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► **To cite this version:**

Dag Øivind Madsen. SWOT Analysis: A Management Fashion Perspective. International Journal of Business Research, 2016, 16 (1), pp.39-56. 10.18374/IJBR-16-1.3 . hal-01306102

**HAL Id: hal-01306102**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01306102>**

Submitted on 22 Apr 2016

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# SWOT ANALYSIS: A MANAGEMENT FASHION PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

*SWOT analysis has over a period spanning several decades enjoyed considerable popularity in the business community. In this paper management fashion theory is used as a theoretical lens to understand the history and evolution of SWOT as a management idea. The analysis shows that SWOT's evolution pattern diverges in several respects from that of other comparable management ideas. The findings from the analysis have several implications for research on SWOT and, more generally, management ideas and fashions.*

**Keywords:** *SWOT analysis, management idea, management fashion, strategy tool*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 SWOT analysis

SWOT analysis is a framework for assessing a firm's resources and capabilities (strengths and weaknesses) and external market situation (opportunities and threats). A number of studies have shown that SWOT analysis is one of the most widely used strategy tools among managers (Abdi, Azadegan-Mehr, & Ghazinoory, 2011; Frost, 2003; Gunn & Williams, 2007; Helms & Nixon, 2010; Knott, 2008; Panagiotou, 2003; Stenfors, Tanner, & Haapalinna, 2004). To this point, Panagiotou (2003, p. 8) comments that SWOT analysis "may well be used more than other management techniques in the process of decision making". In *The Oxford Handbook on Strategy* it is noted that "the best and most familiar example of an organizing framework is SWOT analysis" (Kay, McKiernan, & Faulkner, 2006, p. 43). Moreover, SWOT is listed in *The Economist's guide to management ideas and gurus* where it is pointed out that SWOT "is a handy mnemonic to help corporate planners think about strategy" (Hindle, 2008, p. 181).

### 1.2 Purpose and contribution

The studies referenced above clearly demonstrate the current popularity of SWOT analysis in the management community. Although there is also a considerable body of academic research on SWOT (see e.g. Abdi et al., 2011; Helms & Nixon, 2010), relatively little attention has been paid to understanding the social and institutional context which has shaped the historical emergence and evolution of SWOT. For example, Friesner (2011) notes that there is little in the way of history on the topic of SWOT.

In this paper management fashion theory (e.g. Abrahamson, 1996; Benders & Van Veen, 2001) is used as a theoretical lens to understand the history and evolution of SWOT as a management idea. Management fashion is a useful sensitizing framework since the theory directs attention to the supply and demand side forces shaping the evolution of a management idea over the course of its life cycle, from initial emergence and growth to maturity and decline. Management fashion theory has been used extensively in studies of other management ideas such as Knowledge Management (Klincewicz, 2006; Scarbrough, 2002), Balanced Scorecard (Ax & Bjørnenak, 2005), Business Process Reengineering (Heusinkveld & Benders, 2001) and Lean (Benders & Van Bijsterveld, 2000; Larsson, 2015). However, to the best of the author's knowledge, fashion theory has not previously been applied in the context of SWOT. Hence, by drawing on theories about fashionable management ideas, the paper can shed new light on SWOT's history and evolution.

### 1.3 Structure

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 attempts to trace the historical emergence of SWOT analysis, focusing on the actors shaping its early development. Section 3 examines the key characteristics of SWOT analysis using theories from the literature on management concepts and ideas. Section 4 focuses on the supply-side of the market for SWOT analysis, identifying the different actors involved in popularizing the idea, while Section 5 focuses on the demand-side (i.e. organizations and managers). In Section 6 the findings from the analysis are discussed in light of the literature on management fashions. Section 7 concludes and offers a discussion of ideas for future research on SWOT as a fashionable management idea.

## 2. HISTORICAL EMERGENCE

This section provides an overview of the historical emergence of SWOT. The literature review reveals that it is difficult to trace the history of SWOT. Researchers have noted that the origin of SWOT is “obscure” and “uncertain” (King, 2004). Friesner (2011) writes that it is hard to pinpoint the origin of the SWOT acronym as there is “no obvious history of thinking on the topic” and not a seminal work as the centerpiece of the SWOT literature. As Table 1 clearly shows researchers attribute the emergence of SWOT to different authors and time periods. While some scholars highlight importance of Harvard Business School as the epicenter of SWOT, others look to Stanford University, or even other more recent authors in the field of strategic management.

### 2.1 Harvard Business School

Panagiotou (2003) points out that SWOT has a long history dating back all the way to the 1950s. Moreover, Panagiotou (2003, p. 8) argues that SWOT analysis emerged in the Harvard Business School environment in the 1950s, spearheaded by the work of professors George Albert Smith Jr, C Roland Christensen and Kenneth Andrews. During the 1960s, SWOT was frequently discussed in business school classrooms and in academic conferences held at Harvard (Panagiotou, 2003). Others also share the view that SWOT can be traced back to Harvard Business School during the 1960s, and in particular Kenneth Andrews (Haberberg, 2000; Hill & Westbrook, 1997, p. 47). In a similar vein, Foss, Knudsen, and Montgomery (1995) point out that Kenneth Andrews made the connection between a firm’s strengths and weaknesses, and its environmental opportunities and threats.

### 2.2 Stanford

Other commentators have a slightly different take on the emergence of SWOT. For instance, according to Hindle (2008, p. 181) “Wikipedia credits the technique to Albert Humphrey, an academic at Stanford University, who based it on an analysis of Fortune 500 companies that he carried out in the 1960s and 1970”. In a 2005 Stanford Research Institute newsletter Humphrey looks back on his work with SWOT at Stanford (Humphrey, 2005). However, Friesner (2011) argues that “the crediting to Humphrey as the creator of SWOT cannot be supported.”

