs that a management technique is at the forefront of rational management progress" (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999, p. 709), there are six different models to describe the process of production and distribution of management fashions – or, to be less pejorative, management concepts – which can be clustered into three main blocks (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Models of Generation and Dissemination of Management Trends or Fashions

Model	Authors	Core Idea
<b>Theories of the flow of management ideas</b>		
Distribution of management fashions	Kühl, 2016	Generalization of an originally focused idea; "reframing", "re-XYing"; if it fails, there are excuses (people did not use the tools the right way). In the following years even more books are published with titles like "10 steps to . . ."
Arena of management fashion	Kieser, 1997; Kieser, 1997a	"Management fashion is conceptualized as forming an arena (. . .). The participants can achieve their individual goals of highest possible profit, public image, power or career by widening the arena through luring further participants into it." (Kieser, 1997a, p. 57)
Extended life cycle model	Mazza et al., 2001; Fink, 2003; Fink and Knoblach, 2008	New ideas start as a speculative concept which could develop into a pacemaker concept. They become a key concept and are later a base concept if the ideas of the concept are common knowledge, which will require a relaunch.
<b>Theories about actors generating and distributing management ideas</b>		
Management fashion market	Abrahamson, 1996; Ruling, 2002; Möslin, 2005	Managers are the demand side business schools (representing field a, academics), consultants (representing field c) and 'gurus' are the supply side. The mass media are an original part of management fashions.

Model	Authors	Core Idea
Rational model	Mazza et al., 2001; Nicolai, 2002; Whitley, 1984, 1984a	The ABC system dominates the value chain, publishing and consulting are seen as diffusers, and the management as an acting entity is focused on consuming.
Interaction model	Huff, 2002; Möslin 2005	Firms invest in the in-house production of management knowledge (developing managers and high potentials), so level B (business, management) is not just consuming.
<b>Theories about supporting systems</b>		
Book publishing industry	Mazza et al., 2001; Schönstedt and Breyer-Mayländer, 2010; Fink and Knoblach, 2003	Life cycle management of the book industry, according to the typical development of scientific best or long sellers in coordination with the diffusion processes of ideas and tools.
Multiplicators and mass media (Lippmann, 1922; Kepplinger and Bastian, 2000; Pollock and Rindova, 2003; Wehling, 2016; Kjær and Blach-Ørsten, 2020; Pallas and Fredriksson, 2013; Wonneberger and Jacobs, 2016; Waldherr, 2012)	Kepplinger, 2008; Carroll and McCombs, 2003; Denner et al., 2018; Lombard et al., 2002; Staw and Epstein, 2000; Denner et al., 2021	'News factors' describing the characteristics of newsworthiness; agenda-setting; personification of abstract management topics, the CEO as a representation of new ideas and methods, the VIP factor, framing to create the right labeling; the field-level theory of interaction between mass media and organizations (firms).
Management 'gurus'	Kieser, 1997; Witzel, 2018; Chaharbaghi and Newman, 2007	Gurus could be part of each segment of the ABC system (professors, consultants, business people).

## 2.2 Management fashions as an example of ideas with limited value

Alfred Kieser draws different conclusions about how to deal with management fashions (Kieser, 1997). First, be cautious and be aware of exaggerations related to the success stories about the new management ideas. Second, resist all the myths and legends and reduce their narratives to the core content of domination rules and principles. Usually, you will recognize them quite well and see the relabeling process. Third, before you start a reorganizing process in which modern management ideas or trendy management tools are used, make sure to identify which tools are useful for your company.

In contrast to Kieser's point of view, there are also positive interpretations of management fashions, arguing that a fashion can be seen as something that "provides direction" (Corvellec and Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2021). Barbara Czarniawska, an established expert with a positive attitude toward management fashions, sees in them a possibility to rejuvenate and update the institutional order. "Fashion operates at institutional fringes. Its variety is limited by the 'iron cage' of existing institutions" "fashion is engaged in a constant subversion of the existing institutional order, gnawing ant-like at its bars" (Czarniawska, 2009, p. 428).

Problems arise if the management concept is used without knowledge of its limitations and context of usage. The protagonists of new management concepts and methods often tend to question the statements of previous periods and authors (Monin, 2004). Some scholars and

practitioners of evidence-based management do not believe in the use of the big management theories because in their view such use carries the risk of glorifying a model that was helpful at best under very special historical circumstances. They criticize the tradition of following one big idea (Brodbeck, 2008) or theory, and of using old models and stories to tackle actual challenges.

When it comes to the comparison of business and management impulses from business schools representing the academic section (the “A” in the ABC system) and practitioners representing the business section (the “B”), sometimes including the practical approaches of consultants (the “C”), there could be divergence, convergence (mutual influence), or independence (stability). The further development could also lead to a growing similarity (either by academics or practitioners) (Barley et al., 1988).

To make the situation more complex, the development and evolution of management ideas in the sense of trends and tools could diverge in the international context. Business schools, researchers and consultants are all "carriers of knowledge" in the convergence and divergence of management knowledge across countries, industries, among others (Alvarez, 1998). Still others have developed their own theoretical contributions for explaining the social mechanisms which contribute to the emergence, spreading and disappearance of management knowledge over time (Kieser, 1997a; Huczynski, 1993). Finally, the criticism of fads and fashions, and the role of different actors, and their egoistic (or even narcissistic) motivation should be seen in the context of the value each model or tool creates in the specific context.

