

## Have the Reports of TQM's Death Been Greatly Exaggerated? A Re-Examination of the Concept's Historical Popularity Trajectory

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### ABSTRACT

There is a vast literature on Total Quality Management (TQM) one of the most influential management concepts introduced during the twentieth century. In the TQM literature there are multiple conflicting views on TQM's historical popularity trajectory. In the past commentators have debated whether TQM represents a lasting trend or instead should be considered a more short-lived management fad or fashion. Since the 1990s skeptics have speculated about the imminent fall death and burial of TQM and even delivered eulogies. However others claim that the level of interest has picked back up and that TQM is alive and well. Therefore this paper attempts to synthesize and reconcile these differing views on the long-term trajectory of TQM and provide an updated picture and status report taking into account the latest findings and developments in research and practice. The evidence reviewed in this paper suggests that even though TQM has become much less noticeable in public management discourse compared to the heydays of the 1980s and 1990s the concept has persisted and even to this day remains widely used by organizations worldwide.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Total Quality Management (TQM) can be defined as a “business discipline and philosophy of management which institutionalizes planned and continuous business improvement” (Hill1995 p. 36). TQM is “the most celebrated and widely adopted form of quality management” (Wilkinson and Willmott1995b p. 8) and one of the most influential management concepts and ideas (Hindle2008).

Although the roots of TQM can be traced back several decades to the post-war period (Wilkinson and Willmott1995a) the concept of TQM did not take center stage in the business world until the 1980s when it started enjoying immense popularity. According to Rüling(2005) it was perhaps the biggest management fashion Rüling(2005) was not alone in making this observation as the meteoric rise of TQM during the 1980s and 1990s led many researchers to suggest that there was much hyping of the concept and perhaps a fashion-like aspect involved in its rapid rise and popularization (Cole 1999;Collins 2000;David and Strang2006;Ehigie and McAndrew 2005;Giroux 2006;Jackson2001;Larsen2001;Mueller and Carter 2005;Rüling 2005;Staw and Epstein 2000;ThawesaengskulthaiandTannock2008;vanderWieleetal.2000;Wilkinsonand Willmott 1995a;Zbaracki1998).

In recent years the buzz and hype surrounding TQM has waned considerably. The concept is no longer perceived as new and has been pushed into the background by newer concepts such as Big Data Analytics Agile Management and Industry 4.0 (Madsen andStenheim2016;Madsen2019;Madsen2020;Rigby and Bilodeau2018). However despite lower levels of attention and interest the TQM concept does not appear to have been abandoned in organizational practice. On the contrary the concept has had considerable staying power and continues to impact organizations well into the twenty-first century (Dahlgaard-Park2011). Evidence suggests that TQM is still widely used several decades after its inception. For example TQM has steadily remained in the top 25 of the

consulting firm Bain & Company's "Management Tools and Trends Survey" since 1993 and in the newest edition TQM has broken into the top 10 in terms of use (Rigby and Bilodeau2018).

### 1.1. Research Goals

The intense hype and buzz surrounding TQM during the late 1980s and early 1990s led to a flurry of academic papers suggesting that the concept could be the latest in the long line of management fads and fashions to sweep the organizational world. Some commentators went as far as to speculate about TQM's imminent death and burial. However as indicated in the introduction the various reports (e.g. Albrecht 1992 a1 992b;Bohan 1998;Byrne1997;Paton1994) about the death and burial of TQM may have been exaggerated and premature. Several more recent studies indicate that TQM is still alive both in academic circles and in business practice (Bergquist2012;Douglas 2006;Rahman2004;Rigby and Bilodeau2018;Sower et al.2016;Williams et al.2004).

In other words there is arguably a need to synthesize and reconcile the many conflicting views on TQM's historical popularity trajectory. The current paper aims to do this by reexamining the various accounts available in the literature on TQM. The paper utilizes management fashion theory (Abrahamson 1996;Abrahamson and Piazza2019;Benders and Van Veen2001;Kieser1997) as a theoretical lens and sensitizing framework. Management fashion theory is well-suited to providing a birds-eye view of the evolution and lifecycle of TQM since it is a macro-level theory focusing on the field-level evolution of concepts and ideas (Madsen and Slåtten2015a;Perkmann and Spicer2008).

Using arguments from management fashion theory has a long tradition in the context of TQM (Carnerud 2019;Collins 2000;David and Strang 2006;Giroux 2006;Mueller and Carter 2005;Staw and Epstein 2000;Thawesaengskulthai and Tannock 2008). Hence this is not the first study to suggest that management fashion theory has applicability in explaining and understanding the dynamics of the marketplace for TQM. However most of these earlier contributions that have utilized management fashion-type arguments in the context of TQM are by now more than a decade old. In the author's view time is therefore ripe to reexamine the historical popularity trajectory of TQM and to account for the latest developments in terms of discourse around and use of the concept in practice.

### 1.2. Structure

The rest of the paper is structured in the following way. Section2lays out the research approach. Section3 provides a brief historical overview of the origins and evolution of the TQM concept. Section4 provides an analysis of the framing and characteristics of the TQM concept. Sections5and6analyze the supply and demand sides of TQM respectively. In Section7a discussion of the findings follows before Section8concludes the paper and maps out directions for future work in the area.

## 2. RESEARCH APPROACH

The study aims to obtain a birds-eye overview of the historical popularity trajectory of TQM. Using the terminology of Miller et al.(2018) the current research examines TQM as a global trend. In previous related studies of management concepts and ideas researchers have referred to this process of assessing the impact of management concepts as creating a "mosaic" (Morrison and Wensley1991) or "overall picture" (Nijholt and Benders2007).

In this study the overall research approach can be characterized as explorative and qualitative. The picture of TQM's popularity trajectory emerges as a result of patching together findings from a wide range of existing studies on TQM both from the scholarly and practitioner-oriented literatures. The search for literature can most accurately be described as a snowballing-type procedure (see e.g. Felizardo et al.2016;Wohlin 2014;Wittrock 2016). The search process started by identifying key papers that previously have discussed TQM as a managerial fad fashion or trend (Carnerud 2019;Collins 2000;David and Strang 2006;Giroux 2006;Mueller and Carter 2005;Staw and Epstein 2000;Thawesaengskulthai and Tannock 2008). These key papers on TQM were then subject to both backward snowballing (examining the reference lists of the key papers) and forward snowballing (examining more recent work that has cited the key papers).

Following this type of research approach has several limitations which should be considered carefully. For example there are potential biases related to the author's selection and reading of prior studies as well as issues related to historical retrospection. However from a practical and pragmatic standpoint following such an approach is necessary for several reasons. First of all researching the historical evolution of management concepts and ideas is a formidable task since management concepts are ideational phenomena (Benders et al.2000;Benders and Van Veen2001;Strang and Wittrock2019). Such methodological problems have also been noted in the context of research on TQM. For example it has been observed that studying quality concepts and programs is "an elusive topic of study" (Wilkinson and Willmott1995b p. 1).

Another issue is related to the use of secondary sources. To be able to reconstruct the history and evolution of a particular management concept it is necessary to utilize and rely heavily on secondary sources. As Nijholt and Benders(2007) note the use of secondary sources is often needed to say something about the impact of management concepts. However they also point out that the use of secondary sources is potentially problematic from a methodological standpoint since other researchers have collected such data at different times and for different purposes.