### 2.3 Other influences

Others point elsewhere when trying to pinpoint the inception of SWOT. A less common attribution is to strategic management thinker Igor Ansoff (Turner, 2002, cited in King, 2004), while Koch (2000) notes the importance of various less well-known contributions made during the 1980s and early 1990s. The influential strategy scholar Jay Barney also draws on SWOT in his widely cited article on firm resources (Barney, 1991, p. 100).

**Table 1: Views on the origins of SWOT Analysis**

Actors	Time period	Reference
Harvard Business School professors during the 1950s	1950s and 1960s	Panagiotou (2003)
Harvard Business School and professor Kenneth Andrews	1960s	Hill and Westbrook (1997, p. 47)
Harvard Business School professors in the 1960s	1960s	Haberberg (2000, cited in King, 2004)
Albert Humphrey at Stanford University	1960s and 1970s	Hindle (2008, p. 181); Humphrey (2005)
Igor Ansoff	1960s and 1970s	Turner (2002, cited in King, 2004)
Various contributions by Weihrich, Dealtry, Wheelen and Hunger	1980s and 1990s	Koch (2000) cites Dealtry (1992), Weihrich (1982) and Wheelen and Hunger (1998)

### 2.4 Summary

This brief historical review has shown that SWOT does not have a clear genealogy. There is not much consensus on how SWOT emerged, both in terms the actors spearheading SWOT or the exact time period in which it occurred. However, Harvard Business School seems to have played a pivotal role as the birthplace of SWOT. The important role played by the network around Harvard Business School has also been suggested in studies of other management ideas such as Activity Based Costing (Jones & Dugdale, 2002) and Balanced Scorecard (Cooper, Ezzamel, & Qu, 2012; Qu, 2004).

Furthermore, the strong position of the strategic planning school provided fertile ground for the early emergence and popularization of SWOT. In addition, SWOT fit almost like a glove with the “zeitgeist” in the fields of strategic management and corporate planning. As Kieser (1997) argues, timing plays an important role in determining the success of prospective fashions. A management idea must hit the “nerve of today’s managers” (Kieser, 1997, p. 61). Management ideas which fit well with the current “zeitgeist” with stand a greater chance of becoming fashionable. The next section follows up on this point by analyzing the key characteristics of SWOT which determine its “fashion potential”.

### **3. KEY CHARACTERISTICS**

In this section the key characteristics of the SWOT idea are analyzed drawing on theories about popular management ideas (Kieser, 1997; Røvik, 1998, 2002). The analysis focuses on four characteristics which influence a management idea’s “ability to flow” (Røvik, 2002): (1) catchy label, (2) promises of performance improvements, (3) interpretive space, and (4) universal applicability. The extent to which SWOT exhibits these four characteristics influences SWOT’s fashion potential.

#### **3.1 Catchy label**

The first characteristic is related to how a management idea is labelled. Popular management ideas are typically labelled in a catchy way, using a three-letter acronym (Grint, 1997; Røvik, 1998). In the case of SWOT, the short-form acronym is usually preferred instead of the long-form term Strength-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats, since the latter arguably is too long and not very catchy. In this way, SWOT differs from many other well-known management ideas which are known by far longer labels (e.g. Customer Relationship Management and Knowledge Management). However, it should be noted that in these cases three-letter or two-letter acronyms (CRM and KM, respectively) are often used to simplify. Another interesting aspect of the SWOT label is that it is frequently used as a verb. For example, in the literature we can find expressions such as “to SWOT something” or “SWOTing” (Pickton & Wright, 1998, p. 106). The SWOT acronym has also been reworked and remixed in different ways. For example, there are multiple variations of the SWOT acronym including USED and TOWS (Wehrich, 1982), WOTSUP and SOFT (Panagiotou, 2003, p. 9), as well as SORF analysis (Shadfar, 2013).

#### **3.2 Performance improvements**

Another characteristic of popular management ideas is that performance improvements are promised to potential adopters of the concept (Røvik, 1998; ten Bos, 2000). In the case of SWOT, these promises and claims are not as strong as in the cases of other management ideas. As mentioned in Section 2, there is not a seminal work or bestselling management guru books about SWOT, nor is the idea closely associated with a particular consulting firm or software vendor.

Seidl (2007) refers to SWOT as an example of a relatively simple strategy tool, while Pickton and Wright (1998, p. 104) go even further and write that “SWOT analysis is supremely simple”. Kay et al. (2006, p. 43) point out that this simplicity is appealing to managers: “And for a busy manager, confronted by endless everyday pressures and unused to stand back to think about longer-term issues, it is a particularly useful list.” In a similar vein, Hindle (2008) notes that SWOT can be a “handy mnemonic”, i.e. a managerial memory aid.

Moreover, the SWOT framework is “seductive” to managers since it offers a generic solution: “the promise of uniformity may appeal to those with the task of developing strategies for businesses with increasingly diverse markets” (Hill & Westbrook, 1997, p. 51). To this point, Thomas (1998, p. 10) argues that “...the repetition of phrases and words, without even struggling to understand and define them, will allow managers to control the destiny of their organizations. This is the very principle of myth that Horkheimer and Adorno write of.”

Despite its simple and appealing nature, SWOT has received its fair share of criticism. Both academics and practitioners have questioned the usefulness of the approach (Hill & Westbrook, 1997; Hussey, 2002; Piercy & Giles, 1989). For example, critics have noted the high degree of subjectivity, as well the simplistic and mechanistic nature of the SWOT matrix (Pickton & Wright, 1998). To this point, Pickton and Wright (1998, p. 102) note that “a too simplistic adoption of the SWOT activity can lead to damaging consequences”.