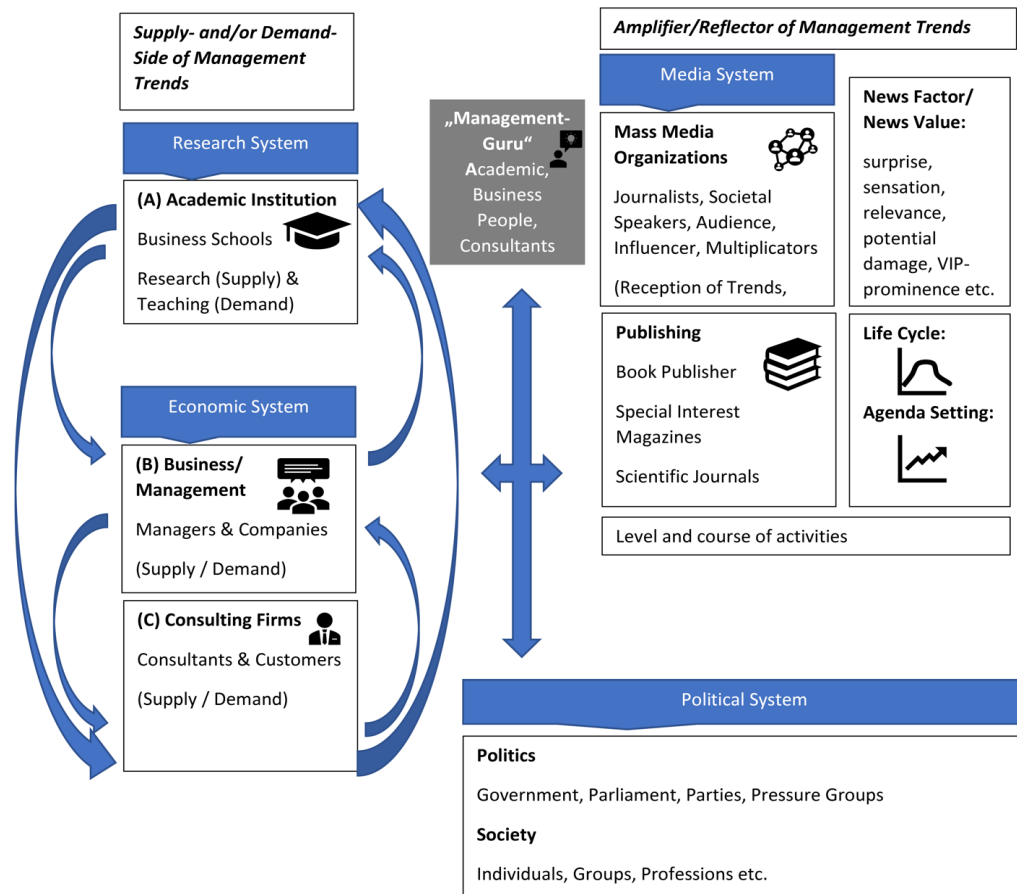
### 2.3 Result – a new framework for management trends

According to Hebeisen (1999), we could use the ABC definition to describe the three main sources of management knowledge. When we focus on these three main actors, the question remains of how they will interact, because there obviously is an interdependency and interaction among the three. In the classic approaches, a strong segmentation exists between producing instances, diffusing instances, and the role of the well-trained consumer (Mazza et al., 2001). This idea of a classic value chain in which practitioners have only the role of consumer has been criticized in different contexts. "Most current approaches conceive of managers as passive and rather powerless consumers of knowledge.

In the framework (Fig. 1) we have implemented the ABC system on the left side, where each of the actors could be on the supply side as an inventor of a new management concept or on the demand side as a consumer of new management concepts which could be used, for example, in teaching, daily business, or consulting. The other actors on the right side of the chart amplify or reflect the new trends. For example, gurus recruited from the ABC system personalize the new management concept and deliver the platform for extended news coverage by the mass media, because personalization and VIP prominence are both among the news factors. All these activities coordinated with the agenda-setting of the mass media correspond with the lifecycle management of book publishers and the choice of the innovators to promote their ideas in a more scientific context (scientific journal) or an applied context (special interest magazines such as business journals). The whole process is embedded in the political context of an individual society.

## 3 The case of “disruptive innovation”: Generation and dissemination of a management idea

Clayton M. Christensen’s theory of disruptive innovation is one of the most successful academic management theories (King and Baatartogtokh, 2015). Especially in business practice, but also in



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework for the generation and dissemination of management trends (own illustration).

scholarly debates, there is almost no discussion about the strategic orientation of firms (Gularso et al., 2020) and business units, about new ventures or entrepreneurship (Mitra and Chunlin, 2010; Leick, 2020; Socorro Márquez and Reyes Ortiz, 2021), or especially about the challenges of digital transformation (Neirotti and Pesce, 2019; Margherita and Braccini, 2021; Lanzolla et al., 2021; Leick et al., 2021), without a reference to disruption. This has led to the impression that disruption is also a buzzword and the theory itself has been criticized for having significant weaknesses (Lepore, 2014), which led to a public debate in various professional publications such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Financial Times* and *Business Week* (Weeks, 2015). While the open debate has calmed down, especially since Clayton M. Christensen's death in 2020, there is still an argument about whether or not the theory of disruptive innovation is a fad.

