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Abstract:
Authors should recognize that the rigor of the peer review process at most major journals has continuously risen over the years and is destined to rise even further, commensurate with advances in the conceptual, theoretical, and empirical domains of research. Moreover, when sensitized to shortcomings that might possibly compromise the potential contribution of a research study to a body of knowledge, researchers have a responsibility to ensure that their future research endeavors are free of such shortcomings.

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During my term as editor, I have had the opportunity to peruse reviewers' comments on more than 600 manuscripts submitted to JM for review and publication consideration. In this process, I was struck by several recurring common criticisms of manuscripts in the reviewers' comments. In the spirit of helping authors improve their work, I attempt to provide an overview of some of the weaknesses frequently cited by JM's reviewers, as well as offer a few guideposts for crafting manuscripts for journals.

The common criticisms of manuscripts include both correctable weaknesses (those amenable to being satisfactorily addressed by the authors during successive iterations of revisions) and uncorrectable weaknesses (some of which are fatal flaws that preclude a manuscript from being published, whereas others are weaknesses that do not necessarily imperil the validity of the study findings, but nevertheless limit the generalizability of the study findings). Indeed, it is conceivable that published research in marketing might evidence one or more of the shortcomings detailed here. Authors should, however, recognize that the rigor of the peer review process at this and every other major journal has continuously risen over the years and is destined to rise even further, commensurate with advances in the conceptual, theoretical, and empirical domains of research. Moreover, when sensitized to shortcomings that might possibly compromise the potential contribution of a research study to a body of
knowledge, researchers have a responsibility to ensure that their future research endeavors are free of such shortcomings.

**Introduction and Literature Review**

*Some Frequently Observed Weaknesses*

- The question of how the research either extends or complements prior research on the topic and its positioning relative to the existing body of research is not clear.
- The only justification given for examining the research question is that it has not been examined in previous research. A stronger justification than this must be provided, Some potentially researchable questions may not have been addressed in the past, because they might have been deemed unimportant research questions.
- The objectives and intended contribution of the manuscript is preceded by a long and rambling introduction of several pages on topics that seem to be only remotely related to the research topic.
- The literature review cites several articles but does not clearly indicate what was learned from these studies that is relevant to this study. The literature reviewed seems to play almost no role in the subsequent development of research hypotheses, study design, or discussion of results. In effect, no new conceptual or empirical insights emerge from the literature review.
- The literature review merely proves that the literature has been read rather than using the literature for conceptual development. For example, many sentences are written in the style of "so-and-so says such-and-such," rather than using the extant literature to develop support for a particular point-of-view.

*Some Guideposts for Authors*

- The introduction should clearly describe the research problem and the context in reference to which the problem is being addressed. The motivation for the study—the reasons why studying this phenomenon is important and why a better understanding of this phenomenon matters—should be clearly articulated. For instance, authors might consider stating the intended contribution of their work in terms such as whether it (1) identifies theory that is applicable to the marketplace, (2) extends extant theory, (3) provides evidence of moderator variables that hold implications for actionable marketing practice, (4) offers enlightenment regarding meditational processes, and (5) identifies boundary conditions for theory.
- The literature review should provide a coherent synthesis of extant research on the topic. Because the present state of knowledge is the benchmark for evaluating the contribution of new research in any area, authors should guard against the possibility of understating what is already known, either knowingly or unknowingly.

**Conceptual Development**

*Some Frequently Observed Weaknesses*
Because the foundation of any research study is its conceptual development, it is not surprising that reviewers' comments on weaknesses in this section of a manuscript are far more extensive than comments on other aspects of manuscripts.

**Constructs**

- A great deal of new vocabulary is introduced without providing clear definitions and adequate descriptions clarifying the meanings.
- The conceptual definitions provided are (1) so broad that it is unclear how their conceptual domain is distinct from those of related constructs and/or (2) ambiguous and lacking in the level of precision needed for their operationalization.
- Many new constructs are introduced without recognizing their overlap or redundancy with other extant constructs.

**Theory**

The research suffers from (I) lack of theoretical explanation for the phenomenon observed, (2) inadequate exposition of theory, (3) use of a theory that does not fit the phenomenon well, and/or (4) theoretical reasoning that is not compelling, because alternative associations between constructs cannot be ruled out.

