

In research we trust: value and relevance of academic research for business practitioners

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ABSTRACT

In spite of extensive research within the field of business-to-business (B2B) marketing, the academic knowledge frequently remains in isolation from the business reality. Although academic scholars aspire for their articles to possess value for other academics, business people generally have little interest in academic journals and current research even though academic knowledge is accessible. Among the main constraints to the application of academic knowledge, business practitioners highlight the abstruse academic writing style, out of date findings by the time of their publications and too broad understanding (or insufficient) of business realities. Moreover, some high quality academic journals do not demand executive summaries, or even managerial implications in the content of their research papers. Thus, taking into account that business managers rarely rely on published academic findings, what would be effective solutions for changing this tradition?

The aim of this research is to address the challenges of academic research and its relevance for business practitioners. The paper applies a qualitative literature review of the top articles published in several prominent journals in B2B marketing. The study emphasizes that in order to achieve managerial relevance and increase interest of business practitioners in B2B marketing research, it is crucial to provide managerial implications and practical cases in a clear, manager-friendly language, otherwise academic papers may be too generic and complicated to understand.

Keywords: Business-to-business marketing, managerial relevance, readability, academic language, qualitative literature review. 2

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge, as a result of the academic research, frequently remains in isolation from the real business environment in spite of the extensive research practice within the sphere of business-to-business (B2B) marketing. In other words, there is a gap of knowledge transfer from academic researchers to managers (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006), who, in spite of close cooperation in the processes of data collection and knowledge co-creation, may find little value in the academic research. Although scholars aspire for their articles to possess value for other academics, business people do not expose much interest in reading academic works (Brennan & Ankers 2004). Among the main constraints to the interest in academic knowledge, business practitioners highlight the abstruse academic language, long time needed for finalizing the findings or publishing them, and too broad understanding of a business reality (Farr & Timm, 1994; Brennan *et al*, 2014; Baer & Shaw, 2017). As a result, academic articles seem to have little relevance for managers (Storbacka, 2014) despite being affordable to access. However, the question is being raised: if the academic knowledge is not found to be relevant for the business world, how can academics change this tradition and contribute to the current business practices? In addition, how can academics encourage business practitioners to implement the outlined managerial implications to their business?

This work-in-progress paper aims to fill these gaps and investigate the main challenges of knowledge transfer from academic research to business community. Additionally, it aims to develop solutions on how to boost interest of business managers to academic journals and knowledge that they produce. In order to reach our aims, we conduct a qualitative literature review, due to the exploratory nature of the study. We selected the top cited articles from five high quality academic journals related to business-to-business marketing (IMM, SJM, JBIM, IMP, B2B Marketing). The criteria for analysis consisted of the availability of executive summaries and/or managerial implications; the language analysis (passive vs. active voice), and the availability of case examples or illustrative examples. A special attention in the analysis is dedicated to the linguistic specifics of the articles, in particular concerning the introduction of new terminology by researchers and application of terms applied exclusively in academic areas. This study emphasizes that in order to achieve managerial relevance and increase the interest of business practitioners in B2B marketing research, it is crucial to provide managerial implications and practical cases in a clear, manager-friendly language, otherwise academic papers may be too generic and complicated to understand.

The article is structured as follows. First, we present review of the relevant literature, focusing on academic knowledge transfer and its challenges. We approach issues of why academic articles cause little interest of managers, and why research findings can find no implementation on practice. Then we focus on specifics of academic language and writings. Secondly, we present our research design and methodology. Finally, expected findings of the paper are presented, together with theoretical implications and future research suggestions. 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

Challenges of academic knowledge transfer

Industrial market research is significant in the current turbulent business environment for which business practitioners prefer to hire consulting business professionals rather than engage in cooperation with academics (Farr & Timm, 1994, p. 6). Business research is also highly perishable in time so in response to fast-changing business environment there is a demand for a shorter “research life cycle” to be able to deal with business dynamics. In some cases, businesses engage academics to investigate their practices hoping for professional input and cost saving (ibid p. 15). In contrast to business consulting, academics aim towards understanding the phenomenon more broadly, and are not necessarily focused on solving a specific managerial issue. Academics tend to generalize the research results in order to apply them in other business contexts and frame the findings with theories which is, naturally, less interesting for managers.

The way of presenting the research results is also a crucial factor in academic articles readability (Bauerly, *et. al*, 2006), since the intended audience of readers is not limited to scholars but also involves, for instance, business practitioners (McGaughey, 2004, pp. 529-550). However, a research of scientific papers accepted for publication in high rank academic journals indicates that the more densely articles are written, the higher a chance for them to be accepted for publishing (Metoyer-Duran, 1993). Therefore, complex academic writing can open a door for a researcher to be published, but it also creates a drawback to reach a wider audience of readers beyond academic community.

