Management consulting: a review of fifty years of scholarly research

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Abstract

Purpose – Academic research on management consulting or having management consultancy as the main research field is huge as the sector is a strategic one for management innovation, but a systematic and updated literature review is missing. This paper aims to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive systematic review of scholarly peer reviewed journals looking at the ambivalent roles of consultants in driving management innovation as well as management fashions.

Design/methodology/approach – A systematic literature review has been performed.

Findings – This paper provides a systematization of existing literature, where the state of the art is assessed and future research paths are highlighted.

Originality/value – The proposed research fills the gap concerning a review of literature on this topic and provides an analysis of 50 years of scholarly research, highlighting both the bright and dark sides of management consulting.

Keywords Literature review, Knowledge management, Management innovation, Strategic management and leadership, Management fashion, Management consulting, Client-consultant relationship

Paper type Literature review

1. Introduction

The topic of management consulting (from now on MC) has given rise to much attention among scholars since the middle of the last century. Several definitions have been provided, focusing attention on the main features and the areas that MC covers.

MC can be defined as:

> [. . .] an independent professional advisory service assisting managers and organizations to achieve organizational purposes and objectives by solving management and business problems, identifying and seizing new opportunities, enhancing learning and implementing changes (Kubr, 2002: p. 10).

Corrigendum: It has come to the attention of the publisher that the article Ernesto Tavoletti, Corrado Cerruti, Cecilia Grieco, (2019) "Management consulting: a review of fifty years of scholarly research", published in *Management Research Review*, currently on Earlycite, listed an incorrect author order. The correct order is Corrado Cerruti, Ernesto Tavoletti, Cecilia Grieco (2019) "Management consulting: a review of fifty years of scholarly research". Future citations should reflect this correction. The authors sincerely apologise for this.

Different elements have been pointed out as key dimensions of MC, such as the role of consultants that have to be independent in financial, decision-making and emotive terms and the skills they are required to have to successfully carry out the consulting process (Ciampi, 2014). The interplay between the national systemic context and outside influences has been taken into account, i.e. the dynamics consultancy–client relationship, and the generation, management and validation of consulting knowledge (Kipping and Engwall, 2002).

MC's main areas of activity are general and strategic management, information technology, financial management, marketing and distribution management, e-business, operations management, human resource management, knowledge management, productivity and performance management, total quality management, company transformation (turnaround, downsizing, outsourcing, insourcing, re-engineering, M&A, joint ventures, privatization) and corporate social responsibility (Kubr, 2002).

When they turn to MC, organizations expect to improve their performance, solve their problems and find new and better ways of doing things, in the private and public sectors.

In recent years, the MC industry has been growing fast: according to FEACO, the European Federation of Management Consultancies Associations, European MC turnover has been growing more than European GDP: on average 6.4 per cent per year vs 2.2 per cent (FEACO, 2017). Similarly, in the same period, European MC employment has been growing more than European overall employment: on average 6 per cent per year vs. 0.8 per cent (FEACO, 2017). At the same time, the MC industry is under pressure because clients are asking for more transparency, as highlighted by the recent ISO 20700 standard "Guidelines for Management Consultancy Services" (ISO, 2017) and the rules of the games in the consulting business are being affected by the digital transformation (Christensen et al., 2013).

The importance of this phenomenon is clear and confirmed by the great number of publications on the topic. Notwithstanding, a comprehensive literature review on the topic is still lacking, hampering a full comprehension and systematization of existing knowledge about MC.

Drawing from these premises, the present paper provides a systematic review of academic literature on MC published in scholarly peer reviewed journals, underlining the evincible trends and main streams of research that emerge. We believe that a review of scholarly research on MC is especially relevant now because MC firms (from now on MCFs) are going through a very disruptive change to their business models. This change has been named the "digital revolution" (Christensen et al., 2013) and reviewing what we know at the dawn of this disruptive change is a critical and preliminary step to face it fully equipped.

The structure of the paper is as follows: Section 2 illustrates the adopted method and steps that have been performed to drive the analysis. Section 3 reports on a quantitative analysis of the nature and distribution of the relevant literature. Section 4 reports on a qualitative analysis on the contents of the relevant literature. Section 5 discusses the results, draws conclusion and highlights future research paths.

2. Methods
The purpose of the paper is to develop a systematic literature review on MC, filling a gap that has emerged in studies on management research concerning this topic. To meet this purpose, the authors followed the protocol described by Tranfield et al. (2003), by documenting the search strategy (i.e. proposed search strings and databases to be used), the selection criteria and the approaches for data extraction and synthesis. More specifically, a search in the EBSCO database has been performed, looking for scholarly peer reviewed journals and articles published from 1947 to the end of 2017. The selection of this database is justified by the fact that it includes the abstracts of all the most relevant journals in management. Therefore, including additional databases would not have enlarged the

number of relevant articles. The databases Scopus, ABI/INFORM, Google Scholar and Web of Science were used to retrieve full texts once a relevant abstract had been identified in EBSCO. Although it is reasonable to assume that relevant knowledge on the topic can be present in books, the business press and business reports, the choice of limiting the review to scholarly peer reviewed journals is justified by the fact that they are the most reliable source of verified management knowledge for the scientific community. At the same time, we have included some highly relevant books in the introduction and discussion, as they contribute to systematize the most relevant ideas and trends in the industry.

The selected keyword was "management consult*" in the abstract, in order to have a broader view on the topic and include, in the first stage, as many studies as possible. The abstracts collected from this search totalled 2,612. These results were then refined, focusing on journals with an emphasis on general management, strategic management and innovation management and the number of abstracts then reduced to 504. These 504 articles were read independently by the authors to delete the non-relevant ones and any duplicates. This process resulted in 116 relevant articles drawn from 64 journals and formed the basis of the analysis (Figure 1).