Defenders of SWOT point out that the idea should be seen as more of a generic framework and template. As pointed out by Kay et al. (2006, p. 43) “SWOT is simply a list. It conveys no information in

itself, but is a way of helping us to think about the information we already have.” In a similar vein, Hindle (2008, p. 182) writes that “the process of doing the analysis is more important and revealing than the results of the analysis themselves. The journey is more important than the destination.” In other words, these authors point out that SWOT can increase performance by facilitating “strategizing activities” (cf. Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007; Whittington, 2003).

### 3.3 Interpretive space

The third characteristic of popular management ideas is that they have a wide room for interpretation, so-called “interpretive space” (Benders & Van Veen, 2001; Clark, 2004; Giroux, 2006). In the case of SWOT a number of researchers have highlighted the “ambiguous” (Hill & Westbrook, 1997) and “open nature and unstructured method of SWOT” (Panagiotou, 2003, p. 9). The interpretive space means that SWOT can easily be understood and “translated” (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996) in different ways and combined and blended with other management ideas. For example, Panagiotou (2003, p. 9) notes that “others have incorporated current available models such as Kaplan and Norton’s Balanced Score Card with SWOT”. As will be shown in Sections 3.4 and 5.3, SWOT has been successfully re-interpreted and “travelled” to other contexts.

### 3.4 Universal applicability

The fourth characteristics exhibited by popular management ideas is that they are presented as universally applicable (Strang & Meyer, 1993) and can be used in organizations across the board (Røvik, 1998). This is clearly the case in the context of SWOT as it is presented as a generic solution (Hill & Westbrook, 1997) which can be applied at different levels, from the individual/personal level to the international level. For example, Hindle (2008) notes that SWOT analysis can be used to assess the competitive advantages and disadvantages of countries. Moreover, as the fictional character Jared explains on the TV show Silicon Valley, you can basically SWOT anything (YouTube, 2015).

**Table 2: Key characteristics of management ideas applied to SWOT**

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Applied to SWOT</b>
<i>Label</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acronym = Label</li> <li>• Used as a verb (e.g. SWOTing)</li> <li>• Multiple variations of the SWOT acronym (e.g. SOFT, USED, SORF)</li> </ul>
<i>Performance enhancements</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Featured in textbooks, but not a clear seminal work or bestselling book</li> <li>• Seductive and appealing to managers because of its simplicity</li> <li>• Not closely associated with a particular consulting or software firm</li> <li>• Criticized by both academics and practitioners</li> </ul>
<i>Interpretive space</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open and unstructured nature</li> <li>• Easily combined with other management ideas</li> <li>• Can be re-interpreted in different ways</li> </ul>
<i>Universal applicability</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Universal in nature</li> <li>• Generic solution</li> <li>• Can be applied across different analytical levels</li> </ul>

### 3.5 SWOT’s fashion potential

The analysis of the key characteristics of the SWOT idea shows that it exhibits several of the characteristics of popular management ideas. These characteristics are the so-called “secrets of the winners” (Røvik, 2002), i.e. the winning formula of management ideas with a high fashion potential. To sum up the analysis, the SWOT acronym is very catchy, and can even be used as a verb. Over time, SWOT has become a standard part of “management speak” and the vocabulary of just about every management consultant. In addition, SWOT analysis is featured in most textbooks on strategic management or marketing. When it comes to performance enhancements, SWOT does not score as highly as most other management ideas. This is because its generic nature makes it more of an “organizing framework” (Kay et al., 2006) or “handy mnemonic” (Hindle, 2008). However, the flipside of being more of a simple organizing framework is that it very seductive and appealing to busy managers.

When it comes to the third aspect, the room for interpretation is considerable, mainly due to SWOT’s open, unstructured and flexible nature. The interpretive space makes it easy to combine SWOT with other management ideas in new “mashups”. In addition, different variations of SWOT have been

introduced such as TOWS, SOFT and USED. Finally, SWOT is presented as an universal solution which can easily be overlaid on nearly any problem, not only those faced by business organizations, but also individuals or nation-states. As will be discussed in more detail in Section 6, SWOT has been adapted to usage not only at the industry level, but also the individual or the inter-country level.

#### 4. THE SUPPLY-SIDE OF SWOT

Thus far the paper has focused on the historical emergence of SWOT, and on analyzing the key characteristics which give SWOT a considerable potential as a fashionable idea. Management ideas which become fashions tend to exhibit most of these characteristics (Benders, 1999). However, only exhibiting these characteristics is usually not enough. Benders (1999, p. 625) points out that fashion setters promote and market management ideas to fashion consumers such as managers. For a management idea to become fashionable, it is important that supply-side actors create awareness and knowledge about the idea so that it reaches a critical mass of adopters. In turn, this may trigger bandwagon effects where other managers are pressured to adopt in order to keep up with their peers (Benders, 1999; Benders, van den Berg, & van Bijsterveld, 1998).

##### 4.1 The SWOT fashion arena

This sub-section takes a closer look at the supply-side of SWOT, i.e. the actors promoting and propagating SWOT to managers and organizations on the demand-side of the market. In the literature on management fashions, these groups of actors (e.g. consulting firms, management gurus and business media) are referred to as the “fashion-setting community” (Abrahamson, 1996) or “fashion arena” (Jung & Kieser, 2012; Klincewicz, 2006; Madsen & Slåtten, 2013). Table 3 provides an overview of the role of most relevant fashion-arena actors in the case of SWOT. The activities of each of the actor groups will be discussed in greater detail in the subsequent sub-sections.