### 3. A BRIEF HISTORY OF TQM

This section provides a historical overview of the origins and evolution of the TQM concept. Researchers have written extensively on the historical emergence and evolution of TQM (Bergquist et al. 2008;Brown 2013;Cole19921998;DahlgaardPark2011;Giaccioetal.2013;HackmanandWageman1995;Harris1995;Juran1995; Martínez-Lorente et al.1998;Miller et al.2018;Sanderson1995;van der Wiele and Brown2002;Weckenmann et al.2015;Wilkinson and Willmott1995a;Zairi2013Zbaracki 1998). Since the history of TQM is arguably well-documented in other contributions this section will not provide a comprehensive genealogy of TQM. Instead it gives a brief sketch of the origins and evolution of TQM with a particular focus on the later stages (i.e. the mid-2000s and onwards) of TQM evolutionary trajectory. This period has so far received relatively less attention in the TQM literature.

#### 3.1. *Origins and Emergence*

Modern quality management tools were developed during the 1930s and 1940s (Giroux2006) and quality approaches have been used in industry since the 1930s (Dahlgaard-Park2015). TQM has roots that can be traced back to the post-war period in Japan. Embryonic versions of the concept were developed in Japanese companies during the 1950s and 1960s based on the thinking of American quality gurus (Hindle2008 p. 191). Therefore a number of quality thinkers such as Deming Juran Crosby and Feigenbaum can be considered pioneers of the concept (Krüger2001). These pioneers worked in industry and for governments and typically hailed from the practice domain instead of academic institutions (Ehigie and McAndrew2005). Hence the emergence of TQM was to a large extent driven by experimentation and development in business practice and by contrast academic researchers were mostly passive during this phase (Wilkinson and Willmott1996).

While the previous section showed that TQM has roots that date back several decades it took several decades before TQM took off at the international level. The 1980s is usually considered the time period when TQM achieved its breakthrough in terms of popularity (Giroux 2006). For example researchers have documented that TQM became popular in the United States (Cole and Scott 2000; Gibson and Tesone2001) as well as in the UK (McCabe and Wilkinson 1998) and Australia (Dawson and Palmer 1993;Lu and Sohal 1993;Rahman 2001;Sohal and Terziovski 2000) around this time. For example the 1980s have been called a “revolutionary era” for quality in the US (Dahlgaard-Park 2015 p. 810).

Why did the interest in TQM “explode” during the 1980s? An important reason was that the concept became “socially appropriate” and in previous research it has been shown that being associated with TQM increased a firm’s legitimacy and that this led to bandwagon adoption of TQM (Staw and Epstein2000Westphal et al.1997). Westphal et al.(1997) found that the organizations that adopted TQM during the fashion boom tended to imitate other TQM users while in the later stages (post-TQM boom) adopters tended to customize and adapt TQM to a greater extent.

#### 3.2. *Evolution*

The popularity of TQM continued at full steam into the 1990s. Several authors commented on the popularity of TQM during the 1990s noting that it was the “decade of quality” (Rajagopal1995) and that the concept was a “corporate religion” (Hill1995 p. 48). Others noted that the concept acquired a paradigmatic status in management thinking during this time (Watson and Korukonda 1995). In the early 1990sSpenny(1992) commented on the hyperactivity surrounding TQM: “there is no doubt that there are more TQM conferences magazines etc. than ever and that there is a drive for many companies to be featured as successful TQM implementors in commercial and government publications” (p. 8).

Despite the high level of activity related to TQM during the 1990s this period was also a time when TQM for the first time faced severe headwinds. During the early to mid-1990s commentators were increasingly growing skeptical and critical of TQM and during the late 1990s there was a backlash against TQM (Hindle2008 p. 192).

Partly this can be explained by the fact that during the 1990s negative stories about TQM started to surface which meant that the TQM concept became associated with failures and “a dirty word” (Bohan1998 p. 13). This trend continued into the twenty-first century. In the words of Dahlgaard-Park (2015 p. 808): “during the first 10

years of the new millennium the term TQM seems to have lost its attractiveness in the industrialized parts of the world.”

In general TQM failed to live up to the high expectations and in the business community there was rising disappointment and disillusionment (Doyle1992Scha ffer1993). TQM was no longer seen as the panacea that companies were waiting for. The disappointment is reflected in Bain & Company’s surveys where TQM fell in popularity during this time period. David and Strang(2006) suggest that 1992 to 2001 was “a period during which TQM went from the limelight to the background of the management stage.” As they point out there was a “fashion bust” (David and Strang2006) and the concept became worn out.

Many commentators were therefore pessimistic with respect to the future trajectory of TQM and painted a relatively bleak picture. Speculations about the demise of TQM were made as far back as the early 1990s (Macdonald1993). Around this time some started questioning the viability of TQM (Paton 1994). (Bohan1998) Commentators started talking about the “last days” of TQM (Albrecht1992b) and the need to “give TQM a decent burial” (Albrecht1992a p. 272).Byrne(1997) referred to TQM as “dead as a pet rock.” Others delivered eulogies (Bohan1998).

However in hindsight it appears that some of these views were too pessimistic Ehigie and McAndrew(2005) found that even though there were indications that TQM looked faddish they could not conclude at the time that it was only a management fad. Some researchers have even documented that there has been a resurgence in the interest in TQM (Rahman2004Williams et al.2004) and that the concept is still alive (Bergquist2012Douglas2006Sower et al.2016) and widely used by organizations worldwide (Rigby and Bilodeau2018).

#### 4. CHARACTERISTICS AND FRAMING OF TQM

This section analyzes the characteristics and framing of TQM. Before proceeding however it is necessary to define what is meant by the notion of a management concept. In the literature on management concepts and ideas there is a multitude of partly overlapping terms such as management tools management techniques and management innovations (Bort2015Wittrock2016). In this paper the author will refer to TQM as a “management concept.” According to Benders and Verlaar (2003 p. 758) management concepts are “prescriptive more or less coherent views on management.” TQM can clearly be considered a management concept since it has a “normative thrust” (Wilkinson and Willmott1995b p. 15) and gives clear recommendations to managers about how to organize and structure their organization to improve quality practices customer satisfaction and ultimately financial performance.

##### 4.1. Label

In the management fashion literature it is frequently pointed out that popular management concepts are labeled in an engaging and appealing way often in the form of a slogan or buzzword (Cluley2013;Kieser1997;Røvik1998). Another typical feature of management concepts and ideas is that they are usually associated with two or three letter acronyms (Grint1997). Grint (1997) uses TQM as a prime example of a three-letter acronym. Over time even though the popularity of the TQM label and acronym has varied it can still be considered a widely used and institutionalized acronym (Yong and Wilkinson2001).

Numerous authors have noted that TQM resembles a buzzword (Bensimon1995Collins2000Qi 1999). As pointed out by Wilkinson and Willmott(1995b p. 1) quality is a term is that “can be used to legitimize all sorts of measures and changes in the name of a self-evident good.” Quality triggers positive associations which makes it an appealing concept (Wilkinson and Willmott1995b p. 2). It is difficult to reject the notion “that we should all strive to improve the quality of products and services” (Tuckman1995 p. 56).Munro(1995 p. 131) asks “Who can be against quality?”

However as noted in Section2 during the 1990s the TQM label started to get “worn out” as a result of negative publicity. As Cole(1999) points out the label became a liability rather than an asset. According to Hensler(2004) there was a general movement away from using the term “quality.”

While there has been a significant reduction in the use of the label TQM in public management discourse it has not disappeared completely evidenced by for instance a wide range of journals focusing on quality issues (e.g. TQM Journal). Moreover surveys show that it is still used to a large extent by organizations worldwide (Rigby and Bilodeau2015).