Each article was content analysed for a dual purpose. The first was to provide an analysis of the main features of contributions about MC. In this sense, the selected articles were analysed in terms of year of publication, names and number of authors, author affiliation, the type of study (theoretical or empirical), the adopted methodology (data collection and processing, unit of analysis, country of the study) and the number of citations according to the Google Scholar index. The second purpose was to identify the main streams of research that emerge from existing contributions, to offer a systematization of the analysed studies. To this end, the inductive category development approach was followed, in which researchers immerse themselves in the data to allow new insights to emerge (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).
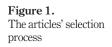
Three researchers performed the analysis. Protocol development and inter-code reliability procedures were used to ensure the reliability and validity of the coding results. The retrieved articles and abstracts were inserted in an Excel file and each author proposed a classification in one of the following three clusters: drivers for MC success, role of consultants and client–consultant (c-c) relationship. Whenever a disagreement about classification emerged, it was discussed until an agreement was reached between the three researchers.

3. Quantitative analysis

The 116 analysed papers were drawn from 64 different academic journals. As shown in Table I, the journals included are numerous, confirming that the topic under investigation is widely covered.

The selected timeframe stretches from 1971 to 2017, covering 46 years of research. The analysis of the number of articles in each year (Figure 2) shows an initial period (1971-1997) where the number of publications remained steadily low. Then from 1998 to 2015 there has been a swinging trend, where an overall growth is slightly visible and a peak in 2016 that has the highest number of publications (n. 14).

Focusing on the content of the analysed articles, 72 per cent of the papers are empirical, against a smaller number (28 per cent) of theoretical researches. Among the empirical

Figure 1.
The articles' selection process

No. of articles	Journal(s)
9	*Organization; Journal of Management Studies; Journal of Organizational Change Management*
6	*International Studies of Management & Organization*
5	*Human Relations; Management Decision; Service Industries Journal*
4	*Scandinavian Journal of Management*
3	*Academy of Management Journal; Organization Studies*
2	*Journal of Change Management; Journal of General Management; Journal of Management Development; Journal of Management Inquiry; Management Learning; Schmalenbach Business Review; Strategic Management Journal; Research Policy*
1	*Academy of Management Review; Academy of Strategic Management Journal; Asia Pacific Business Review; Asian Business & Management; British Journal of Management; Business Process Management Journal; Culture and Organization; Economic Processes Management: International Scientific E-Journal; Ekonomika; Ephemera; European Accounting Review; European Journal of Marketing; European Journal of Training and Development; European Management Review; Financial Accountability & Management; IIMB Management Review; Industrial Marketing Management; International Journal of Business & Information; International Journal of Construction Project Management; International Journal of Higher Education Policy & Management; International Journal of Human Resource Management; Journal of Operations & Production Management; International Journal of Project Management; International Journal of Public Sector Management; International Small Business Journal; International Studies of Management & Organization; Journal of American Academy of Business; Journal of Communication Management; Journal of Contemporary Management Research; Journal of European Industrial Training; Journal of International Management; Journal of Marketing Management; Journal of Organizational Behavior; Journal of Technology Management & Innovation; Long Range Planning; Management Communication Quarterly; Management Research Review; Measuring Business Excellence; Public Personnel Management; South Asian Journal of Management; Strategic Change; The Journal of Developing Areas*

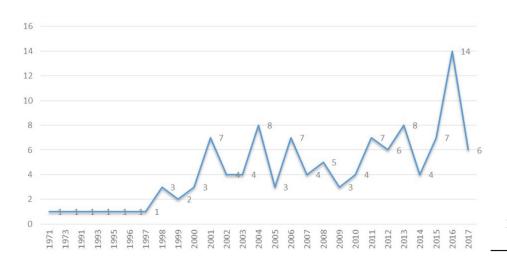**Table I.**
List of journals and
number of articles

Figure 2.
Number of articles
per year

articles, qualitative methods are the preferred option; for example, 38 per cent use interviews and 24 per cent are fully developed case study analyses.

Quantitative methods form a minor part (10 per cent of surveys, 9 per cent of regression analysis, 6 per cent of structural equation models). Other methods include desk research, participant observation, website analysis and mixed methods (Figure 3).

A deeper analysis of the empirical papers aimed at identifying the object of the researches in terms of unit of analysis, MC industry and country. As for the former, in most of the cases (67 per cent) consultants (both firms and individuals) make up the unit of analysis. 17 per cent of the researches are focused on the other side of the coin, i.e. analysing clients (both firms and managers) that turn or have turned to MCFs. Comparative studies are also present (10 per cent) where both consultants and clients have been adopted as the unit of the analysis. In total, 6 per cent of the articles analyse the overall consulting project (Figure 4).

In those articles where the focus was on consultants, consulting companies and consulting projects, a further investigation has been made concerning the MC industry. What emerged is that most of the articles present analyses that include more than one industry or where the industry is not specified (globally 77.2 per cent). As for the remaining part, the sample is almost equally divided with no particularly prevailing options, except for IT strategy (17 per cent) and innovation management (11 per cent).