**Table 3: Actors involved in the SWOT fashion arena**

<b>Actor</b>	<b>Activity level</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<i>Consultants</i>	Medium-low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficult to commercialize and market as a “solution”</li> <li>• Part of a consultant’s toolbox and repertoire</li> </ul>
<i>Software firms</i>	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficult to make advanced software solutions associated with SWOT</li> <li>• Some tools for making SWOT Analysis diagrams (Creately, Gliffy, Grapholite, SmartDraw, SWOT Analysis Generator and SWOT Map)</li> </ul>
<i>Business media</i>	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficult to write (long) books about a relatively simple tool</li> <li>• Low newsworthiness (been around since the 50/60s)</li> <li>• Some shorter e-books and handbooks</li> </ul>
<i>Management gurus</i>	Low-medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thinkers/gurus played a role in the historical emergence of SWOT (1950s-1980s)</li> <li>• No single guru closely associated with SWOT</li> <li>• Difficult to make a living giving speeches about SWOT because of its simplicity</li> </ul>
<i>Conference/seminar organizers</i>	Low-medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relatively small market for conferences/seminars centered around a simple and well-known tool such as SWOT</li> <li>• “Crowd-pleaser” (easy to understand for participants)</li> </ul>
<i>Business schools and academia</i>	Medium-high	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extensively taught in business schools</li> <li>• Discussed in most textbooks in strategic management and marketing</li> <li>• Part of courses in MBA programs</li> <li>• Much academic research utilizing the SWOT framework</li> </ul>

##### 4.2 Consultants

Consulting firms are typically viewed as the most central actor in the management fashion arena (Jung & Kieser, 2012). However, in the case of SWOT, consultants have been relatively passive, at least when compared to the important role of consultants in the popularization of management ideas such as the

Balanced Scorecard (Ax & Bjørnenak, 2005; Madsen & Slåtten, 2013). A possible reason for limited role of consultants this is that SWOT is difficult to commercialize and market because of its simplicity and its nature as an “organizing framework”. Another reason could be that consultants would like to be seen as offering more “sophisticated solutions” to clients. Pickton and Wright (1998, p. 104) have noted that SWOT can be difficult to pitch as a sophisticated tool: “At its most basic, carrying out a ‘SWOT’ is a ‘low-grade’ form of analysis which causes some people to question whether it is truly analysis at all.”

SWOT is not a solution which is typically advertised on large consulting firms’ webpages. Internet searches reveal that relatively few large consulting firms market SWOT as a “stand-alone solution”. However, this does not mean that consultants do not draw on tools such as SWOT analysis in actual client projects. It is likely that SWOT analysis is one of many tools in a consultant’s repertoire which is drawn on in actual projects (cf. Heusinkveld & Benders, 2012).

#### 4.3 Software firms

Software firms provide technical solutions which help in the implementation of management ideas (Klincewicz, 2006). Overall, software firms have been relatively passive in the SWOT fashion arena. Although there are some SWOT-related tools such as Creately, Gliffy, Grapholite, SmartDraw, SWOT Analysis Generator and SWOT Map (BusinessNewsDaily, 2015), the number of available tools is relatively low compared to plethora of software packages made for the Balanced Scorecard (Marr, Erhofer, & Neely, 2000; Marr & Neely, 2003) and Knowledge Management (Klincewicz, 2006). However, as a whole, the SWOT software market can be characterized as being relatively small.

#### 4.4 Business media

Different types of business media such as book publishers and professional magazines usually play important roles in the diffusion of management ideas (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002). In the context of SWOT, business media actors have played a limited role. There are several reasons for this. One reason could be the generally low newsworthiness of SWOT analysis. After all, SWOT has been around since the 1950/60s. Book publishers and editors of professional magazines etc. tend to seek out new ideas (cf. Nijholt, Heusinkveld, & Benders, 2014). Another reason is that SWOT does not lend itself to long expositions and the management bestseller format. It can be difficult to write long books about a relatively simple and straightforward tool such as SWOT. However, as Table 4 shows there are some shorter e-books and handbooks about SWOT.

**Table 4: Examples of books about SWOT**

Title	Reference
The SWOT Analysis: Using your strength to overcome weaknesses, using opportunities to overcome threats	Fine (2009)
Analysis Without Paralysis: 12 Tools to Make Better Strategic Decisions	Bensoussan and Fleisher (2012)
SWOT analysis 34 Success Secrets: 34 Most Asked Questions On SWOT analysis - What You Need To Know	McGuire (2014)
SWOT Analysis. Idea, Methodology and a Practical Approach	Pahl and Richter (2009)

#### 4.5 Management gurus

Management gurus are often closely associated with fashionable management ideas (Jackson, 2001). However, management gurus have not played a very active role in the popularization of SWOT. Although a number of prominent management thinkers took part in the emergence of SWOT from the 1950s to 1980s (cf. e.g. Friesner, 2011), in recent years it is hard to point to a specific management guru who has been closely associated with SWOT. One possible reason for this is that it is difficult to command high speaking fees because of the relatively simple nature of SWOT. In addition, since SWOT has been around for a long time, there is a high level of knowledge and awareness in the management community.