There can be differentiated several issues of academic texts readability. The neutral manner of presenting the research in order to generalize or theorize findings frequently results in general disinterest of managers in the study and, consequently, the practical value of research findings can be lost. The presentation of research also includes a description of the research process including sometimes the philosophical underpinnings, which may be important for scholars but irrelevant for managers. Moreover, managers can be even not aware of the existence of academic journals related to their sphere of business (Perea & Brady, 2017). They could have a potential interest in such research if those would be presented in comprehensive language and be relevant for business practice. One of the barriers to understanding academic articles is the introduction by researchers of new terminology and application of terms used exclusively in academic areas (Baer & Shaw, 2017). In addition, replacement of old concepts with new ones can be confusing not only for MBA educated managers but other academic researchers as well. Furthermore, abstruse academic language is frequently demanded by top-level journals, the rules of which academic researchers have to follow in order to be published (Brennan & Ankers 2004).

Remarkably, academic journals that have been mostly referred to by popular business magazines or media publish press releases on their web sites and publish executive summary of the articles (Hamet & Maurer, 2017). Although press releases are more common for natural science journals, marketing publications could in that way make theory and applied knowledge valuable for managerial decision-making. It is important to provide clear managerial implications to achieve managerial relevance, otherwise the papers tend to be too generic for understanding and complicated in terms of language (Baraldi *et al*, 2014). Assumingly, the managerial implications part of the article bears the most value for managers from the whole scientific input. 4

Interestingly, business managers are keener to read qualitative case studies due to higher relevance of these studies for their business and ease of understanding (Perea & Brady, 2017). Framing the research as a case study increases managerial relevance of the study outcomes (Hietanen *et. al*, 2014). Collected stories of the managers via, for instance, interviewing or other ethnographic methods, plays an illustrative role of managers experience and their own interpretation (or sense/meaning making) of the past events within a specific context. Furthermore, from an academic standpoint, qualitative research provides a relative freedom for researching complex business phenomena, which can bring the researchers closer to the investigated managerial issue. However, an issue of clear and comprehensive case study representation (i.e. how it is communicated to the audience of readers) still exists (Borghini *et al*, 2010). Storytelling as a reporting method of a case study is considered to be memorable and able to sustain interest of the readers who can feel themselves as participants of that story. A more aesthetic way of a case study description and narration can engage a reader into a set of events that may be impressive, fascinating and catching attention. Nevertheless, it is still quite difficult to publish qualitative case study research in high-rank business journals (Birkinshaw, 2004).

Theorizing academic language

As stated earlier, one of the core problems that restricts managers from reading academic articles is that of overcomplicated language applied in those articles. There is no universal definition of academic language. This term can be conceptualized as a formal language that is expected to be utilized in the context of academic curriculum, scientific discussions, making argumentations, propositions, synthesis and interpretation of information (Solomon & Rhodes, 1995, pp. 7-8; Snow, 2010). It is a grammatical resource that enables scientific thoughts. Academic language has various characteristics. First of all, it is a detachment from the interpersonal stance in the narration, where an author, as a scientific expert, provides information about a subject. Academic text should be short, with high information density and avoiding unnecessary repetitions. Stepwise academic text design aims to represent a phenomenon according to research stages in order to bring a logic and structure to argumentation of the research process. All the listed characteristics of academic writing have to correspond with genre of writing, argumentation strategy in the text and, most importantly, knowledge of the subject (Snow & Uccelli, 2009).

Academic language terms have unique meaning in accordance with the field of science it is applied in. Therefore, design of such language is an opposite of casual and informal communication in written or oral forms. Comparing to informal language, academic language is a more precise, passive, aims to communicate maximum of information with minimum words and grammatical construction. Additionally, academic language is neutral in the style of narration and avoids personal pronouns. Personalization of an academic essay by using words as “I” and “we” instead of “one” or “authors of this paper” may, however, make the text friendlier to a broader audience of readers (Badley, 2017). Readers can be keen to know what the authors of the research think about their own findings and why it is so important personally to them. However, as a rule academic texts should not be overconfident, vague or brash but confident in the content presentation. Thus, high-rate marketing journals value articles that are written according to Standard English rules and advice to avoid alternative spellings and inconsistent terminology that can lead to confusion (LaPlaca *et. al*, 2018). Still, it is significant to keep in mind who will be reading the research paper and what style it should adopt to arise interest and not be overcautious or passive. 5

Another distinctive feature of academic articles is the usage of words that are rarely applied in other contexts but in academic writing (Snow, 2010). Of course, the complexity of language varies from high to less academic language, which can be hard to understand and even to produce. However, this complexity arises not only from the usage of terminology that is specific to a certain scientific field but also from the application of general-purpose academic words that are unknown to a reader. Although academic writing is still considered as colourless, difficult to comprehend and “artificial” (Potgieter & Smit, 2009), application of academic language is necessary to impose authority and to be precise (Snow, 2010). That is why scholars apply sophisticated terminology, as well as complex text and grammatical structures.