A final observation concerns the country where the analyses have been performed (Figure 5). In this sense the set is quite varied, with the UK dominating the scene (20 per cent), followed by Australia (11 per cent), Sweden (8 per cent), USA (6 per cent) and The Netherlands (5 per cent).
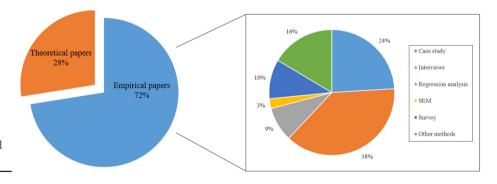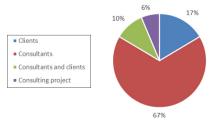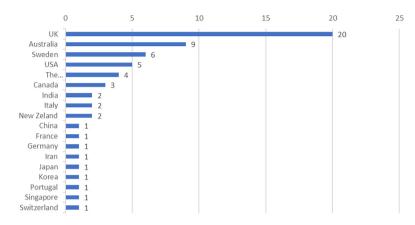

Figure 3.
Type of articles and adopted methods

Figure 4.
Unit of analysis

Figure 5.
Number of articles
that refer to MCFs
located in a specific
country as the units
of investigation

The analysis developed also considered the number of citations as counted by Google Scholar[1]. The article that has been cited the most is *Management Fashion* (3,190 citations), authored by Eric Abrahamson (Columbia University) and published in 1996 in the *Academy of Management Review*. The author deals with the topic of management fashion, encouraging business school scholars to enter into the process and become active drivers of it, instead of passive observers. The second most cited article is from Martine Haas (Cornell University) and Morten Hansen (INSEAD), titled *When using knowledge can hurt performance: The value of organizational capabilities in a management consulting company* (533 citations). This paper was published in the *Strategic Management Journal* in 2005. The authors aim to prove that knowledge *per se* is not necessarily a key to the competitive performance of MC; rather the value depends on how consultants are able to use (or not use) this knowledge according to each specific situation.

Table II provides a list of the five most cited articles. Along with the aforementioned are: Sturdy's (1997) analysis on how consultancy contributes to reassure clients; Anand *et al.* (2007) model to explain the development and setting of new practices in MC companies; and Glückler and Armbrüster's (2003) solutions to institutional and transactional uncertainty.

4. Qualitative analysis
The relevant articles resulted in being clustered around the following three main areas (Figure 6), as independently assessed by the authors:

(1) The first cluster makes reference to the "drivers of MC success" and the actions to be taken by MCFs to improve their offer to clients; being a service industry, driven by talents and people, "human resource management" is a critical sub-section of this one.

(2) The second major cluster of articles is related to clients' demands and how they perceive the 'role of MC' and their positioning.

(3) The last cluster makes reference to the "client–consultant relationship" and the link between the previous two themes.

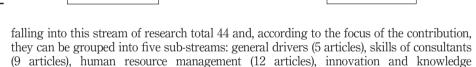### 4.1 Drivers of management consulting success
The first stream of research that emerges from the analysis includes contributions aimed at identifying those factors that can act as drivers for the success of MC processes. Articles

Author(s), *Affiliation*	Year	Title	Journal	No. of citation
Abrahamson E., Columbia University	1996	Management fashion	*Academy of Management Review*	3,190
Haas M., Cornell University; Hansen M., INSEAD	2005	When using knowledge can hurt performance: The value of organizational capabilities in a management consulting company	*Strategic Management Journal*	533
Sturdy A., Bath University	1997	The consultancy process – An insecure business	*Journal of Management Studies*	494
Anand N., Imperial College London; Gardner H.K., London Business School; Morris T., Oxford University	2007	Knowledge-based innovation: Emergence and embedding of new practice areas in management consulting firms	*Academy of Management Journal*	497
Glückler J., University of Frankfurt; Armbrüster T., University of Mannheim	2003	Bridging uncertainty in management consulting: The mechanisms of trust and networked reputation	*Organization Studies*	480

Table 2.
The five most
cited articles

Figure 6.
The main streams of
literature

falling into this stream of research total 44 and, according to the focus of the contribution, they can be grouped into five sub-streams: general drivers (5 articles), skills of consultants (9 articles), human resource management (12 articles), innovation and knowledge management (11 articles) and perception of success (7 articles).

4.1.1 General drivers. In this sub-stream, authors focus their attention on the main elements that could ensure the success of the consulting process. What emerges is that the characteristic of the client organization, the competence of the consultant and the consultation mode can be considered as key variables of the consulting efficacy (Jang and Lee, 1998; Chung *et al.*, 2006). In particular, stressing the consultation mode, Adesi *et al.* (2015) pinpoint the importance of adopting the proper methodology.

From an international perspective, Clark *et al.* (2016) consider the ways in which the most important competencies in MC are perceived in different countries, concluding that competencies priority should be better analysed on a country-by-country basis. Niñerola *et al.* (2017) deal with the decision on entry mode choice in China by Spanish MCFs, and it emerges that this depends on the firm's main specific advantage and the need to protect it.

4.1.2 Skills of consultants. The largest sub-stream is the one focused on analysing which skills consultants should have to ensure the success of the consulting process, based on the reciprocal influence between the consultation process and the role of consultants (Czander and Eisold, 2003).

For example, consultants' education and experience (Richter and Schmidt, 2006), their functions, skills and value (Kumar and Simon, 2000) are seen as having a strong impact on determining the goodness of the overall outcome, along with their ability to manipulate the

institutional context in order to enhance their institutional capital (Reihlen *et al.*, 2010). Consistently, the extent to which consultants are able to exploit their personal and professional network is also seen as critical (Mors, 2010), even more if this ability goes together with an international orientation and technology leveraging (Deprey *et al.*, 2012).

The discourse on consultants' skills goes back to the selection procedures for hiring consultants, which is seen as the first element in contributing to the consulting sector's success (Armbrüster, 2004) and where it is essential to ensure the presence of suitable socioeconomic, educational and occupational backgrounds, as the key ingredients for a successful career in MC (Miner, 1971).

Consultants' skills are also analysed from an external point of view, focusing on clients' perception. What emerges is that consultants should be multi-skilled, technically competent and with excellent people skills (Simon and Kumar, 2001).

4.1.3 Human resource management. The consultant is perceived as a key success factor and therefore managing human resources is a key element to ensure the success of the overall consulting process. A widely addressed topic is that of the occupational identity of management consultants, where the main social roles (Kitay and Wright, 2007), the process of self-categorization (Mühlhaus and Bouwmeester, 2016), and the level of anxiety associated with this status (Gill, 2015) are explored. Singh and Singh (2016) investigate the phenomenon of job crafting as it happens among consultants, identifying and classifying the techniques of this process and their driving factors.

