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## **WORKING PAPER**

**Where do we go from here?**

**Food for thought on academic papers in business research**

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## **Where do we go from here?**

### **Food for thought on academic papers in business research**






#### *Abstract*

In this paper I comment on some of the adverse practices in business research publications. First, we seem to have lost touch with business practice and have narrowed our target group to fellow academics only, reducing the production of useful knowledge. Second, the objectives of our publications are narrowed to impact and citations. This leads to a strict focus on pathbreaking theories and a denigration of replication and qualitative studies. Third, an obsession with the .05 significance level and corroborating findings have left researchers with full file drawers of unpublished papers and could leave journals with a high rate of type I error papers. Fourth, complex, lengthy articles, the importance of carefully crafting a story around our research and a variety of style guidelines make us less productive than we could be. Finally, a blind reliance on ISI's impact and citations scores may not do justice to a researcher's real contribution.

## Introduction

Business research has been criticized to show slow scientific progress (e.g., Armstrong, Brodie and Parsons, 2001). The objective of this paper is to offer food for thought for authors, editors, reviewers and universities on the publication of academic articles. Because publishing an academic journal article is in essence a communication process, I base my discussion on the different steps that need to be taken to develop an effective communication campaign: deciding on the target group (to whom to communicate?), the communication objectives (why communicate?), the message or content (what to communicate?), the creative strategy (how to communicate?), and evaluating the result (impact?) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Stages in communication campaign development

1. Defining the target group		To whom?
2. Setting the communication objectives		Why?
3. Deciding on the content		What?
4. Determining the creative strategy		How?
5. Evaluating the result		Impact?

### 1. Defining the target group

On the basis of an Australian study, Forster (2007) concludes that business people have the perception that academics are just publishing for each other and that their articles are becoming more and more irrelevant to business, industry and public sector practitioners. This does not come to a surprise since, defining useful knowledge as evidence that has the potential to improve

decision making, only 3% of academic papers (and even less so in marketing) appear to contain useful knowledge (Armstrong and Pagell, 2003; Armstrong 2003a, 2004). Somewhere in the progress of business science, academics seem to have lost who their target group is. In 1960, in about 44 percent of the papers published in major academic journals in marketing practitioners cooperated, a percentage that dropped to 14 percent by 2002 (Hubbard and Lindsay, 2002). To become relevant again, business researchers should remember that their target group consists not only of fellow academics, but also of practitioners and students. They should focus on the needs of academic researchers, practitioners and students alike and their research should aim to provide solutions for contemporary business problems again (Ellson, 2009). Put simply, the gap between academics and business that has been widening over the past decades should close and researchers should think over upfront what their research means in the real life world.

## **2. Setting the objectives**

The main objective of most researchers and editors is to gain citations and prestige. This objective requires novel, original, surprising and breakthrough research ideas and results. Although such manuscripts are important to the field and certainly are commendable, care should be taken that the results also mean something in real life. Consumer behavior studies, for example, are sometimes carried out under multiple, well defined assumptions and very artificial experimental conditions and manipulations. Unfortunately these assumptions are often not met in real life (Armstrong, 1998), making it of no or little use to other researchers or practitioners. Other worthy, but often neglected, objectives are to have an impact on the decision making of managers, to reflect real-life business problems and to further the discipline by indicating in which conditions a theory does and does not hold. These goals require a different type of research. Replication studies, for example, are not novel and do not contain surprising,

breakthrough ideas, but they are crucially important to further the discipline and therefore deserve a spot in business journals in their own right (see further).

### **3. Deciding on the content**

Although the content can be distinguished on many different variables, I would like to tackle the following aspects: the problem encountered with replication research, with studies showing insignificant results, and the problems of qualitative research.