#### 4.6 Conference/seminar organizers

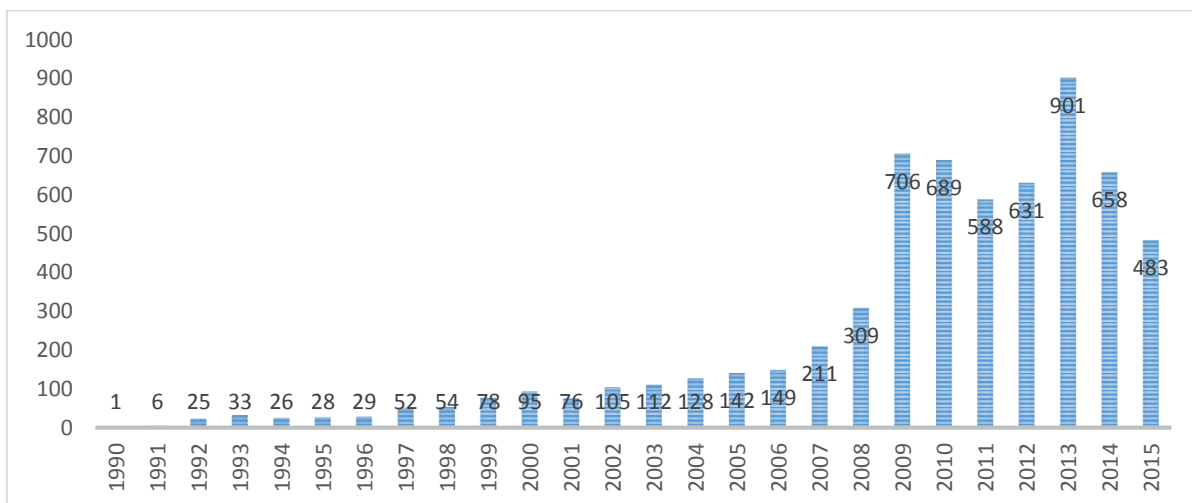
The conference/seminar scene play a central role in the fashionization of management ideas (Kieser, 1997; Madsen, 2014). In the same way that it is difficult for management gurus to command high speaking fees for talking about SWOT, it is difficult for professional conference and seminar organizers to sell expensive seats in conferences/seminars about SWOT. There is simply a limited market for conferences/seminars centered around a simple and well-known tool such as SWOT. However, this is

not to say that there are not any events where SWOT is a topic. For example, SWOT is a crowd-pleaser since it is simple and easy to understand: “the ubiquitous SWOT analysis is a favourite of short management courses and marketing consultants that require a tool that can easily be understood by all participants” (Gunn & Williams, 2007, p. 210-211). Internet searches reveal that SWOT analysis workshops are held in different parts of the world. In addition, SWOT is frequently used as an “organizing framework” for conferences, e.g. where SWOT Analysis is used to “SWOT” (i.e. analyze) a particular industry (e.g. [www.digitalswot.com](http://www.digitalswot.com)).

#### 4.7 Business schools

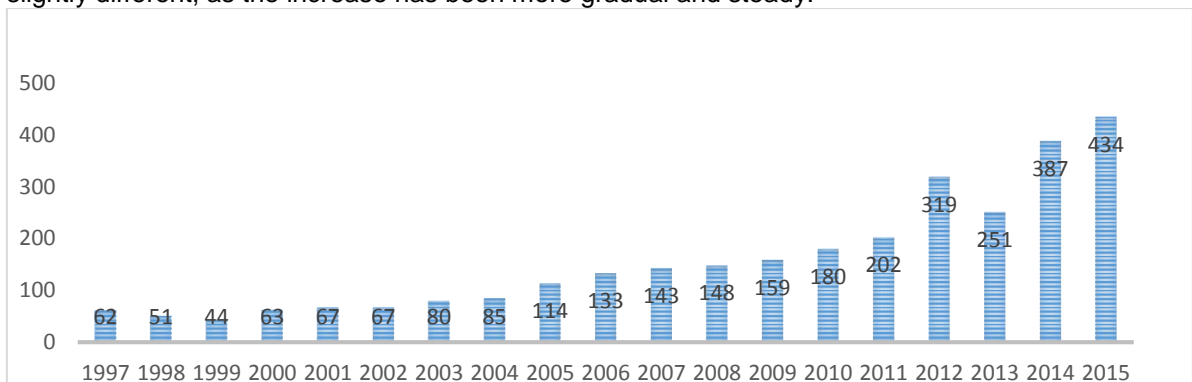
Business schools play an important role in the spread of management knowledge (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002). Business schools have played a very important role in the SWOT fashion arena. Business schools have been active in several ways, from teaching students about SWOT, mentioning it in textbooks and educational materials, and by conducting research and reports using SWOT. To the first point, SWOT has been extensively taught in business schools around the world for several decades. Today, most courses in strategic management and marketing involve a discussion of SWOT in some way or another. SWOT is typically discussed in textbooks in strategic management and marketing (e.g. Hill, Jones, & Schilling, 2014; McDonald & Wilson, 2011). Pickton and Wright (1998, p. 103) noted that “there are many corporate planning and marketing texts which refer to SWOT”. In addition, SWOT is one of the most common tools taught in MBA programs and shorter executive education programs, which bestows some academic legitimacy on the idea.

In addition, recent literature reviews have shown that there is much academic research utilizing the SWOT framework (Abdi et al., 2011; Helms & Nixon, 2010). As Figure 1 and 2 clearly show, there has been a steady increase in the number of academic articles containing the keyword “SWOT” in the databases ProQuest and ScienceDirect. Figure 1 shows that there was an “explosion” in the number of articles around 2008/2009, and since then the number has remained relatively stable at a high level.



**Figure 1: Print-media discourse about SWOT (source: ProQuest database, 11/15/2015)**

Figure 2 also shows an overall increase in the discourse related to SWOT. However, the pattern is slightly different, as the increase has been more gradual and steady.