Human resources management (HRM) is deeply analysed in MC within the small-firms setting (Ram, 1999, 2000, 2001) and referring to specific single-country (Van Nistelrooij *et al.*, 2007) and cross-countries contexts (Meriläinen *et al.*, 2004).

As for the atmosphere, Costas (2012) provides interesting evidence that the culture of friendship, and informal, intimate, apparently egalitarian relations with employees, is a way to accentuate and extend normative control on employees. Klarner *et al.* (2013) focus on team performance in management consultancy and show that its positive relationship with teams' competences is mediated by client communication and team adaptability.

Interestingly, Miner (1973) provides comprehensive statistical evidence that no consistent pattern of superiority in management success emerges among management consultants, so there is no support for the view that consulting firms offer an especially good source of high-level managerial talent.

4.1.4 Innovation and knowledge management. The ways innovation and knowledge are managed also emerges as being a driver of MC success. Studies within this sub-area are highly focused on the development of models for an efficient knowledge system (Werr and Stjernberg, 2003; Anand *et al.*, 2007). An empirical study of five global management consultancies, investigating how consultants choose between different knowledge-sharing systems, found that different criteria are adopted by the leadership of the MCF and the consultants, so that when considering knowledge management (KM) tools it was critical to take a multi-level approach (Powell and Ambrosini, 2017). Haas and Hansen (2005) added that competitive performance depends not only on how much MC companies know but also on how they use what they know.

As for specific types of knowledge related to MC, Adams and Flynn (2005) propose the analysis of The Boston Club, describing the way it creates actionable knowledge – a type of knowledge that, as opposed to information, is useful in guiding concrete behaviour, and that in this case is aimed at advancing women inclusion on corporate boards. Focusing on the UK context, Collins (2016) analyses the networked interactions and the role these have in the consultancy industry to solidify and transmit KM.

Concerning innovation management as a driver for success, despite MC being proposed as the appropriate context in which to study the change and flexibility of contemporary management (Kipping and Kirkpatrick, 2013; Sturdy *et al.*, 2016), it is also stressed that managing innovation does not necessarily have to mean to provide something really new, rather it is revealed that consulting-led management innovation is often highly standardized (Wright *et al.*, 2012). Cesário *et al.* (2015) present the analysis of Portuguese consultancy firms to identify the forms of innovation that these firms can introduce, and the main sources that drive innovation in consultancy. Kalali and Heidari (2016) stress the importance of renewing operational consulting capabilities and report on the ability of MCFs to maintain their competitive advantage during a period of drastic environmental change in Iran.

4.1.5 Perception of success. A further sub-stream concerns the perception of success, mostly considering the consultants' perspective, as their satisfaction emerges as being among the main drivers of the overall consultancy process's success (Rangan and Dhanapal, 2016). In the analysed contributions, several elements appear as being relevant in influencing consultants' perception of success: the intensity of collaboration, the expertise of the consultant (Bronnenmayer *et al.*, 2016) and the involvement of clients in the decision-making processes (Bennett and Smith, 2004). Some differences emerge, concerning the role of trust in c–c relationships, which in some cases do not appear as being relevant (Bronnenmayer *et al.*, 2016), while according to Bennett and Smith (2004) trust can be strategically supported with close contract control over consultants' costs and outputs.

The perception of satisfaction is also analysed by taking the view of the clients. Haverila *et al.* (2011) underline that consultant characteristics, customer focus, value and enterprise considerations are the broad themes driving client satisfaction. An empirical investigation into a global leading MCF reveals significant differences in perceptions of reputation between and within stakeholder groups, with perceptions changing across dimensions and geographies: clients, external stakeholders, employees and alumni have diversified perceptions of corporate identity and a strategy should be implemented to align those different perceptions (Harvey *et al.*, 2017).

Some authors define the challenges that could prevent consultants from performing in a successful way. Srinivasan's (2014) work does it in a general way, providing an attempt to draft the boundaries of the industry and the main challenges faced. Massey (2003) finds a risky disconnection from the theory that is devalued against the practice, from which, in consultants' view, frameworks, models and guidelines for the action can be derived. The search for an underpinning theoretical approach to a consulting project is here proposed as a critical factor that could ensure its overall success.

4.2 Role of management consulting firms
We have identified 48 articles whose different topics can be traced back to the "role" that management consultants play for clients. A previous review on the role of management consultants identifies four typologies: information sources, standard setters, knowledge brokers, and knowledge integrators (Canato and Giangreco, 2011). This classification helps to clarify in detail the role of consultants in providing information and knowledge that is propaedeutic to change but overlooks other roles of consultancy that are widely debated in the literature, such as management fad-setters and uncertainty agents. Therefore, we propose a classification that incorporates those previous typologies by Canato and Giangreco (2011) under a more comprehensive "change agent" label and introduce two additional roles related to management fashions and uncertainty management.

Therefore, in addition to the general review provided by Canato and Giangreco (2011), it is possible to identify three main streams of literature:

(1) MCFs as change agents (29 articles).

(2) MCFs as uncertainty agents (7 articles).

(3) MCFs as fashion setters (12 articles).

These three sub areas also represent the three main roles of consultants for clients and three different impact levels on the organization. The first area epitomizes the virtuous role of consultants producing real change into the client organization; the second area epitomizes a psychological effect, where the impact on the organization is induced through uncertainty management; the third area, on management fads, includes the most critical literature about the role of consultants and their effectiveness for clients.

4.2.1 Management consulting firms as change agents. This stream of literature dates back to Ginsberg and Abrahamson (1991), who stress the role of consultants as external agents, useful in shaping new managerial perspectives and enabling change.