#### *3.1. Original versus replication research*

Journals reward original and novel research and denigrate replication and replication-with-extension research. The objective of a replication study is to repeat a previous study to investigate whether similar results can be obtained, whereas a replication-with-extension study is concerned with repeating a previous study to assess whether earlier research findings can be generalized to other populations, contexts, time periods, geographical areas, etc. (Hubbard and Vetter, 1996). Top marketing journals like the *Journal of Marketing Research* and the *International Journal of Research in Marketing* openly say that replication studies do not belong in these journals (Huber, 2007; Stremersch and Lehman, 2007). Yet, replications are essential for a discipline and are considered the hallmark of science (Blaug 1992). They can corroborate earlier findings and consequently lead to new valid theories and frameworks, or otherwise dismiss earlier findings as coincidental or unstable. Neuliep and Crandall (1993) suggest that journals should reserve at least 15% of their space for replication studies. In contrast, over the period 1970-1991, replication studies in accounting (8.6%), economics (8.4%), finance (9.7%), management (5.3%) and marketing (2.9%) scored well below this bar (Hubbard and Vetter, 1996). The situation has become even worse. Over the period 1990-2004 the percentage of replication studies in top

marketing journals (JM, JMR and JCR) has dropped to 1.2%. Journal of Business Research is a notable exception with 2.8% of its articles being replication-with-extension studies (Evanschitzky et al., 2007). This lack of replication studies is not advancing knowledge in the field, especially in view of the fact that some of the original studies are based on only a handful of college students and several of the replication studies are not able to confirm prior findings. In the Evanschitzky et al. (2007) study, 44% of the replication studies confirmed earlier findings, whereas 25% was not able to find support at all for the initial results. The results in the Hubbard and Vetter (1996) study were even worse. Needless to say that without replication studies (obviously not of all studies, but of the most important studies of the discipline) business science cannot be considered a real science as we cannot know which results, theories and frameworks are and are not valid.

### *3.2. Significance levels and disconfirming results*

In the same line, it is hard to get results published that run counter to previously published results in high-ranked journals, to existing beliefs or to the posed hypotheses. Mahoney (1977), for example, wrote two versions of a paper: one that supported and one that contradicted prevailing beliefs and sent it to over 80 reviewers. Reviewers recommended the version that supported prevailing beliefs for publication and judged the paper to be based on a good methodology. On the other hand, most of the reviewers recommended to reject the version that contradicted prevailing beliefs and criticized the methodology. So, disconfirming results are often judged to be the result of a poor methodology and seldom get published (Armstrong, 2003b). Also studies that are not able to confirm the posed hypotheses have a hard time getting accepted. Atkinson, Furlong and Wampold (1982), for example, found that a paper with non-significant results was three times more likely to be rejected than its identical counterpart with significant findings. As a consequence, some researchers may concentrate on reaching the .05 significance level (i.e., they

keep investigating the issue until they find a significant result by chance), and inflate the occurrence of published type I errors (Sterling, Rosenbaum, and Weinkam, 1995). This practice combined with the rejection of papers with insignificant results or the reluctance of researchers to submit papers with insignificant results, could lead to journals consisting of the 5% studies that are Type I errors, whereas the 95% studies with null results end up in the file drawers of researchers (Hubbard and Vetter, 1996; Rosenthal, 1979). Next, researchers that try to build further on these Type I error papers also fail to confirm their hypotheses and have an additional unpublished paper to put in their file drawer. No wonder, business researchers are less productive than researchers in other disciplines. Half of our research never gets published. The practice of being reluctant to publish replication studies and studies with results that do not reach the “sacred” but merely conventional .05 significance level not only impedes academic careers and not only leads to an enormous waste of research money and research time, it also inhibits the scientific progress of our discipline.

### *3.3. Quantitative versus qualitative research; empirical versus conceptual papers*

Most of the research in top journals nowadays consists of quantitative studies, even for studies for which qualitative or exploratory methods may be more appropriate. For example, the number of paper submissions to JBR using structural equation modeling is ever increasing. However, as Rossiter (2002; 2008) points out strictly relying on data-driven procedures and the results obtained by factor analyses and SEM has led to seriously biased results and, for example, masks content validity problems with the measures used in the study. Also in economics, Sutter and Pjesky (2007) criticize top journals of not being open to math-free articles leading to an impoverishment of the kinds of thoughts and types of research that finds its way to a wider audience. So, also good qualitative research deserves its place in business journals.

Further, in line with more emphasis on quantitative methods, we also see a decrease in the number of conceptual papers to the advantage of more empirical papers. However, both empirical and conceptual papers are essential to develop a discipline (Yadav, 2010).

#### **4. Determining the creative strategy**

How to present the research? I focus on three aspects: the readability of the paper, the paper length and journal style guidelines.

