



Where does business research go from here? Food-for-thought on academic papers in business research

Maggie Geuens

Ghent University and Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Tweekerkenstraat 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium

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ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on some of the adverse practices in business research publications. First, business researchers seem to have lost touch with business practice and to narrow the target group to fellow academics only, reducing the production of useful knowledge. Second, the objectives of business research publications narrow to impact and citations. This view leads to a strict focus on path-breaking theories and a denigration of replication and qualitative studies. Third, an obsession with the .05 significance level and corroborating findings leaves researchers with full file drawers of unpublished papers and could leave journals with a high rate of type I error papers.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 the research and a variety of style guidelines make business researchers less productive than they could be. Finally, a blind reliance on ISI's impact and citation scores may not do justice to a researcher's real contribution.

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1. Introduction

Observers criticize business research for slow scientific progress (e.g., [Armstrong et al., 2001](#)). The objective of this essay 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, the different steps necessary for developing an effective communication campaign inform this discussion: 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 [Fig. 1](#).

2. 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 view may be unsurprising 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, 2003a, 2004; Armstrong and Pagell, 2003](#)).

Somewhere in the progress of business science, academics seem to have lost focus on their target group. In 1960 marketing practitioners authored or co-authored about 44% of the articles published in major academic journals, such authorships dropped to 14% by 2002 ([Hubbard and Lindsay, 2002](#)). To become relevant again, business researchers should remember that their target group includes not only fellow academics but also 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 world.

3. Setting the objectives

An objective of many 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 the studies 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

E-mail address: Maggie.Geuens@ugent.be.

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?

Fig. 1. Stages in communication campaign development.

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).

4. Deciding on the content

Although the content is distinguishable on many different variables, this article tackles the following aspects: the problem encountered with replication research, with studies showing insignificant results, and the problems of qualitative research.

4.1. 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 emerge, whereas a replication-with-extension study concerns repeating a previous study to assess whether earlier research findings generalize 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 Lehmann, 2007).

Yet, replications are essential for a discipline and are 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). This situation has even deteriorated. 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 participants of some of the original studies are 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 does not meet the bar of a real science as one cannot know which results, theories, and frameworks are and are not valid.

4.2. Significance levels and disconfirming results

In the same line, reviewers are reluctant to accept a paper of which the results 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 the versions to over 80 reviewers. Reviewers recommended the version that supported prevailing beliefs for publication and judged the paper to possess a good methodology. On the other hand, most of the reviewers recommended rejection of the version that contradicted prevailing beliefs and criticized the methodology. So, reviewers often judge disconfirming findings to be the result of a poor methodology and consequently researchers are only seldom able to publish such findings (Armstrong, 2003b).

Studies that do not confirm the posed hypotheses have a hard time gaining publication acceptance. Atkinson et al. (1982), for example, report that reviewers were three times more likely to reject a paper with non-significant results in comparison to 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 et al., 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 the business research studies never reach publication. 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, this practice also inhibits the scientific progress of the discipline.

4.3. 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, Rossiter (2002, 2008) points out that strictly relying on data-driven procedures and the results from factor analyses and SEM often leads 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, the number of conceptual papers also decreases to the advantage of more empirical papers. However, both empirical and conceptual papers are essential to develop a discipline (Yadav, 2010).

5. The creative strategy

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

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