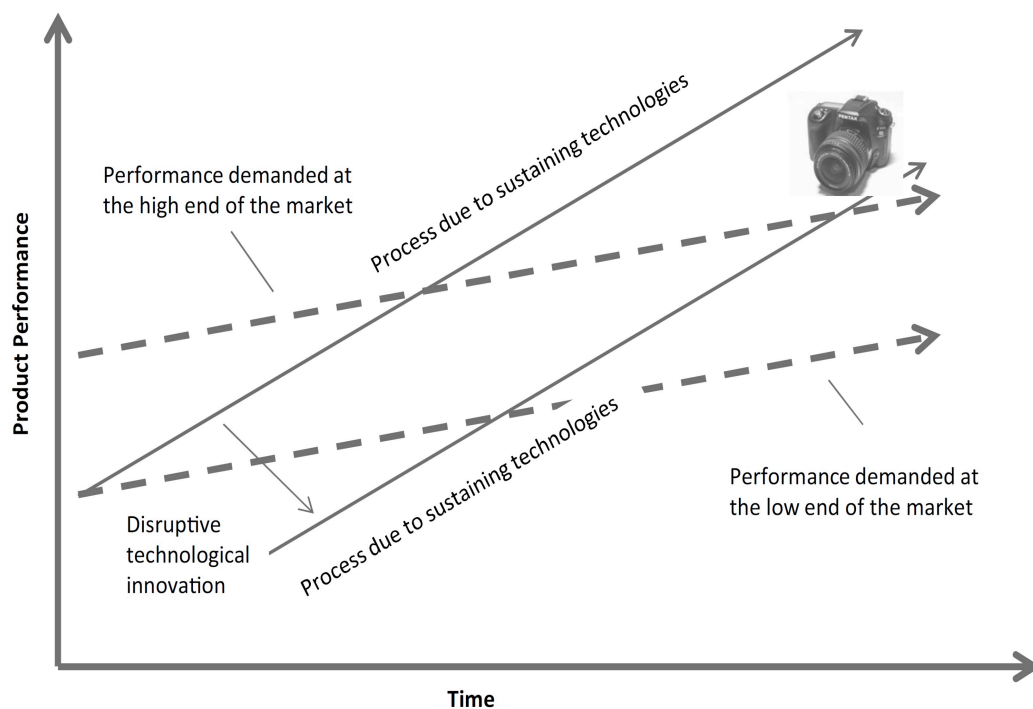
In 1997, Clayton M. Christensen published his book "The Innovator's Dilemma" (Christensen, 1997), which could be seen as the starting point for the development of the idea of disruption in the field of business and economy. Of course, disruption did not start in 1997.

If we analyze the historical background, the genuine idea of thinking and talking about situations where the further development of technologies, markets, organizations and products is not an ongoing stream of incremental changes, but development with a clear distinction from the past. Disruption is not an idea which occurred in the 1990s when analyzing the disk drive industry. There were several earlier authors, such as Joseph A. Schumpeter, who in 1942 discussed creative destruction by focusing on "new technology" which would lead to a new competition "which

commands a decisive cost or quality advantage, and which strikes not at the margin of profits and the output of existing firms but at their very lives” (Schumpeter, 1942). Firms are often “resource conservators” (Antonelli, 2022) instead of innovators. The relevance of technology-based innovation in the information and communication technology section can be proved by historical projections (David, 1990; David and Wright, 1999). These innovations also influence economic growth in general as well as society and the labor market (Dosi and Virgillito, 2019; Dosi and Nelson, 2010).

### 3.1 Disruptive innovation – the idea in brief

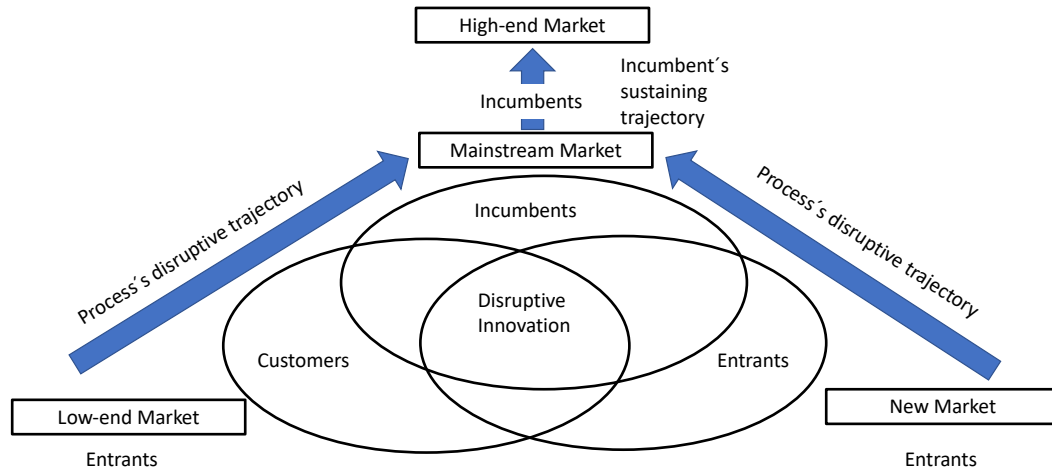
In their 1994 article for the Harvard Business Review “Disruptive Technologies: Catching the Wave” published in the January/February edition of 1995, Joseph L. Bower and Clayton M. Christensen pointed out that established companies “must beware of ignoring new technologies that don’t initially meet the needs of their mainstream customers” (Bower and Christensen, 1995, p. 44). The original idea of disruptive innovation was developed against the background of technology management. They explained this development with reference to Christensen’s favorite industry, the disk drive industry, but we can easily find multiple other examples where the theory is convincing. The core idea of disruptive technologies leading to a disruptive change of markets is characterized by the situation of a new technology or a combination of technologies entering the scene, leading to new methods (e. g., for production). Initially, the new technology is not on the quality level of the established technologies but has another structure and could potentially overtake the existing methods in terms of quality, costs, or other significant parameters of success. As an example, digital photographs at the beginning of their innovation cycle were not as good as conventional ones, but later had the potential to be integrated into social media such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook or WhatsApp, leading to a complete crash of the conventional market and a transformation of the market of photo hardware and photography as a service function (Fig.2).



**Figure 2.** Disruptive changes in the example of digital photographs (Breyer-Mayländer, 2017, p. 34)



The main aspects of the core idea of disruptive innovations are two main directions of development (Fig. 3). The incumbents typically neglect the low end of the market, which could be a direction for the new competitor and its technology (the low-end-foothold), or it could be a completely new market that did not exist before, e. g. the introduction of personal copiers for individuals and small organizations as a new market segment for Xerox and its competitors (Christensen et al., 2015).