This role has been investigated in the public sector (Lapsley and Oldfield, 2001; Lapsley *et al.*, 2013; Radnor and O'Mahoney, 2013; Kuna, 2017), in higher education institutions (McClure, 2017), in small and locally based Italian MCFs (Crucini and Kipping, 2001), in emerging markets (Back *et al.*, 2014), in specific country settings (Chen *et al.*, 2011; Nagayoshi *et al.*, 2015; Mihailović *et al.*, 2016), in organizational design (Visscher and Visscher-Voerman, 2010), in organizational identity (Alvesson and Empson, 2008), in fostering corporate social responsibility (Brès and Gond, 2014), in providing strategic consultancy (Klenin, 2016), with reference to communication consultants (von Platen, 2015) and external providers of 'commercial' services (Furusten, 2013).

According to this stream of literature, the symbolic function of consultants, far from being detrimental to organizations, can be beneficial and enforce organizational change (Pellegrin-Boucher, 2006). Whittle (2006) reflects on what even paradoxical accounts of research findings on MC achieve in the context of organizational change.

A sub-stream of literature focuses on knowledge and KM as a way to introduce change by MCFs. It investigates the intermediary role of consultants for the transfer of "sectoral knowledge" (Fincham *et al.*, 2008; Richter and Niewiem, 2009), the potential of ex-consultants in fostering management knowledge and organizational change (Sturdy and Wright, 2008), the diffusion of management ideas inside a leading MC firm (O'Mahoney and Sturdy, 2016), the mediating role of consultants in developing IT innovation (Bloomfield and Danieli, 1995), dynamics of boundaries and actors in regard to knowledge flow – insider/outsider in respect to *what*, *whom* and *when* (Sturdy *et al.*, 2009) and the difference between consultants and experts in producing knowledge in their firms and those of clients (Creplet *et al.*, 2001).

Armbrüster and Glückler (2007) criticize the essay by Sorge and van Witteloostuijn (2004) that defines consultancy as a fad, as the need for change would be substantially a myth, and consultants are opportunists deriving results from information asymmetry. Answering this essay, the authors support the thesis that the demand for consultancy is genuine. They present data on economic change stressing its importance for companies and focus their attention on the tools that clients have to assess the efficiency of consultants' work and to discourage any form of opportunism.

Bergh and Gibbons (2011) carried out an event study analysis to gather evidence of stock market reactions to the public announcements of companies hiring management consultants. What they found is that this reaction is on average positive and significant, and

is highest for those companies that have a high level of profitability. In addition, the brand name of the consulting firm does not have any effect on the stock market reaction. Therefore, there is empirical support for the claim that the management consultancy has a positive impact on profitability.

We conclude that the role of MCFs as effective change agents in both private and public organizations is well grounded in the literature and there can be few doubts about their decisive role in fostering change in organizations. What is under investigated and offers future research paths is the specificity of that in client SMEs and in national contexts with a low tradition of MC.

4.2.2 Management consulting firms as uncertainty agents. Furusten (2009) suggests that contrary to the assumed role of "agents of change" so frequently mentioned in the literature, consultants are actually "agents of stability" and "standardizers" who help clients to reduce the uncertainty experienced. That function, while not a driver of disruptive change, has a value in itself and cannot be called a "placebo-effect", although Sturdy (1997) suggests that the reassuring sense of control over organization and identity that MCFs provide reinforces a sense of "insecurities". There are also further empirical indications that the actual use of consultants creates additional uncertainties for the client (Pemer and Werr, 2013).

Therefore, there are few doubts that MCFs also play the role of uncertainty reducing agents and this stream of literature suggests that uncertainty has a key role in determining how consultants shape their own organizations (Sturdy *et al.*, 2013), in their self and external recognition as professionals (Maestripieri, 2016), in transactions with clients and in professional standards (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003).

It has been argued convincingly that management consultants can both reduce and increase uncertainty both of which can have positive or negative consequences for their clients; they should be judged on their help in organizing clients' firms and their ability to assess uncertainty, not to remove uncertainty (Czarniawska, 2013).

This stream of literature is mostly focused on western private organizations and little is known about the role of the uncertainty agent for public organizations and SMEs, and in emerging markets.

4.2.3 Management consulting firms as fashion-setters. This stream of literature highlights the unavoidable perception of MCFs as for-profit salespersons of managerial ideas, who tend to empathize their novelty through jargon, rhetoric, storytelling and elitism, and operate as management fashion setters (Abrahamson, 1996). However, it also emphasizes their fundamental role as mediators between management thinkers and firms (Scarbrough, 2002). This literature covers the nature of management fads (Gill and Whittle, 1992; Sorge and van Witteloostuijn, 2004), the implementation in some specific national or organizational contexts (Benders *et al.*, 1998; Wright and Seung-Ho, 2006; Whittle, 2008), the technics of rhetoric (Berglund and Werr, 2000), the relationships with academia (Nicolai and Röbken, 2005), the links with print media (Spell, 2001) and the mechanism of spreading (Williams, 2004).

The widely used concept is the "rhetoric", defined as the pool of linguistic tools and communication strategies employed by MCFs to convince fashion followers that a management technique is both rational and at the forefront of management advancement, and they do so "by exploiting sociopsychological vulnerabilities", such as the fear of lagging behind or appearing retrogressive (Abrahamson, 1996).

Nonetheless, we agree with Sturdy (2011) that MC is still confused with management ideas in general, and there is a need for a research agenda based on distinction and clarification in the context of moving boundaries between "management" and "consulting".