##### 4.2. Performance Improvements

Another essential characteristic of management concepts is the promise of substantial performance enhancements (ten Bos2000). Proponents of new management concepts highlight the risk of being at a competitive disadvantage if the concept is not adopted (Heusinkveld2004;Kieser1997). Moreover proponents



tend to use lofty emotionally charged and upbeat rhetoric to describe the benefits of adopting and implementing new management concepts. In the case of TQM such claims of performance improvements are easy to identify. During the boom phase proponents of TQM would typically talk of a “revolution” and TQM was widely viewed as a “silver bullet” and panacea (Douglas2006).

However as news of failed TQM implementations surfaced and started to circulate in the business community it became harder to continue to make these claims and promises. Over time claims about TQM became more nuanced and TQM researchers started highlighting that the performance effects of TQM to a large degree depend on how the concept is interpreted and implemented in practice (Easton and Jarrell 1998 Powell 1995).

4.3. Interpretive Space

Another characteristic of management concepts is that they are ideational innovations which have a high degree of conceptual ambiguity and leave substantial room for interpretation (Benders et al. 2000;Benders and Van Veen2001;Giroux2006). This feature of a management concept is sometimes referred to as “interpretive space” or “interpretive viability” (Benders and Van Veen2001;Clark2004) and means that these concepts can be interpreted in a multitude of different ways.

In the case of TQM it is easy to identify a high degree of interpretive space. Table1 provides some illustrative quotes about the interpretive space of the TQM concept. In the literature it is often pointed out that there is a large number of different definitions of TQM (Dahlgaard-Park2015) and that there is confusion about the exact meaning of the concept (Zairi1994). There are also semantic issues as there is a lack of a common interpretation of the term “quality” (Bergquist et al.2005). Some consider TQM to be one of several quality management philosophies (Fredriksson and Isaksson2018). Therefore it should come as little surprise that there is no agreed-upon definition of TQM (Boaden 1997;Hackman and Wageman1995) and a lack of consensus (Nwabueze2001).

**Table 1.** Illustrative quotes about the interpretive space of Total Quality Management (TQM).

| Quote   | References                           |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| “seductive and slippery philosophy of management” “diverse and fluid meanings”    | (Wilkinson and Willmott 1996, p. 55) |
| “has the advantages of the wizard of Oz in being many things to different people” | (Tuckman 1994)                       |

It has been suggested that the TQM concept can be viewed as a collection of different tools and methodologies (Spencer1994). For example Cua et al.(2001) identified nine key tools and practices that usually are considered part of TQM such as customer involvement cross-functional product design strategic planning and process control.

Moreover there are multiple schools of thought within the quality movement (Giroux and Landry 1998;Krüger2001). Adding to the complexity is the fact that there are many different concepts ideas tools and techniques associated with the quality movement (Andersson et al.2006Dahlgaard-Park 2011). Therefore TQM could be viewed as an umbrella concept encompassing many different tools techniques and approaches.

Interpretive space and vagueness make it easier for a concept to “flow” in a community of organizations (Røvik19982002).Giroux(2006) found that the ambiguity of TQM varied over time and that the concept became more vague and ambiguous as it gained popularity. Conceptual ambiguity also has advantages when it comes to a concept’s popularity potential. A degree of ambiguity and wide room for interpretation helps a concept become widely diffused. This is because different groups of actors can see value and potential in the concept; and can shape and adapt it to fit their particular needs and interests (Benders and Van Veen2001;Kieser1997).Benders and Van Veen(2001 p. 38) argue that “ any concept must necessarily lend itself to various interpretations to stand a chance of broad dissemination.”

A high level of ambiguity and a wide room for interpretation also means that the TQM concept is easily mixed and blended with other ideas and approaches which is an advantage since organizations often use several concepts and ideas simultaneously. For example it has been suggested that TQM has links to a number of other similar process improvement concepts and approaches such as Six Sigma and Lean (Boaden1996;Goeke and O ffodile2005;Näslund2008). The room for interpretation also leads to a wide range of translations of TQM in practice (Giroux and Taylor2002). In previous research it has been noted that an extensive range of applications are referred to as TQM (Hill1995 p. 48).

#### 4.4. Universality

Universality is a crucial characteristic of management concepts and ideas (Kieser1997;Wittrock 2015). Management concepts are typically decontextualized from the particularities of any given organization industry or national market and are presented as applicable across the board (Huczynski 1992;Lillrank1995;Røvik2007). Universality is seen to a great extent in the case of TQM. Proponents and propagators of TQM typically argue that quality is something that every organization has to take seriously if they are to remain competitive.

Wilkinson and Willmott(1995b p. 9) noted the “abstract and universal character of TQM philosophy.” Another interesting observation related to TQM is that the concept is viewed as beneficial to nearly any type of organization. In the words ofWilkinson and Willmott(1995b p. 16) “it is simply taken for granted that quality management is benign and universally beneficial”.

Tuckman(1995 p. 63) argues that TQM became an increasingly universalized prescription during the late 1980s. There are numerous examples of TQM applications and adaptations across different sectors such as health care (Motwani et al.1996;Yang 2003;Øvretveit 2000) education (Peck and Reitzug 2012;Stensaker 2007;Williams 1993) and social welfare (Berman1995;Martin1993;Mäntysaari 1998) to name just a few examples.

## 5. THE SUPPLY SIDE OF TQM

The market for fashionable management concepts and ideas has both a supply side and demand side (Abrahamson and Reuben2014;Abrahamson1996). This section provides an analysis of the supply side of the TQM concept. According to management fashion researchers the actors on the supply side (e.g. consulting firms management gurus and business media) are referred to as the “fashion-setting community” (Abrahamson1996) or the “management fashion arena” (Jung and Kieser 2012). In previous research it has been pointed out that many types of fashion-setting actors have been involved in the diffusion and dissemination of TQM (Collins 2000;David and Strang 2006;Jackson 2001;Larsen 2001;Thawesaengskulthai and Tannock 2008;Zbaracki 1998).(Wilkinson and Willmott 1995a)

In the following the various actors involved in the supply of TQM will be described and analyzed in greater detail including how their involvement has varied over time.

### 5.1. Consulting Firms

Consulting firms are important propagators and promoters of new management concepts (Heusinkveld and Benders2012b;Heusinkveld 2013;Jung and Kieser2012). The role of consulting firms in the diffusion of TQM has been duly noted in previous research (David and Strang2006;Jung and Lee2016;Wilkinson and Willmott1995a).Tuckman(1995 p. 71) pointed out that a quality-related consulting industry mushroomed during the 1980s.David and Strang(2006) studied the market for TQM consulting services. They found that during the boom phase of the 1980s many new consulting firms entered the TQM consulting market while during the 1990s there were fewer new entrants and many firms exited the market.

Furthermore they found that in the boom phase the consultancy market was dominated by generalists with relatively little technical knowledge. However in the decline phase when TQM fell out of fashion these generalists pulled out and specialist consultants with more sophisticated technical understanding took over. These specialists were more committed and knowledgeable providers of TQM consulting services (David and Strang2006).

### 5.2. Business Schools

Business schools play an essential role when it comes to the anchoring of new concepts in academic research and discourse (Engwall and Wedlin2019;Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall2002; (Douglas 2013) Business school professors were not actively involved in the field of TQM during the early stage (Miller1996) and there were calls for business schools to take a more active role and to develop more courses about TQM and related issues (Zairi1994). However as the concept became more established during the latter part of the 1990s professors of quality were appointed (Larsen2001).