**Figure 3.** Definition of disruptive innovation (Martínez-Vergara and Valls-Pasola, 2021).

If we look for other famous examples to gain an impression of the idea of disruptive innovations, we could consider the media business, where we find disruptive effects in multiple situations. Printed newspapers lost their ad revenues because classifieds like jobs or real estate offers, which are established to create a 1:1 contact between offers and demand, are much better integrated in web portals. The invention of mp3 coding for music by the Fraunhofer Institute for Integrated Circuits led to a dismantling of status-quo CD conceptions (Fraunhofer Institute for Integrated Circuits, 2022). The technology disrupted the whole industry and significantly changed the revenue streams for the major and independent labels. The cell phone market and the change from mobiles to smartphones is another well-known example of a disruptive technology during recent years, but it was not predicted by Christensen when he published his ideas to a broader public. “The iPhone is a sustaining technology relative to Nokia.” “It's not [truly] disruptive...” was Christensen’s forecast in an interview with Business Week (McGregor, 2007).

### 3.2 The expansion to a general idea

There are more than 1,600 publications on Google Scholar today using the combination “disruption era” published in the years 2012-2021, which shows the impact of the idea of disruption, as does the fact that for the expression “disruption management” we could find 5,700 publications in the same period. It seems to be a very common idea with an unusual impact.

Furthermore, the way the core theory has expanded from the area of technology management, was not a sudden change but rather a smooth process. The fact that the best performing firms could easily get thrown out of the market by underestimating disruptive technologies was a significant change to the concept of firms optimizing their existing business, as was mentioned in the work of Peters and Waterman in the 1980s (Peters and Waterman, 1982). The idea of differentiating between efficiency-oriented management and effectivity-oriented leadership is combined with the significant idea of identifying disruptive technologies and their relevance for different markets (Bower and Christensen, 1995), as well as organizing a disruptive organization

as an independent one, where implementation will not be negatively influenced by the actors of the established business (Bower and Christensen, 1995). In this part of the idea of disruptive innovations based on disruptive technologies we can find some general theoretical principles which fit well into the puzzle of other well-recommended theories, for example Michael E. Porter's Five Forces (Porter, 1985). It is therefore not surprising that co-citation analyses show how close Porter's idea is to the development of the disruptive paradigm (Shu et al., 2019). It is usually not an actor in the established market who disrupts an industry. It was Steve Jobs who wanted to sell hardware like the iPod, but had no stakes in the music industry, and he disrupted this industry by promoting iTunes. The major labels wanted to protect their market and therefore made no effort to start implementing single-track downloads. However, Apple was using the potential of mp3 to change the distribution system of music and to redesign the business and revenue model, a disruptive process, which is still ongoing (Kask and Öberg, 2019).

Keeping the focus of a theory primarily based on technology management, it was Clayton Christensen himself who expanded the core domain of disk drives and added new technological fields such as excavating equipment and steel production (Christensen, 1997), semiconductors (Christensen, 2006), computers (Christensen, 1997) retailing (Christensen and Tedlow, 2000), motorcycles and cars (Christensen and Raynor, 2003), management education (Christensen et al., 2003) cardiovascular surgery (Christensen et al., 2009), management consulting (Christensen et al., 2013), and cameras (Christensen, 2006; Christensen et al., 2018). Thus, there was a good deal of domain expansion inherent in Christensen's own scholarly work.

Another 'movement' started when disruptive innovation was separated from technology management and was moved to a general idea of disruptive innovation by being connected to the field of business model innovation and development ("a business model problem") (Christensen, 2006, p. 48). This led to a change of meaning of 'disruption' in business contexts, starting with the three different tracks of 'disruptive technology' (the original main path), 'disruptive innovation' and 'disruptive business model' (Petzold et al., 2019).

### 3.3 Critique and discussion

The mixture of disruptive technological innovation (the basis theory) with the disruptive business model and disruptive product innovation was the basis of the criticism by Constantinos Markides (2006), who showed the differences between the three forms of innovation and demanded a finer distinction between the concepts for the further advancement of the disruptive theory of innovation (Markides, 2006).

Another source of criticism was the selection of cases used in Christensen's original work, which were called "murky" and "handpicked" (Lepore, 2014), while others justified this method of academic research (Weeks, 2015).

Most readers will know the bon mot, alleged to be of Danish origin, that "it is very difficult to predict – especially the future" (Steincke, 1948, p. 227). The quality of predictions is another area where Christensen is criticized. His predictions relating to future developments of technologies, products, and markets did not always come true. Approaches such as algorithms to predict the success of startups, as developed by Thomas Thurston, did not solve this problem (Gobble, 2015). It is difficult to generate precise ex ante predictions based on the methodology of disruptive innovation, but it could be combined with other methods like the Delphi technique to generate clearer predictions about future perspectives (Danneels, 2004). Another point of criticism concerns the exactness of the definitions and the field in which the theory and its practical implications are relevant. It is "not entirely clear what is the core idea and what is peripheral" (Zuckerman, 2016, p. 29).

## 4 The dissemination process of our example “disruptive innovation” – is it a valuable theory or just a fashion?

To gain a more sophisticated evaluation of the basic ideas of Christensen’s early publications and the core ideas of disruptive innovation, we can use the model of Figure 1 and match it with the different analytical results and parameters of the case of disruption.

### 4.1 Methodology in brief

There are number of methods which could be used to reflect the ideas of the analytical approach of our model of dissemination. We focused on a small mix-method approach in this section and we invite the reader to refer to some other methodological possibilities in section 6 “Conclusion“. In paragraph 4.2 we start with the meta-analysis of scholarly descriptions of dissemination process of disruptive innovation and then use the model of Kieser (1997) to show the development of our case. After categorizing the dissemination process, we continue with paragraph 4.3, where we use a variety of bibliometric data to give an impression of the dissemination curve of disruptive innovation. We first analyze the number of international publications in “Google Scholar” and “Scopus” which are dealing with disruptive innovation and compare the dissemination with the idea of “Lean Startup“. After this first step, we compare the results of the international level with a closer look on the German speaking publications, where disruption has been launched as a vocabulary by the idea of disruptive innovation.