The relationship between academic management research and management consultancy is a connected area that is scarcely investigated and where academia does not have the lead in the generation of ideas as it has in other scientific fields. This is so evident that Abrahamson (1996) suggests academia should take the lead in shaping management fashion and practice, not just studying it, and the presence of rhetorical elements of management consultancy have been reported in the academic literature (Nicolai and Röbken, 2005), highlighting that a "market test" to legitimize management concepts is actually at work in academic research. This means that management concepts and theories that have been adopted by numerous, prestigious and successful companies gain legitimacy in academic research despite any consideration regarding their internal theoretical coherence and novelty. This is also reported as "better mousetrap theory", and it can be a scientifically dangerous approach in a context driven by casual ambiguity and recurrent fads.

As the literature is mainly focused on English speaking countries, there is also much to be learned about the role of MCFs in emerging markets and unexplored national contexts that are not part of the so-called Anglo-Saxon world.

4.3 Client–consultant relationship

We have identified 24 articles whose different topics can be traced back to the "relationship" between the consultant and its client(s). Such a relationship is very relevant and complex, given that most consulting activities are long-term, project-based and imply strong c–c interactions (Karantinou and Hogg, 2001).

This area deals with quite diversified issues and approaches, ranging from buyer–supplier relationships, formal vs informal relationships, trust building, management of perceptions, role of symbols, metaphors and rhetoric, agency theory, boundary dynamics and mental models. All these contributions have been classified into three main – often intertwined – areas of research that are focused respectively on:

- the characteristics of the c-c relationship (14 articles);
- the outcomes of the c-c relationship (4 articles); and
- the management of the c-c relationship (6 articles).

4.3.1 The characteristics of the c–c relationship. The contributions dealing with the characteristics of the c–c relationship can be mapped with respect to their view on the role of MC, ranging between the two extremes of a functional view and a critical view, where the former sees the consultant as a "provider of a knowledge-based service at the client's request" and the latter as a "manipulator of symbols in order to create impressions of value" (Werr and Styhre, 2002: p. 46).

On the functional view side, Kakabadse *et al.* (2006, p. 416) present a positive picture where "business consultants appear very humble in their approach to their relationship with clients, and believe that moving clients forward is their ultimate goal". Bäcklund and Werr (2008) investigate the reassuring discourse of presentations to client-managers in the websites of four MCFs, identifying two different discursive practices: a normalizing practice aimed at convincing that consulting is a natural aspect of management (Accenture, KPMG), and a rationalizing practice aimed at explaining the actual advantages of consulting services (BCG, McKinsey and Co). Belkhodja *et al.* (2012) identify in trust, active communication, and shared feedback, the key characteristics of a successful c-c relationship. Even with this functional and positive view of MC, there is no unique approach, as highlighted by

Chelliah *et al*. (2014) who analyse how consulting firms express their identity to the end-users and identify three types of identity: the thinker, the confidant(e) and the researcher.

On the critical view side, Clark and Salaman (1998) analyse consulting as the art of "impression management", focusing on the manipulation of client perceptions of the service delivered and on "systems of persuasion", based on status symbols, language, style, behaviour, assertiveness, curriculum, jargon, impressive statistical computation, credibility of analysis and dress. Similarly Johansson (2004) conceptualizes MC through a theatre metaphor and social interaction based on story-telling, and suggests that it is much more suited to interpret managerial work than any engineering metaphor based on planning, implementation and evaluation. Fincham (2002) applies agency theory to the c-c relationship and describes the management consultant as an "agent's agent"; MC is a "relational work" dealing with the typical agency problem of uncertainty and its central aspects of power tactics and knowledge transfer. Lalonde and Gilbert (2016) investigate the rhetoric of cooperation in management consultancy and the way it is expressed and built throughout the process. Their findings show that consultants develop a dramaturgical awareness of their professional identity that involves both strategy and reflexivity in their relationships with clients.

Several papers highlight an intermediate position between these two extremes. Trust can be considered as the key pillar of such an intermediate position. Nikolova *et al*. (2015) analyse the challenges of developing trusting relationships within the highly ambiguous and complex context of management consultancy, where the actors engaged in the production and consumption of the service are strongly interdependent. Their analysis suggests that three social practices are indeed involved in c-c trust generation: signalling ability and integrity, demonstrating benevolence and establishing an emotional connection. More generally, this intermediate position deals with the consultant's capability of providing positive contributions in spite of the difficulties related to effectively communicating and interacting with the clients. Fincham (1999) combines the "strategic perspective" – where the client is unable to judge the quality of the service and the consultant leverages on persuasion – with the "structural perspective" – where consultants are involved in and subject to clients' political processes – highlighting interdependency in the c-c relationships. Sturdy and Wright (2011) investigate the role of "active clients" of MCFs and focus on their crucial role for an effective flow of knowledge across organizational boundaries. Mohe and Seidl (2011) theorize the c-c relationship, interpreting clients and consultants as two autopoietic communication systems that operate according to different logics and are structurally coupled through a third "contact system", and highlighting that, while due to the different logics of these systems transfer of meaning is not possible, consulting firms can cause perturbations in a client's communication processes and positively induce the client's system to create its own meaning. Retna (2016) analyses the ways management consultants perceive their attempts to change clients' mental models. The findings of this qualitative analysis show that it happens in two ways: building a strong c–c relationship and making use of management concepts (also academic). Several challenges are also identified in this process: previous managerial knowledge of the clients (be it high or low), the trouble of establishing a trusting relationship, the limited perception that clients have about the amount of work consultants actually carry out. Bourgoin and Muniesa (2016) carry out a very focused analysis on the communication that is taking place in a c–c relationship by looking at the process of developing effective and robust slides. They investigate the PowerPoint presentations' production process, as developed by management consultants, highlighting three traits that are adopted to assess the semiotic solidity of the slides: layout, accuracy, and impact.