**Model**

- The model specified is ad hoc. It is a potpourri of unrelated variables with no unifying conceptual or theoretic logic underlying their choice. No compelling arguments are provided in support of why the variables included in the model are important, underresearched, and/or instrumental to understanding the phenomenon being investigated. No rationale is presented for why the variables studied belong together.
- The model (1) is not discriminating—everything is hypothesized to be related to everything else, (2) is underspecified and appears to have been developed without fully taking into account important prior research on this topic, (3) proposes "definitionally" related constructs as antecedents and consequences, (4) shows evidence of a lack of correspondence between the linkages shown in the conceptual model and the hypotheses stated in the text, (5) does not capture all of the hypotheses stated in the text, and/or (6) is essentially a flow chart enumerating the steps involved in the process of accomplishing something, and as currently structured and specified, the proposed model (i.e., process map) is not empirically testable.

**Hypotheses**

- The hypotheses are not grounded in a set of well-reasoned theoretical, conceptual, and logical considerations. It is difficult to see how the various hypotheses specifically emerge from the discussion that precedes them.
- There is no logical connection between the theory invoked and the hypotheses stated.
Some of the hypotheses are (I) truisms, (2) tautologies, (3) self-evident and do not pass the test of being nonobvious; in fact, if they were not supported, the validity of one or more aspects of the empirical study (e.g., reliability and validity of measures) would be questioned, (4) internally contradictory, (5) not directly related to the stated research problem, (6) not in alignment with the proposed model, (7) not new and have been extensively investigated in previously published studies, (8) stated broadly; a hypothesis that merely states that a relationship will exist, but nothing about the directionality of the relationship is of limited value from the standpoint of gaining new and important insights into the phenomenon of interest, (9) stated within the specific confines of the empirical setting and cannot be abstracted to more generalizable marketing phenomena, (10) stated to find support for a null hypothesis, and/or (II) stated as directional hypotheses despite the discussion preceding the hypotheses being equivocal concerning the direction of the relationship.

For the most part, the justifications offered are either common sense justifications, journalistic reports, anecdotal evidence, or empirical precedence. Anecdotal evidence published in the business press does not make a compelling case for justifying a relationship, because a researcher can always come forward with counter examples. Empirical precedence is not sufficient justification either. A firmer conceptual grounding exposition of the logic underlying the hypotheses-is essential.

While extant literature cited in the manuscript is suggestive of interactive, indirect, nonlinear, and/or moderating effects, the hypotheses stated treat each factor as a separate and/or linear influence.

Some Guideposts for Authors

Conceptual development is the cornerstone of sound research. A manuscript must, therefore, demonstrate a great deal of rigor in its conceptual development.

_constructs_. The study of specific constructs in a particular context must be grounded in theoretical reasons that suggest they will provide important explanations of the phenomenon under study. Constructs should be clearly defined so that a reader can compare the operationalization of the constructs with the intended meaning. Because conceptual manuscripts do not delve into operationalization and measurement or empirical testing, it is especially important in such manuscripts to pay careful attention to the issues of operationalizability of the constructs and empirical testability of the research propositions in order to facilitate further research in this area.

_theory_. The theoretical framework that guides the selection of variables for study and the development of the hypotheses must be presented clearly. In the absence of a theoretical foundation that allows for explanation and prediction of the relationships of interest, the conceptual development, as well as the logic underlying the hypotheses, is compromised and weak. That little prior theorizing exists to lay the foundation for a sound conceptualization does not exempt the researcher from the responsibility for developing at least a preliminary framework or model that would provide insights into the phenomenon of interest. For instance, an author could present a logically reasoned explanation of why a certain relationship may be true. Alternatively, an author could talk to managers about the organizational activities that
are the focus of the study and attempt to gain insights into their view of the phenomenon. Researchers also may borrow theories developed in other disciplines. Although such borrowing can contribute much to advancing understanding across disciplines, researchers doing so must demonstrate a significant understanding of the theory base from which they are borrowing, as well as clearly explain what makes that theory base superior to others that have been brought to bear on the issues addressed. It is too easy to select one particular aspect of a theory, look for exceptions, and discredit the whole theory. A better approach would be to draw attention to empirical data that is not adequately explained by accepted theory and then show how the new theory provides a more parsimonious explanation of the phenomenon.