### 4.2 Phases of the creation and dissemination of ‘disruptive innovation’

In the last ten years, there have been various approaches to analyzing the dissemination of disruptive innovation. The analysis of co-citing allows the generation of streams of scholarly discussions to build tag clouds and identify related scholars or authors (Kowamoto and Spers, 2019). The analysis of Shu et al. (2019) defines three stages of the dissemination of disruptive innovation: the pre-paradigm period (1994-2000), the paradigm-building period (2001-2007) and the paradigm-legitimizing period (2007-2014). The pre-paradigm period offers a picture of the different reflections on disruptive innovation based on “industrial economics, organizational strategy and organization behavior theory” (Shu et al., 2019, p. 888). In the following paradigm-building period, there is a significant change, with a distinction between practical and theory-oriented works. Christensen (1997) dominates the practice approach and also part of the new stream of market-orientation (Bower and Christensen, 1995). The second path, the field of theory, can be divided into two main subcategories: the strategy-oriented discussion, which is not directly linked to Christensen but to authors such as Teece et al. (1997), and the research core of the former organization theory based on “a distinctive view on technology disruption and incumbents’ failure” (Shu et al., 2019, p. 889), represented by authors such as Chandy and Tellis (1998, 2000). The last stage, the paradigm-legitimizing period, is characterized as “specialized and professionalized” (Shu et al., 2019, p. 890), and the discussion is now integrated in research streams of marketing and strategy, while the perspective of technology management is still continuing.

**Table 2.** Matching of ‘disruptive innovation’ with Kieser’s 10 rules of management fashions.

Kieser’s 10 general rules for management fashions	Christensen’s realization in the context of “disruptive innovation”
The fashion identifies one factor as the most crucial one for (further and ongoing) success.	Christensen’s theory originally focused on the role of technology in the innovation process (disruptive technologies) (Markides, 2006).
The new principles of a fashion are shown as an unavoidable necessity to avoid dangers, which are usually the same dangers as those which had already been described at the launch of the previous fashion.	This was a problem in Christensen’s ideas, when dangers became quite generic with a broadening of the theory to a general disruptive innovation in the context of business models (Carlborg et al., 2021). Christensen’s ideas became “part of the zeitgeist” (Gobble, 2016).
The new management ideas of a fashion are linked to core values like customer satisfaction or innovativeness of the company, which cannot be questioned.	In Christensen’s case the technological lifecycle or the product lifecycle is connected with the concept of competitive advantages (Dowling and Hüsigg, 2007).
The personification of success with examples of the national environment of the target group or readers is one of the success factors of a new management narrative of fashions.	Fits with Christensen’s description of disc-drives by discussing examples of Seagate, IBM, Conner and Quantum (Bowers and Christensen, 1995), eBay, Oracle, and Microsoft (King and Baatartogtokh, 2015) or fields like the market for Executive Education (Christensen, 1997).
Usually, the previous principles of success are still defined in fashions to be relevant, which is a kind of relief to the managers.	Christensen’s core ideas were based on the technological view, but he integrated in his narrative various apologetic phrases to the traditional companies. “A company’s revenue and cost structures play a critical role in the way it evaluates proposed technological innovations” (Bower and Christensen, 1995, p. 47).
To demonstrate the superiority of the new management principles as a result of the management trend and to make sure that they fit in various contexts, management fashions are often management theories or management tools which contain a clever combination of simplicity and ambiguity.	The ambiguity in the case of disruptive innovation results from the distinction between disruptive and non-disruptive technologies, which was transferred to the distinction between disruptive and non-disruptive innovations, business models etc. (Trimi and Berbegal-Mirabent, 2012).
By pointing out that the concept is difficult to implement, the new management fashions could not always have the full impact.	This could be seen in interpretations of Christensen’s different publications. Critics emphasized when describing his wrong forecast of failure for the Apple iPhone (Weeks, 2015).
To achieve a stronger impact of the new trend or fashion, it is necessary to combine the ideas with systematic empirical research. This has been a critical aspect even in such a systematically developed work based on scholarly work.	This has been part of the criticism of Christensen’s theory such as when Jill Lepore complained about the lack of consistency (“set of handpicked case studies”) while others saw the use of non-peer reviewed articles as a problem (Weeks, 2015).

Kieser's 10 general rules for management fashions	Christensen's realization in the context of "disruptive innovation"
To create a real bestseller out of the management idea, the book has to be written using a vocabulary without limitations.	Christensen's language is not the most communicative and is far from being non-restrictive. However, his ability to choose well-known examples in combination with daily media like the Harvard Business Review is an important success factor.
To have the full impact of new ideas as management fashions, the new published ideas should be compatible with the "spirit of today's managers" and meet the zeitgeist.	The fit into current discussions and the zeitgeist is one of the most interesting variables of the successful rollout of the idea of disruption.

One approach to start matching the dissemination of the ideas of disruptive innovation with the ideal model of management fashions could be the use of Kieser's ten steps (Kieser, 1997; Kieser, 1997a). Kieser (1997) postulated the dissemination of management fashions and compared this with the real situation of disruptive innovation (Tab. 2).

According to this short summary of the ideal management trend or fashion cycle applied to the case of disruptive innovation, there is a strong indication of parallels between the real development of the dissemination of disruptive innovation and the theoretical model of the generation and dissemination of management trends or fashions (Fig. 1), which should be evaluated by quantitative data.