4.3.2 The outcomes of the c–c relationship. The outcomes of the c–c relationship are not often analysed (Wright and Kitay, 2002) and in most cases such outcomes appear strongly influenced by the functional vs the critical view of MC. Appelbaum (2004) provides empirical evidence that the client-consulting relationship has an important impact on project outcome, supporting both the anecdotal and theoretical models and emphasizing the positive impact of consultancy. In contrast Wright and Kitay (2002), based on interviews with consultants and their clients, investigate the ways they evaluate the outcome of consulting projects. The analysis of their perceptions shows how both consultants and clients rely on the subjective assessment of both the consulting impact and impression management. Similarly, Deakins and Dillon (2006), while investigating management consultant performance in local governments, reveal that individual authorities are experiencing significant gaps between their expectations and what is being delivered, due to a lack of rigour within contracts. Following an intermediate approach, Chelliah (2010) reviews academic and practitioner literature with reference to the factors that affect consulting outcomes for both clients and consultants, highlighting the relevance of both the formal contract and the psychological contract.

4.3.3 The management of the c–c relationship. The management of the c–c relationship is radically different, whether the consultant is an outsider interacting based on power and control or an insider working as a partner (Werr and Styhre, 2002; Kitay and Wright, 2004). Kitay and Wright (2004) focus on boundary dynamics in c-c relationships and reveal a huge diversity of roles that consultants play, which revolve around the extent to which the consultant is clearly external to the client organization, with the transaction based primarily on market principles (an outsider role), or has developed a range of social ties with the client, such that the boundary between the client and consulting organization is, to some extent, blurred (an insider role). Similarly Werr and Styhre (2002, p. 61) investigate the network organization practices based on partnerships, 'wherein the use of consultants may be an integral and productive part of everyday managerial life', as opposed to bureaucratic practices, wherein the purchasing of MC is a formalized buyer-supplier relationship and the relationship is managed based on distance and client control. Taminiau *et al.* (2012) look at formal vs. informal relationships and explore whether and how far the informal client relationships developed by management consultants vary across countries, and demonstrate that national culture matters in three different national settings: France (elite model), Germany (effective model) and Britain (highly responsive model). Other papers focus on specific issues involved in the management of c–c relationships: Karantinou and Hogg (2001) explore the mechanisms and policies adopted by consultants including account management; Connell and Zalan (2012) analyse the contingency schemes, such as the so-called 'success fees', highlighting how they may result in a decrease of revenues and a degradation of client relationships; Lonsdale *et al.* (2017) investigate the purchase process of MC services and conclude that the increased procurement professional involvement is introducing transparency and a cost-focused approach that are changing the traditional c–c relationships, with enhanced value from a money perspective.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The three streams of research on MC that emerge in this article – drivers of success, role of consultants and c–c relationships – have in common a divide between two opposite views of MC: a functionalist versus a critical view (Armbrüster, 2006). As two sides of the same coin, the divide characterizes the industry – a bright side of consulting as an industry characterized by innovation and high-value services, and a dark side of consulting as an industry characterized by ambiguity and psychological deception – and cuts across the

three streams of research. The first and most quoted reference (3,190 citations) in relation to the critical view and the "dark side" of MC is Abrahamson (1996). His ideas about the use of "rhetoric" and linguistic tools in order to exploit socio-psychological vulnerabilities, such as the managers' fear of lagging behind, have had a long-lasting influence on management consulting studies. He showed first that MC does not have a linear evolution but a fashion dynamic, where academia publishing is a mere follower of MC fashions.

The antecedents must be found in sociological studies, that highlighted the consumers' demand for new fads and fashions, and the fact that any good can be placed along a continuum between cultural and utilitarian products, where the cultural ones satisfy an aesthetic or expressive function, rather than an utilitarian one (Hirsch, 1972). MC is a product that possesses a cultural nature and is along that continuum. Therefore, by its very nature, it has to satisfy two different demands: a utilitarian demand and a fashion demand. Professionals are not ready to admit that they are also in the business of satisfying a demand for new labels and jargon, and client firms are not ready to admit that they invest shareholders' money in it. In that sense, it is the "dark side" of the coin; it is always there, always as big as the bright side, and always invisible in official communication. Actually, both sides pretend the utilitarian function is the only one but the issue is so evident that Mintzberg (1979) observed that swings between organizational centralization and decentralization resemble the movements of women's hemlines. There are theoretical reasons to believe that this is the manifestation of unavoidable and deep social pressures, that involve a continuous search for management techniques that must be perceived as rational and "progressive" (Meyer and Rowan, 1977) and have "to be in fashion" (Blumer, 1969).

The state of the art in MC research is as follows and we outline it along the three main streams of research that we identified:

(1) Regarding the drivers of MC success, the focus on consultants' education, skills and competences on the one side goes along with their ability to manipulate the institutional context to enhance their institutional capital on the other. The drivers of MC success are considered to be strongly linked to the management of human resources, as consultants' attitude and specific skills are tied up with the good performance of the consultancy. Moreover the way performance is perceived is crucial to determine the final success of the consultancy, and in this sense consultants' self-perception has a powerful influence on the evaluation of the overall process.

(2) Regarding the role of consultants in the economic environment, on the one side the debate is about their role as change agents for innovation and transformation, on the other it is about their ambiguous role as uncertainty managers and fashion setters. The articles focusing on the change agent role are relatively more numerous than the ones dealing with ambiguity, but some of the latter are among the most cited. There is both a balance and a connection between these two sides and there is no doubt that the innovative role of consultants cannot exist in a social vacuum, without taking into account the social dynamics it implies, such as ambiguity management, fashion setting and uncertainty avoidance.

(3) Regarding c–c relationships, the focus on relational capabilities and trust building in the provision of services to clients goes along with the role of symbols, metaphors, rhetoric and mental models that might be manipulated by consultants. These differences often stem from the approach the consultant is using, acting as an insider who works informally with the client or as an outsider with a formal

relationship. At the same time, the client's attitude towards the consultant, shaped by the previous experience of interaction with consultants, can move the relationship towards being more outcome-based.