It has been noted that a possible explanation for academia’s lack of involvement was that there was a certain level of scholarly disdain for the notion of quality. In the words ofWilkinson and Willmott (1996, p. 55) “academics who potentially could provide a broader assessment have tended to regard quality initiatives as too faddish and superficial to be worthy of sustained examination.” The passive role of academia in the early phase meant that quality gurus could dominate the field (Wilkinson and Willmott1996 p. 55). Academics have been “slow to get to grips with TQM leaving the quality gurus to enjoy a virtual monopoly over the discussion” (Hill and Wilkinson1995 p. 8). The relative absence of academics in the early phase could also explain why there is “no single theoretical formalization of total quality” (Hill1995 p. 36).

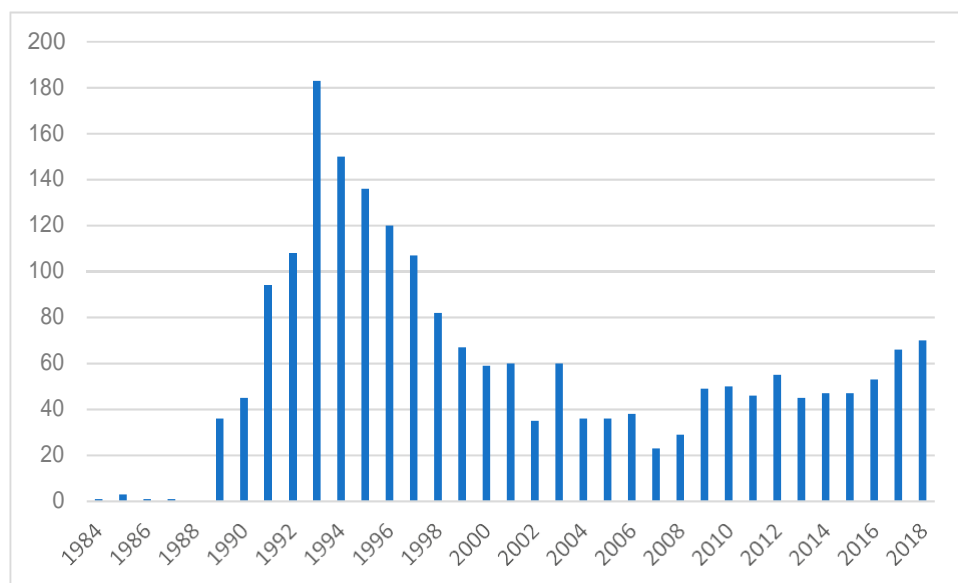
Over time academics have taken a more active role and a large body of research on TQM has accumulated (Carnerud2018;Carnerud and Bäckström2019;Ehigie and McAndrew2005;Larsen2001 Odigie2015). Some of the research has taken a more balanced approach even using critical theories to shed light on the concept (Larsen2001;Wilkinson and Willmott1995a;Yong and Wilkinson1999).

Much of the research has been published in journals with an explicit focus on TQM and related issues. While it has been noted that some TQM-related journals have disappeared (Giroux2006) there are still several academic journals focusing heavily on the TQM concept (e.g. The TQM Journal and Total Quality Management and Business Excellence). For example The TQM Journal has been around for 30 years and is still publishing multiple issues per year (Douglas2013).

During the height of TQM's popularity journals typically published special issues about quality (Giroux2006).Heras-Saizarboritoria et al.(2013) analyzed the popularity of the TQM paradigm using Google Scholar. The number of publications can be seen as an indicator of the popularity of TQM (Näslund2008). As pointed out byGiroux(2006) bibliometric studies have shown that there was a rise in the number of articles about TQM during the late 1980s followed by a fall during the early 1990s.Rüling(2005) noted that based on bibliometric studies it could be argued that TQM was the most important management fashion.

Figure1 shows the evolution of the number of Scopus-indexed articles containing TQM in the article title. Figure1clearly shows that the volume of articles has dropped considerably since the boom period during the early-to-mid 1990s. However since the late 1990s there has been a period of relative stability which could indicate a steady state. However it should be noted that bibliometric research has shown that in recent decades there has been an overall growth in the total volume of indexed articles (Bornmann and Mutz2015). Therefore taking into account this general growth pattern it can be argued that there has been a relative decline in the market share of TQM as a research topic even though the absolute number of articles has stayed relatively stable over time.

**Figure 1.** Scopus-indexed articles with “Total Quality Management” in the title.



### 5.3. Management Gurus

Management gurus develop and popularize new management concepts and ideas (Collins2019; Huczynski1993;Jackson2001). Earlier it was noted that academics were relatively passive in the early phase of TQM's development. This vacuum created an opening for management gurus who assumed a central role in the TQM arena.Wilkinson and Willmott(1996 p. 55) comment that “quality gurus have enjoyed a virtual monopoly over the definition and discussion of the field.”

Several commentators have noted that there have been a large number of influential quality gurus (Bendell et al.1995;Miller1996;Tuckman1995;Zairi2013). Zairi discusses a wide range of gurus that have influenced TQM including Deming Juran Crosby Feigenbaum Ishikawa Conway Tagushi Shingo and Ouchi (Zairi2013).

Others have highlighted the role of Deming Juran and Crosby (Miller1996) as well as Feigenbaum and Ishikawa (Ghobadian and Speller1994).Tuckman(1995 p. 63) argues that Crosby was the most charismatic promoter of TQM. SimilarlyDouglas(2007) notes that Crosby could “hold an audience of academics and industrialists spellbound as he expounded the principles of quality management.” During the 1990s a new generation of TQM gurus appeared led by Oakland (Wilkinson and Willmott 1995b pp. 8–9). Overall the vital

role played by (more or less) charismatic quality gurus means that TQM at least in some ways resembles a religious movement (Walshe2002) with charismatic leaders (e.g. quality gurus) and ardent followers of the different quality gurus.

#### 5.4. *Organizations and Institutes*

One salient feature of the supply side of TQM is the importance of organizations and institutes focusing on disseminating information about the importance of quality and providing guidance to potential adopters of TQM grappling with quality-related issues and practices. These organizations and institutes have played an essential role in the professionalization of the quality field (Antony2013). Many of the infrastructures for the dissemination of knowledge about quality emerged in the post WW2 era. For example the American Society for Quality (ASQ) formerly the American Society for

Quality Control (ASQC) was founded in 1946 (Dahlgaard-Park2015;Giroux2006). Another important organization in the US is the American Productivity and Quality Center (APQC). In Europe The British Quality Association European Foundation for Quality Management and the European Center for TQM are examples of influential organizations.

These organizations and institutes have been influential in terms of building networks between users providing education/training and issuing awards. However the role and importance of these organizations have varied over time Giroux(2006) argues that the number of members can measure the interest in TQM. For example the membership in ASQ tripled during the late 1980s and early 1990s then stabilized before it started falling around the turn of the millennium.

#### 5.5. *Awards*

There have also been many awards related to quality (Bohoris1995;Cauchick Miguel2001; Hendricks and Singhal1999;Kennedy2019;Laszlo1996). The Deming Prize established in 1951 was the first quality award in Japan (Dahlgaard-Park2015). This prize served as the blueprint for other quality awards set up in other parts of the world later (Dahlgaard-Park2015). During the 1980s the US Congress passed the National Quality Improvement Act. The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award was established in 1987 (Cole1999;Shetty 1993) and was followed by the introduction of local awards in the different US states.

During the late 1980s and 1990s similar types of awards spread to other parts of the world. The Australian Quality Award was established in 1988 (Dahlgaard-Park2015) and the European Quality Award in 1991 (Dahlgaard-Park2015). Another example is the European Quality Award Model (Conti2007) and a similar award was given out in Brazil (Cauchick Miguel2001). By the early 2000s it was reported that there were national and regional awards in 16 countries (Tan2002;Vokurka et al. 2000).Dahlgaard-Park(2015) states that a common assumption is that there are at least 90 national and regional quality awards worldwide.