### 4.3 Indicators for the role of life cycles and public agenda-setting

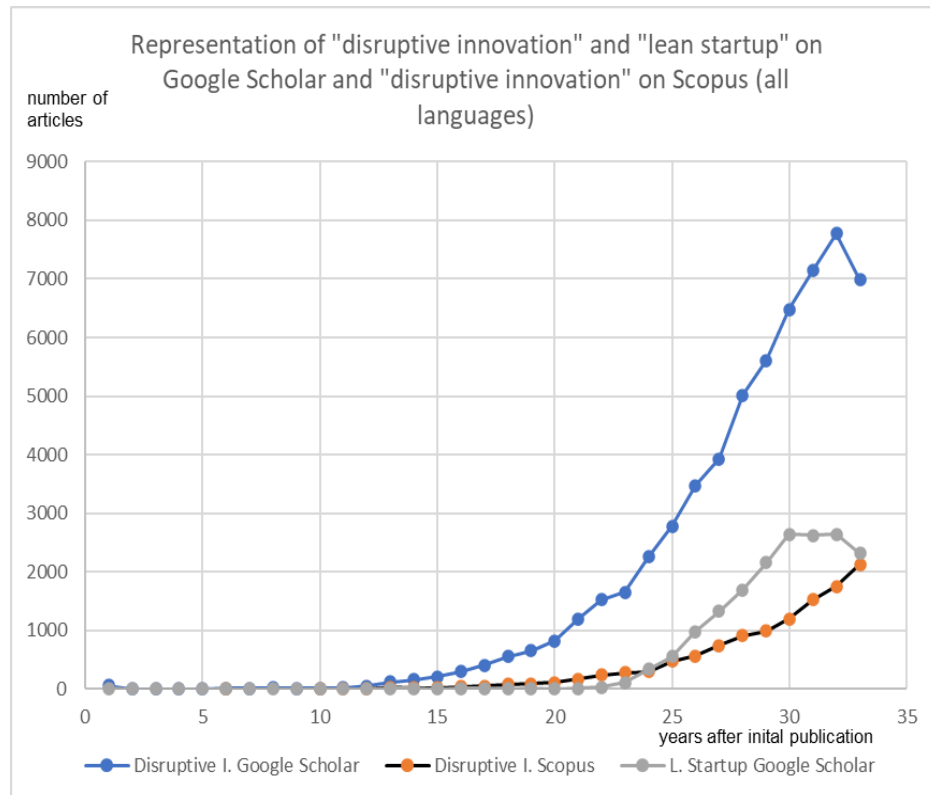
The development of disruptive innovation as a management trend can also be measured by quantification of publications where we can see a continuing increase of academic articles (citing the foundational work) starting in 1999, with a peak in 2015, and an exponential growth of popular press articles mentioning disruption terminology (Christensen et al., 2018). This shows the two directions we have to keep in mind if we match the numbers with the assumptions and hypotheses inherent to the model of dissemination of management fashions.

By using additional data, we can describe the pre-paradigm period, the paradigm-building and the paradigm-legitimizing period with another timeline. When we analyze the academic recognition of disruption, we can conduct a short check on the number of publications before the launch of Clayton M. Christensen's book. To achieve a more specific result, we focus on the expression "disruptive innovation", which omits the number of hits referring to disruption in other contexts such as medicine.

We can count 139 publications between 1990 and 1996 which are referenced by Google Scholar (2 December 2021), 15 references in the year 1997, including the book in question and some meta-references. The dynamic extension of the expression can be shown by checking the data between 1900 and 2020 (Fig. 4).

We can find in the data that the book, when launched, did not immediately influence the numbers, which could be because there is always a certain delay before immediately accepted new ideas can be found in scientific papers. But this also shows that ideas need a certain environment, which in this case is the discussion of digital transformation in general.

Compared to other digital innovation constructs such as the "lean startup" an idea of Eric Ries first published in 2011 (Fig. 5), it took significantly longer to reach a significant resonance. While "lean startup" shows more than 500 references to the publication of the topic two years after the main book publication, "disruptive innovation" needed nine years to generate more than



**Figure 4.** References to 'disruptive innovation' and 'Lean Startup' by Google Scholar and Scopus (own illustration).

500 references a year. One explanation for this slow growth in the first years which led to a continuous growth is the background of digital transformation. The change from industrial society to information society as a variation of postindustrial society is the remarkable background of a fundamental change (Wirtz, 2019), affecting not only companies and organizations, but the whole society. When Eric Ries published his book about lean startups in 2011, describing startups as "a human institution designed to create new products and services under conditions of extreme uncertainty" (Ries, 2011, p. 8), it fitted the context of this development. Google Scholar is not very differentiated when it comes to the question of which source will be seen as a reliable scientific one; Google Scholar tends to show more documents than other databases such as Web of Science (Harzing, 2020) or Scopus. Checking those data (Fig. 4) reveals a similar trend, and the ratio between Google Scholar and Scopus is the one we should expect from other surveys in information science when documents of the management section are analyzed (Gantman and Dabós, 2018). The data in the graph show the congruency to the life cycle in book publishing, which we already explained in the model of management trends. A management trend is different from a mere fashion, which is not able to grow after a period of 25 years but tends to implode after two to five years.

### The role of multipliers and the generalization of an idea

The use of the term 'disruptive technology' was soon transferred to verbal concepts such as 'disruptive innovation' (positive connotation) or later 'disruptive change' (sometimes with a negative connotation in terms of disruption in the labor market, including job loss) (Raj et al., 2019), which makes it necessary to try to recapitulate on whether the general discussion of

disruption could have been triggered by Christensen's ideas. In this case, it is not only a question of which piece of information is put on the Internet and represented in the academic field, but also what the public is searching for. When we use the search questions of Google Trends, we get an impression of search strategies and, in the next step, an impression of the relevance and meaning of different topics during different time slots. The search mainly covers North America, Europe and parts of Asia (e. g. Japan), where Google has a dominating market share in the search engine market. This analysis shows relations between different keyword concepts. The analysis shows a peak of search requests in spring 2018, which we can try to analyze by having a detailed look at the different international discussions of that year. What could be the reason for the peak shown by the Google tool between 25 February and 3 March 2018? During this period, an Accenture campaign promoted the results of one of their surveys with the press release on 26 February 2018: "Nearly Two-Thirds of Large Companies Globally Face High Levels of Industry Disruption, Accenture Study Finds" (Accenture, 2018). The results were published in Barcelona on the first day of the Mobile World Congress attended by 107,000 visitors from 205 countries and about 3,900 journalists. This event had a great impact on the international news stream during this time (GSMA, 2018). The effectiveness of this event shows that the theory of agenda-setting by consulting companies can be easily demonstrated even with rudimentary tools of research. We see an assumption that consulting companies, either as creators or as multipliers of new management thoughts (complex management theories or management tools), could play a crucial part in the promotion of management ideas.