This divide between effective actions by consultants and their manipulating role has always been characteristic of the MC industry but has never been analysed in detail with respect to geographical as well as client areas. Namely, the research identified above is mainly focused on traditional western markets while new emerging markets are quite neglected. In contrast, the different maturity levels of the MC industry as well as the differences in cultures might impact considerably on the industry divide. Similarly, many client areas – such as the public sector or the SMEs – have been covered to a very limited extent, while the issues related to the transparency of consulting activities as well as their impact have different features.

The divide between a bright and a dark side appears to be a key characteristic of the MC profession. Even one of the oldest metaphors on consultancy – the doctor–patient relationship – is not completely appropriate, given that the "responsibility for diagnosis" is not always on the doctor's side but quite the opposite as consultants are often engaged to act on an issue already identified by the management, and even more, the "participation in the therapy" by the patient is far higher than in any doctor–patient relationship as there are no pills or surgery to rely on (Tilles, 1961). Consulting is a very intense social activity that differentiates itself sharply from a science-based doctor–patient relationship and brings with it all the complexity and ambiguity of social relationships.

Social relationships – widely investigated in the reviewed literature when looking at fashion, status, prestige and elitism – cannot be ignored and a "science-driven" MC without a "fashion-driven" one cannot be imagined. Nonetheless, this opens opportunity for management scholars and universities, as places protected from market-driven push for new fashions, and in which independent critical thinking can be applied to revel the presence "old wines in new bottles".

Recently, the industry has been affected by a "digital revolution" that tends to decrease the traditional strategy consulting, so rich in social relationships between consultants and clients, and to increase its IT-driven consulting services. This phenomenon extends to the leading providers of traditional strategy consulting, such as McKinsey Solutions, which provides software and technology-based analytics and tools that can be embedded in the client's IT infrastructure (Christensen et al., 2013). They provide ongoing engagement outside the traditional project-based model but with a lower level of social relationships.

The lesson from the legal consulting and the so-called "Yelpification of law"[2] shows that opacity is rapidly on the retreat: there is increasing Web-based competition between independent practitioners and law firms, sharing of information about consultants, open-source software, open-access documents and free information in a rapidly changing environment. There are no reasons to believe that MC should go in a different direction in respect to the legal consultancy field. The "democratization of knowledge" (Christensen et al., 2013) that the digital revolution implies is irreconcilable with the elitist MC model and the "fashion-driven" approach of emulation that it generates.

Therefore, it can be imagined that the phenomenon is going to produce a more science-driven IT based MC, less affected by its opaque "fashion-driven" side and more focused on its "science-driven" side. We now hope for increased research efforts and empirical studies by management scholars in the area of MC and digital transformation, looking at how consultants are driving their clients in taking advantage of the potential of digital transformation while, at the same time, facing the challenges of the digital transformation of the MC industry. Far from being on a declining path, the MC industry could benefit

significantly from the 'digital revolution' and also its clients but a restructuring and transformation of the industry is to be expected in the next few years (FEACO, 2017). However in the academic journals, there is still no debate on the impact of digital transformation on the MC industry and even less of its impact on the nature of management consultancy.

Confronting our systematic literature review with the themes that are recurring in the practitioners' reports, we are able to identify a number of underdeveloped areas for a future research agenda. In 2017 and 2018, the yearly report of the European Federation of Management Consultancies Associations (FEACO, 2017, 2018) as well as the yearly reports from the German Association of Management Consultants (BDU E.V., 2017), and of the Italian Association of Management Consulting Firms (Assoconsult, 2018) to name a few, are stressing the major changes in the industry driven by the digital transformation. Based on their arguments, it appears that it is critical to investigate how the role of consultants and their skills are changing in the digital age, but all these topics are completely neglected in the academic literature. It also appears that MC for the public sector is a very neglected area, despite its strategic relevance and size: according to the yearly report of the European Federation of Management Consultancies Associations (FEACO, 2018) consulting to the Public Sector represents slightly less than 15 per cent of the European MC market and yet in 2017 it has been the fastest growing MC client industry. Therefore, the peculiarities of consulting public administrations around the world deserve far greater attention, with special reference to digital transformation, e-government and change management. Last but not least, most of the MC research focuses on rich nations and we know little about MC in emerging markets, its adaptation to emerging markets, and the different skills required, if any. The dominance of Anglo-Saxon culture in MCFs is a matter of fact but no attention is dedicated to other business cultures. The MC for large companies accounts for most of the debate while the research on MC for SMEs is limited, despite SMEs being critical for the future growth of many countries and the most important segment for employment in most nations; there are reasons to believe that the roles and skills of consultants change when the client is an SME.

Our systematic literature review on MC has been limited to scholarly peer reviewed journals, although it is reasonable to assume that relevant knowledge on the topic can be present in books, the business press and business reports. Nonetheless, academic journals still represent the most reliable source of management knowledge and some highly relevant books have been included in the introduction and discussion, so that this limitation is not a limit in completeness but a guarantee of high quality research. Also, academic research has the merit of challenging "the claims of consultants, clients and the media, and other taken-for-granted assumptions of consultancy such as that of the objective, concrete, and/or innovative nature of consulting expertise" (Kipping and Clark, 2012, p. 468). We hope for increased research efforts and empirical studies by management scholars in a sector that is so critical for management innovation, business and public organizations.

Notes

1. The number of citations has been continuously updated. Last checked on 25 December 2017.

2. "Yelpification of law" is what Firoz Dattu, AdvanceLaw's founder, calls making reference to the online performance review of legal firms, in substitution of cost and brand as traditional proxies for quality.

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