The concept of “quality awards” has drawn considerable criticism. Some researchers are highly skeptical of such awards Macdonald(1998) calls these awards “Business Oscars” which do little more than legitimize particular fashionable approaches Macdonald(1998 p. 332) writes that “the whole concept of individual company awards for quality or any other aspect of business performance is suspect.” At the same time awards provide some value in bringing quality to the forefront of managers’ attention.

Over time however the role of quality awards has diminished in importance. By the late 1990s the number of applications for awards had already started falling (Harmon and Laird1997). Similarly the number of applications for the Baldrige Award also declined during the late 1990s (Giroux2006). Moreover a recent study finds that the Baldrige Award is on its way out (Cook and Zhang2019).

#### 5.6. *Conferences and Seminars*

The conference/seminar scene plays a crucial role in the diffusion and legitimization of new management concepts and ideas (Kieser1997). The conference and seminar circuit serves as a setting where managers are exposed to new management concepts and ideas (Madsen2014;Powell et al.2006). During TQM’s upswing phase organizations would typically send delegates to TQM conferences to learn about the concept and to network with other users of TQM.

The activity on the conference and seminar scene can be seen as a measure of the popularity of TQM (Dahlgaard-Park2011).Spemley(1992) noted that there were more TQM conferences than ever.Larsen(2001) mentions several examples of TQM conferences that were established and grew in importance during the late 1980s and 1990s.Kravchuk and Leighton(1993) commented that “one sign of the current interest in TQM is the large number of TQM conferences workshops and training seminars run for government executives.” There was also an increase in TQM-related training during the late 1980s and early 1990s (Giroux2006). Table2displays some quotes that illustrate the intense activity during the boom period in the early 1990s.



**Table 2.** Illustrative quotes about the role of conferences/seminars related to TQM.

| Quote  | Reference             |
|--|-----------------------|
| “When I attended my first full-fledged quality seminar in 1990, TQM seemed a perfect fit for our organization”   | Hunt (1995, p. 24)    |
| “at the QHE 24-Hour seminar in January 1993 the TQM-related session was by far the most popular. Anecdotal evidence suggests that TQM-related sessions are now seen as somewhat passé” | Harvey (1995, p. 135) |

However the high level of interest in conferences and seminars related to TQM was not sustained over time. Just a few years later Harmon and Laird(1997) pointed out that attendance at TQM conferences had fallen greatly since the early 1990s. This trend seems to have continued into the new millennium and during the mid-2000sDouglas(2007) lamented that conferences were not well attended and often by the same group of people.

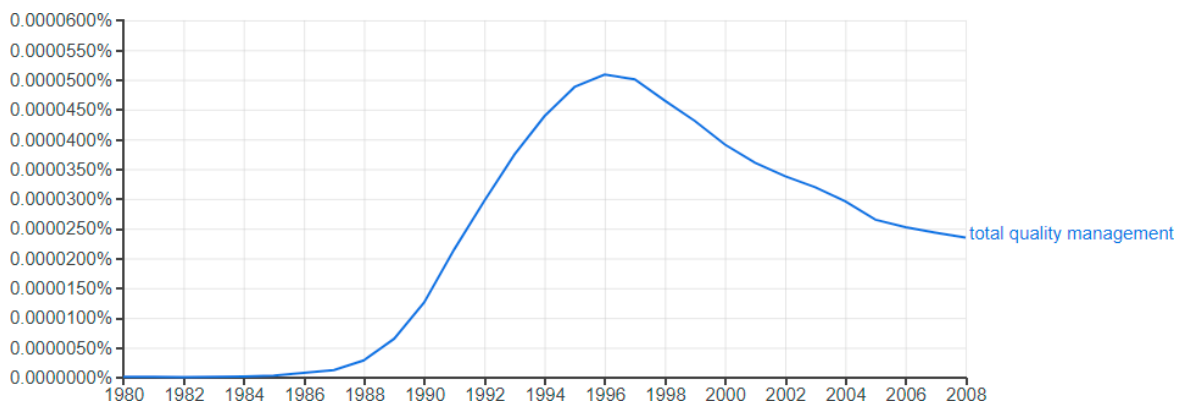
5.7. *Business Media*

Different types of business media organizations (e.g. publishers of newspapers magazines and books) are important in the diffusion of management concepts and ideas (Barros and Ruling2019). In recent years much of the discourse around management concepts and ideas has shifted from traditional print media to social media (Barros and Ruling2019;Madsen and Slatten2015b).

However for the purposes of this paper most of the analysis will focus on print-media discourse related to TQM. There is a natural explanation for why TQM has not had a large footprint in social media. TQM can be considered an “old” management concept and social media were not available during the concept’s boom phase in the 1980s and 1990s. While there is some activity related to TQM on social media platforms such as LinkedIn and Twitter it is not nearly as intensive as the discourse related to new concepts such as Big Data Analytics Agile Management and Industry 4.0 (Madsen and Stenheim2016;Madsen2019;Madsen2020).

In previous research on TQM it has been noted that business media organizations have been involved in several different ways. In the beginning the business media functioned as an enthusiastic cheerleader of TQM drumming up support by publishing mostly positive and upbeat pieces about the concept. Later this changed when articles started questioning the merits of the concept (Yong and Wilkinson1999). As noted byHendricks and Singhal(1999) during the 1990s there were for example numerous articles critical of TQM in high-profile business newspapers and magazines such as The Economist Wall Street Journal Newsweek and USA Today. The TQM craze was also extensively satirized in the Dilbert cartoons (Langlois2000). In addition the intensity of TQM discourse in these channels started decreasing.Ehigie and McAndrew(2005) noted that were indications of a decrease in the attention that the concept was receiving in the popular press.

**Figure 2.** Data source: Google Books Ngram Viewer available at<http://books.google.com/ngrams> retrieved 07 December 2017.



Books about quality have also played an important role in the diffusion and dissemination process. There is a long list of books about TQM (Bank1992;Dale and Cooper1992;Drummond1992; Garvin1988;Oakland1989). As pointed out byDahlggaard-Park(2015) few of the books published before 1990 used the term TQM explicitly and the first book with title TQM was published by James Oakland (Oakland1989). Most of the TQM books

have typically been practitioner-oriented in nature and authored by management gurus and consultants based on experiences from organizational practice and/or consulting work. Books about TQM have only to a limited extent built on an academic/theoretical foundation. As Larsen (2001) notes these books were mostly authored by consultants. During the maturity phase of the late 1990s academics also started writing textbooks. These more scholarly books generally took a more balanced and analytical approach to the concept.

Another way to assess the role of books in the popularization of TQM is to use the Google Books Ngram Viewer (Michel et al. 2011). This analytical tool shows how often the term “Total Quality Management” is mentioned in books in the period up to 2008 (Figure 2). As Figure 2 shows the use of the TQM term peaked during the mid-1990s and entered a period of steady decline during the 2000s. The shape of the curve thus resembles the typical inverted U-shape often documented in studies of management fashions (Abrahamson 1996).