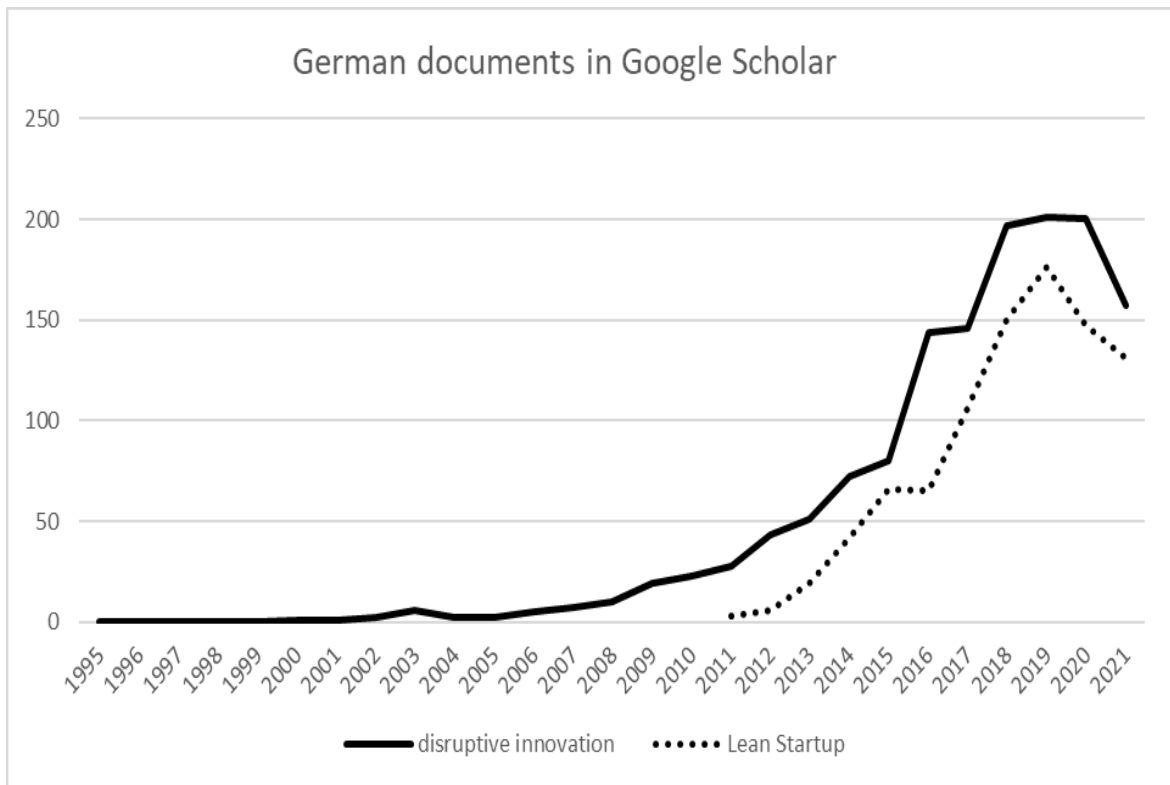
#### **Bibliographic data in German language area**

To get a clear idea of the broad usage of the idea of disruption without interferences with the use of 'vocabulary' in its undefined sense as a common word of the English language, we use a cultural environment where the terms 'disruption', 'disruptive' or 'disruptor' are only linked to the idea of disruptive innovation. Therefore, we have an analysis based on the German language, where there is no general meaning of the word 'disrupt' that could interfere with our analysis.

The repetition of the experiment with Google Scholar and Scopus had to be reduced to Google Scholar (Fig. 5), because the results of Scopus, when limited to German as the document language, offered only seven documents. We can see in the data of Google Scholar, that the general development of the dissemination curve fits the data of the international findings in fig. 4.

#### **4.4 Disruption as a general framework**

The public discussion about "disruption" shows that the theory grounded in technology management was transformed into a general "frame". As shown in the short description of the model for the generation and dissemination of management trends, we always have a framing and reframing effect by focusing on theories and observations. Frames are not only part of the political discussion about different labels (Wehling, 2016); they are "schemata of interpretation", creating a "primary framework", which "allows its user to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its terms, which help people" (Goffmann, 1974, p. 21). Kumaraswamy et al. (2018) emphasize that these frames are helpful in the case of disruptive innovation to explain the idea of the technological innovation (Dosi, 1982; Garud and Rappa, 1994). They are still relevant in the original context of technology and innovation management (Callaghan, 2018; Cillo et al., 2019), but are nowadays also relevant in many other contexts of scholarly discussion of daily life related to society, politics, and economy (Hilb, 2021). People, when confronted with an alarming piece of news in their personal news stream for example, as happened with the press release by Accenture which we mentioned above, do not refer in a



**Figure 5.** German language references to “disruptive innovation” and “Lean Startup” by Google Scholar (own illustration).

sophisticated way to the theory of disruptive technologies or Clayton M. Christensen as an author. They see and feel the concept of disruption as a meme of sudden failure, or loss of structures, stability and even jobs.

## 5 Scope of disruptive innovation from a scholarly and practical point of view

To complete the view on the idea of disruptive innovation as a theory and not a shortcoming trend or a fashion, it is useful to refocus the discussion about disruption in general on the value of the theory of disruptive innovation in order to support the ongoing academic discussion and the transfer to practitioners in business.

### 5.1 Ambiguity

Christensen was concerned about the broad effect his theory of disruption could exert if used as a general frame for radical change with “previously successful incumbents facing difficulties or going out of business” (Christensen et al., 2018, p. 1044). On the other hand, in addition to details of theoretical grounding, this framework effect delivered a common vocabulary that is not only used in business or economic contexts, but also provides an idea of necessary change in many situations in the political or social environment. We talk about the disruption of industries (Horvat et al., 2018) to characterize not only digital transformation scenarios (Klus and Müller, 2020), but also traditional industries and businesses (Ferasso et al., 2017; Carlborg et al., 2019).