**Figure 2: Print-media discourse about SWOT (Source: ScienceDirect database, 11/15/2015)**



#### 4.8 Summary

To sum up, the analysis of the SWOT fashion arena has shown that business schools and academic have been the most influential actor group. Other actors such as consulting firms and software vendors have struggled to commercialize SWOT, while management gurus, conference organizers and book publishers have had limited market opportunities since SWOT is a well-known management idea with a low level of newsworthiness. Overall, SWOT is not supported by supply-side actors in the same way seen in the context of other management ideas such as Balanced Scorecard (Madsen & Slåtten, 2013), Knowledge Management (Klincewicz, 2006) or Lean (Larsson, 2015). In all of these cases, supply-side actors such as consulting firms, software vendors and conference organizers have played relatively more important roles in the diffusion and popularization processes.

The relatively low involvement of the SWOT fashion arena could be explained by the difficulties in commercializing the SWOT idea. Similar difficulties have been noted in previous research on the management accounting idea Beyond Budgeting. Becker, Messner, and Schäffer (2010) found that the consultants have struggled to commercialize the Beyond Budgeting idea since it can be seen as a “management philosophy” rather than an easy-to-implement solution. However, in the case of SWOT the reason is different. Rather than being a “too abstract” and “high level” management philosophy, SWOT is perhaps too simple, since it basically consists of templates and lists (Kay et al., 2006; Pickton & Wright, 1998). These days, it is arguably hard to make a living selling this type of management knowledge. Information about SWOT is readily available free of charge online, e.g. on websites such as Wikipedia, or in a large number of textbooks and handbooks.

### 5. THE DEMAND-SIDE OF SWOT

The demand-side of SWOT consists of managers and organizations considering adopting and implementing the idea. This section looks at trends in the interest in SWOT, diffusion rates in different countries and regions, as well as applications and “translations” of SWOT at different levels of the social context.

#### 5.1 Interest in SWOT

One way to measure and monitor the interest in SWOT is by looking at search engine data using a tool such as Google Trends (Choi & Varian, 2012). Google Trends contains data dating back to 2004. A search for term SWOT shows that the level of interest has remained relatively steady in the period 2004-2015 (Figure 3). It should be pointed out that there has been a slight decrease in the volume of searches, but the downward trend could be explained by the fact that the idea has become more well-known in practice.

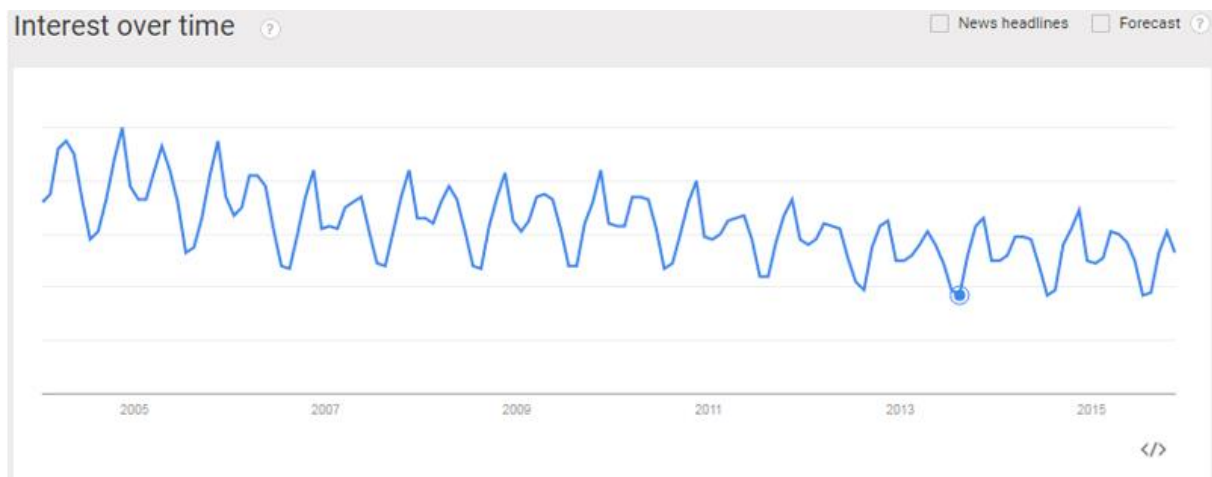


Figure 3: Data Source: Google Trends ([www.google.com/trends](http://www.google.com/trends)), 11/15/2015

Google Trends also shows that there are regional differences in the interest in SWOT. Figure 4 shows that the interest is currently highest in developing countries in Africa and Asia. A possible explanation for why these countries search more for information about SWOT could be that the level of knowledge and awareness is lower in these regions than in the West. For example, the SWOT idea has circulated

in the business community in the US for about half a century, which means that it is by now a relatively well-known management idea and practice.