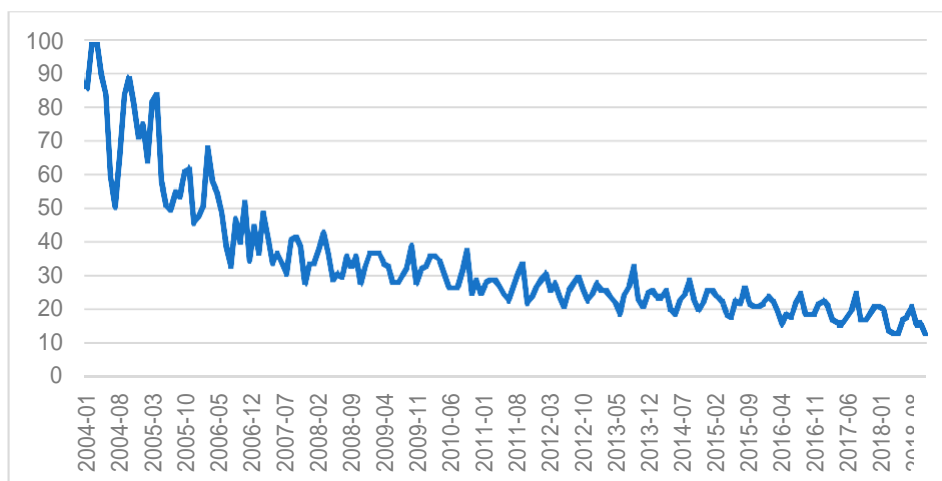
### 5.8. Summary

A broad spectrum of actors have been involved in building and sustaining the popularity of the TQM concept. In terms of driving the theorization and legitimation of the concept the quality gurus have played a particularly influential role for example by translating organizational practices and framing them as theorized management concepts that can be applied irrespective of context. Consultants have also played a central role particularly in the boom phase when most consulting firms offered TQM services. Quality centers and institutes have played an important supporting role on the supply side by carrying out a range of activities to drum up and sustain the interest in TQM. This has for instance been done via quality awards. Business media also took on a role as cheerleaders during the boom years but over time the sentiment of business media articles has turned more critical and skeptical. Social media have not played an influential role in shaping the trajectory of TQM. However it can be argued that the relative neglect these days has a negative effect on the overall perception of TQM's relevance and timeliness. Finally academics were passive in the early phase but have become increasingly more active in recent years.

## 6. THE DEMAND SIDE OF TQM

This section examines the demand side of TQM i.e. organizations and managers that are potential users of the concept. It can be challenging to get data about the uptake of TQM in practice. Assessing the use of management concepts by organizations on the demand side is a general problem in research on management concepts and ideas (Benders and Van Veen 2001; Clark 2004; Nijholt and Benders 2007). Therefore this section utilizes several different sources of evidence that together will shed light on various aspects of the demand side impact of TQM: (1) search interest (2) adoption/diffusion (3) implementation and (4) expectations and effects.

**Figure 3.** Data source: www.google.com /trends retrieved 5 February 2019.



### 6.1. Search Interest

Google Trends (Choi and Varian 2012) is an analytical tool that can be used to monitor and measure the interest in different search terms in the period from 2004 until the present time. In previous research it has been suggested that this tool may be able to provide some insight into the interest in and salience of management concepts and ideas such as TQM (Madsen 2016). As Figure 3 shows the peak interest in TQM was in 2004 and since then the level of interest has been on a steady downward trajectory. The decrease could be explained in

different ways. One explanation is that the concept is perceived as old and not as “innovative” as new concepts such as Big Data Analytics and Agile Management which in the last few years have enjoyed a sharp upswing in popularity (Rigby and Bilodeau2018). Another possible reason for the decrease in search activity could be that TQM has become an accepted and entrenched part of the business vocabulary (Cedrola2015;Dahlggaard-Park2015;Hindle2008) and that there is less need to “Google” what TQM is.

## 6.2. Adoption and Diffusion

Detailed overviews of TQM adoption and diffusion are relatively hard to come by. A general problem is that many of the studies of TQM adoption and diffusion have been carried at different times using different research methods and sample sizes which makes comparison difficult.

Wilkinson and Willmott(1995b) cite a study by McKinsey and Company(1989) which found that there was strong and enthusiastic support for quality initiatives among executives.Wilkinson and Willmott(1995b p. 1) also cite other studies reporting that about three-quarters of companies in the US and the UK have quality initiatives.Osterman(19942000) and Lawler et al.(2001) provided some evidence showing that TQM continued to be widely implemented throughout the 1990s.Gibson et al.(2003) documented that managers had a high degree of knowledge and familiarity with the TQM concept. A survey carried out in Norway showed that most respondents had not adopted and implemented TQM to a large extent and had a long way to go (Sun1999). In a recent study from EthiopiaAddis(2019) notes that TQM is a relatively new concept but finds that it is now used at a moderate level.

Bain & Company’s biannual “Management Tools and Trends” survey can be used to obtain a longitudinal overview of TQM’s worldwide popularity. An advantage in the case of TQM is that the concept has been part of this survey since its inception more than 25 years ago.

Figure4 shows that the adoption rate was very high during the early to mid-1990s before it started falling towards the late 1990s. Although there was a resurgence during the first half of the 2000s the usage rate started falling again during the late 2000s and has stabilized at around 30 percent in recent years. It should be noted that Figure4shows the usage rate percentage and while there is a clear downward trend in terms of the percentage of companies who use TQM there has been a general decline in the usage of management tools according to Bain & Company’s survey (Rigby and Bilodeau 2018). This means that the usage ranking of TQM has increased even though the absolute number of users has decreased.

**Figure 4.** Usage rate (Source: Bain & Company’s surveys 1993–2017).

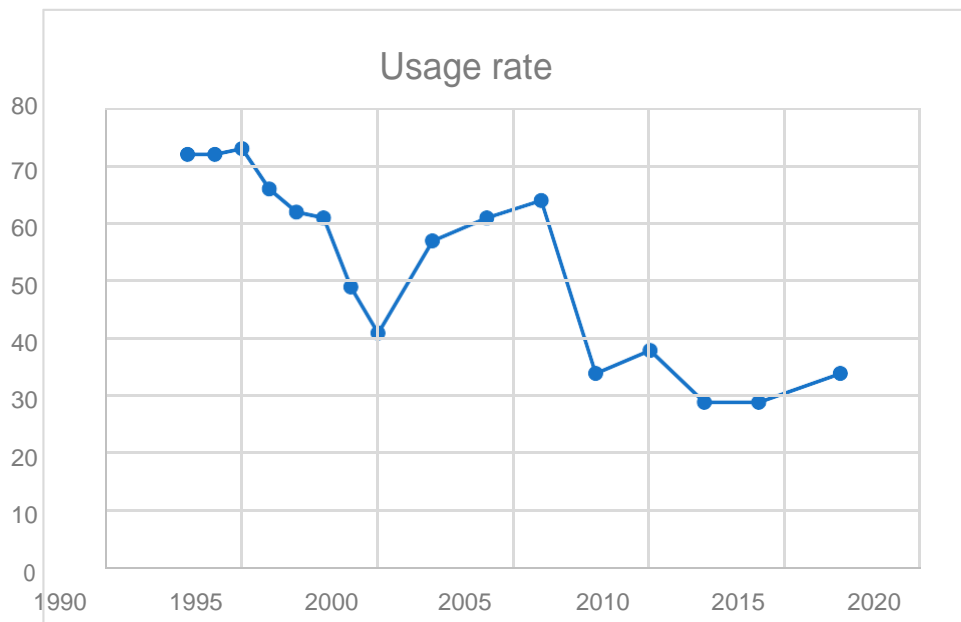
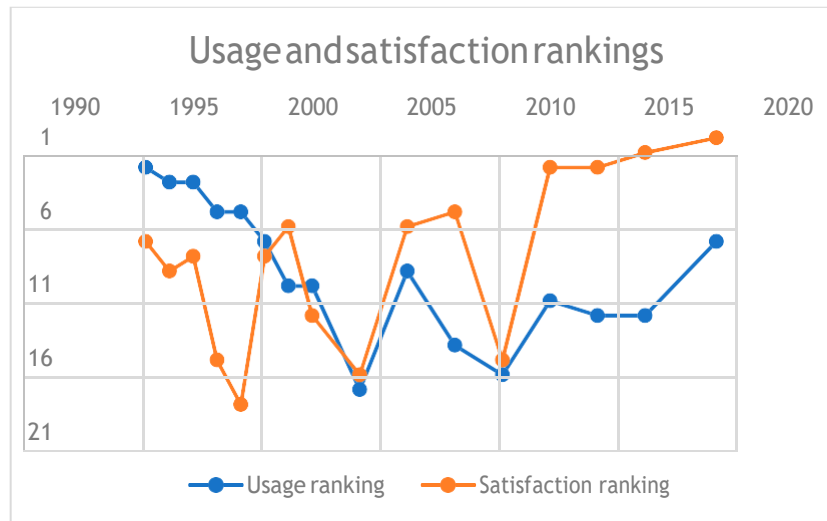