## 5.2 Risks

Even if the tools cover the core idea of a theory, we still have to manage the scope of their application. The core problem with new management ideas and tools is exemplified in the statement, “I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail”, which is credited to Abraham Maslow (Maslow, 1966, pp. 15). People overestimate the value of familiar tools, therefore stretch their area of use and overstep their limitations and constraints. In the case of disruption, we can see this problem in the path of discussion, where disruptive innovation is criticized as not being precisely defined, and for being used in areas for which it was not designed. “Unfortunately, disruption theory is in danger of becoming a victim of its own success” (Christensen et al., 2015, p. 46). Perhaps this disadvantage of a well-known and widely accepted theory is also its greatest advantage.

Christensen did not value the fact that as a result of the overwhelming success of the idea of disruptive innovation in his last years we have a common language, a frame including theories and metaphors to describe the fundamental change that could be necessary in an organization with the need for a disruptive innovation.

Another source of disappointment could result from wrong expectations, using the theory as a magic silver bullet to solve managerial strategic problems or leadership challenges through revolutionary change of organizations.

## 5.3 Opportunities

On the other hand, there are opportunities for the usage and development of the idea of disruptive innovation. The demand of Markides (2006) to find finer categories and to differentiate between technological, business model, and product innovation could be seen as a chance to understand further useful implications of the basic theory. The four-stage disruption matrix of Chakunnath and Panneerselvam (2022) is just one example of how a differentiation between categories such as “product/services”, “customer segments”, “market share”, and “business model” could be a promising path for further development and differentiation. There are frameworks to check the disruptive potential of technologies, business models or even product categories (Rascool et al., 2018). In the field of operationalization, disruptive innovation could offer valuable guidance in specific organizational developments or business functions (Dan and Chieh, 2008).

An effect of disruptive innovation that we can already observe and analyze is the development of a disruptive ecosystem of management tools. The agile movement (Agile Manifesto, 2001), with its development processes and the lean startup principle following the ideas of Eric Ries (2011), is connected with the idea of disruptive technologies and innovations and the need for radical changes in business models. Even in entrepreneurship, it has replaced the traditional discussion about business plans, which had significant disadvantages when subject to a reality check (Blank, 2018) by the agile development principle, the integration of customer feedback, and a framework for business model generation using a canvas (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010).

## 6 Conclusion

With the case of disruptive innovation, we could show that our integrated model for the dissemination of management ideas (Fig. 1) is useful for analyzing the interdependencies of different agents and their actions in the dissemination process. The combination of newsworthiness, multipliers on various levels of the process, the ideas of book publishers according to their life cycle management, and the ideas and rules of the original innovators from the ABC system means we must take a broad view on the whole process.

In our use-case we have shown that the differentiated use of all possible distribution- and communication-channels of academics, business, consulting and multipliers to establish the idea of “disruptive innovation” was completed by professional life cycle management of the book publishers involved and the use of professional agenda-setting. The idea has been accepted over the years by scholarly, academic professional, and professional management or business media, and the search questions of the public show the general relevance of this theory for society in general and especially people in the context of politics and economy. Therefore, we can classify it as an ongoing value management theory and not just a short-term management fashion.

The success described above was enabled by using the complete range of possibilities that the model of dissemination of management ideas offers, including the field of professional media. As we have shown, there is a tendency to use ‘disruption’ as a general frame. We can check this in foreign languages where “Disruption” is not a traditional word. For instance, the German Duden dictionary included the term ‘disruption’ in 2020 and offers the information that disruption is mainly used in professional language, describing a significant (mostly destructive) change, and cites the examples of digital, political and economic disruption (Duden, 2020, 2022).

What other factors of the dissemination process are visible in our case study of disruptive innovation?

We all know that language is always changing. Words we did not know five years ago may be of great value and importance today. In addition, once established, vocabulary changes its meaning. It is no surprise that, especially in fields where professional language meets semi-professionals and the general public, there have been major changes in the usage and meaning of individual words. The word ‘disruption’ is no exception.

Like spiritual or religious beliefs, ideas are used, re-framed and re-used, and start their own life if a discussion has left the close restrictions of a scholarly or professional field. When an idea becomes popular and well-known it starts its own life, which can even be seen in the field of intellectual property, where we cannot protect ideas; only the problem of representation of an individual concrete idea is possible (either formally in the Anglo-Saxon tradition or materially in the other traditions). Therefore, it could be a useful approach to integrate disruption into the field of change, development, and transformation, and accept the broader context of its use. Clayton Christensen made a different clarification in the paradigm-legitimization period, so it is not the responsibility of the original author if “the theory’s core concepts have been. . . misunderstood and its basic tenets . . . misapplied” (Christensen et al., 2015, p. 46) and we can categorize disruptive innovation as a valuable management theory.

What are the limitations of our findings and what could be the next steps?

We combined established models of different scholarly and practical fields of expertise to create a new integrated model to describe the dissemination process of management ideas. The case of disruptive innovation showed the usefulness of this concept but to challenge our existing framework it could be useful to analyze other management theories and their dissemination process. For example, management ideas with a strong limitation on business functions or geographical regions could show other aspects of dissemination which should be integrated in our model. Other cases and a qualitative analysis of the dissemination process not only by content analysis but by qualitative interviews among experts and agents in this process could offer additional details for our model. The process of discussion could be analyzed in a more detailed way by using databases with full-text research in connection with sentiment analysis. These steps could lead to a more detailed analysis of the interaction between agents of the ABC system, maybe in the context of the individual field of the analyzed management theory. Another aspect that should be kept in

mind for further development of the model is the ongoing progress in scientific communication of digital and social media.

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