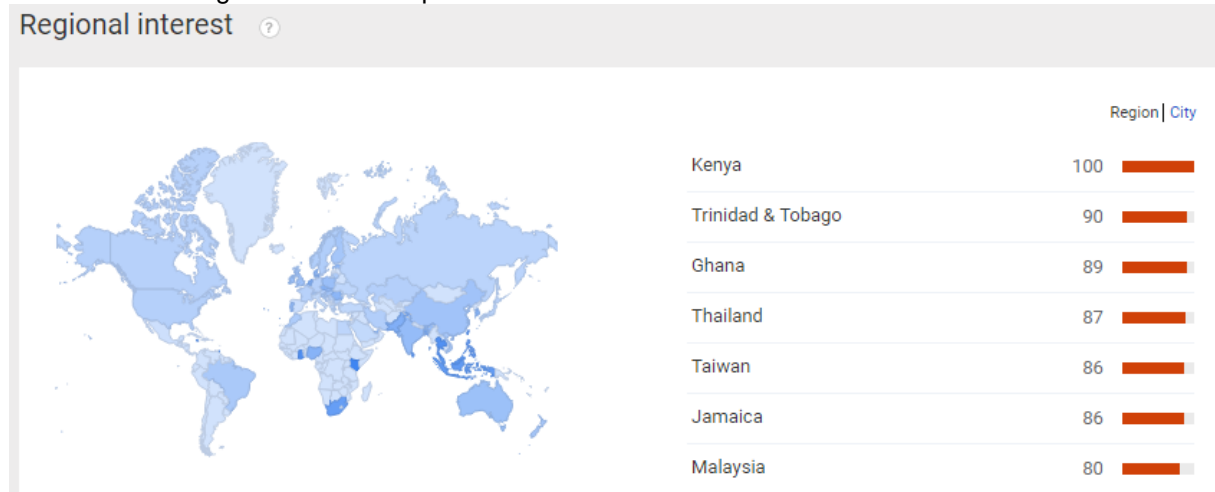


Figure 4: Data Source: Google Trends ([www.google.com/trends](http://www.google.com/trends))

### 5.2 Diffusion of SWOT in different countries/regions

Several studies carried out over the course of the last 10-15 years suggest that the use of SWOT is quite high in different countries and regions (Table 5). In Finland, it ranks among the most commonly used strategy tools among executives (Stenfors & Tanner, 2006; Stenfors et al., 2004). In the UK, SWOT is used by 70% of organizations and ranks first of all strategy tools (Gunn & Williams, 2007). Furthermore, these authors note that SWOT “appears to be a perennial favourite amongst practitioners and academics” (Gunn & Williams, 2007, p. 210). In the Czech Republic SWOT is also the most widely used strategy tool with a usage rate of 93% (Afonina & Chalupský, 2012). Studies also show that SWOT analysis is widely used outside of Europe. For example, in the Australasian region SWOT “dominates” (Frost, 2003), while in China SWOT ranks second, only slightly behind PEST analysis (He, António, & Rosa, 2012).

Table 5: Examples of take-up of SWOT Analysis in different countries/regions

Country/Region	Take-up	Reference
Finland	“the most frequently named tools are SWOT analysis, spreadsheet applications and Balanced Scorecard applications”	Stenfors et al. (2004, p. 639)
	“clearly the most common tool used by executives to support the making of major decisions”	Stenfors and Tanner (2006, p. 222-223)
UK	70% (rank 1st)	Gunn and Williams (2007)
Australasia region	“The tools that dominate in this present study are SWOT, PEST and budgeting”	Frost (2003, p. 59)
Czech Republic	93% (rank 1st)	Afonina and Chalupský (2012)
China	58.46% (rank 2nd)	He et al. (2012)

Although these diffusion studies can say something about the extent to which SWOT is used, they provide little insight into how SWOT is used. As noted in Section 2, SWOT’s interpretive space means that the idea is understood and interpreted in different ways. Moreover, since SWOT is presented as an universal solution it travels easily between different settings. The next section follows up on this point and takes a closer look at application of SWOT at different levels of the social context.

### 5.3 Applications of SWOT at different levels of the social context

SWOT has been applied at different analytical levels, ranging from the individual/personal level to the international level (Table 6). At the individual level, authors have proposed a “Personal SWOT” (Ilott, 1997), “Self-SWOT” (Addams & Allfred, 2013) or “SWOT analysis for individuals” (Von Bergen, 2013). The latter is used by HR professionals and employment counselors by having workers identify their strengths and weaknesses. At the organizational level, where SWOT has the most obvious fit, SWOT is used in a multitude of ways; some examples include facilitating strategic conversations in SMEs

(Sluismans, Lommelen, & den Hertog, 2010) and the strategy development process at universities (Dyson, 2004).

At the national level, SWOT has been applied in a number of contexts, including social work (Westhues, Lafrance, & Schmidt, 2001), development of national HIV/AIDS strategies (Holtgrave & Greenwald, 2015) and hotel industry reform (Yu & Huimin, 2005). Finally, at the international level, SWOT has been used to analyze multiculturalism in different countries and regions (Ng & Bloemraad, 2015) or to analyze the competitive advantages and disadvantages of countries (Hindle, 2008).

**Table 6: Applications of SWOT at different analytical levels**

<b>Level</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>References</b>
<i>Individual</i>	Personal SWOT	Ilott (1997)
	Self-SWOT	Addams and Allfred (2013)
	SWOT analysis for individuals	Von Bergen (2013)
<i>Organizational</i>	Strategic conversations in SMEs	Sluismans et al. (2010)
	Use and misuse among HRD professionals	Chermack and Kasshanna (2007)
	Strategy development process at a university	Dyson (2004)
<i>National</i>	National HIV/AIDS strategies	Holtgrave and Greenwald (2015)
	Social work	Westhues et al. (2001)
	Hotel industry reform	Yu and Huimin (2005)
<i>International</i>	Multiculturalism	Ng and Bloemraad (2015)
	Competitive advantages and disadvantages of countries	Hindle (2008)

## 6. DISCUSSION

This section discusses the implications of the findings from the analysis for research on SWOT, and more generally, management ideas and fashions. The discussion centers around three themes: (1) whether SWOT can be considered a management fashion, (2) the impact of SWOT across time and space, and (3) how SWOT has become a mainstream management idea with broad societal impact.