Model. A well-specified conceptual model focusing on the phenomenon of interest requires specification of (1) the antecedents, mediators, moderators, and consequences, (2) the hypotheses—the nature of the relationship (e.g., direct, moderating, mediating)—that tie these together, and (3) the conceptual rationale for the hypotheses. A researcher can generally list several variables that could be potentially included as antecedents. However, not all potential variables can be included, nor should they be. It is therefore critical to provide a compelling rationale for the variables that are chosen over other potential explanatory variables.

Hypotheses. There should be a logical connection between the theory invoked and the hypotheses stated. The clarity of the derivative logic is important. The reader should be able to see clearly how a hypothesis follows from some theoretical argument. It is not uncommon to find equivocal arguments manifested in rival theories. Researchers have chosen different approaches when faced with this situation. For instance, when the directionality of a relationship is unclear, a researcher might choose to state the opposing arguments and then proceed with empirical testing without stating the hypotheses formally. Alternatively, a researcher can choose to offer additional insight or logic in support of testing one of the competing perspectives.

Research Design and Measurement

Some Frequently Observed Weaknesses

- The design specification of the study is far removed from the realities of the real world.
- Although all of the hypotheses imply causation, the research design used to test them is not amenable to casual inferences.
- The research design does not make it possible to rule out alternative explanations for the findings.
- Evaluation of the technical adequacy of the study is constrained by sparse reporting.
- The independent and dependent measures are confounded. Some of the items used to operationalize a key explanatory variable and the dependent variable are worded similarly.
- There is an overlap in the conceptual and empirical domains of explanatory constructs. The items used to measure one explanatory construct seem to be confounded with items used to measure another explanatory construct.
• The operational measures employed (1) cannot be objectively evaluated because of the absence of clear conceptual definitions of the constructs, (2) are inconsistent with the conceptual definitions of constructs presented, (3) do not adequately reflect the conceptual domains of the constructs, and/or (4) only minimally reflect the conceptual domains of the constructs.

• The operational measures employed are prone to response bias—given the wording of the scale items, it would be obvious to the respondent as to what constitutes good versus bad business practice.

• The validity of scales borrowed from published sources are seriously compromised by arbitrarily dropping items from the original scale.

• Key informants are not supposed to provide information about themselves but about some other entity in which they may (or may not) have played a role. In many of the measures, careful attention to this informant notion is lacking. Many of the scale items carry a referent of "I." This is not consistent with the key informant notion.

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Some Guideposts for Authors

• Although researchers often may be required to make certain compromises in the areas of research design and measurement to enlist the cooperation of research sponsors, they must guard against the specter of science being compromised.

• It is important to ensure that alternative explanations can be ruled out. For example, in a field study without experimental controls, the inclusion of appropriate covariates in the model specification is critical to establishing the validity of the hypothesized effects and ruling out competing explanations.

• It is inappropriate to proceed with theory testing before examining the psychometric properties of the scales developed to measure the key constructs. No confidence can be placed in the findings of a study in the absence of an assessment of the psychometric properties of the measures. If one of the purposes of the study is to develop a new measure of a construct, then the question of why and how existing measures are inadequate also must be addressed. When importing scales from other disciplines, a researcher's contribution to new knowledge also comes from critiquing, updating, refining, extending, and adapting the scales to the marketing discipline.

• Rather than merely establishing the convergent validity of the items measuring a construct, establishing both convergent and discriminant validity is critical, because some of the constructs studied can be related. Demonstration of reliability and discriminant validity is of little value if construct operationalization does not measure the construct as it had been conceptualized. High Cronbach's alphas may support the reliability of chosen scales, but not their content, nomological, discriminant, and predictive validities.

Results, Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

Some Frequently Observed Weaknesses
• There is a lack of congruence between (1) the stated research questions and reported research findings and/or (2) the model proposed and the model tested—a significant portion of the empirical section dwells on relationships for which no conceptual basis was presented and hypotheses stated.