Discussion of the complex phenomenon with difficult words exclude, however, most of the other readers from attempting to understand it (Badley, 2017) and, therefore, the produced knowledge is never disseminated beyond the academic community. Thus, academic texts can be hard to read and understand for managers or students as they are designed for academics who use academic language as their “professional” language.

The challenge of academic texts is also hidden in the tradition of such text compilation. Young researchers have to follow the already formed traditions of academic language established by known researchers of the specific field of science, which makes it difficult to find own approach or “voice” in the academic genre (Potgieter & Smit, 2009). Therefore, academic essays are produced aiming to the groups of scholars according to the style being accepted within that group. As a consequence, scholars may not be even interested to make their research attractive to other educated readers (Badley, 2017). Instead, their writing is meant for each other, and the selection of terminology plays a role of inclusion signals for solely members of academic community.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The paper applies a qualitative literature review of articles in several prominent journals in B2B marketing, namely *Industrial Marketing Management*, *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing*, *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, *IMP Journal* and *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing* and *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing* are amongst the highest ranked industrial marketing journals (Nicholson et al., 2018). The *IMP* journal is the journal of the *IMP* group, members of which conduct top-level research in industrial marketing. Lastly, *Scandinavian Journal of Management* also has a history of publishing notable articles within industrial marketing field (e.g. Håkansson & Snehota, 1989; Halinen & Törnroos, 1998; Lowe, Ellis & Purchase, 2008).

We particularly look at the top cited articles in the aforementioned journals. The reasoning for that is that these articles are commended by the academic society and thus may be of value for business practitioners in terms of the potential knowledge that may be obtained from reading these articles. Another selection criterion for the articles is that they contain case study framed research and managerial implications or executive summary. The period of the years for the articles’ publication may vary depending on the journal selection policy for the top cited articles. 6

Thus, for example, Industrial Marketing Management and Scandinavian Journal of Management the selection of top cited articles ranges from year 2012 till present, whereas for IMP Journal and Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing this selection provides the most cited papers published online in the last 3 years.

The analysis of the selected articles is to be conducted in accordance to several criteria related to linguistic specifics of the articles. The focus is especially on terminology and emphasis of practical usage of the research findings. The introduction of new terminology by researchers and application of terms applied exclusively in academic areas. In order to delimit our analysis we specifically regard the discussion/conclusion part of the articles, as well as managerial implications, since these are presumably the most attractive parts of academic articles for business practitioners.

EXPECTED FINDINGS

This work contributes to the conceptual development of the least accentuated aspect of the research process in B2B marketing field, namely presentation of results and contributions to a wider audience. Selection of the high-rank journals related to the sphere of industrial marketing may disregard the issue that while these journals possess valuable scholarly research on business practices, it possesses little value to managers, due to the way the results of a study are presented. The aim with this article is to provide a platform for constructing a bridge between academic knowledge and business environment in order to make knowledge distribution more accessible and effective.

Among the expected findings, this work aims to deepen the understanding on how to make academic research papers more attractive and interesting for business practitioners. A literature review method is applied to illustrate the challenges of articles' writing from a linguistic and structural perspective. Manager-friendly language and the manner of narration are significant for people outside academia in order to understand the content of the research. Although the usage of academic language as a "professional" language is considered as an indication of intelligence, complicated and dull texts can prevent managers from reading and purchasing access to scientific journals. The findings are also dedicated to strategies of how scholars can emphasize practical or managerial implications of their research by introducing empirical cases or other illustrative examples from the business realities in a manner that is more relatable for business practitioners.

Future research suggestions

This research was narrowed to the investigation of challenges of academic knowledge transfer to the managerial executives i.e. to the language issues and availability of comprehensive managerial implications. We suggest that the interest of managers and their practical utilization of academic research in the sphere of B2B marketing should be investigated empirically via e.g. collecting interviews on managers' perceptions and understanding of academic articles. Additionally, consulting agencies representatives engaged in marketing research could be interviewed in order to understand their attitudes towards academic research and if they apply it in their professional activities. 7

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