Figure5 provides an overview of the usage and satisfaction ranking over the period 1993-2017. The figure shows that the use of TQM ranked among the top 5 in the 1990s. At the same time it can be observed that the concept’s position has slipped a little in recent years. However TQM is still among the top 15 and has climbed to eighth place in the most recent survey (Rigby and Bilodeau2018). The satisfaction ranking has been on an upward trajectory in recent years and has hovered around the top three before reaching first place in 2017. What could explain that an “old-school” concept such as TQM is associated with such high levels of satisfaction? A

possible explanation could be that organizations are better able to avoid the pitfalls now that TQM has become a more well-established concept and is less subject to hyping and inflated expectations.

**Figure 5.** Usage and satisfaction rankings (Source: Bain & Company's surveys 1993–2017).



While Figure 5 illustrates the trajectory in terms of the global usage rate other researchers have noted that there has been a shift in the relative popularity of TQM across geographical regions. In the West TQM has been on a downward trajectory and has been overtaken by other concepts and ideas. In Eastern Europe and other emerging economies there is currently much activity concerning TQM (Dahlgard-Park 2015).

### 6.3. Implementation

As was noted in Section 4.3 TQM is a management concept that can be interpreted and implemented in many different ways Westphal et al. (1997) found that early adopters tended to customize TQM to their organization. In contrast later adopters tended to imitate others and conform to what was considered appropriate ways to use the concept. There also appears to be differences in terms of how firms of different sizes implement TQM Sun and Cheng (2002) found that small and medium-sized firms focus more on the informal and people-oriented aspects while larger firms focus more on the structured organized and process-oriented aspects of TQM. This finding may not be surprising since larger firms typically have access to more time and resources which can be invested to improve structures and processes. Moreover they tend to possess advanced IT systems that can be used to support TQM.

Research has also found that there is considerable variation when it comes to the level of TQM implementation (Dale and Lascelles 1997). An alternative way to look at TQM implementation is to think of “stages of quality culture” (Sandholm 1999) and what it takes for an organization to mature in its quality thinking and practices Hill and Wilkinson (1995 p. 10) note that “companies seem to pick up bits and pieces of TQM and then report that they are operating TQM when in reality most schemes appear an ill-matched mixture of quality circles employee involvement quality tools and long established quality assurance systems.” In practice TQM manifests itself in different ways (Webb 1995 p. 122).

As a whole these findings suggest that while the TQM concept has persisted (Venkateswarlu and Nilakant 2005) there is much variation in terms of implementation patterns. Therefore it is still to a large extent an open question precisely what parts of the TQM concept have persisted in practice (Bernardino et al. 2016).

### 6.4. Expectations and Effects

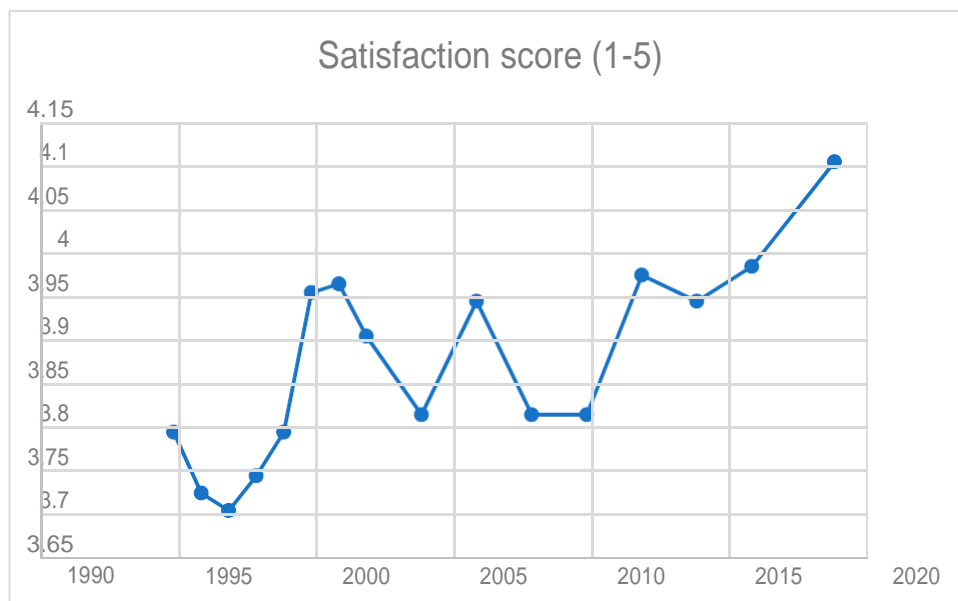
There has been much discussion of whether TQM leads to increased financial performance. During the heydays of the 1980s and early 1990s expectations were very high in particular in organizational practice. It has been noted that TQM implementations generally have struggled to deliver the financial performance improvements that users were hoping for and that these disappointing results have led to disillusionment (Hendricks and Singhal 1999). Some of the reasons for disillusionment could be due to the very upbeat rhetoric about TQM during the early period which led to overly optimistic expectations concerning the effects of TQM (Zbaracki 1998). Staw and Epstein (2000) found that some managers adopted TQM to increase legitimacy and were driven more by bandwagon pressures.

Academic researchers have disagreed when it comes to the question of whether TQM affects financial performance Easton and Jarrell(1998) found a relationship between the use of TQM and performance particularly among the firms that use a more advanced form of TQM Powell(1995) found that it was not the techniques and tools associated with TQM that give firms a competitive advantage; rather it is the “softer” organizational and behavioral changes in the aftermath of a thorough TQM process that may be the source of competitive advantage. Examples of such changes include a more open organizational culture employee involvement and managerial focus. These effects may be hard to imitate while tools and techniques to a greater extent can be copied or bought in the marketplace (cf.Barney1991).

The mixed results have also led to a discussion about whether TQM is a flawed management idea (i.e. there is something wrong with TQM as a concept) or if it instead is implemented wrongly (Wilkinson and Willmott1996). Defenders of TQM tend to argue that the lack of success is due to the way TQM is implemented and that there is not something inherently wrong with the concept (Evans 1995;Sørhaug2016). As a consequence of the many failures reported in practice authors have sought to identify common mistakes made in TQM implementation projects. For example it is commonly argued that it is important to learn from failures (Macdonald1995) and to identify the reasons why TQM does not work (Harari1993). Moreover it is important to understand possible reasons for disappointment (Macdonald1996) and failure (Asif et al.2009;Mohammad Mosadeghrad2014).