• The research findings reported are essentially descriptive. They do not build on any theory that can be used to generalize the results beyond the realm of the context in which it was carried out.

• The findings are susceptible to alternative interpretations.

• Few of the results reported in the tables are summarized and discussed in the text.

• The discussion section, rather than focusing on the broader implications of the reported findings, merely restates the findings reported in the results section and/or reports additional findings that should have been presented in the results section.

• For a hypothesis that is not supported, only the conceptual rationale advanced initially as justification for the hypothesis is revisited and a plausible alternative conceptual explanation is offered. What seems to have been overlooked are other plausible reasons, such as weaknesses and limitations relating to research design, model specification, measures and data analysis.

• The implications for research and practice read more like armchair speculation than well thought-out conclusions stemming from the research study.

• Severe measurement problems make it inappropriate to draw any conclusions from the results.

• The conclusions stated do not follow from the evidence presented.

Some Guideposts for Authors

• The implications section should focus on the unique implications stemming from the research reported. Authors should refrain from presenting as managerial implications, organizational practices that are already widely in vogue, intuitively obvious, or based on common sense and as research implications, research questions that have no direct relevance to the substantive, conceptual, and methodological domains of the manuscript.

• Authors should acknowledge the limitations of the study, as well as address related issues, such as how the limitations might have contributed to unexpected results and why the results that are consistent with a priori expectations should be viewed as valid despite the limitations. However, excessive post hoc rationalization of unexpected results diminishes the credibility of those results that are consistent with a priori expectations. If there is reason to believe that certain confounding factors might have influenced the results, a compelling reason must be offered to support the claim that they might have only affected the unexpected results and not the expected results. Furthermore, advancing several plausible explanations from the literature to support the results that are contrary to the a priori hypothesized relationships is indicative of weak conceptual development.

• Authors should highlight what the reader might learn from the manuscript that would be helpful in other contexts—principles, hypothesis, or useful methodological tips that other researchers can use in other contexts.
In Closing

Let me conclude with a few parting thoughts on making a contribution to marketing thought and practice through scholarly research. Each year, JM receives at least a few manuscripts that are essentially descriptive research studies void of any theory or even a semblance of any attempt toward theory development. Such manuscripts are routinely rejected without sending for formal review. In the absence of a theoretical basis, readers can never be sure whether the reported empirical findings are expected or unexpected, spurious or nonspurious, and whether the explanations offered are anything more than informed speculation. Regardless of how clean the pattern of results may be, it is simply not enough to demonstrate an effect without providing an explanation as to what is driving the results. A scholarly research piece must strive to make a conceptual contribution (e.g., presenting new theory, or at least a rigorously developed conceptual framework with clearly defined and measurable variables, and empirically testable research propositions) and/or an empirical contribution (e.g., demonstrating how the methodological characteristics of prior studies could have led to potentially misleading results and how the reported study overcomes these limitations). Once a topic is conceptually well explored, good empirical research is needed to advance the field. Continued exhortation of the importance of the topic and the need for empirical research is inadequate. Nor does a manuscript that merely draws the attention of the reader to the complexity of the problem under study add much depth or insight. Although there can be exceptions, a manuscript that merely enumerates the deficiencies in previously published work is unlikely to be viewed as making a significant contribution to the literature. The potential for making a truly significant contribution is greater when the manuscript also presents or proposes solutions to overcome these deficiencies.

I hope that this discussion of weaknesses and guideposts are helpful to authors who are committed to making a concerted effort to ensure that their next manuscript submission to a journal (and the research it is based on) is better than their last one. Indeed, authors might find it worthwhile to undertake a content analysis of reviewers’ comments on their prior submissions to journals. Such an analysis of reviewers' comments on the conceptual, empirical, and measurement aspects of both accepted and rejected manuscripts should yield valuable insights into research shortcomings that transcend individual research studies and the related manuscripts.

This editorial builds on the insightful reviews of numerous JM reviewers, and from the comments and suggestions of many reviewers on the JM Editorial Review Board and my colleagues at Texas A&M University on an earlier draft of this editorial. I am grateful to all of these people, who are too many to be individually acknowledged here. I take full responsibility for any remaining errors.