##### *4.1. High or low readability*

In an experiment in which he sent out a complex and an easy version of several papers to reviewers, Armstrong (1980) found that the reviewers judged the author to be significantly more competent when they received a complex as compared to a simple version. Stremersch, Verniers and Verhoef (2007) also observed a negative relation between readability and article citations indicating that easy to read articles may hurt academic credibility and impact. To be able to build bridges to practitioners and to open up our research for a wider audience, we should start to embrace the KISS principle of advertising and keep our papers simple and easy to read.

##### *4.2. Length of a paper*

Also concerning the length of a paper, we should embrace the KISS principle and keep our papers short. In business research we are used to write lengthy papers. Our papers duplicate about 40 to 50% from other papers to have a nice theoretical framework and to create the right positioning. Most editors and reviewers judge the positioning of the paper as extremely important and this has an enormous impact on the decision whether to accept or reject a paper. The emphasis should be on the real issue of the paper, the main contribution, the study that was



conducted and the results that were obtained, not on how the story is told, and how many previous authors were cited. It should be the product that matters, not the packaging. Shorter articles, focused on the real merit of a paper, saves researchers time to work on additional research instead of writing and rewriting the positioning of the paper. Moreover, it opens up space to publish additional papers in a journal, which can lead to an increase in journal citations. Indeed, Armstrong and Pagell (2003) divided articles in quintiles and compared the two quintiles with the shortest papers to the two with the longest papers. They found that doubling an article's pages increased citation rates by only 20 percent.

#### *4.3. Uniform journal style guidelines*

Another time-consuming, useless aspect is that many journals adhere to different and often lengthy and unnecessarily detailed style guidelines. One uniform set of guidelines could save researchers from the boring task to adjust references, rewrite sentences to passive or active verbal tense, etc. Authors should present their work in a decent, readable fashion, without having to cope with what are essentially production editing issues. They could be asked to clean up their manuscript upon acceptance.

### **5. Evaluating the result**

Faculty candidates are hired, promoted, and fired on the basis of their research results. Schools often judge the quality of a faculty candidate's paper by the reputation of the journal in which it is published (Armstrong, 2004). Yet, the use of such metrics can be criticized on several grounds. First, the traditional journal impact factors of ISI (Institute of Scientific Information) are calculated as the number of times published papers are cited in ISI journals. However, ISI covers only a subset of the journals published in business. Therefore, the real number of journal and

article citations can be largely underestimated. A good alternative to the traditional impact factors could be using citation data (be it citation data or the hg-index (a combination of Hirsch's h-index and Egghe's g-index) based on Google Scholar instead of ISI (Kousha, Thelwall and Rezaie, 2010; Moussa and Touzani, 2010). Second, the impact factor, or the h-, g- or hg index of the journal in which a faculty candidate has published most of the time is unrepresentative of the academic impact of the individual author's citation impact (Harter, 1996; Woodside, 2009; Jeang, 2009). Therefore, not the journal's impact factor but the citations of the individual article should be used for evaluating the candidate. Third, although individual article citations are a better measure than journal impact factors, they do not only reflect the quality of the researcher's output. Indeed, a recent study shows that the domain in which a researcher publishes also significantly drives citations. For example, studying citations of marketing articles published between 1990 and 2002, Stremersch, Verniers, and Verhoef (2007) found that articles on relationship marketing, service marketing and e-commerce tended to be cited significantly more often than other articles in the marketing discipline, whereas articles on advertising, sales, and consumer knowledge were cited significantly less often. So, younger domains get more citations than more mature domains, just like larger domains reach more citations than smaller domains (King, 1987) and domains that are relevant to many other domains get more citations than domains that are relevant to no or a few other domains (Stewart, 1983). Schools should take this differential citing culture into account when evaluating their faculty candidates to avoid giving an incentive to researchers to abandon domains that attract less citations.

In sum, good academic articles come in different forms. They can be pathbreaking or replicating, they can be quantitative or qualitative, they can have significant or insignificant results. The most important thing is that they are of good quality, use a sound methodology and are relevant for the

target groups that we serve. Easier to read and shorter articles may find its ways to practitioners and students more quickly, and shorter articles and uniform style requirements for all journals could save researchers a lot of time. Finally, correct evaluation procedures could steer academics to the right research objectives.

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