Figure6shows that the average satisfaction score has remained relatively stable but also that it has been on a slight upward trajectory in recent years Rigby and Bilodeau(2018 p. 5) note that “Total Quality Management’s systematic approach to quality improvement earns the highest satisfaction rates including particularly strong reviews in China and India.”

**Figure 6.** Satisfaction score (Source: Bain & Company’s surveys 1993–2017).



## 7. DISCUSSION

### 7.1. Emergence

The historical review has shown that the emergence of TQM to a large part was driven by quality gurus such as Deming Juran and Crosby. The passivity of academics during the early phase created a vacuum and an opening for these gurus to establish themselves as authorities and thought leaders (Wilkinson and Willmott1996). Over time the strong position of the quality gurus also shaped the TQM literature and discourse and gave it a distinct “guru flavor.” During the 1980s and 1990s a wide range of fashion-setting actors (e.g. consultants trainers conference organizers book authors business journalists) threw their hats into the ring and generated a “wave of interest” surrounding quality.

Another important driver of the emergence of TQM was the formation of an elaborate organizational infrastructure (e.g. organizations and institutes) which disseminated information and knowledge about quality



thinking in the post WW2 era. This organizational infrastructure supporting quality thinking (cf. e.g. Benders et al.2019;Perkmann and Spicer2008) has been important in sustaining the interest in quality even in the face of various criticisms and problems Perkmann and Spicer(2008) describe the various types of supporting activities carried out by proponents of the quality movement (e.g. standard-setting awards development of professional identities which has helped institutionalize TQM and make it a more permanent practice (Perkmann and Spicer2008). The varied evidence reviewed in Section4shows many examples of activities performed by suppliers of TQM.

### 7.2. *Current Status*

During the 1990s the TQM concept started to face strong headwinds. TQM generally failed to live up to the overly high expectations among adopters and academics and other skeptics started to question the lofty promises and the TQM concept's overall merits. During the 1990s the concept faced strong competition in the market for management knowledge as several competing management concept movements tried to establish themselves e.g. Business Process Reengineering (BPR) Benchmarking Lean and Balanced Scorecard to name just a few. As Wilkinson and Willmott(1995b p. 9) noted TQM came under attack from "those peddling new panaceas" such as BPR which criticized TQM as being an incremental as opposed to a radical "big bang" approach to organizational change.

Moreover during this time several competing and to some extent related and complementary concepts were introduced and popularized in the management knowledge market. For example Six Sigma is an example of a related concept (Goeke and Offodile2005;Sabet et al.2016) which Green (2006) argues breathed new life into TQM and contributed to a revival of TQM through the use of "fresh" and non-contaminated labels (cf.Benders and Van Veen2001).

In recent years there have been some developments that suggest that the TQM label has gone out of fashion and that it has been toned down. For example it has been observed that the wording of the quality awards has been changed slightly (Dahlgaard-Park2015). Another example suggesting that the word "quality" is not as popular as it used to be is the fact that the EFQM Model has been changed to the "European Model for Business Excellence" (Dahlgaard-Park2015).

Despite the criticism and strong competition from other management concept movements the TQM concept has not disappeared and is still impacting both discourse and practice (Bergquist2012; Douglas2006;Sower et al.2016). Some researchers have documented that there has been a resurgence in the interest in TQM (Rahman2004Williams et al.2004). During the mid-2000sEhigie and McAndrew (2005) noted that the adoption and diffusion of TQM was on the rise globally. While it may be on a downward trajectory in the West there are signs it may be on the rise in other parts of the world (Dahlgaard-Park2015). For example the TQM concept is widely diffused in countries such as China (Huang et al.2016) and Turkey (Özen and Berkman2007).

### 7.3. *Possible Future Trajectory*

Lastly the discussion will focus on TQM's future trajectory similar to what others have done in the past (e.g. Brown2013;Harris1995). The historical review in this paper has shown that the TQM concept has roots that go back decades and in a life cycle perspective the TQM concept reached old age already during the early 2000s (Larsen2001). TQM no longer receives the level of attention in public management discourse that it did in the early phase of its life cycle.Dahlgaard-Park(2015) argues that other buzzwords such as Six Sigma Lean and Business/Organizational Excellence have taken TQM's place in public management discourse.Jung and Kieser(2012 p. 329) define management fashions as those "management concepts that relatively speedily gain large shares in the public management discourse." Following this definition it can be argued that the TQM concept is no longer a management fashion.

At the same time the evidence indicates that TQM is still alive and that the concept has persisted despite criticism backlash and stiff competition from a multitude of newer management concepts. It is interesting to observe that a concept from the "boomer generation" of management concept is still ranked in the top 10 of management concepts and tools (Rigby and Bilodeau2018).

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

### 8.1. *Concluding Comments*

The current paper has aimed to reexamine the historical popularity trajectory of TQM. As noted at the outset there is a multitude of conflicting viewpoints on the trajectory of TQM in the literature. By synthesizing and reconciling the findings of the vast literature on TQM this paper provides an updated status report and a longitudinal overview of the trajectory of TQM from its inception up until today.

While the current paper is certainly not the first to view TQM through the lens of management fashion it differs from previous papers by taking an integrative view of TQM from both a supply side and a demand side perspective. This arguably provides a more balanced account of TQM's historical popularity trajectory. A study focusing solely on TQM from a supply side perspective would easily conclude that the concept is on life support since it no longer occupies a central place in public management discourse. When looking at the demand-side however the picture becomes more nuanced as several sources show that TQM is still alive on the demand side. This finding is interesting in the context of the debate of the coevolution between public management discourse and organizational uptake of management fashions (Abrahamson and Fairchild1999;Clark2004;Nijholt and Benders2007). It suggests that once-fashionable concepts such as TQM may stick around for a very long time in organizational practice (Heusinkveld and Benders2012a;Perkmann and Spicer2008).

### 8.2. *Limitations and Areas for Future Research*

The current paper has several shortcomings which should be considered carefully. Due to the various challenges associated with researching management concepts and ideas (Madsen and Stenheim 2013;Strang and Wittrock2019) it has been necessary to make several pragmatic methodological choices.

The current paper has aimed to provide a birds-eye view of the historical popularity trajectory of TQM. It has not been possible to fully take into account the viewpoints of all the actors involved or to chronicle all the events that have taken place in the history of TQM. Instead the picture that emerges can be considered a "mosaic" (Morrison and Wensley1991) or "overall picture" (Nijholt and Benders2007). The paper is also limited by its heavy reliance on secondary sources (Nijholt and Benders2007) which have been gathered at different times using different research methods and sample sizes. Lastly the analysis is also a little skewed towards data about supply side activity around TQM. As discussed in Section6 it is relatively hard to find suitable and reliable data about the use of TQM among organizations on the demand side.

The various limitations open up several possibilities for future research. Instead of retrospectively reconstructing an overall picture of the trajectory of TQM in the future researchers could follow and trace the trajectory of TQM in real-time. Since the field of TQM is not as fast-moving as it was during the boom period of the 1980s and 1990s it is now easier to obtain and maintain an overview of the key players and their activities.

Another possibility would be to zoom in on the diffusion and implementation of TQM in different regional or national contexts. In the current study the focus has been on the popularity of TQM at the international level. However the popularity trajectory of TQM is likely to diverge as the concept is diffused and translated in different local settings and the so-called "national reception patterns" (Benders et al.2000) of TQM may vary. The findings of this paper indicate that while TQM is on the decline in the West it is on the rise in emerging and developing countries (Addis2019;Dahlgaard-Park 2015;Isaksson et al.2016). A cross-country study of the diffusion of TQM could shed more light on how the trajectory of the concept varies across time and space.

### **Conflicts of Interest:**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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