### 6.1 Is SWOT a management fashion?

An interesting question is whether SWOT is a fashionable management idea. The analysis in Section 3 showed that SWOT is a management idea exhibiting many of the characteristics of management ideas with a high fashion potential, or what Røvik (2002) calls the “secrets of the winners”. The studies cited in this paper also show that SWOT is widely diffused in the business community. A hallmark of widely diffused management fashions is that they are supported by fashion-setters such as consultants. However, the analysis of the supply-side in Section 4 showed that the SWOT fashion-setting arena has been less active than what is typically seen in cases of other comparable management ideas. In other words, the popularity of SWOT can to a large degree be attributed to the characteristics of the idea. For example, the interpretive space of SWOT has made the idea travel easily between different settings, and has contributed to translations and adaptations of the idea at different levels of the social context (e.g. individual and inter-country level).

Using the term “management fashion” implies that SWOT is a relatively short-lived phenomenon. However, in the management fashion literature it is increasingly recognized that ideas such as SWOT, under certain conditions, may become institutionalized so that they “stick around” for a relatively long period of time. In the next section, the impact of SWOT across time and space will be discussed in more detail.

### 6.2 The impact of SWOT across time and space

The impact of fashionable management ideas varies across time and space (Madsen & Stenheim, 2014a). When it comes to the spatial impact, the studies cited in this paper have shown that SWOT is frequently used in organizations in different parts of the world. As a whole, SWOT appears to be widely diffused, and more so than most other management ideas. With respect to the time dimension, SWOT has had been around for several decades and the typical inverted U-shaped management fashion life-cycle curve has not materialized. Instead, SWOT seems to be an “enduring” management fashion (cf. Grant, 2011). The SWOT fashion seems to have reached a degree of permanence (cf. Perkmann & Spicer, 2008), making it more than a transient management fashion.

What is interesting about the high levels of both diffusion and institutionalization is that SWOT analysis is not supported by a constellation of supporting actors, at least not to the same degree seen in the case of other management-idea-movements such as the Balanced Scorecard (Madsen & Slåtten, 2013). As pointed out by Perkmann and Spicer (2008) a diverse group of supporting actors is important in diffusing and institutionalizing ideas. However, in the case of SWOT, the idea has enjoyed very high levels of popularity and acceptance without consulting firms and software firms extensively promoting and selling solutions related to it. Therefore, we may speculate whether SWOT is a prime textbook example of a management idea which over time has become firmly entrenched in the business community. The different sources of evidence suggest that SWOT has become widely accepted and taken-for-granted. This means that SWOT's popularity is not as dependent on supply-side actors continually breathing new life into the idea in the form of books, conference presentations etc.

### **6.3 Mainstreaming and societal impact**

Finally, another interesting aspect of the evolution pattern of SWOT is that the idea has considerable impact even outside of the traditional business/management domain. Over time, SWOT has morphed from being primarily a business-level tool to a framework which can be used at the individual/personal level to the international level. Also, SWOT is not only used in business contexts to make business-related decisions. Rather, it has "travelled" widely and become an organizing framework which is frequently used in academic studies in fields typically decoupled from a business context, such as health policy and behavioral sciences (e.g. Holtgrave & Greenwald, 2015). In this respect, SWOT shares some commonalities with the Corporate Social Responsibility idea which also has a broad societal impact and is widely used outside of the traditional business domain (Jutterström & Norberg, 2013; Madsen & Stenheim, 2014b).

Finally, another interesting development is that SWOT appears to have a broad mainstream appeal. An illustrative example of this is the fact that SWOT has made its way into popular culture via the HBO hit series *Silicon Valley*. In an episode which is widely referenced on social media, two of main characters are faced with a moral dilemma, when another "corporate type" character suggests "SWOT-ing" the decision (YouTube, 2015). Such popular culture references indicate a widespread institutionalization and "mainstreaming" of the SWOT idea far beyond the business community.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

The current paper set out to analyze the history and evolution of SWOT using the lens of management fashion theory as a sensitizing framework. The analysis has revealed that SWOT has an unclear genealogy. However, it is clear that the idea has been around for about half a century. Over time, SWOT has evolved in different ways and "travelled" into new contexts. The evolution of SWOT is an interesting case since it differs in several respects from other comparable management ideas. There have been relatively few opportunities for fashion-setting actors to commercialize SWOT into sellable proprietary solutions and the market potential and newsworthiness of the idea is relatively low. Nevertheless, the SWOT idea has had considerable "staying power" both in academic circles and in organizational practice, evidenced by high levels of usage, acceptance, as well as considerable impact even at a broader societal level. These interesting aspects of SWOT should be investigated in more detail in future research.

It should be pointed out that the current study has been preliminary and exploratory in nature. This means that the conclusions should be interpreted with some caution. However, the research reported in this paper could be extended in many different ways. For example, more empirical work on the use of SWOT in different contexts is needed. Although there are some studies of uptake of SWOT and other strategic tools, extant studies have typically been conducted at different times using different research methods, which makes comparison problematic. Furthermore, inter-country studies of SWOT usage would allow for comparisons of how the idea is used in different social and cultural settings. Another way forward would be to utilize qualitative approaches to study how SWOT is applied in organizational practice. For instance, researchers could study how consultants draw on fashionable management ideas such as SWOT in organizational change projects (cf. Heusinkveld & Benders, 2012). Another possibility would be to study how managers are exposed to and "handle" the SWOT idea in the post-adoption phase (Madsen & Slåtten, 2015; Røvik, 2011). Such investigations could provide insight into how processes related to implementation and use of SWOT unfold over time.

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